

The Life and Times of Lady Wentworth

WORDS ELIZABETH ARCHER

With Wilfrid Blunt and Lady Anne Blunt as parents, the only surviving child could not be anything other than interesting.



Judith inherited a lot of her father's characteristics together with his intuitive flair. She was beautiful, athletic, talented, loved poetry and had a very good eye for a horse. Like him she had an authoritarian and unforgiving side, and this resulted in the breakdown of several relationships in her life. She inherited persistence and courage from her mother and intelligence from both. She had an outstanding memory, a ready wit, was an excellent after dinner speaker, and was very interesting on any subject. Her qualities and strength of personality were admired by many, though she was somewhat intimidating.

Judith was born on 6th February 1873 in Brook Street, London. She did not see much of her parents in her childhood as they travelled so much, and she was often left in the care of Mrs Pollen, a tenant at Newbuildings. Wilfrid called her 'Bibi', and he found her precocious wit and tomboyish love of outdoor life a delight. She tried hard to be the son he desperately wanted, and she worshipped him.

She accompanied her parents to Egypt in the winter of 1888/89 and was taken to Sheykh Obeyd. At the time the gardens were still being restored and the construction of the house was not quite complete – nevertheless she was enchanted and wanted them to move in immediately. Her 16th birthday fell during that visit and she was given as a present Mesaoud, then a young colt. The Blunts clearly came to realise this was an overly generous gift and so began a family tradition of giving children a horse and then reclaiming it.

At this young age she showed foresight in believing it to be a mistake to maintain studs in both England and Egypt as it would not be possible to manage both satisfactorily. As things were, only six months were being spent at each establishment. The situation improved enormously for the Blunts when Mutlak was employed in 1897 and he became a trusted and able manager of Sheykh Obeyd in their absence.

When she was in her early twenties Judith was shattered to learn the father she adored was not the man she thought and the relationship between them was never the same again. She discovered that not only had her father sired an illegitimate child, but he had also tried to lure her good friend Emily Lytton to Paris. Judith intervened, persuading her friend not to go, which annoyed Wilfrid intensely. The feud continued for a few years before some sort of reconciliation came about. Judith wrote 'to me he had once seemed a glorious ideal, which crashed to dust to my eternal grief'. Thereafter, there were long periods of amiability interspersed with sudden and violent outbursts. There was in fact more than one illegitimate child, and some were supported financially.

By 1898 she had 'come out' and been launched into London society for a season. For a country loving girl, it was not the life for her – she felt awkward and was not tempted by any of the many suitors she attracted. Instead, in the summer of 1898, at the age of 25, she accepted the attentions of Neville Lytton, the 19-year-old son of her parents' friends, and brother of her good friend Emily. Wilfrid and Lady Anne were fond of Neville but concerned that he was too young, and Wilfrid suggested to him that he should wait a year.

The couple did not wait, and they were married in Egypt on 2nd February 1899, spending their honeymoon at Sheykh Obeyd. Judith was promised the grey mares Bozra and Nejiba as a wedding present, but Bozra was never given and Nejiba, like Mesaoud, was later reclaimed. A celebration feast was held, to which five local villages were invited. According to *The Times*, a whole flock of sheep was slaughtered. The wedding was of interest to Queen Victoria and she enquired if all had gone well. There were close connections between the Lyttons and the Royal Family. Neville's father had been Viceroy of India and British Ambassador in Paris, and four years after his death, his widow, Neville's mother, had been appointed 'Lady of the Bedchamber' to Queen Victoria. She was concerned that



Left: Lady Wentworth of Crabbet Park. Photo used with permission of the Lytton family.

Right (top): Both Judith and her husband Neville Lytton were very good at real tennis. Neville was the World Amateur Champion in 1911. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

Right (bottom): Lady Anne Lytton riding Kaftan. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

Wilfrid would impose his anti-empire political views on Neville.

