

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

# These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

**Lucy Deane Streatfeild**

**1865 – 1950**

By Pat Pleasance

## “A pioneer amongst women”

Lucy Anne Evelyn Deane was born in 1865 in India, and grew up as part of a British Army family, first in India, and then in South Africa. She was the eldest child of Bonar Millett Deane and his wife Lucy, sister to Viscount Falmouth. In the social context of the late nineteenth century this background would have opened doors and would enable her to exercise her gifts as an energetic confident woman devoted to the improvement of working conditions.

Tragedy struck while Lucy was still in her teens. Her father, Colonel Deane, was killed in South Africa leading a charge at Laing's Nek in 1881. Five years later her mother also died, in London, and Lucy and her younger sister, Hyacinthe Mary, were alone. A quarterly allowance from wealthy relatives helped, and after staying for a while with an aunt, the sisters set up house together in Kensington.

In pursuance of her goals Lucy worked to improve her skills and knowledge. She obtained a nursing diploma from the National Health Society (not of course our modern NHS) and worked at the Chelsea Infirmary. Later she also passed an examination at the Parker Institute for a Sanitary Inspector's Certificate.

Her diary for 1893 shows that she was already making a name for herself. She was leading a busy life, including going round to inspect sewage works, apparently on her own initiative, and giving lectures on health issues, as well as attending lectures by others. She also represented the National Health Society at a Women's Conference in Leeds. In this same year, 1893, Kensington Vestry (an administrative division of London before 1899) took a very bold decision. Although Inspectors of Workshops had always been men up to this time, they advertised to take on two women Inspectors, checking places where women were employed, to ensure compliance with the Factory Acts. This covered overcrowding, lighting, ventilation and sanitary conditions.



Lucy applied. She and Miss Rose Squire were appointed at a salary of £60.00 p.a., the first two women to hold such positions. Lucy was also earning money from her lectures.

Magazines pursued Lucy for interviews, and she relates in her diary that one printed a sham interview, putting words into her mouth which she had never said. This caused some upset.

Lucy was really getting noticed, and was also meeting many women who shared similar concerns. She had an invitation from Lady Dilke, who clearly wanted to assess her capabilities. Consideration was being given to the appointment of Women Factory Inspectors, which would be responsible positions at a much higher level than the position Lucy then held. It emerged that Mr. Asquith (then Home Secretary) was ready to nominate her if she could satisfy the Civil Service Commission as to her qualifications. She gained the appointment. Unsurprisingly there were adverse reactions from some men officials, but fortunately Mr. Sprague Oram, the Chief Inspector of Factories, was supportive.

Lucy's friend Violet Markham relates that Lucy and May Tennant (also appointed) included in their responsibilities the inspection of sweat shops in Soho, which involved dealing with their hostile foreign owners. A friend gave Lucy some practical advice at this time. She should keep clear of public speaking, trade unions etc. because the government would not employ a "party" woman who was strongly connected with any cause. Lucy was grateful for this advice, which may have made her more cautious, but clearly could not persuade her to relinquish entirely her involvement with causes she believed in. Not long afterwards she was at a trade union meeting with Lady Dilke, and was relieved that she managed to avoid being called upon to speak.

In 1898, as a result of what she was seeing in the course of her work, Lucy became convinced that dust particles and particularly asbestos were causing lung disease. Looked at under a microscope the particles were very sharp. These warnings were included in the reports of the Chief Inspector of Factories, but it was not until 1911 that they were taken seriously.

In 1901 public opinion was becoming incensed at what was happening in South Africa during the second Boer War. [Emily Hobhouse](#), who had been to South Africa on behalf of a charity, had seen some of the conditions in the Concentration Camps. On her return to England she publicised the burning of farms, deportations, and semi-starvation in the disease ridden camps. The government was eventually forced into action and unusually decided to send out a "Ladies Commission" to South Africa to investigate the camps, which were mainly occupied by women and children as the men had been transported



elsewhere. The commission was chaired by Dame Millicent Fawcett, a Liberal supporter, and Lucy was appointed as Secretary.

They went to South Africa and spent over four months travelling by train, inspecting the camps. In one of the last of her regular letters to her sister from South Africa, Lucy writes of her frustration at trying to get her viewpoint included in the report of the Commission.

“It seemed to me that it would be most mischievous if we split. It would be more “white-washy” than ever. So I have struggled and fought and pleaded and argued for my main points and got nearly all of them. I couldn’t prevent all the jam and blarney at the beginning ... “.

The eventual report fully supported [Emily Hobhouse](#), and it may be that Lucy’s pressure was crucial. Conditions in the camps were improved and the high death rate was much reduced. Lucy’s letters to her sister give a vivid description of their own daily lives during this visit to South Africa: the ankle deep dust, difficulty of getting water to wash in and extortionate prices for vegetables and eggs. Lucy’s maid, Alice, had to sweep their accommodation several times a day to try to keep the dust down.

It was not long after her return that tragedy struck yet again. In 1903 Lucy’s beloved sister Hyacinthe died in a railway accident on her way back from her duties in Ireland. She also had a position in public life and was an Inspectress of Domestic Science.

Leaving London behind, Lucy moved to Westerham in Kent in 1904, and lived here for the rest of her life. Ill health in 1906 caused her to resign her official duties, but when she recovered it was not long before she was again in demand. Under the Trade Board Act of 1909 various boards were set up, and Lucy sat on those relating to shirts, tin boxes and paper. Following the establishment of National Health Insurance in 1911 she held a senior administrative position as Chief Woman Organiser. In 1912 Mr Asquith (now Prime Minister) appointed her as a member of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service.

In 1911 Lucy married an Architect, Granville Edward Stewart Streatfeild, and she became known as Mrs. Deane Streatfeild. Her husband was always very supportive of her work. Women were demanding the right to vote, and Lucy was active in the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. In 1913 there were large marches and rallies in London, and Lucy helped to organise the women’s contingent from Westerham.

The outbreak of war in 1914 meant more government work. She was the woman member of the War Office Appeals Committee, which dealt with disputes over pensions and allowances to soldiers’ dependents. Still concerned for working conditions, she organised



the setting up of canteens for night workers in munition factories. This did not mean neglecting other matters about which she cared.

She supported the idea of the Women's Peace Conference in The Hague in 1915. She was one of these selected by Mr. McKenna, the Home Secretary, to receive a passport, and no doubt all the government work she was doing made her an acceptable choice.

During the war ugly rumours had been circulating about the behaviour of women in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Lucy chaired the Commission of Enquiry sent out to France to investigate, and to look into the conditions under which the women lived in 1917/18. She found the conditions were good, and unsurprisingly that the rumours were grossly exaggerated. She did however comment that some of the women did not understand that when they were in uniform different behaviour was required.

She threw herself into committee work in her home area of Kent, and was involved in a number of County Committees, including the West Kent Women's Agricultural Committee. She also became a Justice of the Peace acting for the Sevenoaks Petty Sessional Division.

A strong supporter of the Women's Institute, she founded the branch in Westerham, and produced some Shakespeare plays in which she also acted. She was very keen that these should be projects involving the whole community in the village.

Her London connections were not entirely forgotten, and she was instrumental in setting up a home in Chelsea for unmarried mothers and their babies.

In 1918 public recognition of all Lucy had achieved came in the form of a CBE, which was presented to her by King George V.

Lucy died in 1950 and many tributes were paid to "a pioneer amongst women". She was a public servant who used her official positions and the status these gave her to work tirelessly for the improvement of the lives of others, particularly women.



