

Earl Grey

Liberal peer who marketed a brand of eponymous biscuit and tried to sell combat trousers and capoules

THE 6th EARL GREY, who has died aged 74, was the great-great-grandson of the reforming Whig Prime Minister of the 1830s who gave his name to the distinctive blend of tea.

Grey's lineage was a colourful one. His prime ministerial forebear, the 2nd Earl Grey, notoriously fathered an illegitimate daughter by Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, as well as lending his name to the fragrant tea imported from China, playing a leading role in the abolition of the slave trade, and introducing the Reform Act of 1832.

The 6th Earl became an energetic and popular Liberal (later Lib Dem) member of the House of Lords – cutting a dash in hawking jacket and brightly coloured coats and waistcoats, and once entering the voting lobby on a three-line whip dressed in T-shirt and shorts, having not had time to change after a charity row on the Thames.

But in 1969 he was a victim of the Labour government's reform of the House of Lords; despite his 75-word testimonial appealing to be allowed to sit as an elected member,

and citing his "GSOH" (good sense of humour), he was among the 665 hereditary peers who lost their seats.

Pondering his need for gainful employment, Grey had the idea of manufacturing Earl Grey Biscuits – small, dainty and round, expensively packaged and each one stamped with the Earl's coat of arms and signature. They were made by his own company in seven different flavours, including a simple shortbread, almond and honey, and – a nod to the flavour of the famous eponymous tea – lemon with bergamot. The biscuits are still sold today in upmarket food outlets.

He also had plans to sell casual leisure wear, including combat trousers with drawstrings, T-shirts and capoules also bearing his coat of arms and the St George flag. He wanted to market the range under the brand name Earl Grey – Westminster.

Twisted by one newspaper for looking like an "unusually portly Freemans model *d'un certain age*", Grey plunged into his new venture with the enthusiasm of the

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Earl Grey: he drank the tea with milk

gentleman amateur. "I may not be 6ft tall or have model looks," he observed. "But I think I have an idea what other people would wear." When the business failed to take off, however, Grey accepted the chairmanship of the London Cremation Company, a post he held for more than 20 years.

Richard Fleming George Charles Grey was born on March 5 1939 at Slough. His father was serving as a trooper in the Canadian Armoured Corps when he was killed in action in 1942. From Hounslow College, Richard went on to study at Hammersmith College of Building.

He began his working life as a quantity surveyor, but never settled. He moved into hotel management, frozen food and public relations, succeeding his elderly second cousin to the earldom in 1963 when he was 24.

Grey became the Liberal spokesman on social services, paying particular attention to disability policies. In 1979 he hosted the visit to London of 350 intemperate Canadians to help them lobby Parliament for the return of their land rights and for political recognition. Among his other appointments, Grey was an official observer at the 1980 election in Rhodesia. From 1980 to 1984 he served as secretary to the House of Lords small business group.

He became chairman of the London Cremation Company in

1992, and shortly afterwards took on the role of president of the Cremation Society of Great Britain. Grey was modest about his links with his famous forebear, but admitted to being partial to the tea – which he took with milk. One regret was the failure of the 2nd Earl to profit from his popularity.

"My famous ancestor took no financial interest in the tea at all," he explained. "They didn't in those days. It was commercialism, a dirty word, so my family didn't reap the millions. He might have been a brilliant politician but he wasn't much of a businessman."

In 2011, with Grey's approval, Twinings launched The Earl Grey, a new tea blend the company claimed to be an improvement on the one created in 1831 for the 2nd Earl.

Lord Grey's first marriage, in 1966, to Margaret Bradford, was dissolved in 1974. His second wife, Stephanie, survives him. His younger brother, Philip Kent Grey (born in 1940), succeeds to the earldom.

The 6th Earl Grey, born March 5 1939, died September 10 2013.