

# HICKEY

THE late Queen, pictured, could have had a career as an impressionist and did a mean impersonation of Lancastrian comic crooner George Formby, says her biographer Gyles Brandreth.



"She had an enormous sense of fun, was an incredible mimic and told me she'd been inspired by a famous female impersonator, Florence Desmond, who came to Windsor Castle to entertain the Royal Family during the war," says Brandreth. "The Queen could do all kinds of regional accents. She once performed George Formby's When I'm Cleaning Windows for me, while strumming an imaginary ukulele!"

Sounds an improvement on many of the turns she endured watching Royal Variety performances over the years...

THE Queen Mother was an Elton John fan who harboured a crush on the singer.

Sir Elton's friend, author and presenter Susannah Constantine, recalls a private dinner followed by an intimate piano gig at the Queen Mum's Windsor residency, Royal Lodge. "That night Elton played for the Queen Mother. He began with Blue Eyes - the Queen Mother had beautiful, sparkling, cheeky blue eyes - then Crocodile Rock. It was a privilege to witness the flirtation between him and the Queen Mother who sat up very straight and patted her chest." Rock and roll!

NATIONAL treasure Dame Joanna Lumley shares her looking good tips. "My secret is lashings of make-up and good lighting."



Stimline Joanna, pictured, continued: "If you're putting on weight, get clothes that are two sizes too big so people say, 'Oh look, you must have lost weight!'"

"But the biggest thing is smiling. Even if you're not necessarily very good looking, if you smile, you look ravishing." Well, you do if you look like a former model Joanna!

COULD aristocratic sci-fi actress Helena Bonham Carter pop up in a soap opera? Helena, who has been playing Crossroads star Noelle Gordon in TV series Holly, muses: "I haven't been offered a role in a soap - oh come on, I could do it! We could have fun." Coronation Street could be a possible - knighted actor Sir Ian McKellen played conman Mel Hutchwright while hairdresser Audrey Roberts is portrayed by actress Sue Nicholls, aka the Honourable Susan Nicholls, daughter of late Tory MP Lord Harmar-Nicholls.

PRESENTER Mariella Frostrup says she doesn't diet nowadays but that her size used to fluctuate with her state of mind. She remembers: "My weight used to be aligned with my mood. Happy, and I'd lose a stone. Miserable, and on it piled."

ACTRESS Sally Lindsay created and stars as TV antique dealer sleuth Joan in The Madame Blanc Mysteries - but confesses she knows nothing about antiques in reality. "Not really, I've always loved old things but I don't really know anything about them."

"Joan is a bit of a fantasy really, I'd never appear on Celebrity Antiques Hunt, the character would be blown immediately."

DIXIE1

# Pole position... how Britain's female skiing pioneers took on the men

## Wooden skis, woollen plus fours, aggressive bears and more than a little chauvinism... but 100 years on, the original adrenaline-fuelled club for women skiers is celebrating the daredevil antics of its founder members



OLD STYLE: Chemistry Alcott wearing ski gear from 100 years ago

WHEN Mikaela Shiffrin, the world's top female skier, hurtles down a giant slalom or a downhill slope, she crosses the finish line just a few seconds slower than the world's top male skiers. In the adrenaline-fuelled world of snow sport, men and women are almost on level pegging. It wasn't always this way. A century ago, when skiing was still a very novel pursuit, women had to struggle just to be allowed on the same slopes as the men. And among the earliest pioneers were three British women who met in the Swiss mountain village of Murren. Here, in the shadow of the Eiger mountain, in an upstairs room at the very grand Palace Hotel, they established the Ladies' Ski Club.

They wanted to assemble a hardy band of female adventurers who could raise the profile of women by challenging male domination in the rugged world of ski racing. What came out of their meeting was an organisation of bold, independent women whose achievements in public life were as remarkable as those on the piste. One flamboyant society members include Sophie, Countess of Wessex, an expert skier who holidays regularly in the Swiss Alps with husband Prince Edward and their children, Louise and James. A century after that inaugural club meeting on January 22, 1923, modern members honoured their founders with a slalom race, wearing 1920s outfits and using equipment from the original era. Thirty or so skiers donned the ankle-length skirts and plus fours favoured by their forebears and swapped lightweight ski jackets and protective helmets for woollen jumpers, coats and caps. They were cheered as they zig-zagged around the markers using wooden skis and poles so basic they'd leave an Olympian wobbling like a novice.

