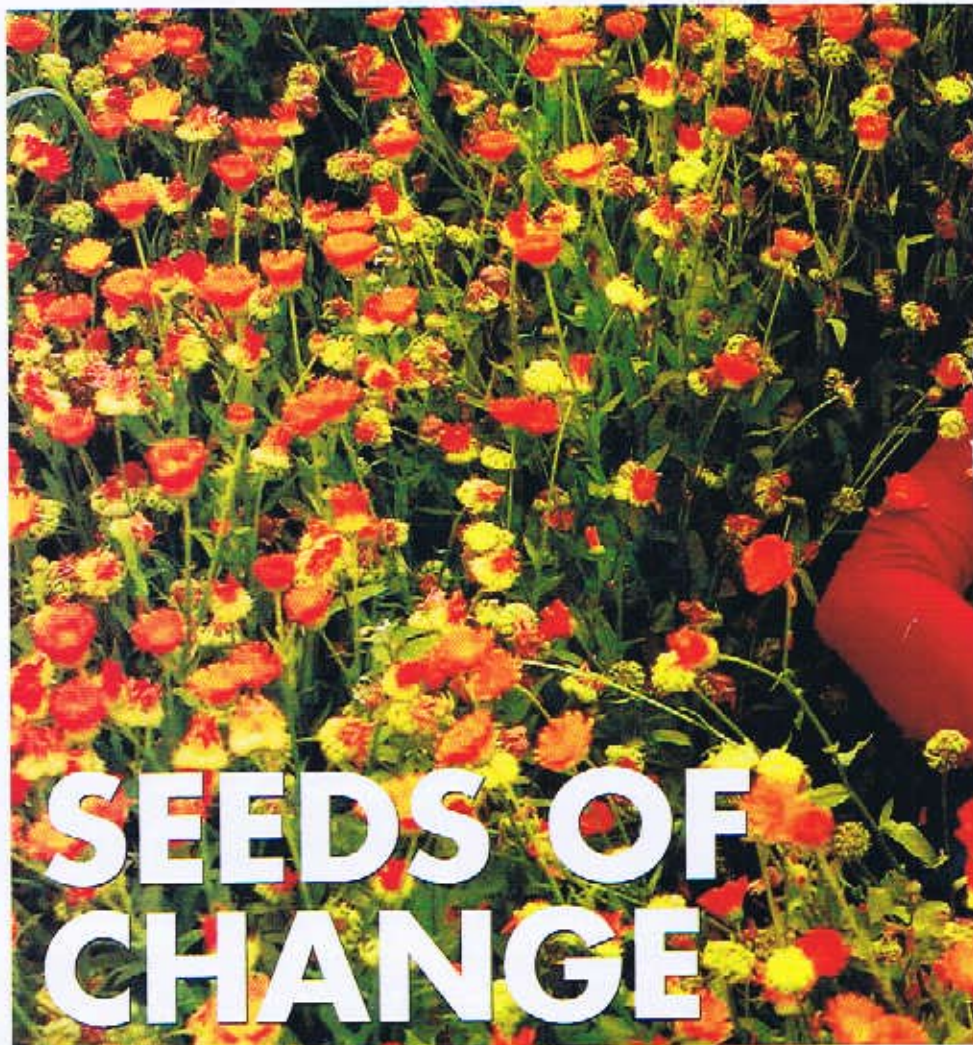




Moving over from New York City to the depths of the Kent countryside, Phyllis Kane, who is now Countess Sodes, found a new life. She runs her late husband's estate and grows and markets non-food crops, as she tells  
**Beverley Byrne**



Having fallen deeply in love, Phyllis Kane took a dramatic decision when, in 1986, she left her native New York and came to live in England with her new husband George Henry Herbert, The Fifth Earl Sodes.

As his wife, the young American not only joined the ranks of the English aristocracy, she also became *châtelaine* of a 4,500-acre estate in Kent's most beautiful countryside. This was a turning-point in her life.

