

Lady Saltoun, member of the Royal family with a hereditary peerage who enlivened the House of Lords – obituary

She called the removal of the hereditaries ‘an upmarket version of the compulsion to break things which seizes idle and unemployed youths’

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Lady Saltoun with Simon Fraser, 16th Lord Lovat, at a Clan Fraser gathering at Castle Fraser in 1997 | CREDIT: Shutterstock

The 21st Lady Saltoun, who has died aged 93, was Chief and Name of Arms of the Clan Fraser, one of the very few female hereditary peers to have sat in the Lords, and – by virtue of her marriage to a great-grandson of Queen Victoria – a member of the extended Royal family. She was entitled to a red crown on her car for royal occasions: the last name on the list of royal precedence.

Flora Fraser was head of the lowland Frasers of Philorth, whose origins lay in Anjou; their seat is Castle Fraser, in Aberdeenshire. By a decree of the Court of the Lord Lyon made in 1984, she was chief of the “whole Clan Fraser”. However this ruling was treated with indifference by the Frasers of Lovat, as the Lord Lyon’s writ does not run to the Highland clans; the current Lord Lovat, Simon Fraser, retains the chiefship in the Peerage of Scotland.

(Marjorie) Flora Fraser was born in Edinburgh on October 18 1930, the daughter of 20th Lord Saltoun and his wife, Dorothy Welby, daughter of Sir Charles Welby, Bt, one time

member of Parliament.

The Saltoun title was created in 1445 for Sir Lawrence Abernethy, descendant of Hugh, Hereditary Abbot of the Pictish Abbacy of Abernethy on Tay, extant in 1172. The 4th Lord Saltoun fought at Flodden and escaped. On the death in 1669 of Margaret Abernethy, the title went to her cousin Alexander Fraser, a faithful supporter of both Charles I and Charles II, and has remained with the Frasers of Philorth ever since.

The most distinguished of Flora's ancestors was the 17th Lord Saltoun, KT (1785-1853), who served in the Peninsular War, at Waterloo and in China. For his defence of Hougoumont, the Duke of Wellington called him a "pattern to the army both as a man and a soldier".

The Frasers of Philorth founded the fishing port of Fraserburgh, but bankrupted themselves at the end of the 16th century trying to endow a university there. They had to sell the Castle of Philorth, and it was 1934 before Flora's father managed to buy it back (renamed Cairnbulg Castle).

He had succeeded as the 19th Lord Saltoun, but became the 20th, after it was determined that his forebear Margaret Abernethy had been the 10th Lady Saltoun and not the 9th as previously reckoned, having survived her brother, the 8th Lord Saltoun, by 10 weeks.

In February 1944, Flora's elder brother, the Master of Saltoun, was wounded and taken prisoner while serving with the Grenadier Guards. His whereabouts were unknown for a year, after which he was presumed dead. At that point Flora became the sole heiress. In 1951 she trained as a chartered secretary in a city office.



Captain Alexander Ramsay of Mar pictured on his 81st birthday | CREDIT: The Field

When in 1956 Flora became engaged to Captain Alexander Ramsay, who had lost his leg serving in North Africa in 1943, the Queen had to give her assent in council under the Royal Marriages Act, which she did aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia at Leith before going ashore to attend the Edinburgh Festival.

“Sandy” Ramsay was the son of the former Princess Patricia of Connaught, known as Lady Patricia Ramsay after her marriage in 1919, and one of the last surviving granddaughters of Queen Victoria.

As a child Sandy had attended the young Princess Elizabeth’s parties. On their engagement, Flora was taken to visit his aunt, Princess Arthur of Connaught, curtsying to the bedridden invalid.

The Ramsays took part in all the major royal events in Britain, and followed the Queen down the steps at her annual garden party at Holyroodhouse. They also often went to Stockholm and Copenhagen, as Sandy’s aunt, Princess Margaret of Connaught, had married the Crown

Prince of Sweden.

At the time of the wedding Sandy was an assistant on Lord Linlithgow's estate at Queensferry. They married in the small local church in Fraserburgh, with a reception at the bride's home, Cairnbulg Castle. The ceremony was notable for its lack of pomp: Flora carried no flowers, had no bridal attendants and designed her own dress in white *peau de soie*. On her head she wore a simple seed pearl circlet.