ALCOTT, who raced in four Olympics and seven world championships, ended up flat on her back when she completed the run in baggy trousers, jacket and beret, for her show. The 40-year-old said afterwards: "That was incredibly challenging. I had no control at all. I have so much respect for the ladies who started the sport that I love so much. "These were brave pioneering women who were prepared to hike uphill for hours carrying their skis before skiing down, really unprepared, on pretty dangerous pistes."

Gayle Parsons, the club's vice-president, explained how this was an era long before

DIXIE1



CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS: Current Ladies' Ski Club members photographed in vintage kit in Murren, Switzerland, last month to mark 100 years

These were brave, pioneering women prepared to hike uphill for hours carrying their skis

TRAILBLAZERS: Early club members included adventuress Audrey Sale-Barker (left flying, and second from left in line-up) and its first president, Wrens inaugural director, Dame Katharine Furse, centre

the invention of ski lifts, and that those first female skiers took up to five hours to reach the top of the piste, through rough, snow-bound conditions, before racing down. She says: "There must have been some horrific injuries, but we Brits are a hardy breed." The club was originally formed by wealthy, well-connected expats who transformed Murren, a secluded hamlet more than 5,000 feet up the mountain, into a fashionable enclave in the early 20th century. Sir Arnold Lunn's father, Sir Henry Lunn, discovered and developed Murren's tourist potential through his embryonic Lunn Poly travel business. It became a winter sports mecca for everybody who was anybody, with regular visitors including Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle, and the King and Queen of Belgium.

Sir Arnold was dubbed the "patron saint of skiing" and, in a lifetime devoted to the sport, is arguably best-known for holding the first slalom race in Murren in 1922. He encouraged his wife Mabel, a gifted skier in her own right, to launch the ladies' club because women were barred from joining his other venture, the Alpine Ski Club. Gayle added: "Women were not encouraged to join men's clubs. Sport in general was male dominated and for women to be involved in those clubs perhaps didn't sit very well. But they were allowed to ski with men, and they did that quite regularly and not shabbily by any means. They really held their own." Mabel Lunn became the club's vice-president, while the first presi-

dency was offered to the formidable Dame Katharine Furse, already well known thanks to her work in public service. She spent the First World War leading the British Red Cross's voluntary aid detachment. She later launched the Women's Royal Naval Service. During the Second World War, she took charge of the Land Girls. Her skiing wasn't bad either. As a girl, she practised with Conan Doyle when he visited the region. She took up serious ski racing after setting in Murren in her late 40s, and wrote a popular ski guide which included tips on how to deal with the bears that still roamed certain mountain ranges. She told her readers they would be unlucky to encounter one of the carnivores, adding: "It is said that a bear cannot traverse down a slope, so that the skier could easily get away." Another president was

THRILLING: Ladies' Ski Club vice-president Gayle Parsons helps celebrate centenary

man. The Daily Express was the first newspaper to publish the text of her note, which read: "Please come and fetch us. We have had an air crash AND ARE HURT!" During the Second World War, Sale-Barker joined the Air Transport Auxiliary, or Spitfire Girls, as they were known, flying warplanes from the factories to RAF bases, ready for raids on Nazi Germany. In 1947, she married the chief intelligence officer for Fighter Command. The lipstick SOS note was kept framed above her Dorset cottage door. Although the ski club struggled for new members as the 1930s depression flattened the tourist trade, it recovered with the consumer boom of the 1970s. Today, they have about 300 members and concentrate on sponsoring British snow-sport athletes and fencing schoolgirl teams to a contest in the French resort of Flaine every year. GAYLE says: "They were very encouraging then and we still are. We're not exclusive with those who want to race. We say, 'Come and give it a go'." Club president Ingrid Christophersen adds: "Our ladies' ski club embodies the ideals of pioneering intrepid fore-runners, initiators and stubborn defenders of freedom, breaking the glass ceiling long before any of that was fashionable. We are celebrating not just 100 years of ladies skiing, having fun and looking beautiful. We are documenting a social revolution."

PHOTO: JONATHAN BLOOMFIELD