Jeremy Piven as Harry Selfridge and Frances O’Connor as Rose, his wife, in the ITV drama *Mr Selfridge*. Picture courtesy of ITV Drama.
Harry Gordon Selfridge spoiled women in his personal life the same way he did the female customers in his department store. But his love of dance girls, his ostentatious plans and lavish spending in Dorset heralded the start of his sad demise into penury.
portrayed in the TV show by actor Jeremy Piven.

Stevenson isn’t particularly impressed with the TV version. “Frankly it plays fast and loose with the facts,” he says. “They’ve made Selfridge so much younger than he really was. He was 53 when he opened Selfridge’s. There’s nothing in the programme to indicate that.”

However, Stevenson does concede that everyone else - Lindy Woodhead and Highcliffe Castle management included - seem delighted with the series. Not surprising perhaps. Visitor numbers and book sales have soared since the first series of Mr Selfridge hit the TV screens in early 2013. The second series picks up the story again in 1914 and if, as is hoped, a third is eventually commissioned, it will take the show into the Highcliffe years. “We’re keeping our fingers crossed,” says castle manager David Hopkinson.

Meanwhile Stevenson says people are eager for new stories about the charismatic Mr Selfridge and his time at Highcliffe. It was a period of change for Harry during which both Gaby Deslys and his wife Rose would meet premature deaths. His family made a big impact on Highcliffe during the First World War, flying the Stars and Stripes from the castle roof and establishing a Convalescence Camp for wounded servicemen on the nearby recreation ground. After Rose’s death from pneumonia in 1918, Harry devoted even more time to playing the grand showman. His Whitsun Fete at the castle in 1920

While his devoted wife Rose and their children enjoyed the genteel country life in Highcliffe, Harry would race to town to entertain the glamorous young French singer and dancer Gaby Deslys
attracted 5,000 people with special trains laid on from Bournemouth and Southampton ferrying the crowds to and from the station at nearby Hinton Admiral.

Selfridge was set on a path of outrageous displays of wealth and grandeur at Highcliffe. He would play high-stakes poker with society friends like the tea magnate and keen yachtsman Sir Thomas Lipton and Royal financial advisor Sir Edward Cassel, who had a holiday home at Branksome. Later Harry himself would keep a huge steam yacht, Conqueror, moored at Southampton.

Like most of his interests it cost a fortune. But gradually the money was running out. The Wall Street Crash

“Everybody says Selfridge came to Highcliffe because he was worried about his family being in London with the First World War Zeppelin raids but the other half of the story is that he was having an affair”
combined with a reckless relationship with gambling-addicted showgirls, The Dolly Sisters, proved financially fatal. The girls - identical twins who specialised in mirror dancing - laid waste to Harry's fortune with glee. Apparently oblivious of the consequences, Selfridge would buy diamond necklaces to cheer them up when they lost his money on the tables in Monte Carlo. By the late 1930s his £60 million fortune was gone. He owed the taxman tens of thousands and Selfridges could no longer afford to pick up the tab. In a boardroom showdown Harry was forced out of the business he loved.

Harry Gordon Selfridge would die, aged 90, in relative poverty. A tragic down-at-heel figure in his final years, he would often catch the bus to Oxford Street just to stand and look at the great store that continued to thrive without him. Shabby and ill-dressed, he was once even arrested as a suspected vagrant. His simple gravestone now stands alongside those of his wife and mother in St Mark's Churchyard in Highcliffe just a few hundred yards from his grand former home. Just a mile or two away is the beauty spot Hengistbury Head, the site of one of his more bizarre plans, to build a massive castle of his own.

Selfridge could stand at the bottom the Highcliffe grounds and see the ancient headland. When he eventually managed to buy it from Bournemouth landowner Sir George Meyrick, he announced with customary gusto that he was going to build “the biggest castle in the world” at Hengistbury Head.

Plans were drawn up for a massive 250-room Neo-Classical palace, a Gothic fortress with four miles of ramparts, its own theatre, a huge ballroom and a Versailles-style Hall of Mirrors. At one point he even planned to include a 300-foot tower. It was never to be. Eventually he had no option but to sell Hengistbury to Bournemouth Council.

Ian Stevenson, like many other locals, is hugely relieved that this nature reserve and centre for environmental research was spared the worst excesses of Selfridge’s imagination: “It’s a blessed relief that he frittered his money away,” he tells me.

The singer had the run of the Oxford Street store, helping herself to whatever took her fancy. Jewellery, furs, fine silks... they all went on Harry’s personal account
Highcliffe Castle has been described as one of the most important surviving houses of the Romantic and Picturesque style of architecture, which flourished at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. The magnificent Grade I listed cliff-top mansion was built mainly between 1831 and 1836. It is the realisation of one man’s fantasy - Lord Stuart de Rothesay - a distinguished diplomat who had known and loved the cliff-top site overlooking Christchurch Bay since he was a boy. A large amount of medieval French masonry was shipped across the Channel for use in its construction and it is this Norman and Renaissance carved stone, along with the Castle’s Gothic revival features and ancient stained glass, which make it appear older than it is. The Castle reopens to the public on 1 February (11am - 5pm), though the Tearooms are open every day. The Castle is also a popular and romantic venue for weddings.

Where: Highcliffe Castle, Rothesay Drive, Highcliffe, BH23 4LE Tel: 01425 278807

“Nobody would have been able to afford to keep that building up and ‘The Head’ would now be littered with the ruins of his castle.”

One final tale from Stevenson perhaps speaks volumes about how Harry Gordon Selfridge, despite fabulous wealth, would never be admitted into the elite circle of British Society. The 1921 wedding of his daughter Violette to French Viscount Jacques de Sibour was a huge social event but a request for Violette’s good friends, Daphne and Viola Bankes from Kingston Lacy, to be bridesmaids earned a sharp rebuttal from their mother, Henrietta.

“Titles were more important to her than money,” says Stevenson. “She was far too snobbish to allow them to take a role in the wedding of a commoner’s daughter.”

Visiting Highcliffe Castle

Highcliffe Castle today

Left: Some of the cast of the ITV drama Mr Selfridge Pictured L-R: Gregory Fitoussi as Henri, Aisling Loftus as Agnes, Katherine Kelly as Lady Mae, Jeremy Pevin as Harry Selfridge, Zoe Tapper as Ellen Love, Francis Connor as Rose and Samuel West as Frank

Below: Sunflowers laid on Harry Selfridge’s simple grave at St Mark’s Churchyard at Highcliffe