

Andrew bytes back

PRINCE ANDREW is in hysterics. “What a stupid question!” he exclaims, roaring with laughter. I have merely asked what it was like to abseil 1,004ft down The Shard, a feat accomplished by the Queen’s second (some say, favourite) son in 2012. “No different to abseiling down something else that is tall, slippery and shiny,” he guffaws.

I suppose if you have flown helicopters in the Falklands War, descending London’s tallest skyscraper with only a harness and a hard hat for company is all in a day’s work.

While he is flippant about it now, it was quite a leap of faith for the 54-year-old, coming just a year after a spectacular fall from grace.

It will be exactly three years to the day tomorrow that Andrew was stripped of his role as UK trade envoy, amid lurid headlines on his links to convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein and such shady Middle East figures as Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s son Saif.

Eyebrows had already been raised over the prince’s relations with Timur Kulibayev, son-in-law of the President of Kazakhstan, after he bought the Duke’s Sunninghill Park home for £3million more than its £12million asking price.

That came after Andrew’s former wife Sarah Ferguson was caught in a 2010 tabloid newspaper sting operation offering access to the prince for a £500,000 backhander.

Then there were the long-running complaints about the lavish nature of the foreign trips enjoyed by Britain’s special representative for trade and investment, aka “Air Miles Andy”. Now, after what royal aides have described

‘He has inherited his father’s directness’

as a “period of intense soul-searching”, the Duke is enjoying something of a renaissance.

Having largely ditched the overseas jaunts (bar brief trips to Kuwait and Germany this year on behalf of his mother), these days a more fitting moniker for the former jet-setter might be “Apprenticeships Andy” for the prince has taken it upon himself to champion young people.

Nowadays he is so “down with the kids” he counts Black Eyed Peas entrepreneur will.i.am among his close acquaintances.

The Duke has managed to remodel himself as the royal doyen of the digital age, promoting science and engineering in schools, entrepreneurially focused education and on-the-job training. Having eschewed higher education to join the Royal Navy, it is arguably a natural fit for a proud graduate of the university of life.

He and The Voice judge have collaborated on the Inspiring Digital Enterprise Award (iDEA) scheme which supports 16 to 25-year-olds to develop digital business ventures. At another event in April, the prince took his first selfie at Pitch@Palace, when 12 young entrepreneurs were invited to St James’s Palace to make their case for funding, advice and introductions.

I caught up with the Duke at Buckingham Palace, where the staff canteen was turned over to schoolchildren for CoderDojo, a computer coding club for youngsters, earlier this month.

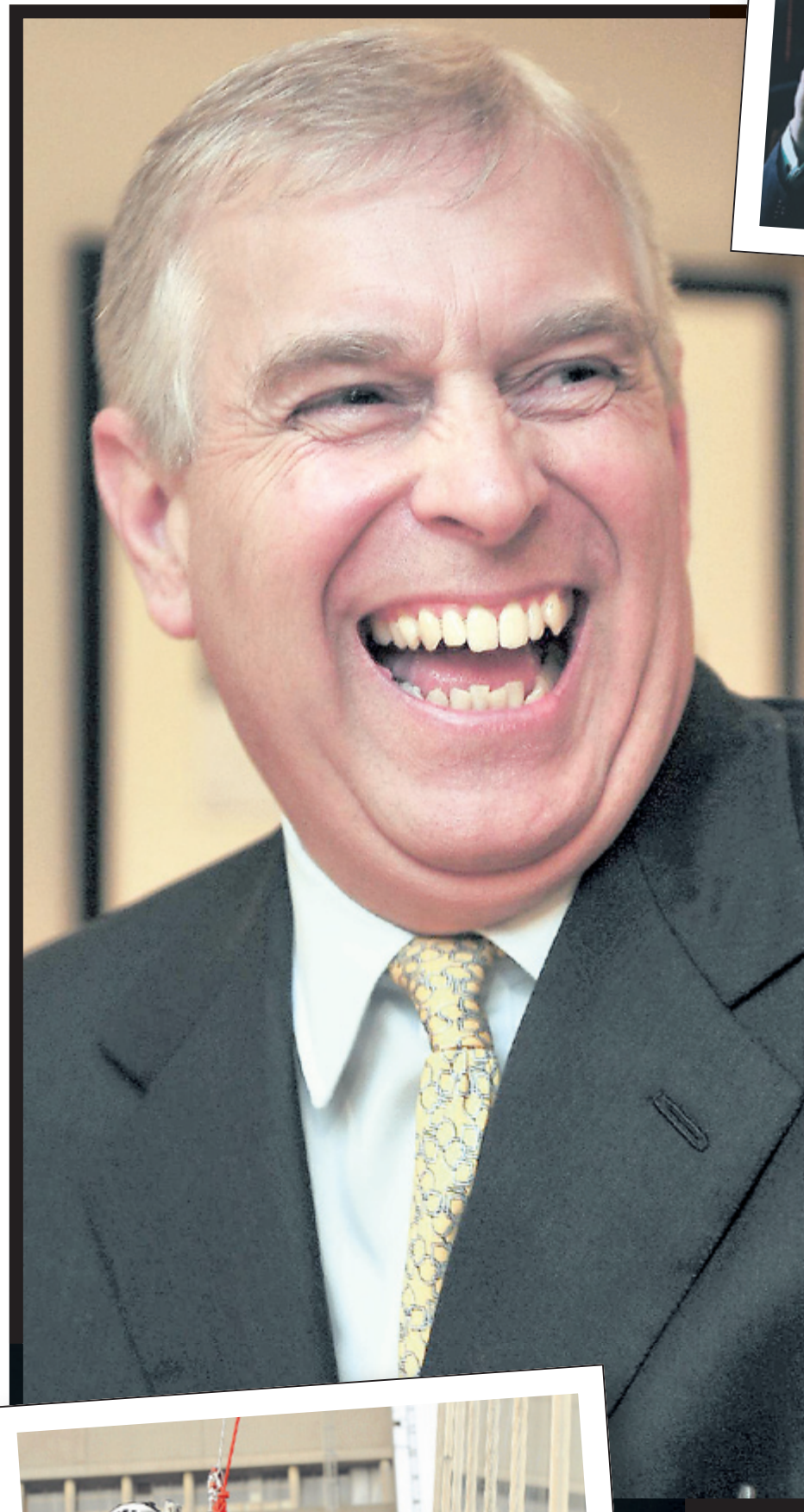
“The 21st century is about the digital economy and if young people aren’t given the skills to be able to participate they are going to be disengaged,” says the Duke, to explain why he is supporting such initiatives.

