

# Noel Streatfeild

(24/12/1895 – 11/9/1986)

## A Brief Summary

Actress, writer, public speaker, author of some of the most famous and loved books for children in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, Mary Noel Streatfeild, known as Noel, was descended from Elizabeth Fry, prison reformer, and Joseph Fry, who invented drinking chocolate and whose great - grandson subsequently patented the chocolate bar. Her mother Janet Mary Venn was descended from the inventor of Venn diagrams - illustrious family backgrounds that may have inspired her path to creativity and fame.

## Early Years and Education

The Streatfeilds were a vicarage family, a family of clergymen, originally from Kent but Noel was born in Frant, East Sussex, the family then moved to churches in Amberley and St. Leonards. In her book "A Vicarage Family," although the names were changed, Noel drew on her vivid experiences of vicarage life and the central character of Victoria mirrored the young Noel: "Victoria was undeniably difficult" she writes.

Noel hated her school in St Leonards and was excited when her father's job moved to Eastbourne in 1911, he was to become the Vicar of Eastbourne at St Mary the Virgin Church, in Church Street, Old Town. Like Victoria, who also moved house in the book, she saw this as a chance for "a fresh start," particularly as her parents had been asked to remove her from her school in St Leonards.

Noel did not enjoy vicarage life, the comings and goings, the endless bustle and visitors. But she describes the vicarage and grounds in her book very favourably, "It's a lovely house lying in a big garden." "The field... looked over the grounds of a preparatory school for boys." The Vicarage belonging to St Mary's was a lovely building, rebuilt in 1852 near the workhouse, which

subsequently became **St Mary's Hospital**. It is still recognizable, although updated, at the junction of **Vicarage Road** and **Vicarage Drive**, and at the time the Streatfeilds moved there the Prep School for Boys was **St Cyprians**, notable attendees at that point would have been Sir Cecil Beaton, Cyril Connolly and George Orwell.

Noel and her sisters, Ruth and Barbara, attended **Laleham School**, in Selwyn Road. They were able to walk there and were not boarders. Although the family was not wealthy they have listed 3 servants, this is the sort of family that Noel would in later years write about.

Eastbourne in those days was a blossoming resort, the railway line had opened up the south coast and the visitors would have been more well-to-do than those going to St Leonards, hotels and many boarding schools employed staff and servants and there was little unemployment or poverty. The Vicar of the Parish was a leading figure in the town and the house was always full.

**Laleham School** offered a calmer existence for Noel, although her school reports still complained that she "could do better," and she did not get on with the Head Mistress. The Russian Ballet was the talk of all schoolgirls, Diaghilev and Nijinsky visited London but Noel's family was not able to afford for her to go on the school trip. She dreamed of ballet, collected pictures of Anna Pavlova, describing in "A Vicarage Family" how "Victoria" asked the girls who went to the ballet endless questions when they returned. Noel was a bookworm, she read Beatrix Potter, also "Tanglewood Tales" and of course the classics. Angela Bull, in her biography of Noel, "Noel Streatfeild: A Biography" quotes her as saying that she felt "unhappy and misunderstood", "I didn't belong to the environment in which I was born." She dreamed of being chosen, of being successful, it is no surprise that her characters mirrored this ambition and longing to break out: in "The Painted Garden" Jane was described as "the difficult one, Jane was the inartistic one, Jane was the plain one." Yet Jane was subsequently chosen for the main part in a film. In "Tennis Shoes" Nicky, another self-portrait is chosen to receive tennis lessons.

In 1959 Noel spoke to The Brighton Girls' Club, she proclaimed that any girl who is not academically gifted should be given "individual attention so that somebody finds out something at which she can shine."

At **Laleham School** she was only chosen for tiny parts in plays, usually in the Chorus, but she learned about acting and memorizing lines. She began to write short plays for parish entertainments, to raise money for the church roof, she had longed for ballet lessons but her family considered ballet to be vulgar and they disapproved of the theatre.

Noel and her sisters did manage to go to some theatre treats, to see “The Country Girl,” “Aladdin” and “Alice in Wonderland.” They went to the theatre on Eastbourne Pier, and saw a performance by a travelling troupe of young children performers, Lila Field’s “Little Wonders.”

In “A Vicarage Family,” Noel describes how her fictional family, and also her own family, were “spellbound and utterly absorbed.” She felt envy for the performers, those lucky children, so miraculously free from the boring life led by other girls, especially girls whose home was a vicarage.” One of these Little Wonders was Noel Coward, and also, most notable for Noel, an Irish dancer, Edris Stannis, visited Eastbourne in 1913 and performed “The Dying Swan,” Edris became the prima ballerina, Dame Ninette de Valois, certainly this was a major influence on Noel and her later, most successful book, “Ballet Shoes.”

In 1913 Noel was beginning to have a social life, she attended a Hunt Ball, at **The Queens Hotel**, she met new friends, there was an air of emancipation, and she knew of Mrs Pankhurst, who had actually given a talk in Eastbourne in 1909. She wrote plays, some were performed at The Winter Garden, she sometimes took the lead. Later, her books were to reflect the intense social changes that she experienced following wars, changing women’s roles, work and family life.

