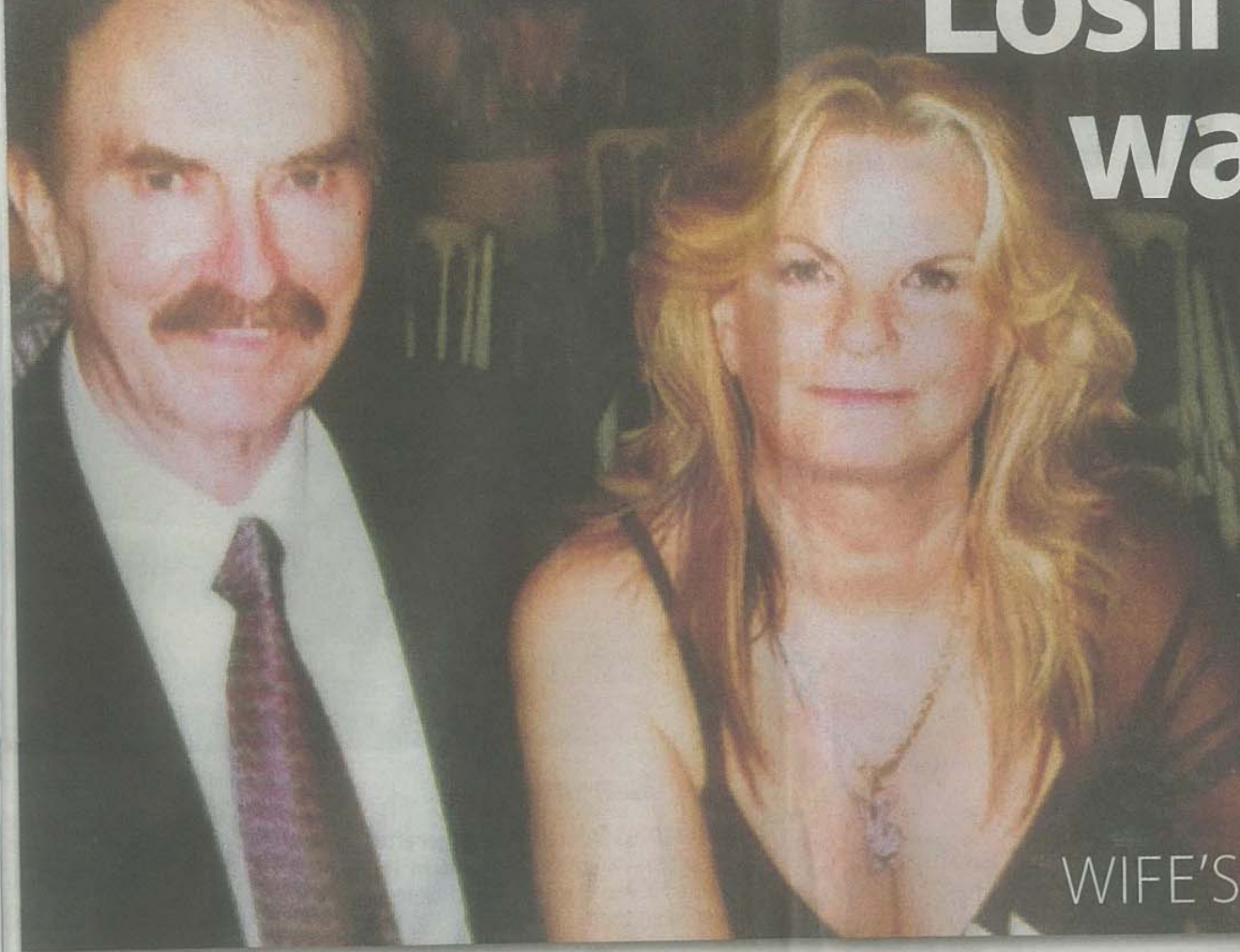


DEVOTED: George and Maureen



# Losing my husband was hard enough ...but then my stepdaughters contested his deathbed will

## WIFE'S COURT BATTLE OVER £4M FORTUNE



STEPDAUGHTER: Amanda Wharton



STEPDAUGHTER: Victoria Wharton



**S**itting on her partner's hospital bed, Maureen Gray held his hand in tears. Seconds earlier, George Wharton had asked her to marry him – and she had accepted.

