

Putting Princess Margaret on one side for the moment and she is perhaps unfortunate to have been drawn into this period of royal misfortune this would be a crushing blow for both Andrew and his sister Anne.

For both have shown unbelievably bad timing to display the less attractive side of their characters to the world.

Anne tersely murmured, when Iris Halfpenny gave her a flower basket outside the Sandringham church on Christmas Day, that it was 'a ridiculous thing to do'.

She is expected to take on considerably more official duties in the coming years to help out her mother, now 74, and more importantly her father, who will be 80 in June.

As for Andrew, flabby at ■, he leaves the Navy after 21 years in April and faces a future which would be completely blank but for his roistering without an official job being found for him.

One has been, of course he is taking over from the Duke of Kent as vice-chairman of British Trade International, a hugely important roving ambassadorial role drumming up trade for Britain.

As one senior Palace courtier complains: 'He hasn't looked much like an ambassador this week, has he?' Andrew has taken over, again from his cousin the Duke of Kent, as president of the Football Association and is anticipating a much wider role as a front-rank royal, carrying out important public engagements.

This week Andrew has been pictured cavorting with topless beauties on a rich man's boat anchored off Phuket, in Thailand.

If the shots of him having cream smeared into his sun-scorched body by a topless friend had been of his ex-wife Fergie, they would have raised an outcry from Buckingham Palace.

They follow pictures of him looking rather dishevelled at a Halloween 'hookers and pimps' fancy dress party in New York, and emerging in the early hours from London nightclubs.

Obviously, there is no reason why a man of ■ who is no longer married, should not enjoy himself in the company of pretty girls.

But Andrew has been making too much of a habit of partying, lately, from London to New York, and not always in the company you would expect to find the Queen's favourite son.

His most constant friend appears to be New York-based **Ghislain Maxwell**, 39, daughter of the monstrous **fraud** Robert **Maxwell**. He named his private yacht from which he died after her and stole employees' pension savings to service his own investments.

Miss **Maxwell** can hardly be held responsible for the actions of her dead father, nor should she be.

And yet, is there not something troubling about a **Maxwell** daughter, who never seems to be short of money, becoming the social fulcrum of the Duke of York's life, introducing him to a kaleidoscope of her socialite friends whenever they are together?

At the Palace, they are certainly a trifle uneasy about it.

Princess Anne, 50, is experienced enough to have kept her tongue between her teeth or at least, as her friends would expect, in her cheek in taking an old lady's gift, rather than allowing her explosive side to surface, upsetting so many people.

No wonder they are worried at the Palace.

No wonder they talk of new arrangements and fearfully wonder what is coming next for the blast of censure has been fierce at a time of the year when the Royal Family can normally expect to bask in public approval.