## **World War One**

Eastbourne feared invasion and the war seemed very close across the channel in Mons and Ypres, Noel had left school and had been sent to **Eastbourne School of Domestic Economy**, in Silverdale Road, a far cry from her interests and dreams, but presumably an attempt to teach her new skills. These skills were put to use when she went to work in the kitchens of the infirmary, later **St Mary’s Hospital**, on the site of the old workhouse between **Church Street**

and **Vicarage Lane**. The workhouse, built in 1794 and formerly a barracks and stables in the days of the Napoleonic wars, was adapted and extended to be a hospital for returning injured troops. Many injured troops were brought by train and Noel worked in the kitchens, proudly wearing a uniform and chopping vegetables, saying, "I was bursting to help my king and country in a big way." Noel lost her much-loved cousin Derek in the war and saw that as a traumatic time, a time of growing up. In her novel, "Parson's Nine," written in 1932, she describes the grief of her main character, working in hospital kitchens and grieving for her twin brother.

In 1918 Noel moved away from Eastbourne, she lived in a hostel and became a munitions worker at The Woolwich Arsenal. This was very physical work; she became ill and was invalided home to Eastbourne. In 1919, with her family's blessing she was finally allowed to follow her acting dream, she auditioned and was offered a place at the **Academy of Dramatic Arts (now known as RADA)** to learn acting and ballet, she moved back to London and began her acting career.

## **Personal Life**

Noel's acting training was hard, there were many talented students, in "Ballet Shoes" she describes her own feelings through her character Pauline. At the time Gerald du Maurier, Gladys Cooper and Flora Robson were prominent names in the acting profession, Flora Robson remembered Noel as a student she admired, but Noel left without any great successes to her name. She took the name Noelle Sonning and appeared as a chorus girl, she describes the experience as drudgery. She travelled with a Shakespeare touring company, other actors involved were Ralph Richardson, Cecil Parker, Norman Shelley, Donald Wolfit. When they appeared in Eastbourne she took them for tea at the Vicarage. In 1921 Noel appeared again at **The Devonshire Park Theatre**. In 1922 she campaigned against the exploitation of young actors and subsequently lost her job. Her next role was to play opposite John Gielgud in "The Insect Play." Parishioners in Eastbourne remember that mention of the family was "in hushed and sympathetic tones because the Vicar's daughter had gone on the stage."

Later books, “The Whicharts,” “Tops and Bottoms,” and “It Pays to Be Good,” were to call upon Noel’s experience of minor actresses exploiting their talents and using their looks. Noel also worked with child actors in Newcastle, mirroring her days working with children in the parish and watching the Little Wonders.

After touring South Africa, Noel returned to Eastbourne, enrolling in a correspondence course to learn about writing skills. In the 1920s she toured Australia and in 1928 her father was made Bishop of Lewes and her parents moved there.

In 1929 Noel’s father died suddenly on a train from Lewes to Eastbourne on the way to a dental appointment, an event greeted with an outpouring of grief, “the Old Town stood still.” Noel returned from Australia immediately, she missed the funeral, and on the journey she decided to become a writer. At this time there was a band of female writers: Virginia Woolf, Rose Macaulay, Barbara Cartland, Mazo de la Roche, Rosamund Lehman.

## **Achievements – Writing**

Noel withdrew to a flat in the Cromwell Road, London and began writing books for adults:

1931 The Whicharts was published, about 3 sisters and dancing.

1932 Parsons Nine- about vicarage life

Tops and Bottoms – reflecting theatre life

The Shepherdess of Sheep - reflecting the rural Edwardian life experienced with her grandparents in Sussex

In 1936 Noel was requested by the children’s editor of Dent to write a children’s book, about the theatre, due to her insight into children and their lives. “**Ballet Shoes**” was published and became an instant success.

It was in part a re-working of *The Whicharts*, which featured at the core a family, evoked by Noel's memories of her early years spent in Amberley, when her family would go to Pevensey Bay for their holidays. The Fossils were sisters, like her own sisters, and they dreamed of ballet careers, as Noel did, influenced by her schooldays, *The Little Wonders*, Pavlova, Nijinsky and Diaghilev. These sisters achieved their dreams and in particular Pauline mirrored Noel, the one who was never chosen. Noel had technical knowledge from her ballet training and wrote with affection and accuracy. Her publishers suggested an illustrator, not realising that it was Noel's sister Ruth Jervis, and so "Ballet Shoes" fulfilled another dream of the 2 sisters.

The book sold out and was widely acclaimed; publicity material pictured a 10 year old ballet student, the young Moira Shearer. Other children's books at this time were the Arthur Ransome series, *Mumfie*, the *Chalet* books, *Just William*, *Biggles*, *Mary Poppins*, but this was a new genre, a career novel featuring a family living in London, in the Cromwell Road. Not wealthy, they took in boarders, they followed their dreams, their vocations – like Noel's father and grandfather and every child had a chance to shine, Noel's dream for herself and for all children.

