



THE FAMILY IN QUESTION  
**THE SACKVILLES**  
WEDNESDAY 20 JULY

The Sackville dynasty was effectively founded by Thomas Sackville, Lord Treasurer to James I, who, inheriting a royal debt of £100,000, multiplied six times during his term of office. Despite his profligacy he was rewarded with the Earldom of Dorset, and soon set about building his great house, Knole, just outside Sevenoaks with 365 rooms- one for each day of the year. Thomas enjoyed a fortune of £6000 a year, approximately equivalent to £1.8 million now, which his grandson, Richard, succeeded in squandering to the tune of a remainder of only £60,000 by the time of his death at the age of 34. His wife's diaries record how he went to London "*to Bowling Alleys, to Plays and Horse Races while I stay in the country like an owl in the desert.*" Later at the restoration of Charles II a Sackville became Lord Chamberlain, a patron of poets, the drinking companion of the rakish Earl of Rochester and the lover of Nell Gwynne before he passed her over to his Monarch. The first Duke of Dorset took an Italian mistress, Giovanna Baccelli, memorably painted by Gainsborough, and formed a magnificent art collection, probably with the help of his friend, Sir Joshua Reynolds. A Victorian Sackville also had an Italian mistress, Pepita, who became the grandmother of Vita Sackville-West, the lover of Virginia Woolf and Violet Keppel. In middle age, she itemised her three great loves as her husband, poetry and Knole insisting that Knole was the greatest of the three. Vita survives in the popular imagination as a gardener of genius with a vigorous libido; her extraordinary garden at Sissinghurst certainly speaks to a woman of great, idiosyncratic passion and strong intelligence.