

After an unconvincing start as a Royal, Sophie, Countess of Wessex, is now viewed as a safe pair of hands. She has become one of Her Majesty's closest confidantes and even joins her mother-in-law on the regal sofa to watch TV. CAMILLA TOMINEY reports on the remarkable turnaround

ONLOOKERS may have been surprised to see the Queen arrive at church on Christmas Day, not with one of her own children but her daughter-in-law Sophie, the Countess of Wessex. Dressed in coordinated Christmas outfits, they could easily have been mistaken for mother and daughter as they arrived at St Mary Magdalene church.

While the rest of the Royal Family, including Prince Philip, 88, made their way on foot from Sandringham, only Sophie was granted the special privilege of travelling with the Queen in her chauffeur-driven car.

Sophie's appearance alongside the monarch on Christmas morning has become almost as traditional as the Royal Family's annual festive ritual at the Norfolk estate. Since she married Prince Edward in 1999 Sophie has become very close to her mother-in-law, especially since her own mother, Mary Rhys-Jones, died from cancer in 2005, aged 71.

The Queen, 83, has also come to rely on Sophie more and more following the death of her two closest female confidantes, her sister Margaret and the Queen Mother, who died within two months of each other in 2002.

With Sophie living at Bagshot Park in Surrey, just a few miles from Windsor

'The Countess has simply got on with it'

Castle, the Queen's favourite residence where she spends most weekends, the pair see a great deal of each other. A senior royal aide said: "It's no secret that the Queen and the Countess get on incredibly well. They spend a lot of time together."

"The Countess regularly accompanies the Queen to church and the Sandringham Christmas Day service is no exception."

The pair are understood to regularly watch television together and have a shared passion for military history, often exchanging books on the subject.

The Queen has always liked Sophie, 44, the down-to-earth daughter of a tyre salesman, for her lack of airs and graces and easy-going nature. As royal author Phil Dampier put it: "Sophie was a breath of fresh air for the Queen after the over-emotional Diana, who tended to overshadow everyone else, and needy Fergie, who was always a controversial figure. Sophie simply got on with it."

It has always been said that Edward, at 45 her youngest child, is the Queen's favourite. He was unfairly dogged by rumours over his sexuality in his formative years and the Queen has always credited Sophie with helping to rehabilitate his image.

In the Eighties and Nineties, Edward became a laughing stock for his forays into television with his production company Ardent. His royal version of the game show *It's A Knockout* exposed Buckingham Palace to ridicule in 1987 and he later courted controversy by flouting a press ban to film Prince William, his nephew, when he was at St Andrew's University in 2002.

These days Edward is considered one of the hardest working Royals and is being



Picture: ANWAR HUSSEIN/All Action/PA

How Sophie became the Queen's favourite

groomed to take over his father's mantle as the next Duke of Edinburgh.

Unlike the rest of the Queen's offspring, Edward and Sophie have also made a success of their personal life. Their 10-year marriage has endured while Prince Charles, Princess Anne and Prince Andrew have all been divorced. Perhaps it is little wonder that Sophie is the Queen's favourite daughter-in-law since she and Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, are the only ones left.

What makes Sophie's bond with the Queen all the more extraordinary is the fact that not long ago the Countess was considered a pariah after her run-in with an undercover reporter posing as a sheik, when she branded Cherie Blair "horrid" and William Hague "deformed".

Worse still, Sophie stood accused of trading on her royal connections.

The headlines following the sensational revelations in 2001 could not have been more damaging with Sophie quoted in large type on the front of one downmarket rag insisting: "My Edward's Not Gay".

It was a huge mistake but one that the Countess has learned from. She stepped down from her PR company within months amid accusations she and Edward were using their position for commercial gain and now neither has any outside business interests.

Despite being parents to two young children, Louise, six, and James, two, the couple do not shirk their royal responsibilities. Last year, Edward performed 341 official engagements, Sophie 168. Sophie has also earned praise for her campaigning on neonatal issues after the traumatic birth of her daughter Louise who was delivered four weeks prematurely on November 8, 2003, by emergency caesarean section that nearly killed the Countess. This was after her ectopic pregnancy in 2001.

During the delivery of Louise, Sophie suffered a placental abruption, where the placenta detaches from the womb, losing nine pints of blood. She underwent a

'Edward is thought of as hardworking'

three-hour operation during which doctors said she was 20 minutes from death. Mother and daughter then had to spend their first crucial days of bonding apart as Louise, weighing 4lb 9oz, was transferred to the neonatal unit at St George's Hospital in Tooting while Sophie remained at Frimley Park Hospital in Surrey.

So fond are the Queen and Philip of Sophie that they took the unprecedented step of visiting her in hospital (which was never reported at the time) and they have felt particularly protective of Louise as she was born with a squint.

According to Phil Dampier: "The Duke of Edinburgh is very good with children and he and the Queen particularly like spending time with Louise and James because they missed out on the early years of their older grandchildren. When William and Harry were that age, the Queen and Philip spent half the year on tour overseas."

Edward and Sophie are very hands-on parents although they do have a full-time nanny. Like Princess Anne they decided to reduce the responsibility on their children by not burdening them with the royal title, HRH. Louise is simply known as Lady Louise Windsor and James is Viscount Severn.

Choosing not to give their children the Prince and Princess titles that would open more doors showed just how far Edward and Sophie, once criticised for cashing-in on their royal status, had come. The Queen gave her approval and when it comes to such matters, Sophie has clearly learned from the master.

She might not be a blue blood but when it comes to quietly doing her duty, Sophie is a chip off the old block.