Initially, Judith and Neville lived in Paris, where Neville was studying art. He was a talented artist and his murals at the Balcombe village hall (near Crabbet) are especially good. From Paris they went to a rented house in Cheyne Gardens in London for a short while before moving in 1903 to Forest Cottage on the Crabbet Estate. By that time, they had two young children, Anthony who was born in 1900 and Anne who arrived in 1901. Their third child Winifrid was born in 1904, and that year Wilfrid, at the age of 62, thought he would not live much longer and made over Crabbet to Judith with two conditions: firstly, to change her name to Blunt-Lytton and secondly, to take on the £15,000 mortgage. He refused to include Neville in the deal as he wasn't a blood relative.

The house was let at the time and so the young family did not move in until 1908. By then the real tennis court had been completed. Designed by the architect Joseph Bickley, and considered a fine example of his work, the building was thought by Wilfrid a great extravagance,

and it included not just a real tennis court but also a squash court and swimming pool. For the opening day Geoffrey Covey, World Professional Champion for 16 years, was invited to play and so began a life-long association with Crabbet, starting as a real tennis coach, and eventually becoming manager of the stud and the estate for Judith. Both Judith and Neville were very good at real tennis and Neville was the World Amateur Champion in 1911. Not to be outdone, Judith awarded herself the title World Champion as well, although there wasn't actually a championship for women.

Following the separation of her parents in 1906 she attempted to keep in with both parents, but visiting Newbuildings would imply acceptance of Dorothy Carleton, which would hurt her mother, so as a compromise her children visited

Newbuildings without her and they had many happy times there with their grandfather. For the same reason she would not receive Dorothy at Crabbet, which resulted in another outburst of rage from Wilfrid.

Judith was very much involved in the stud and was consulted continually by Lady Anne following the partition of the stud. She also bought horses for herself from her father. Lady Anne wrote, 'it is a joy we are absolutely at one over stud matters', and she was trying to find Judith a grey stallion. Judith had not shared her mother's wish to avoid greys, which were not so popular with buyers. As a consequence, some very good horses were sold too soon, and Judith wanted to remedy the situation. She felt colour was of secondary consideration, quality

being the most important thing. Forging pedigrees in towns in the Middle East was common practice at that time and Lady Anne was the ideal person to authenticate the horse's pedigrees. She found some of the rare Krush strain and these were at Sheykh Obeyd at the time of her death, though she had her doubts that they were of a high enough standard to import to Crabbet.

Judith and Neville had started to drift apart. Judith preferred the country life and Neville loved London, and for a couple of years before the outbreak of the First World War he only visited Crabbet at weekends. They went to America together in 1914 to play tennis and sell Neville's pictures but the trip was a disaster; an appalling passage out, pictures lost, nine feet of snow, Judith was not allowed to watch Neville play tennis because she was a woman, and Geoffrey Covey was beaten twice by the American champion. When the war broke out Neville enlisted in the infantry and was injured. His visits were by now rare and they eventually divorced by mutual consent in 1923.

Their finances as well as their relationship had gone downhill. The war had made life difficult for all large estates, and on top of an estate that was not making a profit, Judith had the burden of a large mortgage. The Arabians were not wanted by the army, and with the shortage and high cost of feed, they were becoming increasingly expensive to keep and sales were extremely difficult to achieve. The future of the stud and Crabbet Estate looked bleak. The Blunts had heard that Judith planned to sell land, which alarmed Lady Anne and infuriated Wilfrid who blamed Judith and Neville for their 'extravagant' lifestyle – not the person to accuse other people of extravagance, and Judith reacted with a venom to match her father's. Lady Anne commented how they were 'so alike in their absolutism'. A sale of land was eventually held, with the exception of the house, park and pleasure grounds, and both Wilfrid and Lady Anne bought parts.

