

A lady of substance and inspiration and a story of love and tragedy

The Rt Hon Virginia Lee, Viscountess Deerhurst.

On the 7th October 1866 Virginia Lee Daniel was born to her parents Rhodie (nee Stephens) and William Daniel in Grass Valley, Nevada County in California USA. She soon adopted the pet name "Jennie" by her parents, and she was often referred to as Jennie throughout her life.

Gold had been discovered in North California in 1848 and Grass Valley had a growing population as its surrounding mines played a prominent part within the "American gold rush".

What happened then is subject to speculation, but William was sentenced to 4 years in San Quentin prison after he attempted to shoot his superintendent Phillip Galloway at the Allison Ranch mine.

Following William's arrest Rhodie took her daughter to Sacramento where she successfully filed for divorce.

William was released after only two years on condition he "left and never returned to California". He took a stagecoach heading to Nevada, but for reason broke his journey in a small town named Austin. A Marshall found him barely alive, and he was taken to the local hospital where he died of self-inflicted neck wounds that same evening. He was an unknown until the Marshall searched his belongings and identified him after finding various documents connecting him with Grass Valley and the Allison Ranch mine. An envelope was found in his pockets with two pictures of a baby girl. "Dear papa, (Jennie's kiss), Your daughter Jennie Daniels" was written on the back.

After his death her mother Rhodie went on to marry Charles William Bonyng (of Irish decent) and Virginia was formerly adopted by her stepfather and into a new family. She inherited a sister, Louise. Her stepfather went on to make his fortune through sharp dealing in stocks within Texas and from the silver mines of Nevada.

1884: The family moved to England and settled into their new home at 42 Princess Gate, in Knightsbridge London.

Bonyng's wealth was made, and he had an appetite to encourage his daughters to better their education, mix in London's high society and to gain social status. It was a trend that tempted many wealthy American families.

Virginia was an enigmatic character and the society London society she mixed with could be extremely difficult, particularly for young American woman.

The relationships between the "short of cash" aristocracy and the "newfound wealth" of Americans grabbed headlines as the British and American press were always keen to comment and criticize whether asked or not. Her manners were once described as "charming, frank and pleasing". Her appearance also attracted unrequested comment. Her "slender build and beauty" was matched in the USA new articles with "slim, tall and pretty" to the readers across the Atlantic. Virginia Lee was of course very well educated and carried her thoughts ambitions, political opinions well, but in these pioneering days, the hot topics of women who work, women's women in clubs and societies and worst of educated women with political views of social reform were considered an embarrassment at best and were certainly an irritation for the establishment. The ageing Queen Victoria had of course struggled throughout much of her life with several governments, some elected prime ministers and even the older members of her own family.

Nearing the end of the 19th century was of course a time of a great political awakening. Being a forerunner navigating these hurdles was not for the faint hearted. But without wavering, navigate them Virginia Lee did, and she did it very well.

Virginia became a regular invitee of the aristocracy, attending fine events and society garden parties and it is recorded that "she mixed in well" to the resentment of "older money" American families. Perhaps tinted with jealousy the Bonyng family were amongst those who became known as America's "nouveau rich".

She was initially escorted by the Earl of Warwick's son Rt Hon (Ronald) Lord Greville, but things didn't work out. More serious attention was given to Viscount Cantaloupe eldest son of the Earl de la Warr, and they became engaged to marry.

One day the Viscount received a poison pen letter from a John Mackay in Virginia City, Nevada. The letter stated that Virginia Lee was "the daughter of a murderer". The Earl immediately called off the plans and their engagement dissolved. Virginia Lee was heartbroken.

Undeterred Virginia Lee met with various members of the royal family and went on to become friends with Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein (formerly Princess Helena). The Princess, 20 years Virginia's senior was the most active member of the Queen's children carrying out extensive royal engagements. An active patron of charities and a founding member of the British Red Cross and President of the Workhouse infirmary nursing association and against the advice of Florence Nightingale, a strong supporter of the registration of Nurses she had already become a somewhat controversial figure that yielded considerable influence on her new friend. There is no doubt that Bonynges family wealth opened doors, but it was Virginia's specific interest in Unionist politics and her generosity towards charities that helped women and girls of all classes that brought her close to Princess Helena.

It was during these events that Virginia Lee met the Coventry family and she went on to marry the eldest son of the Earl, Viscount Deerhurst

1894: Viscount Deerhurst (eldest son & heir to 9th Earl of Coventry) married Virginia Lee Bonynges at All Saints Ennismore.

1901, The Deerhurst's moved to Worcestershire, temporarily to Burlingham and then onto Pirton Court. The Deerhurst's had 4 children; Helena (later countess of Harrowby), Peggy, George William (later became the 10th earl) and John.

1910: Pirton Court extension completed – An Edwardian extension added (on east side) to make a 12-bedroom property for the growing family. The extension was built in the style of the original Tudor building. Lady Deerhurst's parents joined the family to live at Pirton Court

1913: The death of her stepfather Charles Bonynges was quickly followed the year after in 1914 with the death of her Mother Rhodie.

1916: Virginia (Lady D) became honorary president of the Pershore WI (Women's Institute) having campaigned for women's rights before the outbreak of WW1.

1917: Virginia (Lady D) organised lunch for 100 land girls who had marched to Worcester.

1918: Women over 30 gained the right to vote under the representation of the people act 1918

1920's & 30's John Coventry (plays for Worcester cricket club and father George is chairman of WCC)

1927 Viscount Deerhurst (The Hon George William Coventry 1865-1927) died on 8th August 1927 – and 3 years before his own father. His death led to the Deerhurst's eldest son to become heir to the Earldom. Lady Virginia (no longer Viscountess) became dowager and would hence never become the countess.

1948: The Hon Virginia Lee - Dowager Lady Deerhurst (1866-1948) dies at Pirton Court and was. Buried alongside her family at Croome D'Abitot

2013: Arriving at Pirton Court in 2013, two twin ladies from the local area visited us for tea. They had worked as chamber maids in the house and remembered Lady Deerhurst well. They introduced me to her story and recounted the moments as her funeral casket was leaving Pirton Court by Horse drawn carriage.

Shortly after their visit I began some initial research and I realised that All Saints Church in Ennismore Gardens is in fact now the Russian Orthodox Cathedral where, as Project Director, I had overseen two extensive phases of restoration and conservation of one of London's most beautiful churches.

We all love a coincidence, but Lady Deerhurst became the first inspiration for Jacqui and myself at Pirton Court.