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The height of good manors

She may be part of the wealthy Sainsbury family and married to a prince, but that hasn't stopped Jessica Frankopan from working hard to build a thriving business of her own, as *Fiona McCarthy* discovered

Photographs SIMON BROWN

Opposite: Jessica with husband Peter, twins Katarina and Flora, and sons Francis, six, and Luke, three. Above, from left: the family's Oxfordshire home, where colour clashes and contemporary furniture create cutting-edge elegance

The boutique country house hotel and spa Cowley Manor is in the heart of the Cotswolds. The picturesque vistas and lush green that surround it are quintessentially English, and the Manor's co-founder, hotelier Jessica Frankopan, matches its spirit, with her flawless English rose complexion, strawberry-blonde hair and quiet reserve. What's more, Jessica is part of a national institution, J Sainsbury's, which her great-great-grandparents started in 1869 with just one small grocery store in London's Drury Lane.

Despite recent rich lists estimating her family's collective fortune at over £1 billion, and despite her being married to a Croatian prince, Peter, there's no hint of grandiosity. 'I was certainly never an It-girl,' says 39-year-old Jessica, who drives a low-key family car, and in terms of extravagance restricts herself to an occasional splurge at Temperley. 'I don't understand this concept of having to upgrade your possessions every five minutes. I've had the same mobile phone for six years, and Peter had it before then,' she says. 'It's a matter of principle. I was brought up not to show off.'

She says she had a very happy, sheltered rural childhood with her older sister Camilla and brothers James and Alexander, relishing the tomboy pursuits of chasing wild rabbits around fields and whittling bows and arrows with a penknife.

It wasn't until her early teens that she began to realise that her surname was in any way out of the ordinary. 'I know you won't believe me, but it didn't really dawn on me until I was about 14,' she says, 'when I started to read the newspapers at boarding school and see things written about my family. I was brought up in an environment where it just wasn't an issue, so I didn't think it was anything strange. We lived in the countryside, I rode a pony – it wasn't a terribly unusual existence.'

Naturally, though, she appreciates that her position in one of the country's most formidable dynasties (although still significant shareholders in the business, the family are no longer involved in the supermarket's day-to-day running) has helped enable her and Peter to develop their Curious Group of Hotels company.

However, she says it was philanthropy rather than entrepreneurship that was encouraged around the dining table by her father, former Conservative MP Sir Timothy, her mother Susie, and her siblings. 'We were taught that giving back and helping to improve was the right thing to do,' she says. Among her many charitable projects, she is a trustee for Survival, which supports tribal people's rights around the world, the Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy (which was set up by her cousin Mark Sainsbury) and the Staples Trust, which deals with overseas development, the environment, women's rights and combating domestic violence, and was named after her great-great-grandmother Mary Ann Staples.

> 'On romantic weekends away, we realised how uncomfortable we felt in the very formal, hushed country hotels at the time. It felt like we had to be on our best behaviour'

Despite a brief stint working at Sainsbury's in her 20s, a future with the retailer was not to be. 'Had I been the generation above, I probably would have stayed in food retailing,' Jessica says. 'I love going to supermarkets – I can spend hours there,' she laughs, adding that she remains very loyal to the family firm (but doesn't get a discount). Yet opening a contemporary country-house hotel and spa was not an obvious career path for either Jessica or Peter. Peter, a resident fellow at Oxford University's Worcester College, is as low-key as Jessica, choosing to use the simple surname Frankopan, in preference to his official title of Prince Peter Doimi de Frankopan Subic Zrinski.

They have twin daughters, Katarina and Flora, eight, and two sons, Francis, six, and Luke, three.

Peter and Jessica met while studying at Cambridge. Jessica graduated with a degree in archaeology and anthropology, then went on to complete a master's degree in development studies at the London School of Economics. Peter graduated in Byzantine history and then completed a doctorate at Oxford, becoming a don at the age of 26.

It was one afternoon, ten years after they met, when they were lounging on their sofa at home, that they hatched the idea of becoming hoteliers. 'It was probably quite a good thing that we were young and foolish,' says Jessica. 'We'd gone from low-budget backpacking in our 20s to slowly wanting to spoil ourselves a bit with romantic weekends away, and we realised how uncomfortable we felt in the very formal, hushed country hotels at the time. It felt like we had to be on our best behaviour all the time.'

