

# Cynthia Payne, madam - obituary

Brothel keeper dubbed 'Madam Cyn' who was jailed after holding sex parties in Streatham in exchange for 'luncheon vouchers'



Cynthia Payne, who has died aged 82, became Britain's best-known brothel keeper when police raided her suburban home in Streatham, south London, in 1978, interrupting a sex party that was in full swing; at her trial, she was ineradicably branded "Madam Cyn" and imprisoned for 18 months for running "the biggest disorderly house" in British history.

A rapt media feasted on stories of middle aged and elderly men queuing up in SW16 to exchange "luncheon vouchers" for food, drink, conversation, striptease shows, and a trip upstairs with the girl of their choice.

Businessmen, vicars, MPs, lawyers and even, reportedly, a peer were among those who considered Cynthia Payne the best hostess in London. Jeffrey Bernard in *The Spectator* declared her "the greatest Englishwoman since Boadicea".

On appeal, Cynthia Payne's sentence was reduced to six months and a hefty fine. She was unrepentant, however, and on her release from prison she resumed her parties until the police called again in 1986.

Such attention gave Mrs Payne the chance to entertain the nation with her outspoken views on men and sex and, more seriously, to confront the contradictions and shortcomings of the British laws on prostitution.

Detectives who raided her detached Edwardian home at 32 Ambleside Avenue in December 1978 found 53 men huddled in the hall. Most were queuing on the stairs leading up to the bedrooms, and were clutching vouchers to be redeemed for sex; some appeared to have come straight from the office. Of the 13 women on the premises, some were completely naked.

*Jeffrey Bernard  
declared her 'the  
greatest  
Englishwoman since  
Boadicea'*

Judge David West-Russell noted, however, that Mrs Payne had appeared in court on four previous occasions, on similar charges. As well as sending her to jail, he fined her a total of £1,950 and ordered her to pay costs of up to £2,000.

The public was as shocked by the sentence as Cynthia Payne herself, and a national debate ensued. Thirty MPs of all parties – among them Sam Silkin, the previous Labour attorney-general, and Tony Benn – signed a Commons motion deploring her imprisonment. They added that she posed no threat to the community, and advocated the

prosecution of her male customers.

Cynthia Payne was born in Bognor Regis on Christmas Eve 1932. (The correct spelling of her name was disputed and may originally have been Paine, but she settled on Payne.) Her father, Hamilton, was away at sea for much of her childhood, running the hairdressing salon on board the Durban Castle, a liner on the South Africa run.



Cynthia Payne (right) with Julie Walters to celebrate the launch of the comedy film *Personal Services* Photo: PA

Her mother died of throat cancer in 1943 when Cynthia and her sister Melanie were still young; the two girls were brought up by a series of housekeepers hired by their father. Expelled from school for being "a bad influence" (a cousin recalled she never stopped talking about sex), Cynthia was enrolled by her father on a hairdressing course at a technical college in London, but she was asked to leave because of her lack of interest. An

apprenticeship with some hairdressing friends of her father in Aldershot proved equally fruitless; they insisted she saw a psychiatrist to cure her compulsive swearing, and after claiming falsely that she was pregnant and threatening to swallow weedkiller, Cynthia was disowned by her father.

Back in Bognor in 1950, aged 17, she took a job at a bus garage where she began an affair with a married man (a period dramatised in the 1987 film *Wish You Were Here*). Her lover followed her when she moved to Brighton to work as a waitress and then to London, where Cynthia Payne fell pregnant. A son, Dominic, was born, followed – as a result of another affair – by a second son who was put up for adoption.

When she was 22, Cynthia Payne met an amusement arcade operator from Margate with whom she lived for five years. After her third illegal abortion (the man scorned contraception), she left him and embarked on the career change that would make her name.

Holding down her day job as a waitress in a London café, she rented four small flats which she sublet to working prostitutes. She hit on this idea as the result of a chance meeting in the café with a prostitute who offered her £3 a week to use her room in the evenings. Cynthia Payne quickly realised the profitable potential of such an arrangement (this sum was twice her weekly wage as a waitress); she became a prostitute's maid at her network of flats, opening the door and answering the phone to clients, and when the girls failed to pay the rent on time, decided to try her hand at "the game" herself.





Cynthia Payne with Lord Longford Photo: Eric Roberts

She spent two years working as a prostitute before opening her own brothel. With savings, an inheritance from her mother and help from a boyfriend, she managed to put a deposit on a small terraced house in Edencourt Road, Streatham. Her clients there included her own son Dominic, deflowered by one of her girls as a 16th birthday present.

In 1974, she paid £16,000 for a much bigger house called Cranmore in Ambleside Avenue, not far from Streatham's notorious Bedford Hill red light area. Its unusual features included an instruction signed "Madam Baloney" forbidding sex in the bathroom, and a sign in the kitchen proclaiming "My house is clean enough to be healthy... and dirty enough to be happy".

Cynthia Payne bought Cranmore with financial help from her devoted friend and "sex-slave" Squadron Leader Robert "Mitch" Smith, with whom she lived until his death in 1981. He was "a bit of a kink", she once testified in

court "who liked to be caned and whipped". The house was furnished in a style of overwhelming suburban ordinariness, with nets at the windows, starched antimacassars and plenty of pretty china.