Far from being a surprise, she'd been expecting this moment. Nearly 32 years earlier, the couple had made an emotional pact with each other – if one of them ever became terminally ill, they would marry.

In September 2008, that moment arrived. Aware that George was losing his two-year battle with cancer, Maureen, 66, was devastated at the prospect of a future without him.

Putting her emotions aside, days later, George, 78, was allowed home and they finally wed sitting in the living room of their luxury house on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent.

Before the ceremony took place, George asked to be alone with his solicitor. It was then that he made the changes to his will that would cause a devastating three-and-a-half year legal battle between Maureen and her three stepdaughters.

Within days of their father passing away, they claimed his decision to leave his entire £4million fortune to his new wife wasn't valid because it was made

plot. She says: "Wed only been together a while when I took the plunge and went to live with him."

Her children Zoe, 49, Zena, 48, and Rick, 44, also moved with her to Minster, Kent, but, at the time, George was estranged from his own children – Vicki Wharton, 55, and Gina Fagin, 51, from his first marriage, as well as Amanda Wharton, 42, from another relationship.

"George hadn't been a very good father to his daughters – he certainly had his faults," says Maureen.

"But I managed to convince George to develop a relationship with Vicki and Gina.

"Still, it was always on and off and they were never very close."

Together, Maureen and George built his business, turning White Horse Leisure into a successful chain of leisure and caravan parks.

Despite two of Maureen's children, Zena and Rick, taking George's surname in 1980, the couple were always set against marrying.

"We were married in all but the official document," says Maureen. "My children loved him and called him dad – we were a proper family, we didn't need a piece of paper to prove it."

"I had been married twice

good experience of marriage, so we were happy to stay as partners.

"But George always said he wanted to be buried with a ring on his finger, so we made our deathbed pact. Even when I had breast cancer in 1999, we didn't consider getting married as we knew it wasn't terminal.

"George nursed me back to health until he died just three days later.

Then, in 2006, George was diagnosed with eye cancer. He had successful treatment but, two years later, he was rushed to hospital with abdominal pain. The couple's fears were confirmed when they were told the cancer had spread to his liver.

"It was devastating. We knew there was no chance of him getting better and that it was time."

So, with George in his blue and white stripped pyjamas and Maureen in her pink dressing gown, they finally made their wedding vows.

The only witnesses were the couple's

solicitor and Maureen's daughter Zena. "George was in good form. He had two whiskeys to celebrate and I had a cup of tea. We were so happy that day, although we didn't even take a picture or have a cake.

"We didn't need all those things to make our wedding special."

Maureen didn't leave George's side until he died just three days later.

"As I stroked his face he whispered to me, 'Today's the day. Your dad's here'. It was incredible. My dad died on the same date 26 years earlier.

"I knew then that George was going, so I told my son to get on the phone to his daughters.

"George asked me not to, but I couldn't live with them not being there on my conscious.

"I didn't know where Amanda was but Gina and Vicki came to say goodbye," she recalls.

When they arrived, they were unhappy with the way their dad was

receiving palliative care. "Vicki said I was giving her dad morphine, which he was allergic to," claims Maureen.

"I hadn't given him anything myself and George's hospice nurse tried to explain it was a morphine alternative. It was heartbreaking that George had to listen to all of that in his final hours of life."

Later that night, George passed away, with Maureen and her grandchildren at his side.

Days later, Maureen went to their solicitor to hear the will.

"George had left me everything, his entire £4million fortune, without leaving his daughters a penny," says Maureen.

"With various delays it was almost a month later by the time we were able to bury George.

"I really threw myself into giving him a good send-off and 400 people came to pay their respects.

"We had 12 funeral cars, including

one for his daughters. I'm not sure if they even attended the funeral, I certainly didn't see them. I thought they should have been there really."

Although doctors had disproved Vicki's concerns about her father's care, Maureen was soon to find out that her stepdaughters were accusing her of unduly pressurising their father into leaving them nothing in his will.

