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A woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark blue sleeveless dress and blue wedge sandals, stands on a stone path in a garden. To her left is a tall, dark green topiary hedge. In the background, there are more rounded topiary bushes and a grassy hill under a blue sky with some clouds. The woman is smiling and looking towards the camera.

He is the heir to Mapperton, the finest manor house in England, and will one day become the Earl of Sandwich. **A charmed life?** It would be, if he did not suffer crippling withdrawal symptoms from drugs he should never have been prescribed. Now he's fighting back

Julia Llewellyn Smith meets Luke Montagu



Luke Montagu,
Viscount Hinchingbrooke,
with wife Julie and children
at their home in Dorset

PORTRAITS Dan Burn-Ford

It's a chilly summer morning and Luke Montagu, aka Viscount Hinchbrook, and I are strolling through the grounds of his family home, Mapperton, named by *Country Life* as the finest manor house in England.

I've rarely seen a more enchanting place. Behind us stands the sprawling, honey-coloured house, used for Bathsheba Everdene's farmhouse in the 2015 film of *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Below the house stands a circular pond; behind it, two larger, rectangular ponds flanked by yew topiaries nestle in the idyllic, green Dorset valley. We climb a gently sloping Italianate terrace, then pass the elegant orangery with the Montagu crest of three lozenges carved over the door.

Yet as we continue, past the croquet pavilion, where Montagu, 45, was married 11 years ago, it's obvious that the heir to all this loveliness is uneasy.

"I can't properly enjoy the garden, because everything in it seems hyper-real," he says quietly. "Colours are too saturated, noises too loud. It's like having a terrible hangover every day of your life."

At the time of his wedding, Montagu's life appeared pretty perfect. He was the heir to Mapperton and the family title, Earl of Sandwich (his ancestor, the fourth Earl, gave his name to the snack).

While his parents lived at Mapperton, Montagu, who had a successful career founding a series of technology and media businesses and at that time was CEO of the Met Film School, the largest film school in the UK, was in a terraced house in Wandsworth, southwest London, with his American wife, Julie, and her children, Emma, now 16, and Jack, 14. The couple's eldest son, William, was born in 2004, followed two years later by Nestor.

But underlying his busy life was nagging unease. For the past 20 years, Montagu had been taking antidepressants – first Prozac, still new back then, now one of the most commonly prescribed drugs of all time, subsequently other common antidepressants such as Seroxat.

Yet when he was first prescribed these drugs at 19, Montagu was not depressed and had never been diagnosed with depression. He was a student at New York University, and had recently undergone a general anaesthetic for a sinus operation that left him with headaches and feeling, as he puts it, "not myself". Without carrying out any tests, a British GP announced that he had a "chemical imbalance of the limbic system" and prescribed Prozac. Montagu, "impressionable and in awe of doctors", swallowed them unquestioningly.

However, he didn't feel any better and over the course of the next five years saw various doctors who, no less than nine times, switched

him to different drugs. Montagu was given a variety of different diagnoses, with no two medics seemingly able to agree. "One doctor said it was anxiety, another suggested conversion disorder. None of them seemed to accept what I knew – and would point out quite heatedly – which was this was all a consequence of the sinus operation and the chopping and changing of the various drugs."

On a couple of occasions, Montagu had tried to quit, but always felt so bad that he quickly resumed the drugs. "I thought it was because I needed the medication; now I understand that it was because I was going into withdrawal each time I tried to come off the drugs. But the doctors never spotted that," he says.

"When I restarted the drugs, I would feel better, at least initially. At the time, I didn't realise that I was just like a junkie who needed a fix – my body and brain had become dependent on these chemicals. My life was going well otherwise: I was living in Kensington with a girlfriend, extremely busy with my internet business. Eventually, I decided just to stay on the drugs and only went to the doctor for repeat prescriptions; I kept taking what was prescribed and managed to keep functioning even though I didn't feel 100 per cent."

At the end of 2008, however, Montagu, by then 38, resolved that enough was enough. He was on a new antidepressant, Effexor, that made him feel wired. To counteract this, he'd been prescribed sleeping pills, clonazepam, but they made him forgetful. He decided to start the new year clean.

At the time, he was seeing Dr Mark Collins, a psychiatrist at the Priory Hospital in southwest London, whose patients had included Princess Margaret, Ruby Wax and the Marquess of Blandford. "Dr Collins went to Eton; he was from a similar background. He seemed to be somebody I could trust," Montagu says ruefully.

On Collins's advice, Montagu checked himself in to the Priory, where his clonazepam was taken away (he stayed on Effexor). "I thought I wouldn't sleep for two or three nights, then I'd be so tired I'd crash out. Instead, it felt like my brain was torn into pieces."