So, at the age of 30, they scribbled down on a sheet of A4 paper their idea of what would make a great country hotel, and embarked on the search for what was to become Cowley Manor. It took them only six months to find Cowley, a large 1855 Italianate villa once owned by Lord Horlick. It took a further two years to restore it to its former glory, and the hotel and spa opened for business in 2002. 'The house itself was very sad and dilapidated, with an awful musty smell. It had previously been a retirement home,' Jessica says. 'But when we walked around the gardens, ➤

◀ past the cascades, we were instantly hooked.'

Jessica's eye for simplicity and vibrant splashes of colour has brought the hotel to life. 'Modern doesn't have to be dull. It is more welcoming and homely and fun to have colour,' she says of her love for clashing hues such as orange, pink and purple. 'Anything slightly too tasteful feels contrived. I go by what I like, and often, if I can't find the pieces I want, I commission wallpaper, furniture and carpets.'

Jessica's preference, both at the hotel and in the Frankopans' own home, is testament to a childhood spent at her parents' 1970s concrete house which was filled with great art, both old and new. Her parents, she says, were good at 'mixing mid-century classics with 16th-century English oak antiques'.

Very little of the original building remained at Cowley, but Jessica and Peter have painstakingly tried to restore features such as the intricate pearwood panelling in the dining room, and to use local materials such as Cotswold slate to line the modernist-inspired award-winning pool and spa house. Having overseen every last detail, from light switches to the music playlist, Jessica says, 'It feels very personal to us – it's our kind of dream country house.'

Their most recent development is the launch of the Green & Spring range of natural skin, bath and body products inspired by England's glorious flora and fauna. 'The products we had created for the hotel and spa at Cowley Manor when we first opened weren't entirely natural, and this was becoming an issue for me,' explains Jessica. We're talking as we walk with her four children to see the cascades – the natural springs that are to be found in the quiet of the Manor's gardens.

'As you get older,' she says, 'you don't want to stuff your body full of chemicals, so creating a range that drew on the beauty and efficacy of nature was key. And as Cowley lies in the heart of the British countryside, we have commissioned British designers to make much of the hotel's furniture, we've filled it with British art, and being very British about Green & Spring was important.'

Two years in development before launching into Liberty and Harvey Nichols as well as in Cowley's spa, the chemical-free botanical range is infused with extracts of herbs and flowers such as lavender, camomile, rosemary, red clover, elderflower, dandelion, fennel and rose, inspired by the kitchen and landscaped gardens at Cowley but also by the hedgerows and native blooms. Spring water from the estate is used in the aqueous-based products in the range.

The countryside's allure has grown stronger for Jessica as her family has expanded. 'Without sounding too puritanical, I want life for the children to be about the simple pleasures of running around in total freedom.'

Being with the children is important. Jessica and Peter are rarely away from them on business for more than a night or so, and make time for family holidays in the wilds of Sweden, where Peter spent many of his childhood summers, or in tucked-away nooks in Greece. 'The beauty of setting up your own business is having the flexibility to be there on sports days and during school holidays,' says Jessica. 'The girls, particularly, have started asking why I'm not always there to pick them up like the other mums. I remember looking through the crowd myself, hoping to see my mother but being disappointed that she wasn't always there…'

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It's not the glamorous, globetrotting lifestyle you might expect from a couple in their position. 'Our idea of luxury is staying in and watching *24*,' Jessica says.

She doesn't, though, discount the possibility of following in her father's political footsteps. 'I used to think I wanted to go into politics. From an early age I knew it was a way to make the world a better place – really, it was as clichéd as that,' she says. 'But I think it is important that you have experience of the real world first.'

Robust debate was always encouraged in Jessica's family. 'My dad never forced his own views. I remember being little and saying, "I'm bored", and my dad would say, "Winston Churchill learned everything about politics around the dinner table", so that has certainly rubbed off on me.'

But for the moment, she has plenty to keep her occupied. The Curious Group of Hotels also has the famous L'Hotel on Paris's Left Bank and a private members' club in Oxford, while a third hotel is due to open in Amsterdam next year. However, given Jessica's great-great-grandfather's original ambition to have a shop for each of his sons, 'we're still behind if we're going to have one hotel for each of the children,' she laughs.

For more information about Green & Spring, visit greenandspring.com. Cowley Manor, Cowley, Nr Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, tel: 01242 870900; cowleymanor.com

The hotel, above, a 19th-century Italianate villa, has been fully renovated. Right: modern British furniture is a key theme throughout. Below right: the new Green & Spring range. Below: the award-winning pool and spa. Bottom: the family by the cascades – Cowley spring water is used in some products