Lady Anne was by then stuck in Egypt because of the war and her health was failing. She was very worried about the future of the stud, and the poor relationship between father and daughter. In the end, she decided to leave her estate and 'stud or studs' in the hands of Trustees on behalf of her granddaughters Anne and Winifrid. The wording was a little ambiguous and when Wilfrid decided the horses should be and were his, Judith, now Lady Wentworth, responded with a determination that was to prove too strong



Below: The illustrious stallion Skowronek with Lady Wentworth. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

Right (top): Arabian mares with Lady Wentworth in front of the tennis court. Left to right Marhaba, Nasra, Riyala, Nazira, Silver Fire and Rifala. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

Right (bottom): Lady Wentworth with her dogs. Archives of Rosemary Archer.



for Wilfrid. His attempts to sell a large number of horses so that he could bring numbers down to approximately 30 from the 70–80 that were owned at the time by them all, concerned her greatly.

The Trustees consented to the sale of the Sheykh Obeyd horses by Wilfrid, a decision criticised by Lady Wentworth, especially as the horses of the Krush strain were particularly rare. She claimed Riyala, who she'd bought a half share in to prevent her being sold to America and the greys, and the Trustees claimed the rest on behalf of Anne and Winifrid. Lady Wentworth claimed Rasim on behalf of her son Anthony. She attempted several compromises, none of which were acceptable to Wilfrid, and so he took the

matter to court. Due to his poor health the court had to go to Newbuildings, where they gathered round Wilfrid reclining in his bed, splendidly dressed in Arabic clothes for the occasion. His counsel did their utmost and were 'offensive and vindictive' to Lady Wentworth but she never lost her temper. The decision went against Wilfrid and a new era of the Crabbet Stud began.

Lady Wentworth took charge, overseeing all aspects of the stud. Lady Wentworth bought those horses belonging to the Trustees apart from two each for her two daughters, which later found their way back to Lady Wentworth. Anne Lytton was particularly keen on horses and had been encouraged by her grandmother. She wanted Ferda and Nasik, but Lady



Wentworth persuaded her to take the gelding Kaftan instead of Nasik as she would enjoy riding him more. Anne bred five foals from Ferda, all of which she gave to her mother, before Ferda was included in a large sale to America – together with the replacement Rossana. A large sale was negotiated to Egypt and as became routine she hid the horses she did not want to sell.

Sadly, her relationship with her son Anthony broke down. She had experienced first-hand the miseries of her mother's life and constantly warned Anthony about the sins of her father – illegitimate babies, cruelties, treasons, falsehoods, extravagances. She feared his magic influence and that 'he would be deceived by the guile of her artful parent'. In one letter to her son she said, 'HF (Wilfrid – Head of Family) played havoc with her (Lady Anne's) heart, wrecked her life and, jealous of her intellectual gifts, appropriated the credit of her brains to himself with shameless arrogance. Yet in her anxiety to save him from the forces of his bad company and ever increasing influence of drugs, she sacrificed everything, including vast sums of money, in the hope of a change of heart'

– '30 years of injustice and misery she endured, I was an agonised and protesting witness'. Torn between the two, in 1926 Anthony decided that he would end his unresolved perplexities and would no longer defend either his 'beloved' mother or his grandfather, who had tried to detach him from his mother's influence. Lady Wentworth viewed this change as unaccountable malice and for 30 years she refused to see him and uttered the worst she could, not just to him but about him.

From now on her life revolved around the Crabbet Stud, which she defended fiercely from any criticism. She was shy and rarely spent a night away from Crabbet for the last 30 years of her life.

There was her love of poetry and she was proud of her volumes of poems. She also wrote several books, including *The Authentic Arabian Horse* (largely based on her mother's work, which she had virtually completed at the time of her death), and *Toy Dogs and Their Ancestors*, which Wilfrid said was quite exhaustive of its subject.

A grey stallion was still wanted for the stud and it was Anne Lytton who first spotted Skowronek at a show. The rest of the story of how Skowronek arrived at

Crabbet and the doubts about his pedigree have been covered thoroughly elsewhere so will not be repeated here. Lady Wentworth also acquired others, but as she always wanted to register them in the GSB, some such as Mirage and Dafina (of the Krush strain) were sold on, and Fedaan and Nimr who belonged to Musgrave Clark were not used, although she would have liked to. Skowronek was the last Arabian import into the country that was accepted by the GSB.