Sensing that her widowed father (with whom she had been reconciled) was missing the company of women, she let him have the run of her house – and the girls. "I can see now why men like coming here, Cinders," he once commented from the depths of one of her red Dralon sofas. "It's because when you look round, you don't feel you are in a brothel."

*Her regulars included a night watchman, a vicar with a penchant for plump angels, and a barrister who would change into high heels and stockings*

She drummed up business by word of mouth, and by distributing her calling card, signed Cynthia Payne LV (Luncheon Vouchers). She barred men under 40 ("all Jack-the-lads boasting about their prowess"); her regular clients included a night watchman in his sixties who availed himself of a special £5 discount for pensioners, a vicar with a penchant for plump angels, an exhibitionist professor, and a barrister who would arrive as if dressed for court, then change into a full tart's costume of extra high heels, black stockings and make-up.

"We had a high-class clientele," Cynthia Payne recalled many years later, "no rowdy kids, no yobs, all well-dressed men in suits, who knew how to respect a lady. It was like a vicar's tea party with sex thrown in – a lot of elderly, lonely people drinking sherry."

Cynthia Payne and her girls provided a wide range of personal services, to satisfy the requirements of the most exotic male fantasies. She understood completely when one of her clients revealed his penchant for polishing a

woman's shoes while she was still wearing them, and always kept her own high heels and cane by her door to please others. At the same time, as the fastidious and orderly proprietor of a disorderly house, she took a motherly interest in the welfare of her staff: each girl would end the afternoon's work with a snack of poached egg on toast and a hot cup of tea.

Having served two-thirds of her sentence, Cynthia Payne emerged from Holloway in 1980 as a fully fledged media madam, and was driven to a south London hotel in a supporter's Rolls-Royce for a champagne reception.



Cynthia Payne leaving Holloway Prison in 1980 with her pet dog Sandy.  
Photo: Rex Features

In 1983, the News of the World revealed that "the luncheon voucher queen has put sex back on the menu" by resuming her famous parties. This time, Cynthia Payne claimed she was not charging money but leaving clients to make their own arrangements with the women. But according to one guest, nothing much had changed: it began as "an ordinary cocktail affair with ... polite chatter about politics and gardening.

"Suddenly, three scantily-clad attractive girls came dancing into the room and went round kissing everybody and greeting guests like old friends." Normal service had resumed at Ambleside Avenue.

Her celebrity career prospered. The novelist Paul Bailey wrote her biography *An English Madam* (1982) and Terry Jones directed a film about her life, *Personal Services* (1986), in which she was played by Julie Walters.

Meanwhile, the police were still watching. Although Cynthia Payne insisted she no longer ran a brothel, she did admit to throwing "an occasional swinging party". It was at such a celebration to mark the end of filming *Personal Services* that detectives raided her home for a second time in 1986.

In an atmosphere of barely subdued mirth, the resulting court case in January 1987 made more headlines and kept the nation amused for 13 days with lurid tales of sex, slaves, transvestites and undercover policemen in disguise. In the end, Cynthia Payne was cleared on nine charges of controlling prostitutes.

She left the court clutching a Laughing Policeman doll which she had kept as a mascot throughout the trial. This time the champagne corks were popped in a suite at the Waldorf. Later she sent Judge Brian Pryor QC a copy of *An English Madam*, with the inscription: "I hope this book will broaden your rather sheltered life."



The Conservative MP Anthony Beaumont-Dark thought the case had made fools of the police. "People are wondering why squads of policemen are launching punitive raids on a bit of harmless fun," he added, "rather than getting on with the real job of hammering rapists, burglars and muggers."

Another maverick Tory, Nicholas Fairbairn MP, thought Mrs Payne should have been mentioned in the Honours List for keeping the nation amused. If the police would concentrate on matters of national importance, he told The Daily Telegraph, "they would be spending their time more usefully than prosecuting a jokey English lady who has made us laugh during a cold winter."



Cynthia Payne electioneering for the Payne and Pleasure Party in 1988 Photo: Rex Features

Following her second trial, Cynthia Payne determined to change what she considered to be Britain's archaic sex laws. She stood for Parliament as a candidate for the Payne and Pleasure Party in the Kensington by-election in July 1988 and again in Streatham in the 1992 general election. Her stated aim was "to provide light relief, to whip up support and to raise funds".

Later that year, Cynthia Payne completed a three week season at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival playing to packed houses. She became an accomplished after-dinner speaker, particularly at police conferences. In 2004 she raised £325 from an auction of memorabilia, including a French

maid's outfit, a mink coat, and a projector used to show blue films. In 2006 she re-launched her range of sex toys and raunchy outfits on the internet. "These days I am still in demand," she said, "but in a different way. In my thirties I was doing it, in my forties I was organising it and now, unfortunately, I can only talk about it."

Latterly Cynthia Payne lived quietly at Ambleside Avenue with her secretary and adviser Gloria Walker. Although always known as Mrs Payne, she never married.

**Cynthia Payne, born December 24 1932, died November 15 2015**