Collins, he later learnt, had made a dreadful mistake – long-term users of sleeping pills need to taper off over months, or even years. Over the next few days, Montagu experienced a "tidal wave of horrific symptoms".

Initially, he couldn't walk. "I couldn't coordinate my body or judge distances, I didn't know how far things were away from me. There was this incredibly loud ringing in my ears. I couldn't see – everything was blurry and I was having flashback after flashback of distant memories, things dredged up from years gone by. I was crying for no reason, sobbing hysterically.

"It was like the detox hell I'd seen in films like *Trainspotting*. I thought, I'm just going to have to ride this out and it will get better in the same way heroin withdrawal eventually loses its grip. But I had no idea that withdrawal from long-term use of sleeping pills can take months and sometimes years."

A few days later, Montagu discharged himself. "I was in a state of absolute terror. I just wanted to get out of the hospital because I knew that something dreadful had been done to me. Somehow I made it home, but there I realised everything was different. I'd left the house as one person, but returned as another. In a quite literal way, I had lost my mind."

Since then, Montagu has endured seven years of what can only be described as hell. A softly spoken man with a gentle demeanour, he is mainly calm as he describes his ordeal, but occasionally his voice wobbles.

Back home, he found himself unable to focus. "I could barely put a sentence together, remember who I was or what I was supposed to do. It was as if parts of my brain had been erased. For the first couple of years, I had to try to pretend to be the person that I was, while knowing inside that that person had gone."

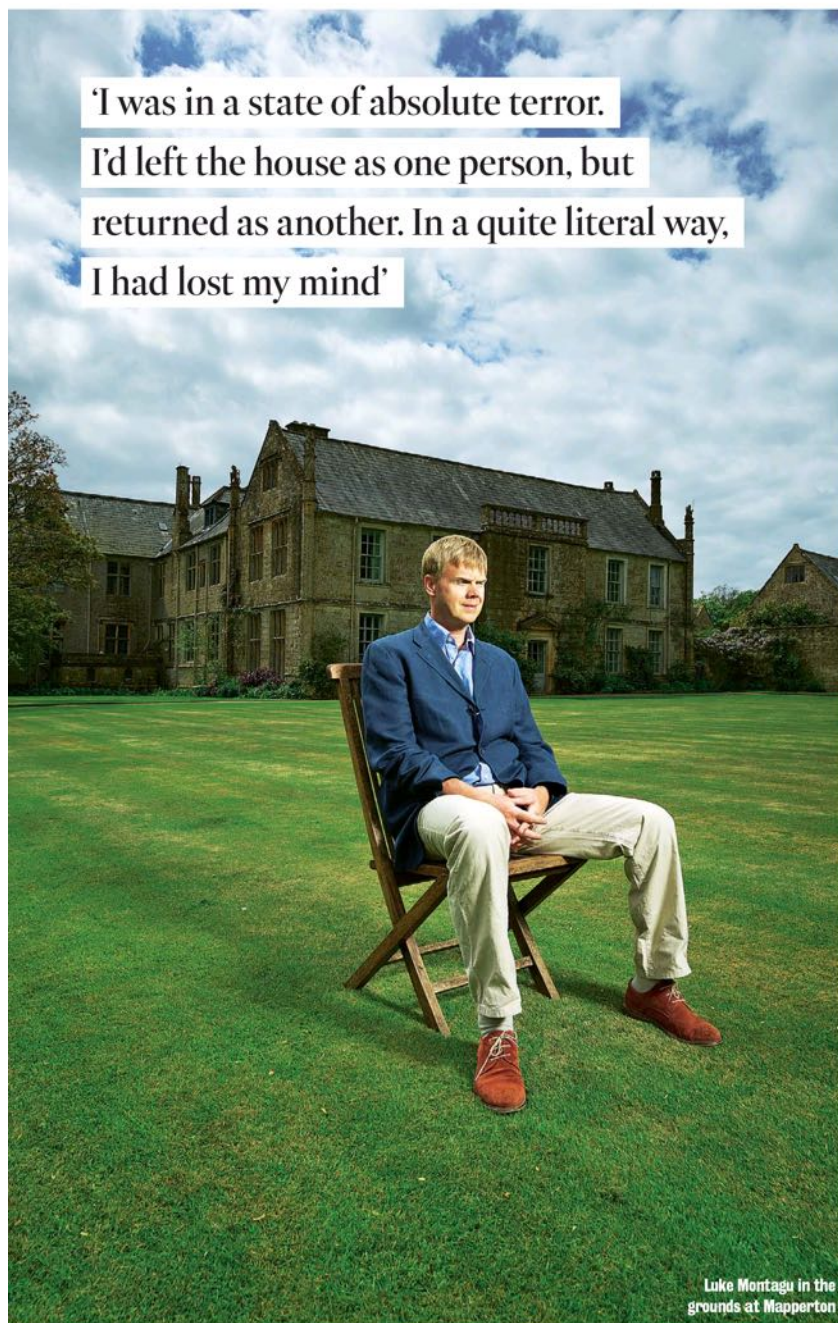
The Met Film School needed him, but he couldn't function. "I've always been very good at getting things done and knowing what to say, but now I'd sit in a meeting without knowing what to do next." At a board meeting he burst into tears in front of his fellow directors. "I had to say, 'I just can't do this. I'm really not well.'"

