



Lucy displays one of the pair of shoes she wore when dancing with Len Goodman on BBC4's *Dancing Cheek to Cheek* in 2014

LESSONS *from* LUCY

WI favourite Lucy Worsley invites *WI Life* into her world at Hampton Court Palace to talk history, women, and a very controversial black pudding...

Interview HATTIE PARISH Photography JENNY STEWART

She's long been a champion of the WI, presenting a TV documentary on our centenary and speaking at meetings across the country, but now she's let *WI Life* into her inner sanctum behind the ancient walls of Hampton Court Palace. With the launch of her new book, *Jane Austen at Home*, lovely Lucy Worsley, the Chief Curator of Historic Royal Palaces, opens up on her fascinating and often surprisingly fun life in history.

My job isn't like work, it feels more like playing. I work in historic palaces looking at artefacts, putting together exhibitions, doing research and writing books. It's stuff I like doing and would do it for fun anyway.

I'm shameless when it comes to history. Some people say the fact that I dress up is a bit trivial, that I have no dignity and I'm giving academia a bad name. But that just washes off my back. I'm also accused of dumbing-down, but I take that to mean we have different frames of reference.

The best part of my job is hearing I've inspired someone.

People have written to me after seeing a documentary or having a day out at Hampton Court Palace has 'lit a little fire', and they've gone on to study or further their interest. That makes me really, really happy.

I'm currently working on a research project about Queen Victoria's clothes, which I'm really enjoying. We're also about to open a new exhibition on Georgian princesses and on the side I'm working with the Royal Opera House for a BBC2 documentary on the history of opera.

My favourite collection at Hampton Court Palace is the dress collection. It sounds obvious but it's brilliant because it's so intimate. You can get so close to somebody from history when you are able to see the exact physical shape of their body.

Elizabeth I is one of my favourite women from history. She was so unashamedly powerful in a way that is very challenging for women



Lucy's fast FACTS

Something we might not know about you?

I believe that I should have been a chorus girl in a West End musical. I can kick, I can wear high heels...

Guilty pleasure?

I don't like this concept of guilty pleasure, because it implies that we're supposed to make moral judgements about watching *Homeland*, for example. I do watch it but I don't feel that guilty about it.

Hobbies?

I like walking and running. I also like cooking, but not baking. I let the WI down here, I'm a terrible baker. I recently went on a skiing holiday and was making cakes for the group every day, but after three days they asked me to stop.

Who's been your biggest influence?

My mum. She's a good hard worker, and made me into a good hard worker, possibly too much so – a dysfunctionally hard worker!

Has anyone ever doubted your career?

At college I was involved in the student 'raising and giving' organisation and had to give a speech to some of the other volunteers. When I sat down afterwards my boyfriend at the time said: 'Lucy, public speaking's never going to be your thing.'

The strangest fact you've uncovered in your work?

In our stores at Hampton Court Palace we have the remains of a Tudor chamber pot – a 'pysse pot'. It's 500 years old and was dug up by archaeologists. The laboratory analysis report said it still contains traces of genuine Tudor 'pysse.'

If you were to set up a WI...?

It would be called Lucy's Lovely Loafers WI. We would loaf around historical properties together.



I think Jane Austen is a better version of me. I aspire to be like she was: clever, kind, a good human being, witty, funny but also a risk-taker and somebody who did difficult things. I see her as a role model for all women, leading the way for us to follow.

Some of Austen's struggles are still relevant to women today. In the book I explore how the home could be a prison as well as a place of pleasure for women. For example, I spend a lot of time arguing chores and housework. You can say that that's a tiny, trivial domestic concern but it isn't – it's our lives and these things hold us back. If you're doing the washing-up you're not doing something else. You could be ruling the world!

Everybody thinks Austen had her heart broken. She didn't! She wrote letters about this Irish law student who had to marry money and explains how melancholy she was, with tears running down her face – but she was joking. She was spoofing mushy romantic novels in which the heroine was always in tears and always being abandoned by a man.

The WI's Centenary Annual Meeting was truly one of the best days of my life. It was really sensational to be on the stage with thousands of people all singing *Jerusalem* at the same time.

Making the documentary *Cake Bakers and Troublemakers* was brilliant. I visited loads of different WIs, made jam with the chutney champion of Hampshire and met the original *Calendar Girls* who were a hoot – they took me to the pub and got

me drunk. I also met the Shoreditch Sisters WI and we went on a campaign march, which was a complete change of pace. I love the way all the WIs can coexist, but they all have their own thing that matters to them – there's real diversity there.

The WI is a great way to see what's been on women's minds throughout history. If you look at the resolutions over the last 102 years you see how the WI was concerned with equal pay for equal work way before it was campaigned on more widely. The same goes for AIDS, breast cancer screening and lots more.

One of the earliest WI Presidents was imprisoned for throwing a black pudding at an MP. Edith Rigby was a suffragette and friend of the Pankhursts. After another stint in prison for burning down the holiday house of Sir William Lever in 1913 to protest 'intolerable grievances for women' she then set up a WI in Lancashire.

The WI's slogan says it all. They are inspiring women and they are inspiring *for* women – both are equally true. When I go to federation meetings there are all sorts of different people there but they've all got something in common; it's the WI that's brought them together.

If I had to sum up the WI in three words... I would say contradictory, consoling and powerful. Three quite different concepts at the same time.

• *Lucy's new book *Jane Austen at Home* is out now, £25 in hardback, published by Hodder & Stoughton*

to be. I'm also fond of Marie Antoinette for doomed glamour, or 'posh doom', as it's called. I also love all the women history has forgotten the names of.

One really annoying thing about historical research is the lack of women. When looking at sources for Hampton Court Palace for example, it's so hard to identify them. They're often just 'the women who emptied the chamber pots' and their names are rarely mentioned.

We do have records of one woman who worked in the kitchens called Mrs Cornwallis – she made the King's puddings, so I'm very keen on her. For me she stands for an awful lot of other women about whom we know nothing.

I've been criticised for focusing on the domestic side of history. Think about the politics of that – who thinks the domestic is not important? Men think it. To those critics I would say you've had your own way for quite a few centuries; it's our turn now.

My experience of fame has mostly been good. I'm in a lucky and slightly privileged position whereby the people who know who I am tend to be BBC4 viewers – and generally speaking, they are nice, intelligent, cultured people, so I don't have to deal with much grief.

I remember the worst thing anyone ever said to me. I was carrying an admittedly ridiculous parasol on a very sunny day and a man shouted out of a passing van: 'Oi, you off the telly, **** off back to 1907!'

If I were to throw an historical dinner party I'd want there to be fireworks. I'd invite Jane Austen and the Prince Regent, whom she hated, and the Prince's ex-wife – whose side Jane was very much on.

Jane Austen is the greatest human being who ever lived. I love her and I've always been interested in the history of houses and palaces, so I thought I'd combine the two in a book. Looking at the homes she lived in might give a new insight because she was so private.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Lions rampant at Hampton Court Palace; Lucy takes tea; knick-knacks on Lucy's office mantelpiece reflect her sense of fun; an ornate Tudor ceiling **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Lucy's office is lined with bookcases and royal souvenirs; Tudor roses decorate a sign in the Rose Garden, created in 1924; lavishly embellished urns signify grandeur; the Gate House is one of the best preserved pieces of Tudor architecture