Before I met Countess Sodes, I thought of her life as something of a modern fairy tale. Having read a brief biography, I could see that it had all the necessary ingredients: the beautiful heroine, a handsome hero, a tragedy, a transformation and a resolution. Yet what is not included in this synopsis is the passion that this former city girl feels for her surroundings and the unique ways in which she is securing the future of the estate that she has inherited.

On a hot summer's day, I drive to Kent to meet her. Early for our appointment, I stop to admire the sweep of the valley and the wooded hillside. A slender woman with long dark hair is walking across the fields; I am sure this must be Countess Sodes, taking time out to breathe in the scent of newly-cut crops – and, as will be revealed, it is these very crops which form part of a far-reaching programme of diversification that she has initiated and pioneered. At

last, I arrive at the 18th-century beamed farmhouse which she shared with her husband until his untimely death, from cancer, in 1996. It is a comfortable home, with open fireplaces, plump sofas and photographs that show not only the late Earl's family but also illustrate the story of a happy marriage.

"He was such a good-looking man," she says. "We met in New York. He had been a daring adventurer and, to me, he seemed like the man of my dreams. We shared a love of travel and a passion for adventure but it was only after we had married that we both knew it was time to come home."

Over tea and carrot cake, served by her congenial butler, I ask the Countess, who is casually dressed in jeans, shirt and knee-high leather boots, to describe her first impressions of the estate.

"I was captivated by its beauty and its sense of history and tradition," she says. "The Lees Court Estate has been in my husband's family for 700 years so that I could not fail to be astonished by my surroundings and I felt privileged to be offered an opportunity to experience this wonderful way of life. But, as there was no way I could prepare myself for this new role, it was also rather daunting."

This is something of an understatement

as Phyllis had been brought up in a happy family on Long Island, New York.

"I had a fairly conventional American upbringing with my two brothers. I retain very warm memories of my childhood," she recalls. "However, from an early age, I always had a desire for romance and adventure. I had an active imagination. My ambitions were to travel and find out what went on in the world."

Would she describe herself as a rebel?

"Oh yes," she laughs. "As a teenager, I developed an independent streak and ultimately discovered that the city of New York was an exciting place to be.

"Although I majored in finance at New York University, I did not find it exactly enthralling – but the city, with its vibrant energy and fascinating people, suited my thirst for adventure and I gravitated towards it.

"Somehow, I had always felt I was dancing to the beat of a different drum. I knew that society teaches us to conform but I wasn't really ready for that. I wanted to follow my heart and that is something which has stayed with me."

Phyllis was in her 20s when she fell in love for the first time and married but, tragically, her new husband died just six and a half weeks later. Throwing herself into New York society life and travel, she

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house. Stopping beside a field of gold, she beams enthusiastically and says:

"This is calendula, or marigold, known to have positive uses – both pharmaceutically and homoeopathically. Calendula oil can also be used to replace the drying agent for oil-based paints. Now look closer. What can you see?"

Peering into this shimmering field, I see lots of butterflies, bees and various other insects, proving that such crops have a positive benefit for conservation.

Next, we stand before a sea of deep blue-purple – this is echium, the seed of which has scientifically documented nutritional benefits. Then, we drive on, through fields of hemp and peas, all of which can be used for anything from cattle feed to loft insulation.

"It is very exciting to be part of this process," says the Countess. "Looking back, I could not have anticipated what it would feel like to have all this responsibility.