It was just the beginning of a three-year court battle to have George's will ruled invalid.

"They said that because he was terminally ill and on heavy medication, his ability to make sound and reasonable changes to his will was impaired," says Maureen.

"But the fact was there was no way I could have influenced his decision to rewrite his will as I hadn't even known he was changing it.

"I only found out he'd left everything to me after he passed away.

"I was heartbroken to find out they were taking legal action.

"Half of the caravan business was mine anyway – I worked seven days a week to build it up to what it was. If they had just come to me, I'd have happily given them some money."

In the High Court in London in December 2011, they claimed Maureen made it clear they weren't welcome at the funeral and accused her of cutting up and sending back a card with flowers Victoria had left for her dad.

even be mine afterwards. I'd worked on that business for half of my life – I couldn't cope with handing it over."

In court, George's daughters later denied any of them suggested their father had been "unlawfully killed", with Vicki insisting they'd contacted a coroner to ask for an autopsy because they were "not happy" about the way morphine had been administered.

Eventually, Maureen won the case. The judge described them as a "family at war with itself".

He added: "I do not regard it as suspicious that a husband should leave to his 'wife' of 32 years the entirety of his estate, even if he's a rich man."

But, for Maureen, it was a bitter-sweet victory.

"I was happy to hear the verdict but these three years have been the worst of my life.

"What upset me was they made a mockery of us both.

"We were accused of having a purely business relationship, despite the fact that we held hands everywhere we went.

"I still feel angry at George. Not that he didn't leave his daughters any money, but that he left me.

"He was a strong-willed man right to the end and I know that, if he didn't want his daughters to have his money, there was nothing anyone could say to change his mind."

With the case finally behind her,

I had a cup of tea to mark our wedding – we were so happy

If they had come to me I'd have given them money



# 'But I'm NOT a gold-digger!'



I was living on the dance floor when a good-looking stranger boogied over to me and started joining in. thought: *He's nice.*

Then I asked him: 'What's our aftershave?' 'It's a new brand,' he replied. 'It's called Kiss Me.'

I rolled my eyes and laughed. His name was George. He was 7 and I was 31 but when we shared our first kiss, I felt as if I was 18 again. He owned the caravan park where I was staying, and soon I started visiting him every weekend.

Five months later, George said: 'Move in with me, Mo.'

'OK,' I replied. I quit my job as a hairdresser and George gave me a job working at the park, selling caravans and helping him run the club. We became partners in every aspect of our lives. We loved dancing the night away at the club or going out for day trips on George's boat. But most of our time was spent working together, building the business.

Then one day, I was working when I came across an opened letter in George's car. As I read it, my mouth fell open. Later that night, I asked



George and me

George: 'Who are Gina and Victoria?' He flashed me an awkward look. He said: 'They're my daughters.' I'd known that George had one daughter, Amanda, but I hadn't realised he had another two. He told me he didn't see them. I found it sad, but George was a very private person and I knew not to pry. Many years went by. George and I had our ups and downs but our love never wavered. At times, we discussed marriage but in my eyes we were as good as married anyway. I changed my surname by deed poll to match George's. We even changed my kids' names too. And we made a pact. George said: 'Promise me if one

George was the love of my life, so why was I being punished for becoming his bride? By *Maureen Wharton, 66*

of us ever gets really ill, then we'll get married.' 'It's a deal,' I agreed. There was only one real sadness in our lives and that was the distance between George and his children.

I spoke to him about it and he arranged for us to see Gina. We met in a cafe and I discovered that I liked her. Over the next few months, George and I continued to see her, and sometimes she would bring Victoria along too.

Both women seemed pleasant, but things didn't last. George and Gina fell out again and stopped talking to each other. It was a shame, but then I had other things to worry about.

One morning, I woke to find George clutching his stomach in agony. I called an ambulance and he went to hospital. At first the doctor said: 'It's probably indigestion.'

But when the pain didn't go, George was admitted and had tests. A week later, we saw the consultant for the results.

He told us: 'I'm afraid you've got liver cancer. There's nothing we can do to treat it.'