He realised he could no longer work. For the next three years, Montagu was stuck at home in agonising physical and mental pain. Horrified by the risk of additional drug harm, he decided to wean himself very slowly from the Effexor, leaving him with severe burning nerve pains, like pins and needles, all over his body, that continue to this day.

Now, he's been drug-free for four years, but the ongoing pain has stopped him returning to his former, high-stress job, and makes him irritable. Talking to Montagu, he gives away little of the discomfort he's in, but he looks weary from the effort of having to stay in control and present a polite face to the world. His tinnitus means he sleeps badly, waking at dawn every morning. "But I don't complain about tiredness. It's nothing compared with the pain."

"It's hard to socialise," he continues, without self-pity. "You just don't feel like sitting around a table laughing and joking." Family life was badly affected. "It's been very hard. I lose my temper more easily than before, though I try hard to control this, and when one person is on edge it raises the emotional temperature of the house for everyone."

'I was in a state of absolute terror.
I'd left the house as one person, but
returned as another. In a quite literal way,
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Luke Montagu in the grounds at Mapperton

Like many aristocrats, the Montagus are asset-rich but relatively cash-poor, not least because Mapperton costs £200,000 a year to run. Without her husband's income, Julie rapidly had to find work. "When you have four kids, you can't lie on your bed and sink into despair, which is what I often wanted to do. I had to keep going," she tells me over the phone. She took a yoga instructors' course, then "walked around London with Nestor in a buggy putting flyers into yummy-mummy letterboxes. When two people came to a class in a church hall, it was such a relief."

Seven years on, Julie teaches at the ultra-fashionable Triyoga in Chelsea where, according to *Tatler*, her yoga classes have a waiting list "longer than your arm". She also set up a healthy eating blog, the Flexi Foodie, has just published a cookery book and is a regular on *Ladies of London*, a Bravo reality show about upper-crust women in the *Real Housewives* vein.

"I had to find my passion so I could motivate everyone else," Julie says. "But don't get me wrong, there were times I sat in my car and broke down. Sometimes I'd say to Luke, 'Oh my God, I need antidepressants,' which he didn't find very funny."

One of the worst things the family has had to endure has been the scepticism of others. Antidepressants and sleeping pills are everywhere – one in three British women will take antidepressants in her lifetime and one in ten men. People don't like to hear that something supposed to make them feel better might actually be harmful.

"I know so many people who have them in their bedside drawer, who just refuse to believe they can be harmful," Julie says angrily. She's lost a lot of friends over this. "I just stopped talking to people about what had happened, because no one believed me. They told me Luke must be bipolar, or that he'd been popping pills like Robin Williams."

Montagu has also lost contact with many friends, including the best men from his wedding and some family members. "Some people simply refuse to believe that this was really caused by these drugs, [they think] that it's all in my head and I just need to pull it together. Others just can't cope. It's as if you're tarnished."

By now, we're sitting in front of the huge, unlit fireplace in Mapperton's hall. It's the epitome of British shabby chic and would have oligarchs speed-dialling their interior designers. The panelled walls are lined with portraits of ancestors, the 17th-century furniture is laden with books, the Arts and Crafts ceiling embellished with a replica bas-relief from an ancient Greek temple. The carpet on the flagstone floor is so faded as to be almost invisible and an imperious cat occupies one of the threadbare armchairs. ➔

Caroline, Lady Sandwich and Montagu's 72-year-old mother, sits in jeans and trainers, waving around an iPhone she's using to tweet criticism of the Saudi government (she was a journalist specialising in Saudi affairs).

"What's happened to Luke's been a scourge affecting three generations," she says, as rain beats against the mullioned windows. "John [the Earl] and I have been so tired by this. That's the best adjective I can use. The way it affected his family ... There were two or three Christmases, he couldn't come downstairs. Julie was absolutely wonderful. I remember both of us sitting in the bathroom upstairs one Christmas, trying to hold Luke together so he didn't shriek and howl in front of the children. I was terrified. Hearing your son scream, 'I want to die,' is the worst thing that can happen to a mother. It tore me apart."

