

Lucy Faithfull

Speech made by **Judith Niechcial**

at the unveiling ceremony of Baroness Faithfull's Oxfordshire Blue Plaque
at 303 Woodstock Road, Oxford on 9 May 2026

Lucy came to Oxford in 1958 to take up the role of Children's Officer for the City. Her previous job had been as a Home Office inspector of children's departments, so she knew that Oxford would be a good place to work. She would be responsible to the Children's Committee of the local authority, and she recognised that the Oxford Committee had intelligent and capable councillors, as many of the members were University dons! It was also a relatively small authority; one on to which she could put her own stamp.

She set up home in this very house with her elderly mother Bessie. She was 48 and although she had had several admirers, she had never married, as in those days if a woman married, she had to leave her job, and Lucy was entirely committed to her calling to protect the welfare of children. She in fact came to know nearly all the Oxford children in care personally.

Her commitment was rooted in her own early experiences. Her father was killed by gas poisoning in the First World War when she was only six years old. The widowed Bessie got a job as matron in a boys' boarding school, and Lucy was sent to a girls' boarding school aged only seven, a devastating separation. She later said 'the night before I went I had the most terrible nightmare, and when mother left me there I looked over the banisters to see her go, and I froze, I couldn't eat, I couldn't talk, I couldn't move.' This unsettled and homeless childhood let her to think 'when I am grown up I am going to work with children who are not happy'.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Lucy was working for the London County Council as an 'Assistant Child Care Organiser' in deprived areas of Bermondsey, Rotherhithe and later in the as yet ungentrified Islington. She was responsible for the material and psychological need of school children. She was the Islington organiser of the evacuation of children from the danger of bombing to so called 'safe areas' in the countryside. She found that 'as the time came for the train to go off, the women would weep, and ... there was a terrible silence among the children, a terrible apprehensiveness at what was going to happen'.

In Oxford the condition of the Children's Department's office in Worcester Street was dire. Lucy wrote to her Committee, in an attempt to obtain more suitable offices, 'In the wet weather the rain seeps into the Children's Officers' room; it percolates into the clerks' office and unless care is taken it causes

damage to the files. One of the interviewing rooms has on occasions to be mopped out.... As a new Children's Officer I am filled with admiration and some wonder at the way in which the staff have worked for so long under such conditions'. She could make a persuasive case!

She and her staff colleagues had caseloads and worked with the Juvenile Court, finding and vetting foster homes, arranging adoptions, working with adolescent boys and liaising with the children's homes. The homes were at 25 Maltfield Road for, quote, 'subnormal' children, Hernes House housed twelve boys in long term care, Windmill House was for children in long term care but not suitable for foster care, with a nursery wing. The department also had access to 'Thornbury', a remand home in Kidlington. Lucy was very much in favour of placing children, especially young ones in foster care rather than in homes, and argued with her committee for better 'boarding out' rates of pay for foster carers. Homeless family accommodation was at Slade Park, a barrack-like place where whole families were put into one room. By 1967 Lucy had managed to re-house the accommodation at Garden House, in Cowley, with individual flatlets, and with the aim of helping the families become responsible tenants.

By 1962 her efforts to provide a proper, or at least dry, office for her increasingly numerous staff bore fruit. It was at 77-79 George Street, above some shops, one of which was a cobbler. People used to come up by mistake, and a staff member said, 'We used to come forward helpfully to see what their problem was, and they would give us their little tickets to collect their shoes!'

Lucy created a culture of acceptance and valuing of the individual, whatever their role, treating secretarial and cleaning staff in the same respectful and informal manner. She had an inner confidence that carried her wherever she wanted to go. She used the contacts she had made in the Home Office when necessary.

It was during her time in Oxford that society began to realise that parents and other adults could inflict injuries on children, 'non-accidental injury'. She was quick to see the implications for social work, and liaised closely with Dr Kit Ounsted of the Park Children's Hospital – 'those evening visits by Lucy to help us with a child whose problems stretched our intellects and tore our hearts were healing as well as inspirational'.