George stared at him in disbelief. He was silent for a few moments. Then he asked: 'How long have I got?'

The consultant looked grave. He said: 'It may be no more than

three to 10 days.' I buried my head in George's lap and began to cry.

He gripped my hand and we sobbed together. Then George said something.

I looked up at him. 'Please, Mo,' he said. 'I don't want to be buried without a ring on my finger. Marry me today.'

I said: 'Of course I will.' But the question was, how? There was no time to arrange a ceremony.

George said: 'Leave it to me.' At home, he had a private meeting with his solicitor and when he'd left, a registrar arrived.

George was still in his pyjamas, so I went upstairs and got changed into mine so he wouldn't feel daft. Then we stood together in front of the registrar — me in my pink fluffy dressing gown and George in his blue-and-white striped pyjamas — and repeated our vows.

As we made promises for a future we knew we didn't have, I was very upset. All I could think about was what my life would be like without George.

George looked into my eyes and said: 'I love you, Mo.'

'I love you too,' I replied. Then the registrar pronounced us husband and wife. There was no church, no extravagant wedding dress or fancy reception. But,



George's caravan park

quietly and without fuss, I had become George's wife after 32 years together.

The following day, he deteriorated.

I asked my son Rick to call George's daughters, so they would have the chance to say goodbye to their father.

When Gina arrived she took his hand. Victoria also came. It was clear they were both very upset.

A day went by, then another. And then, three days after George and I had wed, he looked at me and said: 'It won't be much longer now, Mo.'

'Don't be silly,' I replied. But later that night, as I sat by George's side, he slipped away. He was 78.

Afterwards, I felt completely numb.

So when George's solicitor asked to meet me for the reading of the will, it was the last thing on my mind.

But there was a shock in store. George's estate came to £4million.

The solicitor said: 'He's left everything to you.'

I was stunned. And I wasn't the only one.

A few months later, I received a letter. When I opened it, my



Amanda Wharton



Gina Fagin



Victoria Wharton

face flushed red with anger. I told my daughter Zena: 'Gina, Victoria and Amanda are taking me to court. They say I pressured George to cut them out of his will.'

I was outraged. I loved George. We'd been together for 32 years and I'd been at his bedside as he died. The idea that I'd spent the last days I had with him manipulating him into giving me his money made me feel sick.

I said: 'I can't believe they are doing this.'

The last thing I wanted was a row over money, but I had no choice. In time, I made my way to the High Court in London, to face Victoria Wharton, 55, Amanda Wharton, 42, and Gina Fagin, 51.

The court heard that George had made the will on the day he was

discharged from hospital, knowing that he had little time to live. My case was that he had chosen to leave his £4million to me, as he was not close to Victoria and was estranged from Gina and Amanda.

They contested this. They said I had put pressure on George to cut them out of the will.

Victoria claimed her father had told her that there was nothing to worry about in regards to his will, and that everything was taken care of.

Her lawyer, Jeremy Cousins QC, said: 'If she is right in what she said, it casts very grave doubt over whether Mr Wharton really did intend to dispose of his assets as the will suggests.'

It was terribly distressing. I felt I was being portrayed as the wicked stepmother, when all I had done was love George.

After hearing all the evidence, the judge, Mr Justice Norris, addressed the court. He said that a deathbed marriage and a large amount of money could be expected to provoke indignation

and he described us as a family at that he had made his ruling.

Then he made his ruling. He said that he believed George knew exactly what he was doing marrying me and making his will.

He said: 'I do not regard it as suspicious that a husband should leave to his "wife" of 32 years the entirety of his estate, even if he is a rich man.'

It meant that the will was valid and the money was mine. I should have been relieved but just felt angry.

I'd wanted to grieve for my husband in peace and with dignity. Instead I'd been dragged through a legal nightmare.

Now I am trying to move on with my life but it is difficult.

Just the other day I left my home in The Leas, Sheerness, Kent, to flowers on George's grave, and someone had put a wallet there. It was meant for me, it seems very clear.

I feel I've been treated like a gold digger, when all I ever did was love someone with all my heart. I'd given up every penny of that money to have my George back again.



The court

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