Even so, the crowds of well-wishers had to be held back by police. The wedding was attended by the Queen Mother, on what was said to be her first visit to North-East Scotland, and by the groom's cousin, Queen Ingrid of Denmark, who had never visited Scotland before.

The couple inherited Mar Lodge in Aberdeenshire from Princess Arthur of Connaught, who died in 1959, but since all the furniture had been left to her son, the Duke of Fife, they had to improvise. Latterly they built a mock-baronial house nearby.

Flora had never boiled an egg until she married, but she went on a Cordon Bleu course and became a first-rate cook. As a child brought up during rationing, she had been taught to avoid waste, and any leftovers not eaten by the family were put into buckets for pigs or hens. She also served the sharpest dry martini in Scotland.

Flora succeeded her father as Lady Saltoun in 1979. When most of the hereditary peers were removed from the Lords in 1999, she was one of 28 crossbenchers – and the only holder of a lordship of Parliament – elected to remain. She served on the upper house's ecclesiastical and procedure committees, and spoke regularly into her 80s on devolution, Lords reform and procedure, the Common Fisheries Policy and same-sex marriage, bringing a strong element of common sense to debates until her retirement in 2014.

In 2011 she defended the tradition that peers address each other in the third person, stating: "It is much more difficult to be rude to somebody when you have to address them in the third person. It is worth the time and the effort, simply because it cools things. Make no mistake, we do our work just as well when we are courteous and friendly to one another – in fact, we do it rather better than when we are ill-tempered because it is easier to work together to try to find a way forward."

She disapproved of interruptions when a peer was speaking, likening a "cabal" that had recently decided to torment a

speaking Peer to “sharks that had smelt blood”.

Naturally Lady Saltoun resisted the removal of the hereditary element: “What is this compulsion to destroy things which seems to seize even people who should know better? It is just an upmarket version of the compulsion to break things which seizes idle and unemployed youths in no-go areas of cities. Clearly, I am mistaken in expecting the Government to know better, for I see very little difference between their plans for reform of this House and the vandalism of job culture.

“Not for nothing has our Parliament been called the mother of Parliaments. It has been the model on which most Commonwealth Parliaments and, indeed, most of the Parliaments of the free world have been based – not that they are all exact copies, any more than children are ever exact copies of their parents. Some are good, some less good, but whatever the merits or otherwise of her offspring this Parliament was the matrix, and what does the coalition want to do? Destroy half of it.”

She rued the way the Labour reforms had filled the chamber “with a flood of the Prime Minister’s cronies”. In June 2010 she said: “I do not think that the people of this country want the House of Lords destroyed. It is the Government who want this House destroyed, when it does its duty in preventing them getting their own way without a second thought. That is why the Government are determined to do what they propose. They do not wish to destroy – for destroy it would be – this House because it does not work. They wish to destroy it because it does work – too well for their comfort.”

Lady Saltoun could be formidable at first encounter but once her confidence was won, she was utterly loyal and warm. She was particularly generous to any Frasers from overseas who rang up out of the blue and wanted to see the family portraits. A somewhat alarming motorist, she drove at great speed.

She was a great support to the Duke of Kent in 1970 when, as the new president of the RNLI, he attended the funerals of five lifeboat crew, lost off Fraserburgh. That same lifeboat had been launched by his mother Princess Marina after an earlier disaster, in 1953, when another five of the crew had been lost. These successive tragedies deeply affected the Duke, and his last engagement in May before stepping down from royal duties was to visit Fraserburgh.

The last major royal event at which Lady Saltoun was

present was Prince William's wedding in Westminster Abbey in 2011. The King and Lord Lyon King of Arms had to be informed of her death before it could be made public.

Flora and Captain Ramsay had three daughters, Katharine, a goddaughter of Queen Ingrid and the Princess Royal (Princess Mary); Alice, a goddaughter of Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester; and Elizabeth.

Kate, known for many years as the Mistress of Saltoun, now succeeds her mother as 22nd Baroness Saltoun, and head of Clan Fraser.

Lady Saltoun, born October 18 1930, death announced September 4 2024