In 1970 the Local Authority Social Services Act was passed in Parliament, which combined the Children's Departments with Welfare and Mental Health services so that people had 'one door to knock on' when problems arose. Lucy was swiftly appointed to the Directorship of the new Oxford department. She realised she was going to be much less involved directly with children. To

prepare her for her complex new role the City sent her on a management training course at Birmingham University, where she had done her initial social work diploma. The city was divided into three 'areas', each with a team leader and staff group. One issue that demonstrates her talent for problem solving arose in 1972 when Idi Amin expelled Asian people from Uganda. As Chief Officer Lucy had the responsibility to house and rehabilitate them. She later told the House of Lords:

'The local authority said it could not give them council houses. I went to Oxfam and posed my problem. At the drop of a hat and without any more ado the then director gave me a cheque for £10,000. With that I bought a house in which I put one family. I then mortgaged that house to buy a second house. In the end I bought fifteen houses with that £10,000.'

In 1972 she was awarded an OBE and held a celebratory party for the staff. In her speech she acknowledged the work of her department and smiled, 'My dears, I know what people say about the OBE, it stands for 'other buggers' efforts'. For many of the staff who worked with Lucy during her sixteen years at Oxford City, this was a golden period in their careers. They pay tribute to her unfailing support of them, her integrity, her courage, her political skills, and her clarity of vision about what she wanted the department to achieve.

Nevertheless many people who knew Lucy in Oxford admit that she was not as eminent a Director of Social Services as she had been as Children's Officer and the honours that were heaped on her in the next few years were earned perhaps more by her work between 1958 and 1970 than between 1971 and 1974. In a city where 'town' and 'gown' occupied different spaces, Lucy was pre-eminently 'town', but in 1973, much to her delight, St Catherine's College offered her an honorary MA degree.

In 1974 there was yet another Local Authority reorganisation, and Oxford City merged with Oxfordshire. This was the moment Lucy chose to retire. She was 68. After a period of international travel, she returned to this house, and set about converting it into 2 flats. She took up residence in the top half, letting the ground floor to visiting academics. One of these tenants wrote a limerick:

*In Oxford there lives a lady quite delightful
Whose working hours are simply frightful
How do you suppose
With so little repose
She remains so pleasant and delightful?*

She involved herself in a plethora of voluntary roles, such as Governor of the College of Further Education, Chair of the Caldecott Foundation, a therapeutic residential community for emotionally damaged children, of Bessels Leigh, a residential school near Abingdon, and the local branch of the NSPCC. She was also appointed to the Council of Dr Barnado's, the Oxford branch of which she set up in 1978.

In 1974 Mrs Thatcher recommended to Harold Wilson that Lucy be offered a Life Peerage at the House of Lords. She accepted reluctantly, but then realised the opportunities she would have as the only social worker in the House. She took the name of Lady Faithfull of Wolvercote, and so began another chapter in her life, where she gained fame by her influence in the passing of the Children Act 1989, a key piece of legislation which still underpins social work in child protection and support of parents to prevent taking children into care.

At the same time as all this was happening, Lucy had a parallel life by finding ways of protecting children by working therapeutically with child sexual abusers. This was pioneering work, but I will leave that to the speaker from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation.

In March 1996 Lucy suddenly collapsed at the House of Lords and was taken to St Thomas' Hospital, where she died in a room overlooking the Houses of Parliament. Her funeral was at St Mary's, where she had been a regular parishioner. Her ashes were scattered on the banks of the canal behind this house, and there followed a huge Memorial Service at St Margaret's Westminster.

Sir William Utting who knew Lucy in his capacity of Chief Inspector at the DHSS summed her up. 'The whole of suffering humanity awakened her concern ... the inspiration for the love she shed about her lay in a profound Christian faith. Lucy set out to do good, and to that end deployed formidable qualities of persistence, backed by an inexhaustible supply of charm and exercised fearlessly across an extraordinary network ... much of her influence was exercised through personal exchanges that went unrecorded except in the memories of those who shared them ... she possessed a fundamental goodness that nearly all who met her responded to'.

That was Lucy Faithfull.