"Ballet Shoes" sold 10 million copies in 50 years, still sells and is on library shelves, it has been filmed and recorded for TV, at its core are loving, family values, with children working to achieve their dreams.

1937 Noel wrote "Tennis Shoes," Nicky, again based on Noel herself, longed to be special, was a contrast to her 2 sisters, mirroring everything Noel has experienced in her upbringing, the desire to be chosen and the excitement of achieving a dream against all odds.

Noel travelled with *The Bertram Mills Circus* to research her next book, "The Circus Is Coming." She also travelled to America and researched writing film scripts.

## **World War 2**

Noel became a warden and did charity work in Deptford with the WVS in a mobile canteen, she lost her flat in an air raid, she raised money to help

children in displays of selfless dedication mirroring her father's dedication to his vocation. She was an eccentric, flamboyant character, she rode a motor-bike, she delivered lectures and she helped the rescue workers when a bomb hit Woolworths in Deptford which was full of children and families.

Noel needed money in wartime so she wrote novels under the name Susan Scarlett, using her now trademark settings, a vicarage, a munitions factory, a theatre company. She wrote of the loss and disorientation of war, which she herself experienced. In 1944 she wrote a sequel to "Ballet Shoes," "Curtain Up", reviving the dance academy but showing the effects of war.

### **Post-War**

Noel continued to reflect the difficulties of post-war life, rationing, evacuation, broken homes and loss. She won a bet on a horse and used the money to clear a bombsite.

### **1950s and 60s**

"Beyond the Vicarage" continued her fictional yet obviously biographical work chronicling the years after she left home. Noel was a "celebrity," she opened bookshops and bazaars, gave speeches and was deemed to be "one of the 16 principal literary figures in Britain." "White Boots" was published in 1951, again a family of contrasting sisters, family life and hard work at its core, Noel having studied the technicalities of ice-skating in order to be accurate.

She said, "Books should be doors leading children into unfamiliar worlds."

In "The Years of Grace" and "Growing Up Gracefully" she gave advice to teenagers, the kind of advice she wished she had been given.

"A Vicarage Family" was published in 1963, with her hiding her own experiences and emotions behind the veil of fiction, but her strong feelings upset Eastbourne parishioners who had loved her father.

1968 Noel suffered a stroke; she lost many of her friends and family and felt out of touch, particularly with very new departures in children's literature.

Still writing prolifically in her 80s, she had spent 10 years as an actress and 50 years as a writer.

- Awarded OBE in 1983
- Appeared on Desert Island Discs
- Lecturer and public speaker
- Wrote 112 books or anthologies also radio serials, some of her books televised and filmed
- Champion of children and also of the poor
- Socialite and celebrity
- Winner of Carnegie Medal
- Wrote a biography of Edith Nesbit
- A great influence on other writers, notably JK Rowling

Noel died in 1986 and is buried in her family plot in Westerham, there is a blue plaque in St Leonards marking the vicarage where she and her family lived.

## **Researcher's View**

Throughout my research I have been fascinated to see the links between all Noel's experiences and her writing: the schoolgirl who did not fit in and felt herself to be doomed never to be chosen attained great celebrity and success through writing books which were all about girls, like herself, following and achieving the seemingly impossible. She was eccentric and flamboyant, she had singular insight and empathy and she showed this in her life, not just on the page. Her acting years gave her knowledge and confidence, and great

insight into character, she had 2 successful careers in times when there were many other great talents making their names. The Eastbourne years brought inspiration, built many happy memories and she started to feel more of value, and also to make concrete plans for future success. She seems to me to have been a very forward-thinking woman, she understood children and those who felt themselves to be failures, she certainly demonstrated how to overcome difficulties. It is fascinating to walk around Eastbourne and to see where she lived, where her father's church is, to think of her watching The Little Wonders in awe on the Pier, to imagine how she built her dreams. Her books were my favourites when I was a child and they showed me an exciting and affectionate world, I am so pleased to have been able to learn much more about the author, I think she would have been a delightful companion.

# Bibliography

## Websites:

Ancestry.co.uk

Find My Past

Wikipedia

Noel Streatfeild- White Gauntlet Design

St Mary's Hospital, Barracks & Workhouse | Blue ... - Visit Eastbourne

[www.visiteastbourne.com/Eastbourne-St-Mary's-Hospital-Barracks.../details/?dms=3...](http://www.visiteastbourne.com/Eastbourne-St-Mary's-Hospital-Barracks.../details/?dms=3...)

[www.workhouses.org.uk/Eastbourne](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Eastbourne)

## Books

A Vicarage Family –a biography of myself

Noel Streatfeild

Collins 1963

Noel Streatfeild – A Biography

Angela Bull

Collins 1984

Barracks, Workhouse and Hospital-

St Mary's Eastbourne (1794-1990)

John Surtees

Eastbourne Local

History Soc 1992

The Years of Grace

Noel Streatfeild

Watson&Viney 1950

Ballet Shoes

Noel Streatfeild

Dent 1936

Eastbourne- A pictorial history

by Elleray 1995

Publ. Phillimore