“This is about giving kids opportunities and making sure as many as possible have that access and those digital skills. That is what iDEA is about and to some extent, at the other end of the scale, Pitch@Palace; getting the businesses to give them that investment.

“This is how it starts. You get them at this age and you inspire them and they then get the aspiration to follow that career path.”

Once described by a US ambassador as speaking so “cockily” during an official

After his dramatic fall from grace in 2011, the Duke of York has emerged as a champion of youth training in the digital age, says Royal Editor CAMILLA TOMINEY



engagement that it “verged on the rude”, there is no doubt Andrew has inherited Prince Philip’s directness.

Those who have worked with him, however, insist he knows his stuff. Bill Liao, co-founder of CoderDojo, says: “He gets it. You can tell when someone has got a real grasp of what they are talking about or whether they are just paying lip service. At the original planning meeting, we all got heard. He could have rolled over everyone but he listened carefully and made good points.”

It is a similar story at The Royal Society in London, where the Duke visits 11 to 16-year-olds creating inventions for Teen Tech, industry-led events to help youngsters discover careers in science, engineering and technology.

Former Tomorrow’s World host Maggie Philbin, Teen Tech’s founder and chief executive, says she likes the fact he is so hands-on: “The Duke just gets stuck in, which the young people respond to really well. He is no nonsense which is great because teenagers can see through people who talk BS.”

INDEED, Andrew is not backwards in coming forwards as he questions the pupils about their work. “Is this designed for adults or children?” he asks a trio of boys from Park House School in Newbury, who have invented software to protect children from cyber bullying.

He tells pupils from Hampton Academy in Richmond upon Thames who have invented a special scanner to detect when food in a fridge is out of date: “Occasionally I get the entire contents out to see what’s hiding at the back.”

Really? One imagines he might leave that to his former wife, who still lives with him at Royal Lodge, Windsor, despite them divorcing in 1996 (Fergie says they are the “world’s happiest unmarried couple”).

The Duke was meant to stay for only half an hour and visit a couple of displays. More than an hour later, he has spoken to every one of the pupils and is delivering an impromptu speech.

I ask his assistant private secretary James Upsher if this is normal. (His formidable private secretary Amanda Thirsk, who has been the chief architect of his “rehabilitation” since taking control of his office in August 2012 and was at the CoderDojo event, is not here today but “across everything” in the manner of ice queen Vogue editor Anna Wintour, I am told).

“He just ad libs,” says Mr Upsher. “We might give him a few notes but we never write his speeches. He just does them off the cuff. It is the same with the timing of everything. We will have done the programme as planned but if he wants to stay on, he stays on.”

After telling pupils: “I know you are going to be some of the really important thinkers of the future” the Duke notices he is late. “Where is everyone? Lunch? Oh, I better hurry up!”

I ask if the Duke, as a father of Beatrice, 25, and Eugenie, 24, is promoting sciences to plug a gender gap. “I am interested in giving kids the opportunity whether they are boys or girls.”

With that he bounds off with characteristic gusto, looking not to the past but the future.

HE GETS IT: Prince Andrew, who abseiled down the Shard for charity, visited a technology show with will.i.am, his collaborator in the iDEA jobs initiative

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