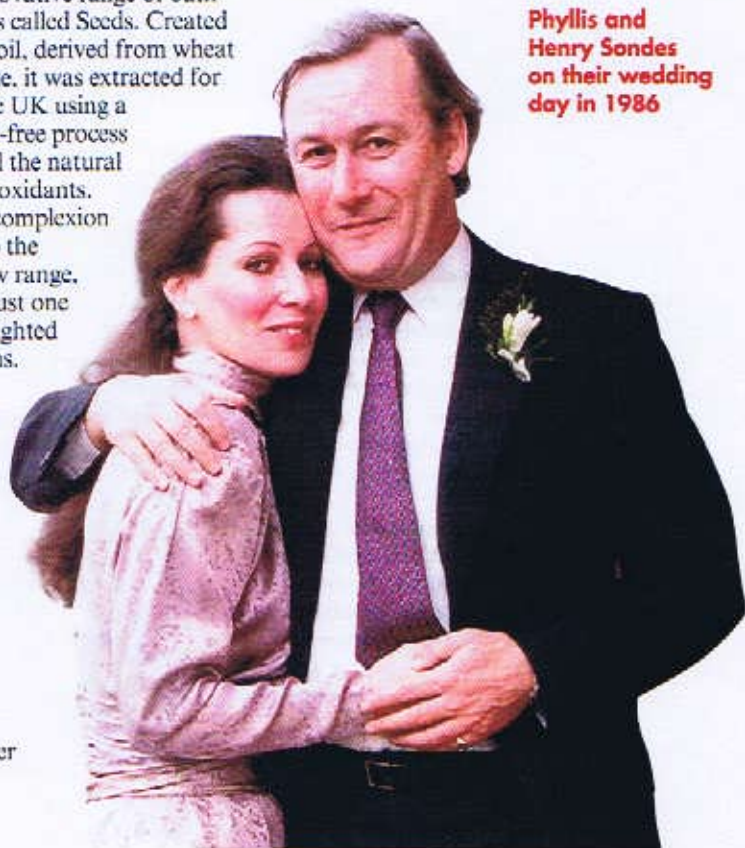
"Now, I am passionate about the future, not only of the estate but also about the significant changes in farming which may come about."

Driving back to her home, I suggest that it is her pioneering spirit, combined with the objectivity of an outsider, that have inspired this vision.

"I am very conscious that I lack a depth of knowledge," she replies, "but, with hindsight, some of my ignorance has been a strength. I find that by asking a different set of questions, new answers can be found. For me, a love-story has evolved into an adventure which will, hopefully, ensure that the Lees Court Estate will be secure for centuries to come."



**Phyllis and Henry Sondes on their wedding day in 1986**



**Phyllis in a field of calendula flowers grown on her estate this summer**

tried to distract herself from this tragedy. It was some years later that she met her second husband, Henry Sondes and they returned to England as man and wife.

It is clear that the 10 years they shared were blissful. Together, they enjoyed both travelling overseas and the whirl of city life in London, where she continues to maintain the family home.

Her husband's untimely death meant that the Countess was confronted with the responsibility of maintaining the ancestral estate. Determined to keep the land that her husband had so loved, but mindful of the crisis in British farming, she began to think of alternative ways to secure its future. Her solution was ingenious: she pioneered the cultivation of non-food crops, such as hemp, calendula and echium, for use in industry, pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, personal care products and bio-fuels.

Given the diversity of such crops, it is thought they could revolutionise farming, and make up a third of farming in non-food crops within the next decade. It is also possible that this change in practice could have a knock-on effect for Developing World economies and global warming.

Yet, although the government has been encouraging farmers to grow non-food crops, the response in Britain remains slow. The Countess, however, has appreciated

the potential value of this diversification and, in 2003, the estate celebrated the cultivation of its first non-food crops.

One of the by-products initiated by the Countess is an innovative range of bath and body products called Seeds. Created from wheat-germ oil, derived from wheat grown on the estate, it was extracted for the first time in the UK using a specialist chemical-free process which preserves all the natural vitamins and anti-oxidants. Her own flawless complexion bears testimony to the benefits of this new range, which represents just one aspect of her far-sighted and inventive plans.

To further illustrate her vision for the future, Countess Sondes invites me to take a tour of the estate. Accompanied by her estate administrator, Elizabeth, we drive through the backbone of the valley below her