

WHO REALLY OWNS BRITAIN

Barely a week after Prime Minister John Major declared his belief in Britain as a classless society, the Marquis of Cholmondeley inherited a £118million, 14,000-acre estate. The will is a record in Britain, yet as landowners the Cholmondeleys are strictly second division. There is no official record of who owns what, but the Daily Mail has compiled its own list.

It shows that even after a century of shrinking estates through crippling death duties, forced sales and the emergence of the National Trust, 16.5 million acres are still in private – and largely aristocratic – hands. Biggest ‘commoner’ landowners are the Macdonald-Buchanans of Black & White whisky fame, who own 71,000 acres in Scotland.

Incredibly, a third of the land mass of Britain belongs to fewer than 1,500 families. After the Queen and the Prince of Wales, who has 140,000 acres, these are the nation’s leading landowners...

Duke of Buccleuch, 67. Acres: 247,000. The colourful Buccleuch, who often writes fervent letters to papers was once described as “Britain’s largest private landowner – other than the Queen, of course. But when he saw the description, he altered the word ‘Britain’ to ‘Europe’”. He has two homes including the beautiful Boughton House, near Kettering, Northants, set in 11,000 acres, and has another home – Bowhill near Selkirk.

The 200,000-odd acres he possesses in lowland Scotland are mostly wild moors. They go back to the claymore-rattling days of Robert the Bruce. The Duke’s clan, the Douglas’s were given the property as a reward for supporting him.

Lord Lovat, 79. Acres: 190,000. The family seat is Beaufort Castle, outside Inverness, which Lord Lovat has passed to his son, known, logically, as the Master of Lovat. ‘My youth positively reeked of privilege,’ he says. ‘But my politics remain strictly feudal.’ The family is worth around £55million.

Earl of Seafield, 51. Acres: 186,000. His mother owned 800 square miles of the best bits of Scotland’s grouse moors and farms. Short of cash in the Seventies, the earl sold a small 21,000-acre estate for £1million. He’s now worth £35million. The family seat, Cullen House, Banffshire, was sold for about £350,000 for conversion into flats. In the good old days, the earl used to horrify relatives

and neighbours with open-air pop festivals at Cullen House. Much more sober these days – with a poor local reputation for Highland Clearances.

Duke of Westminster, 39. Acres: 158,000. Worth £4billion, he’s reckoned to be Britain’s richest man – second only to the Queen in wealth. The Duke, who recently fought Westminster City Council in the courts, owns some 300 acres of Mayfair and Belgravia in London – reckoned to be most valuable real estate in the world.

In the country, he has 13,000 acres around his 1960s-built home, Eaton Hall, near Chester, Cheshire. He also owns 100,000 acres of Scottish forest, as well as a sizeable tract of Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland.

Duke of Atholl, 59. Acres: 135,000. In 1987 the Duke had his house whitewashed. It cost an unbelievable £250,000. The turreted 180-roomed Blair Castle, built in the 13th century, is exemplary of the style and scale of his estates. Altogether, his land and assets are worth £143million. On the rolling acres, his own private army of 80 soldiers train for ceremonial duties.

Viscount Leverhulme, 75. Acres: 118,000. Grandfather founded the Lever Brothers soap company and got seriously rich. In 1918 the first Baron Leverhulme bought the Hebridean island of Lewis and part of neighbouring Harris for his retirement.

William inherited the title in 1949 and since then has devoted himself to his acres in Cheshire and Lancashire. He’s rather eccentric, and in 1970 he converted the classic ballroom at Thornton Manor, his 50-roomed Cheshire home into a heated swimming pool at a cost of £20,000.

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(abbreviated)