

Alexander McQueen... mystery of £16m legacy



QUESTIONS: McQueen's siblings Tony, Janet and Michael and, right, Lee

he was. She recalls: 'Lee phoned me on the Sunday, we had a little chat and then he said, "I love you."

'I thought it was strange as he was not a demonstrative person. Then on the Tuesday, he rang me and sounded more upbeat.

'He said, "I'm going to make Mum an old-fashioned pink winceyette nightgown and have it biked to the funeral parlour."

'I thought that he was slowly coming to terms with her death. How wrong I was.

'We'd all have been hammering on his door if we had had an inkling

in waiting

extremely proud of what Lee had achieved.'

Lee remained close to his siblings and was generous towards them. Sister Janet says: 'At his shows we would go backstage and say hello and then get out of his way. It was manic, with hair and make-up being done and Lee fitting and straightening every garment. Once the show began Mum would always have a front row seat. We girls sat behind.'

And Tony recalls how once he told Lee he was looking for sunglasses. 'He brought out this tray of McQueen glasses and I said: "You know, Lee, I'd rather get some David Beckham ones." He went mad!

'He used to tell my wife Sharon, "Have anything you want. Have a look through the rails." She would say, "Lee, I would have to sew three dresses together to go around me," and he would reply: "Lose some weight then!"'

something was wrong,' McQueen was found hanged at his flat in Mayfair, in the early hours of Thursday, February 11. He was 40. He left a note saying: 'Look after my dogs. Sorry. I love you. Lee.'

It was Michael who broke the news to their father, Ronald. 'I broke down and cried. I said: "Dad. Sorry. Lee's killed himself."

'Obviously he was very upset but he didn't cry.

'He just kept saying, "My poor boy. Why have you done this to me, Lee?"

Lee's funeral took place at St Paul's Church, in Knightsbridge, followed by a wake at Claridge's hotel. It was organised by a former colleague and attended by 2,500 guests, including Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell and Stella McCartney.

At first, the family welcomed the help organising the event, but later realised it had paid no more than a passing nod to McQueen's East End roots.

'Looking back we were in turmoil,' recalls Janet, a former council administrator. 'The funeral was basically taken out of our hands.'

'It was just put to us: "There's a nice church in Knightsbridge if you are OK with that." We were asked for our preference in prayers and we had a family reading but other than that they took over. Although we were sitting at the front, I felt a like an outsider. I didn't really know a lot of people there.'

Later, the family decided to bury their brother's ashes on the Isle of Skye, where

they had gone on family holidays and where McQueen had felt most at peace.

After the funeral, the family met the executors of Lee's will: accountant Gary Jackson, 58, and David Glick, 50, an entertainment lawyer whose clients include Sarah Brightman and Norman Cook. The two men visited Lee's father's home in Hornchurch, Essex, to inform the family that Lee had bequeathed £250,000 to his five siblings and £50,000 each to his nieces, nephews and godson.

The family established that McQueen had left £16,036,500.

He owned six properties including a three-bedroom apartment in Mayfair, a country house in Hastings and a villa in Majorca. He had donated £100,000 to four charities: the Terrence Higgins Trust, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, the London Buddhist Centre and the Blue Cross Animal Centre in Burford, Oxfordshire.

And they learned that the remainder of his estate was split into two trust funds – a property fund for the family and a trust fund for his own charity, Sarabande.

McQueen had appointed Glick and Jackson and his former assistant Trino Verkade as trustees and asked them to consider granting bursaries to students at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design in London, where he studied. Janet says she emailed Jackson to request details of the donations made but he replied that the information was confidential.

'I just wanted to know that his money was being spent wisely,' she says. 'I didn't bother to contact them again.' More than a year after their brother's death, they had still not seen his personal belongings and turned to solicitors. In October 2011 they were told they could look through his personal effects.

'I did get a phone call saying that if we wanted Lee's bonsai trees, which he loved, we could pick them up from the garden,' says Janet, 'but everything else had already been packed up – even his clothes.'

'It was only after our solicitors had contacted the executors, that they finally let us choose some of Lee's personal belongings. I picked a blue chequered shirt, which was ripped because he wore it all the time, and my son Gary chose a beige coat. It was moth-eaten because it had been in storage so long.'

Michael is incensed about the CBE. 'I would like to know how you put a price on a medal,' he says. 'You can't buy one. You can't sell one. Surely the family could have it.'

The family have been unable to scrutinise Sarabande's accounts in detail; legally they

must rely on what the trustees tell them.

But according to Charity Commission figures – publicly available – Sarabande spent just £240 on charitable activities in the year ending March 31, 2012, despite having an income that year of £10.36 million, and has made charitable donations of £48,000 this year, having banked another £283,353.

In the course of the past two financial years, it spent £15,484 on governance and £11,792 in support costs. 'We have no idea who they have made donations to,' says Janet.

'They won't tell us whether they have made grants to students as Lee wanted.'

The family is also concerned by the sale of McQueen's apartment in Mayfair, which was once PG Wodehouse's home.

Sold on January 18, 2012, to developers Aspire Change for £3.15 million, the flat is now on the market, two years later, for £7.25 million, which could give Aspire chief executive Gary Brine, who employs trustee Gary Jackson as his accountant, a substantial profit.

RESPONDING on behalf of Sarabande, Bates Wells Braithwaite solicitors said that the initial sale of the Mayfair apartment was handled on an 'arm's length' basis and sold to the highest bidder. The price doubled after the flat was extensively renovated and put back on the market.

BWB said the trustees had responded to questions from the McQueen family in accordance with the legal advice they had been given and that they could disclose only what they were legally entitled to disclose.

Janet and her brothers feel that their own attempts to cherish the memory of their brother have been hampered by Kering, which owns the trademark to his name.

'Newham College got in touch with me two years ago and said, "Would you present an award each year for a fashion student of the year? We can do this in Lee's name."

'But Kering told them they have to apply for permission to use his name on a yearly basis and that the college is not allowed to publicise it externally.'

Newham College told The Mail on Sunday that getting permission to use the Alexander McQueen name is so complicated that the award is unlikely to continue. Nevertheless, a spokesman for Kering said: 'We engaged with Newham College at the re-quest of his family and are proud to work with them.'

Their brother's untimely death has left a gaping hole. 'What always baffled me was why would someone who had so much would take his own life?' asks Michael. 'I feel his head was turned by fame but in the end he realised it was rather false and not all it was cracked up to be.'

'He was longing for love and when he lost the two people closest to him – Mum and Isabella – it was the final straw.'

● The McQueen family was not paid for this interview. Donations can be made in Lee McQueen's memory to St Luke's Hospice, Basildon: stlukeshospice.com; and Help for Heroes: helpforheroes.org.uk.