

FEATURES

Goodbye Vogue House: Isabella Blow, *Tatler* and me

Her creativity and chaos echoed through the corridors of Vogue House as she launched the generation's finest models and designers. In a piece from the 310th anniversary issue back in December 2019, Richard Dennen remembers one of *Tatler's* greatest fashion directors, Isabella Blow

By Richard Dennen
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ISABELLA BLOW IN A PHILIP TREACY HAT, 2005 Miguel Reveriego / Art Department

Apart from sitting next to the future Duchess of Cambridge once in history of art, I achieved very little at university. So when a friend dialled down from St Andrews to the *Tatler* offices in London to arrange an internship for me after I'd graduated, I was thrilled.

I met *Tatler's* fashion director, Isabella Blow, on my first day. The then features editor, Camilla Long, having given me my induction to the magazine – 'There is no party in this town that one can't gatecrash, Dickie' – promptly sent me down the third floor corridor of Vogue House to fetch her dry cleaning.

Issy intercepted me, appearing from the fashion department with her bare breasts protruding over an armour-like bodice. She said she loved my hair (it was peroxide blond at the time) and whisked me downstairs to the back door loading bay, where we smoked and talked for ages.

She remained a big figure in my life during those first years at *Tatler*. She knew everything about fashion and history, and was, without a doubt, the friendliest and most life-enhancing person in town. While she was no snob, when we met she was deeply obsessed with tided blondes (she'd placed Eloise Anson with Philip Treacy and was in the midst of launching Mary Charteris' modelling career). She always had cigarettes, and despite the days of smoking in offices being long gone, there were marks all around the floor of her desk where she had stubbed them out.



ISABELLA BLOW ATTENDS THE ANNUAL KRUG ROSE CELEBRATION AT DEBENHAM HOUSE, LONDON, 2005 Dave M. Bennett/Getty Images

Issy was already a fashion star – the champion of young designers and new models, who'd discovered Philip Treacy, Alexander McQueen and Sophie Dahl. The very first magazine I'd ever bought for myself, en route to my new school, was the December 1993 issue of British *Vogue* and in it was a story she had styled, 'Anglo-Saxon Attitude', shot by Steven Meisel, that launched a new generation of Swans: Plum Sykes, Honor Fraser, Bella Freud and Stella Tennant. It was fabulous and cool and I knew right then that world was for me.

In 2002, Issy had become *Tatler's* Fashion Director, hired from the *Sunday Times* by Editor Georgie Greig, and she immediately unleashed mad fashion with a deep cultural knowledge on to its pages, whether it was hyper-real, high-gloss shoots shot by David LaChapelle, or risqué swimsuits in the streets of Naples in 'See Nipples and Die'. (I don't think her assistant ever got over being pushed in front of the camera for that one.) Her work was infused with an understanding of Britain's history and mythology, from King Arthur to Bloomsbury to the Bright Young Things.



ISABELLA BLOW Nick Harvey

In his new memoir, *The Glassy Years*, Nicholas Coleridge, the Chairman here at Condé Nast Britain, remembers how, during Issy's first week, she hailed a black cab from Liverpool to London, explaining that she hadn't realised there was a railway station in Liverpool. And he recalls, too, her trip to Delhi when she booked herself into a suite at the Imperial hotel, with no means of settling the bill, assuming that Condé Nast would pay – even though she was there on holiday.

By the time I arrived three years later, a features assistant mainly steaming clothes for the features desk to wear out that night, there wasn't a day that went by in the office that something fabulous and hilarious didn't happen.

There was the time she boomed out across the desks, with a hoarse cackle, that she'd just had a moment of passion with her lover, a Venetian gondolier, on the back stairs between the second and third floors. We all loved it when she was interviewed by the *Guardian* sitting at a desk right outside the Editor's office, with its door wide open. Asked about Georgie, she bellowed: 'He's a *little* man, a *tiny* man. I say he's *Napoleonic*, really. All this energy crammed into such a little body...' Another time, we were all ushered into the fashion cupboard, where she had some young man with her who turned on a ghetto blaster and proceeded to strip while she whooped away.



PHILIP TREACY AND ISABELLA BLOW ATTEND THE LYCRA BRITISH STYLE AWARDS AT OLD BILLINGSGATE MARKET, 2003 Dave Bennett/Getty Images

She was outrageous, but also kind. In what I still consider a career low-point, I used to style 'Babe of the Month', the magazine's back page. But, despite my reservations, Issy always insisted it was '*marvellous*'. 'Darling, I've got a *wonderful* girl for you,' she would say in that low, breathless way she had.

She gave me a wacky top hat that Philip Treacy had made for her husband, Detmar Spoke. She would drag me off to the Blue Bar at The Berkeley to see an artist she'd just met and spoke openly about being depressed and wanting to kill herself at a time before it was ever normal to talk about those things, couching it, as always, by being wickedly witty.



MEREDITHE OSTROM, NICK RHODES, ISABELLA BLOW AND SAFFRON ALDRIDGE Nick Harvey

As time went on she slipped away to the edge of our office's everyday world, but occasionally I had news of her. There was the time the call came through from the driver of the car she'd booked on the *Tatler* account from London en route to Doddington, her empty, crumbling, ancestral family seat in Cheshire. The driver was saying she was going to kill herself there, and Georgie had to get the car to turn around.

The last time I met her was strange. I was dashing out of the door to work one morning and there she was, standing outside the house I lived in on Flood Street, in a shimmering white, ghostly dress, which was very Miss Havisham. She was walking back from a party on Chelsea Embankment. In those days - 2006 - this didn't seem strange at all, and we kissed, now I realise, goodbye.

Her memorial service was held during London Fashion Week. The Ferry brothers wore smart military uniforms and served as ushers – she was Otis Ferry's godmother – while her sister, Julia Delves Broughton, now married to Hans Rausing, and niece Harriet Verney, who helped me to relaunch *Tatler* 11 years later, read lessons. Two of her former editors, Anna Wintour and Georgie Greig, gave addresses. At the end of his, Georgie played out her recording from her voicemail: that fruity voice booming out across the Guards Chapel.

Even today, years later and again sitting back in the *Tatler* office, I sometimes race through my phone contacts and see her name and number *whizz* past. I've ditched the peroxide blond hair, and the Philip Treacy top hat was stolen at an after-party I threw back in wilder days, but there are some things you can never edit out.

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