

Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm Prunella Stack and I'm so looking forward to telling you all about my mother, Mary Bagot Stack and the Women's League of Health and Beauty which she founded in 1930.

Mummy certainly didn't have an easy time of things in lots of ways. I was born in India in 1914. My father, Ghurkha Rifles Captain Edward Bagot Stack was killed at the front in France the year I was born as Mummy and I were sailing back to England.

Mummy had serious illness as a child and recovered through a physical exercise regime which restored her health. This gave her a passionate belief in the value of physical fitness for all. She wanted the method to be a combination of exercise and dance which would energise and strengthen the whole body and mind. While living in India she was struck by the unconscious grace, looseness, freedom of movement and habits of posture amongst the Indian women, men and children. These observations informed her methods in creating the basis of her teaching.

To this end she opened the Bagot Stack Health School in London in 1925 all the while preparing me to carry on the legacy. She believed in creating 'a league of women who will renew their energy *in* themselves and *for* themselves day by day' and in the power of women to make the world a better place in which to live.

At the school the trainees, all women, learned anatomy and physiology, also dancing - including tap, voice production and public speaking.

Mummy wished, possibly above all else that we would become a peaceful world. She felt that women would knit together in a determination to prove themselves the more resolute sex capable of creating and putting into practice a constructive policy whose outcome would be peace.

The very first class was held in March 1930. Financially we needed more members so on 12<sup>th</sup> June that year we put on a demonstration which I led in Hyde Park at which 70 members performed. We drew a huge and appreciative crowd. We performed again in Hyde Park the following year and in the autumn held an even bigger event: 500 members performed at the Albert Hall. We had a full house; it was stunning.

Women were queueing to join. By 1935 we had 220 branches and 120,000 members all over the United Kingdom. That same year we had to face the death of my brave mother Mary. She had achieved so much. It was always the plan that I would become the new figurehead. I suppose you could say it was my destiny, which I took on with enormous pride.

In 1938 I married David Douglas Hamilton and we had two sons, Iain and Diarmuid. Sadly, David, by then a Squadron Leader in the RAF, was killed when his battle-damaged plane crashed on landing at RAF Benson in 1944 returning from enemy action over France.

By 1950 the boys and I were living in South Africa where I decided the League would ignore the new racial laws and make our classes open to all women, regardless of race or creed. I am proud to report we caused uproar in South Africa when we took a multiracial team to London in 1953 to perform in honour of the Queen's Coronation. The Women's league of Health and Beauty had become a well-established institution all over the world, with branches in Australia, Canada and Hong Kong. It was said of my mother that 'she was a dreamer with the knack of making her dreams come true'.

*[Post-word: Prunella died in 2010. My sister Lis and I used to go and stay with our much-loved aunt, Nancy Dobbin, who had trained as a League teacher in London. We would go with her to her classes in the evenings. I think she retired around her sixtieth birthday. She could tap dance and still do the splits in her late 50s. There was always a pianist at the classes, a woman, who seemed to be able to play anything at a moment's notice, from memory. Lis, who saw Prunella, probably in her eighties, perform in Warrington told me: 'She was a bit stiff and elderly, but she could still do it.']*

**Prunella Stack**

**Charlotte West-Oram**