

Peyton Palace

The latest royal scandal is proving to be anything but a gay old time for the Windsors **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**



The aborted trial of a former palace butler has plunged the British royal family into the queerest scandal in memory—an affair that has transfixed London for weeks thanks to charges of gay rape, cover-up, and palace orgies.

While the Windsor family is no stranger to controversy, this scandal—which continues to unfold—certainly ranks up there in terms of impact and importance.

"It's just consumed the media," says Matt Wells, media correspondent for *The [London] Guardian* newspaper, who is openly gay. "Everything else fell off the agenda. It's hard to tell

what the long-term effects are. It certainly destroyed any sense of mystique surrounding the royals, if there was any remaining."

The media storm began with the trial of Princess Diana's former butler and close confidant, Paul Burrell, who was charged with being in possession of stolen property. A police search of his home uncovered hundreds of personal items—ranging from clothes to CDs—belonging to Diana and her children. Burrell says he was holding on to the items so he could give them to Diana's heirs at the proper time.

The trial was cut short in early November, when Queen Elizabeth II sud-

Tabloid trashing

The rape scandal has given Fleet Street tabloids a chance to really show their backward views on homosexuality, a London media watcher says.

denly remembered that she had met with Burrell earlier and that he told her he had some of the late princess's belongings.

But the trial wasn't short enough to halt the string of allegations that followed. Among them:

- Diana taped an interview with former valet George Smith, who claimed that another male palace employee had raped him once and had attempted to do so a second time. Palace officials ►

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Diana's former butler Paul Burrell kick-started the scandal.

say they investigated the charge but that it was never brought to the attention of the police. Prince Charles's private secretary has announced that the prince will conduct an internal review concerning the rape allegations.

- The "rape tape" is reportedly one of the items in a war chest of dirty secrets Diana kept as ammunition in her battles with the Windsor family. Also in the

chest, which police reportedly found in Burrell's home, was a letter from Prince Charles's father, Prince Philip, calling Diana a "trollop."

- Smith also says he found a male member of the royal family in a compromising position with a male palace employee. The press has made less-than-subtle hints about which family member and which palace employee were involved,

but no names have been revealed.

- Former palace employees and security personnel charge that palace servants brought "rough trade" and prostitutes into the royal residences, had orgies (though not apparently gay ones), took drugs, and sold off royal property for personal profit. They also report that it was common knowledge that the Queen Mother preferred gay employees around her daughters, Elizabeth and Margaret, when they were young to avoid any chance of their being compromised.

- Burrell says Diana had him procure "top-shelf [pornographic] magazines" for Prince William. He also says the princess sometimes met lovers while wearing nothing more than a fur coat.

In turn, Burrell, who is married and has two children, has been the subject of several charges from gay men, including an Australian man who provided love notes and photos of himself and Burrell; he claims that Burrell wanted to marry him.

"Paul Burrell is obviously a man who is confused about his sexuality," Wells says. "No question about that. I kind of feel sorry for him in a way. He would have been much better off just going back into the shadows."

Instead, Burrell—as is common in the United Kingdom—sold his story to a tabloid newspaper, for about \$450,000. Now he is shopping a game show program called *What the Butler Saw*.

Smith's credibility has also come under attack. "George Smith is a very compromised witness," Wells says. He points out that Smith claimed to have been raped at least once by a different man, but the charges were investigated and discounted by police. He also reportedly suffers from alcoholism and mental problems stemming, in part, from the carnage he saw during the Falklands War.

"I think the feeling is that all of this [scandal] is a storm in a teacup and ►

none of it probably ever happened," Wells says. "But it's a bizarre situation where the monarchy is rocked to its foundations. That's really interesting as well, the idea that [the monarchy] is so fragile.

"The big problem was the cover-up," he adds. "All this stems from the initial cover-up. I'm not entirely sure whose fault that was. If they hadn't covered it up so badly, we wouldn't be in this situation."

London's sensationalistic tabloids are well-known for their biting reports. The scandal also has given the Fleet Street tabloids a chance to brandish their backward views on homosexuality, Wells says.

"It's shown how the press still can't

handle homosexuality," Wells says. "It's either a badge of shame ('Palace Gay Sex Secrets' or 'Gay Sex Slime of Palace Butler')—you know, that kind of thing—or it's an object of derision ('Palace Butler Wanted White Wedding'). The scandal has shown up the worst aspects of

the British press in terms of its attitude toward homosexuality."

And it's not over yet. Another trial of a palace employee is about to get under way. This one is accused of stealing items and then selling them. (Burrell, by all accounts, had no intention of selling the items in his possession. Some see him as merely hoarding them like a sort of fan.)

"We are still in the middle of it," says Wells, who doesn't at the moment expect any radical policy changes regarding the royal family, especially since the fiercely royalist Tony Blair is prime minister. "Britain's a weird place," he says. "Don't underestimate the power of inertia in Britain. Things often just carry on as before and may well yet." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.

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