

PEOPLE...

Sofka Zinovieff

To the manor brought

Who is Sofka, what is she? Almost in the words of the famous old song, many a Faringdonian has wondered just who is the new lady of the manor — the inheritor of Faringdon House.

Sofka Zinovieff was researching in Greece for her doctorate when she received a summons from her grandfather, Robert Heber Percy, to discuss his decision to leave his home to her. She was again in Greece, only a few months later, when Mr Heber Percy died. Then aged just 26, the new owner of 18th century Faringdon House was more concerned with her academic studies than in settling down and dropping roots — let alone taking on a stately home.

She has yet to establish a career. But she has just won her PhD in social anthropology, having taken a First at Cambridge, and is thinking at the moment in terms of doing something in journalism — probably on a freelance basis.

Sofka's enigmatic name has romantic enough origins: her grandmother on her father's side

was a Russian princess who escaped the Revolution — also named Sofka — only, strangely enough, to become a Communist in this country. She lives in Cornwall. Sofka feels her Russian ancestry strongly, she says, although her father was born in England.

'I thought it was a beautiful, magical place'

As a child Sofka did not know her grandfather Robert Heber Percy, who had separated from her grandmother. She was 17 before her mother took her to visit him in Faringdon for the first time. He was then in his late '60s. On her occasional visits from then on, their relationship grew despite the age difference, as they shared interests and conversation.

"I was not used to the kind of atmosphere I found at Faringdon House at that time, and I thought it was all wonderful — a beautiful and magical place. Perhaps he realised that." Cer-

tainly, she could hardly believe it when Mr Heber Percy summoned her to confide his plan to leave the estate to her. "But I didn't see it then changing my life. I simply assumed he would live for a long time, and we didn't even discuss it. I suppose I thought it all rather inappropriate to have something like Faringdon House at my stage in life."

She was not only shocked, then, but 'terrified' at the prospect that lay before her when the promised inheritance suddenly turned, all too quickly, into reality. But she has tended to treat it as something of a family rather than an exclusively personal inheritance. As well as her mother, who lives in London, and her grandfather's nephew Alan, who farms in Faringdon, there are her two younger brothers. One of them, Leo, lives in Great Coxwell and is a furniture

designer at Coleshill. He has stayed occasionally at Faringdon House, as has her other brother, Kolinka. She says neither brother became familiar the house before their grandfather died, "so it was never really a part of their lives", and her mother never, in any case, expected to inherit. All have been happy to share with her in her good fortune.

She found it a strange experience in the early days, even a little shocking, as she faced the challenge of adopting a strange new role. She had first known Faringdon House when it was still exuding an atmosphere of 'romantic elegance', when as she puts it, 'everything seemed to shimmer'. She couldn't hope to recreate that, but was conscious of the need for some kind of

Turn to page 9

From page 7

continuity, while facing up to the everyday realities of running a big house and estate and staff, and at the same time thinking about a career.

A very attractive young woman, self-assured but of quiet charm and femininity, Sofka is young enough and independent enough to want to give Faringdon House some of her own style, while being too sensitive to the value of traditions to want to sweep away established ways.

Thus, as a vegetarian she has little time for hunting — but allows the hunt to cross the Park as long as they keep away from the immediate grounds around the house. And while she enjoys the spacious elegance of the drawing rooms, she has indulged in a modern kitchen (designed by brother Leo) where she can eat informal meals.

Perhaps surprisingly, the house is not so big as to be daunting — it has just five bedrooms. And although the reception rooms are large and gracious, they are well-warmed and quite cosy enough for Sofka not to have to retreat into sheltered corners.

'Tea parties — but with a difference in style'

The lunch and tea parties may be a little different in personnel and style to those which Lord Berners once hosted, but Sofka has them nevertheless. She says her friends have not found it so strange visiting her in such grand surroundings, as they have shared with her the gradual realisation of her inheritance.

She is indebted, she says, to those who keep Faringdon House going — Don Pargeter, a kind of Man Friday around the estate, Des Bell the gardener, and Chris France the estate manager. Rosa Proll, long-serving housekeeper has now retired. Sofka has a daily help, Diane Brooks. She says she feels much more confident now about her new role, and positively enjoys making business plans with Mr France.

While Sofka is happy to share 'this beautiful house' with her family and friends, she also has plans for allowing more public access to the park through special openings and organised visits. But although she recognises some personal responsibility to the community of Faringdon, she would hate this to be one born of any 'anachronistic' class-consciousness, cut off from real life.

In any case, at the moment she is anxious to continue her research and studies, involving considerable travel — time enough later to settle down as the lady of Faringdon House and getting involved in local concerns. Meanwhile, she will enjoy her books and her music (she plays the piano, and has catholic tastes) during her limited stays at the house of which she is so proud. "I am a sociable person, but I also appreciate my solitude," she explains. In Faringdon House, there is certainly room for both. □