Reassurance that Montagu was no hypochondriac or junkie came from online forums, populated by thousands in similar withdrawal hell from prescribed drugs. "Invariably, doctors deny that the drugs are the cause. So many of us were on the drugs with no underlying reason in the first place – perhaps they'd been low after a virus. They'd all been told, 'Take this, you'll feel better,' and then they felt worse. The message over and over again is, how could people we thought were trustworthy do this to us?" says Montagu, who became a forum administrator "to help others and to find some purpose in my suffering".

The worst thing, he says, is having no idea when the pain will ever end. "The thing that keeps me going is hope. The forums have stories of people suffering for five or more years who suddenly go back to normal in five weeks ... But then others can't take it any more." He reads aloud from a forum post on his phone: "I could not sleep for days and began to hallucinate. The level of sustained fear and terror I felt was immeasurable ..." Oh God, it makes me want to cry. You read about terrible things people have done in the paper and I wonder if they were in withdrawal. It makes me realise how lucky I am to have a supportive family and a financial cushion."

As he slowly began to feel better, Montagu poured his energies into fighting back. Knowing his experiences would be dismissed as anecdote, together with various credible medics, he co-founded CEP, the Council for Evidence-based Psychiatry, which gathers evidence of the harm caused by psychiatric drugs in order to lobby politicians and medical bodies. To give others hope, he uploaded short films of recovery stories to the website. They have become a popular resource.

"It's pretty shocking that there are virtually no NHS resources to help people get through the hell of withdrawal, particularly since the problem has largely been caused by NHS



'There are days when the pain is so bad I worry it won't ever go away'

treatment," says Montagu, still measured in his speech but his passion rising. "It's getting worse – more than 57 million prescriptions for antidepressants were issued in England last year. That's 7 per cent more than 2013 and 500 per cent more than 1992."

CEP's message upsets many, who retort that such drugs have saved countless people from suicide. Montagu shrugs. "Psychiatry is a corrupt and dishonest business: it treats so-called illnesses that don't exist with drugs that don't cure and can cause great harm. And once you have been harmed, it then diagnoses further illness and prescribes yet more drugs. I know they can help some people in the short term, but they're just psychoactive like alcohol or cocaine – they can make you feel better initially, but over the long term they cause dependence and destroy your physical and mental health."

On a personal level, he's had an apology from the GP who first gave him antidepressants, saying he'd since seen many patients react badly to anaesthetics and would now just let them recover, rather than prescribe drugs. "I was deeply angry, but at least he was honest," Montagu says.

Mark Collins also responded apologetically, taking responsibility and even offering to write a book with Montagu about his experiences.

Luke Montagu and family in the hallway of the family seat at Mapperton

But when Montagu sued him for misprescribing and the rapid withdrawal, he claimed he'd only said this to make Montagu feel better. "I find it hard to forgive him for changing his tune once the lawyers got involved," Montagu says grimly. Eventually, they settled for £1.35 million, including legal fees, some of which he paid back to his parents, who'd helped out financially.

"Of course the money has helped – but it only covered loss of earnings; there's no compensation for the mental and physical pain caused." He hopes the large settlement will deter other doctors both from misprescribing and recommending rapid withdrawal.

Driving back to London in his Audi, I ask Montagu if he wishes he'd just stayed on the drugs. "I'm really pleased I'm no longer ingesting any chemicals, particularly because there's growing evidence of long-term harm," he says as we pass Stonehenge. "But then there are days when the pain is so bad and I worry it won't ever go away..." How is the pain today? "Pretty bad," he says quietly.

Still, things are improving. "Recently, I've started to feel like me again. I can think clearly and remember stuff." He's started working again and has rejoined the Met Film School board. He plans to spend more and more time in Dorset, and has started a series of projects to help support the Mapperton estate after his parents move out next year, including the development of redundant buildings, building a new shop and a proposal to open the main house next year for the thousands of annual visitors.

Julie, meanwhile, has been wryly observing their former friends. "I didn't hear from them for years, then when they heard Luke was taking over Mapperton, it was all, 'Where's my invitation?' I didn't text them back."

She's optimistic. "Today's our wedding anniversary," she says during our final conversation, "and we've just been out for breakfast. For so many years we didn't mark our anniversary at all. I remember one year begging Luke to go for a walk with me and, after a few minutes, he said, 'I can't. The birdsong's hurting my ears. The sky is too bright. It's making me agoraphobic.' But today there were tons of people around us and it was all great." ■

A CEP conference, More Harm than Good: Confronting the Psychiatric Medication Epidemic, takes place in London on September 18 (cepuk.org). Mapperton Gardens are open to the public until October 31 (mapperton.com)