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Elizabeth Harris Aitken, peer's daughter who survived turbulent earlier marriages to Rex Harrison and Richard Harris – obituary

When in 2002 Jonathan Aitken announced their engagement, an observer said of his fiancée that she had 'an elegant air of Weltschmerz'

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Elizabeth Harris Aitken, who has died aged 85, began her career as an actress and later founded a successful PR business; but she became better known for her turbulent marriages to the actors [Richard Harris](#) and Sir Rex Harrison, which she chronicled in a volume of memoirs, *Love, Honour and Dismay* (1976).

In the 1980s she endured further discontent as the wife of Lord Beaverbrook's grandson, Peter Aitken, an investment banker, before eventually finding happiness as the second wife of Aitken's cousin, the former Tory Cabinet minister and reformed jailbird Jonathan Aitken.

Elizabeth Harris Aitken memorably described her life as “a story of tenderness, treachery, madness, adultery, drink, ambition and suicide. The usual everyday problems”, and when Jonathan Aitken announced their engagement, one journalist present observed of his 66-year-old fiancée that she had “an elegant air of Weltschmerz”.



Elizabeth Harris with Jonathan Aitken in 2002 after it was announced that they were to marry | CREDIT: Michael Stephens/PA Wire

She was born Elizabeth Rees-Williams in Glamorgan, Wales, on May 1 1936, the middle child of David Rees-Williams and his wife Constance, the daughter of the Lord Mayor of Cardiff. Her father would serve as Labour MP for Croydon South from 1945 to 1950, when he was raised to the peerage as Baron Ogmores, and subsequently served as Minister of Civil Aviation in Clement Attlee's administration.

Later on he crossed over to the Liberals, was made president of the party and carried the coronet at the investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales in 1969.

Despite his Left-of-centre leanings, Lord Ogmores sent his daughter to finishing school in Switzerland, and when she told him that she wanted to be an actress he insisted that she also do the Season as a debutante. She was presented at court by the Countess of Longford in 1954.

She enrolled at Rada, where her contemporaries included Albert Finney, Alan Bates and Peter O'Toole, then joined the repertory circuit, but her acting career fizzled out after she met a hell-raising but impecunious young red-haired Irish actor called Richard Harris in a coffee bar in Earl's Court in 1956.

They began an affair during which she spent the whole of her £50-a-month dress allowance on his rent. When their marriage was celebrated with a glittering reception at the House of Lords in 1957, the sum total of the groom's fortune was £25.



Richard Harris with his former wife Elizabeth in 1988 | CREDIT: PA/PA Wire

The couple soon had three sons in quick succession, and Elizabeth put her career on hold to travel with her husband as he became a big star. Harris, however, was not prepared to play the role of paterfamilias. “Sometimes he would say, ‘I am just going out for a drink,’

and forget to say he was going to a bar in Dublin,” she recalled. “I would be waiting for him at home in London and I wouldn’t hear from him again for a fortnight.”

On one occasion he disappeared for a month, only to return home asking: “Why didn’t you pay the ransom?”

She said: “He was wild and young. There was no structure, I never knew what was going to happen tomorrow or where he was going to be.” As the 1960s wore on it became increasingly hard for her to put up with his behaviour.

Eventually, she turned for consolation to Robin Douglas-Home, the writer, musician, photographer – and nephew of the former prime minister Alec. By the time Douglas-Home committed suicide in 1968, the Harris marriage was all but over. They divorced in 1969, though they remained good friends.

During her marriage she had left the drinking to her husband, but after they parted company, as she recalled in her memoirs, “I couldn’t rest until I had evened the score with Richard. I behaved appallingly.”

She partied relentlessly, staying away from home for nights on end, and was constantly in debt. She dated [Christopher Plummer](#) briefly, and also began to spend a lot of time with Rex Harrison and his fourth wife, Rachel Roberts.

Sensing, despite his chequered romantic past, that Harrison, 30 years her senior, might offer her the stability she craved, Elizabeth embarked on an affair with the veteran actor and the couple flew to Tangier only four weeks after he had announced his separation from Rachel (who attempted suicide in response).



With Rex Harrison, July 1971 | CREDIT: Barrette/Daily Express/Getty Images

Elizabeth became Harrison's fifth wife in 1971 but Harrison was a notoriously autocratic, pernickety man with a pronounced vein of cruelty. At first Elizabeth enjoyed his obsession with order, but soon she began to find it stifling.

She had to dress for dinner every night even if the couple were staying in; she was expected to plan menus and arrange for three trays of drinks to be laid out every evening in different rooms to enable her husband to decide at the last minute where he wanted to be.

On one occasion, no doubt emboldened by his employer's example, Harrison's butler slapped Elizabeth's hand when she picked up a plum from a bowl, telling her "those are the master's plums." She recalled that she was so in awe of her husband that she started standing up whenever he entered the room.

His behaviour became common knowledge, and when Elizabeth's first husband Richard Harris read that Rex Harrison had thrown wine in her face in a restaurant, he rang him up and said: "If you ever do that again, I'll come round and kick your hairpiece off."

When an old friend rebuked Harrison for his behaviour towards Elizabeth, saying: "I've never met a more unhappy woman in my life," Harrison replied: "Oh, haven't you? I have. All my other wives."

The marriage limped along until finally, in July 1975, the couple parted, after which, in an attempt at catharsis, Elizabeth embarked on her memoir (which she dedicated ambiguously to "RH").



In 1972 | CREDIT: Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty

She also began an affair with Jonathan Aitken, then an ambitious young Tory MP, a relationship that foundered when she took up with his cousin Peter.

She and Peter Aitken married in 1980, but as she recalled, “It wasn’t a marriage really, it was a mistake.” It ended in 1985 in bitter acrimony, and when the dust cleared, Elizabeth found she had very little money left. As soon as she could, she changed her name back to Harris by deed poll.

As she struggled to put her life back together again she founded a PR business which became a success, representing several luxury hotels around the world.

She was in no hurry to get married again, but in 2001 she met her old flame Jonathan Aitken at a showing of a film featuring her son Jamie and Aitken’s nephew Jack Davenport, both actors.

Aitken, having famously fallen on his “sword of truth” after admitting lying during a libel action, and having found Christianity during seven months in Belmarsh prison, was a very different man from the ambitious young politician she had known in the 1970s.



With Richard Harris and children Damian, 6, Jared, 3 and Jamie, 1, on their way to spend Christmas in Co Clare, 1964 | CREDIT: PA/PA Wire

They dated for six months before Aitken proposed, during which time Aitken got to know and became friends with Richard Harris, who was dying of Hodgkin's disease. When she and Aitken got engaged Harris gave his approval, and when her former husband died in October 2002, Aitken was present during the administration of the last rites.

They married in 2003 at St Margaret's, Westminster, in a ceremony attended by various politicians, and by a few old lags who had done time with Aitken in Belmarsh. They then spent their honeymoon in the Bahamas at the house Elizabeth had once shared with Richard Harris.

They settled down to contented married life and in 2018 Elizabeth found herself the wife of a prison chaplain after Aitken took holy orders to be a chaplain at Pentonville.

For the last 10 years of her life, however, she suffered from worsening health problems, which began with a massive stroke, followed by a second stroke, heart failure and two tumours.

She is survived by her husband and by the three sons of her marriage to Richard Harris, including the Bafta-winning actor Jared Harris.

Elizabeth Harris Aitken, born May 1 1936, died April 15 2022

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