Finances were improved by the appearance of breeders in England, which took a little pressure off the need to sell abroad. Large sales were still important and when the Russians came in 1936 and wanted several, she had to include some she did not wish to part with. There was one horse she did not want to part with for any price, and she hid at Frogshole a

Above: Rissla with her foal being led by Lady Wentworth. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

Right: A post-war parade at Crabbet. Indian Magic is held by Fred Rice. Standing next to Lady Wentworth is Fred Branch. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

particularly fine grey colt with spectacular action, called Indian Glory. Tragically he was struck and killed by lightning, adding to her distress at the departure of so many good horses. There was a very useful interchange of stock with Lady Yule of the Hanstead Stud for many years. On one occasion Lady Yule got a Mr Kent to buy Astrella and Naxina for her so Lady Wentworth would not know she was the buyer. There was no objection from Lady Wentworth – after all she had used the same tactics herself if she thought the price would go up as soon as the seller knew she was interested.

During the Second World War the house was requisitioned for Canadian soldiers, and to their surprise Lady Wentworth stayed put. Even more to their surprise she took them on and beat them at billiards, and some kept in touch with her after the war. Their occupation gave rise to claims of damage to furnishings by Geoffrey Covey and Lady Wentworth. One very visible item damaged was the weather vane on the Coronation Stables, which was used for target practice. By this time Geoffrey Covey was very much in charge of virtually all aspects of management of the estate, stud and the finances.

The war brought about further changes. Lady Wentworth's aunt, Mary Lovelace, died and left her some money, which lessened the pressure to sell. After the war, there was an increasing

demand and many wanted to visit the stud. In response, annual parades were held which were very much enjoyed. They provided a unique experience to visitors, and the local pony club were invited too; perfect surroundings, a summer's day, and beautifully presented horses.

Lady Wentworth did like larger horses saying, 'you couldn't have too much of a good thing', and they were easier to sell, but quality and type were what she prized most, and all sizes were kept at Crabbet. She kept a large number of stallions, usually about 20 stallions to 40 mares so she could have the widest possible choice of bloodlines. Some stallions were used sparingly and others much more.

Lady Wentworth loved the outdoors, especially trees, which made life difficult for the staff as she would be furious if any branches were cut back unless they were dead or dangerous – 'in the way' was not sufficient reason. If the staff had to remove any branches the evidence was covered with mud. She had an electrically operated chair to get around the Estate as she'd never learned to drive. She dressed simply and always wore plimsolls (athletic shoes with canvas upper and rubber sole), and spent most of her time in the library, which had a table covered in books and papers, and dogs running riot along the top of the sofa.

She could be kind and helpful, especially to the young, giving advice and assistance. She took an interest in children

and would check on the welfare of the staff's young families. Growing up on the Crabbet Estate was paradise for a child. So many places to play and surrounded by beautiful horses.

On the other hand, she was apt to fabricate, touching up photos for example, and many feel she could not be trusted. The proof perhaps is in the pudding as the Crabbet horses were renowned for their style and presence, hallmarks of the Arabian horse and attributes highly valued by the Blunts. The original stock purchased by her parents were an excellent foundation, yet Lady Wentworth managed to breed horses of the highest calibre for decades, despite selling many of the best abroad. My mother, Rosemary Archer, had vivid memories of the style and presence of the Crabbet horses, and of strings of beautiful fillies appearing in the tree lined paddocks as you drove down the avenue to the house. Lady Wentworth was fit and active to the last few months of her life when she fell ill and died on 8th August 1957, her son Anthony was present. U

References

Rosemary Archer, Colin Pearson and Cecil Covey, with Betty Finke: *Crabbet Arabian Stud – Its History and Influence*.

The Earl of Lytton: *Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*. Archives of Rosemary Archer.

