

Ruth Cavendish Bentinck in 1912 when she was campaigning for women's votes

In September 1911, the *London Daily News* published an irate letter from the resident of Mortons House at Corfe Castle. Considering this large Elizabethan manor house was affordable only by the wealthy, the subject matter was perhaps surprising. But the writer, Ruth Cavendish Bentinck, despite her marriage into the Duke of Portland's family, had a strong social conscience. Ruth railed against changes to fair wage legislation, which she

Born in Tangiers in 1867, Ruth St Maur was one of two illegitimate grandchildren of the 12th Duke of Somerset, Edward Adolphus St Maur (a variation of Seymour). The dukedom was created for Edward Seymour, brother of Jane, the third wife of Henry VIII. Ruth's father was the 12th Duke's eldest son and heir. Ferdinand ('Ferdy'), Earl St Maur was a handsome, foolhardy but courageous soldier who turned his back on the political career envisaged by his father for love.

The Suffragist of Corfe Castle

thought would damage the next generation. Working men were struggling to feed their families, she said, and widows were expected to be grateful for a pittance to raise their fatherless children: "The West Country labourer is supposed to live on the beauty of his scenery and his picturesque (and too often insanitary) house," she wrote. Ruth was keen to prevent such people becoming part of the "human wreckage" of society. She also wanted to secure the vote for women, to give them the power to make a better world.

In 1909 Ruth had joined the Suffragettes' party, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the following year she became a member of the Fabian Society. Given her privileged upbringing, Ruth's convictions may have seemed a contradiction but she used her connections to help those less fortunate. She also knew what it was like to feel an outsider.

Ruth Cavendish Bentinck's parentage was said to have inspired *Pygmalion*, but it would be her determination to secure the vote for women that would leave a lasting legacy and a library

WORDS: Jane Dismore

Ruth's mother, Rosina Swan, was a serving girl, whose parents were a gipsy and an illiterate bricklayer from Suffolk.

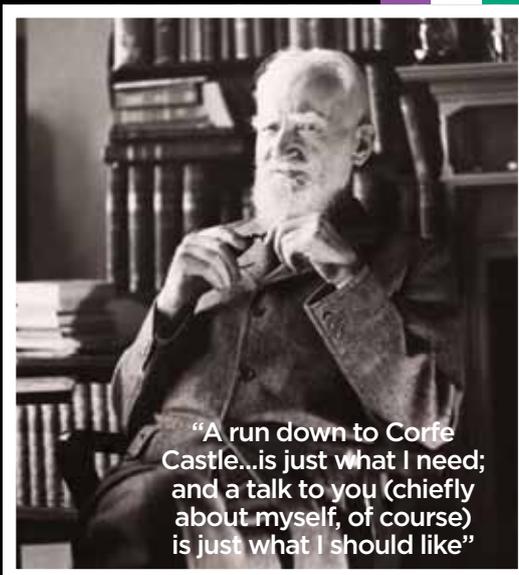
Ferdy and Rosina met in Hyde Park, London in 1866, when he was 31 and she was 17. Ferdy's beloved brother had recently been killed by a bear in India, and to add to his misery he had been rejected by the woman he loved. Rosina was homeless and penniless after being bullied out of her post as a kitchen maid. Captivated by her beauty and intelligence, Ferdy took care of her. He also improved her literacy and taught her French. But their wide social differences meant there could be no question of marriage. Ferdy took Rosina travelling through Europe, then to Tangiers, where Ruth was born. In 1868 they returned to England, where Ferdy faced his family and Rosina gave birth to their son, Harold.

Their life together was short. In 1869 Ferdy died of

lung disease and Rosina died of tuberculosis in 1872. Their children became the cherished wards of their grandparents, living in luxury at the Duke's homes, among them Stover in Devon and Somerset House in London. Although Harold enjoyed the male privilege of being sent to public school, Ruth benefited from being educated under the Duke's supervision and mixed with notables of the day like Disraeli. Clever and independent in thought, she was influenced by her great aunt, Caroline Norton, who had successfully campaigned for law reforms benefitting women. Ruth began attending meetings of the Associated Workers' League, convinced that it was the duty of the leisured classes to meet their less fortunate citizens as friends and not as 'Ladies Bountiful'.

She also understood the stigma of illegitimacy. Happily, Frederick Cavendish Bentinck ('Freddy') was not deterred by this nor, despite being a Conservative, by her socialist politics, and they fell in love. Freddy's father, the Right Honourable George Augustus Cavendish Bentinck, MP, adored Ruth too, which made up for her mother-in-law's loathing of her illegitimacy and radical views.

After marrying in 1887, the couple lived on Brownsea Island, a gift from Freddy's father, staying in a small villa. Ruth persuaded her father-in-law to restore the island's historic castle at great expense. Tragically, in 1892 their third son, George, died just after his first birthday, having contracted typhoid from drinking



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George Bernard Shaw

the castle water unboiled. The death of Freddy's father the previous year had revealed huge debts, and Brownsea was sold.

The couple rented Mortons House in East Street (now a hotel) until 1933, and lived in a family house in Harley Street, London where Ruth met with major figures in the socialist and suffrage movements. Ruth worked with Beatrice Webb on the reform of the Poor Law, which separated old married couples and put them in single-sex workhouses; she supported the women's strike at Bryant and May; visited families in slums; wrote pamphlets and chaired meetings. The playwright George Bernard Shaw, who became a lifelong friend, is said to have based *Pygmalion* on her parents' unusual union.

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As the House of Commons continued to reject private members' bills supporting women's suffrage, Ruth marched outside Parliament with billboards strapped to her. She spoke at public meetings, lobbied town councillors and wrote countless articles and letters. In 1909 she founded the Cavendish Bentinck Library, containing a thousand books on every topic concerning women, and made it available for anyone working for women's suffrage. It became the foundation of the Women's Library, now part of the London School of Economics.

In 1912, dismayed by the violence of the WSPU, Ruth joined the less extreme National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies under Millicent Garrett Fawcett, another visitor to Harley Street. Ruth asked Shaw to help secure the release of Gladys Evans, imprisoned for attempting to burn down Dublin's Theatre Royal. In his reply Shaw referred testily to "this dreary old nonsense about political prisoners having special privileges." Ruth responded by inviting him to Dorset for the weekend. "Do not tantalise a poor author," Shaw replied. "A run down to Corfe Castle...is just what I need; and a talk to you (chiefly about myself, of course) is just what I should like; but I am rehearsing two productions...I will attend to Miss Evans if I have time; but I really cannot spend every day rescuing prisoners." She was released a month later.

Ruth believed in the "fundamentally democratic nature" of the women's movement. But her views were unpalatable to some. Whenever Freddy stayed at Welbeck Abbey, seat of the Dukes of Portland, with his cousin the 6th Duke, Ruth was never invited. Ironically, after her death in 1953, her sons successively became the 8th and 9th Dukes of Portland. However, the title was all they inherited. The 6th Duke had made provisions that saw the family fortune go to his granddaughter Anne. But it is Ruth's legacy which is priceless. ♦



Ferdinand St Maur - Ruth's father



Rosina Swan - Ruth's mother

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Jane Dismore is a writer of history and biography. Find out more at janedismore.com.