

Women Who Made Britain

Dorothy Lawrence is not an obvious choice of woman to be in the 'book' but when I started my search, her name came up and she was referred to as a 'forgotten Wiltshire heroine'. Her story interested me and to my surprise the next day in one of the tabloid newspapers her name appeared under Born on this Day and that is when I decided I wanted to know more about her.

This is Dorothy's story

Dorothy Lawrence 1896 – 1964



Dorothy was born on 4th October 1896. There are differing reports of where she was born, and parents unknown (although there is mention in one article that she was the second daughter of Thomas Hartshorn Lawrence and Mary Jane Beddall). There is very little reported about her early life except that after an unconventional existence with her mother living in London, she was abandoned and eventually adopted by a guardian of the Church of England, a very wealthy and well respected Mrs Josephine Fitzgerald and they lived at no. 31 The Close Salisbury. Dorothy was educated in Salisbury at a girl's private school which must have been a far cry from her previous education, if any, in London. Whatever the difficulties of those teenage years, Dorothy later came to refer to 'that dear old Cathedral city' with affection and her links with the city and its inhabitants continued to exert an influence on her life.

Dorothy had a strong desire to be a journalist and in 1911 she returned to London to find work. The radical tactics of the suffragette movement were

everywhere challenging perceptions of what women could do and be. Despite this atmosphere of empowerment, Dorothy's status, as a woman, severely limited her career prospects in journalism. Although she contributed regularly to Nash's Pall Mall Magazine and the Times Newspaper, her journalistic work remained limited to light entertainment and showbiz interviews. When the First World War broke out in 1914 she knew she wanted to be a war correspondent. Despite the fact that even seasoned war correspondents were struggling to get access to the front lines, in Dorothy's mind this was a chance to become indispensable – to write stories so compelling that the papers and public would recognise her ability.

In an effort to achieve her aim she marched up and down Fleet Street knocking on the door of every publication she could find presenting her proposition of reporting back from the front line and was laughed out of every establishment except one. Eventually on the vague pretext of 'entertainment' reporting, she managed to persuade the editor of The Times to help her procure a passport to get across the channel to Paris. And so on Midsummers Day 1915 she boarded a boat bound for France armed with her bicycle and note-book. With little money in her pocket and a vague promise from the editor of The Times she had one thing on her mind; to establish herself as the first female war correspondent.

It became clear that she needed to come up with a plan if she was going to accomplish her aims. Her gender and youth restricted where she could go and the information she could access. She soon realised that to get the story she wanted she would need to undertake radical transformation. Dorothy used both her charm and intellect, when developing her plan, which evolved over the next 6 weeks.

Dorothy set about enlisting help and she began by making friends with two British soldiers in Paris. These were the first of her group of 'khaki accomplices' as she called them. They were lonely and homesick and eager to communicate with fellow Britons. As such, she found it easy to persuade them to help her get hold of a uniform. Over the course of the next week, Dorothy would meet the men regularly in the evenings and they would give her 'washing' to do. The 'washing' was a different piece of uniform each time, wrapped in newspaper. One night it was boots, then trousers, cap and braces until eventually Dorothy had a complete set. From there, with assistance of her two new friends, she forged papers and named herself Private Denis Smith of the 1st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment. She knew she needed to crop her hair and headed to St.Lazare station and managed to convince two Scottish military police officers to cut her hair and then asked them to draw a razor down her face, to rough up her skin and in the hope of growing stubble. She was skilled at reading people and was able to quickly size up which men would be sympathetic to her cause. She was resourceful and made a homemade corset, using bandages, to flatten her chest and used a diluted pomegranate cleaning solution to darken her pale girlish complexion.

Sapper Dorothy Lawrence
Royal Engineers 51st Division, 79th Tunnelling Company



Dorothy travelled in her very modest civilian clothes and kept her disguise closely guarded, wrapped in paper, on the back of her bicycle. She slept in bombed-out buildings, in cornfields and forests. She was stopped on several occasions as she must have looked strange wearing female attire with her closely cropped hair and dirty face but Dorothy used her charm and, seemingly, didn't arouse suspicion.

Dorothy cycled hundreds of miles and having taken a wrong road she eventually arrived in a place called Albert, an area of the front which was so dangerous that it was off limits to authorised war correspondents. She promptly set out to find her next 'khaki' accomplice. After watching groups of soldiers, she realised it had to be someone who was of a similar stature to herself and when she met Tommy Dunn, she knew it would be him. She approached him and needed to be sure that he was trustworthy. She told him her story and he was keen to help her find a place to hide out. He said she must hide during the day and that he would visit her at night and bring her food. When he was sure it was safe, he told her he would take her out with him on a night shift. That time came and he took her onto the front lines. As a result, Dorothy spent the next 10 days and nights living as a soldier. She set up mines, she marched, mingled with other soldiers. Unfortunately, her health started to suffer. By this time, she had spent two months trying to get to the front, often sleeping outside in terrible conditions. She was exhausted and in pain, rations were scarce and, combined with 10 nights spent under constant fire, she became unwell and started having fainting fits. Fearing her ill health would result in her and her accomplices being found out, she decided to come clean.

She was arrested by a British sergeant and she stated that she wished to make it clear that she was not a spy that she was an English girl. British authorities, embarrassed by the idea that a girl had somehow managed to infiltrate their ranks, decided to detain Dorothy. She was interrogated by several generals over the course of the next few days. Ultimately it was decided that she should be sent to a Convent in St. Omar for 2 weeks to cleanse her mind, before returning to England, and she was forced to sign an affidavit swearing not to share her story with the public.

In October 1915, Dorothy arrived back in London to face homelessness, unemployment and secrecy. Her whereabouts during the rest of the war have remained something of a mystery.

By April 1918 Dorothy was living in Islington and had re-drafted the book despite the official injunctions and by the end of that year she had secured a publishing deal with John Lane Publishers. The war was over and she could at last tell her story. The book entitled Sapper Dorothy Lawrence: The Only English Woman Soldier, was released in mid-1919 to mediocre reviews. By the mid-1920s the book had been all but forgotten.

Both her mental and physical health began to fail. She later wrote of a 'nervous complaint' that caused her to shake. The symptoms were, perhaps, the initial manifestation of an illness that was to consume her. In 1925 Dorothy was admitted to Hanwell Lunatic Asylum. She was difficult to interrogate and had no surviving family to support her. Her only friend is named as Mrs Josephine Fitzgerald of The Close, Salisbury. Whatever happened between them during the war years we will never know. Although, it seems that in Dorothy's moment of need she may have turned to her old guardian. It seems they lost contact and Josephine died shortly after the end of the war. Nowhere in Dorothy's medical records are any other visitors mentioned at any point during what was to be a 40year incarceration.

Dorothy died in 1964 and is buried in an unmarked grave in North London and her story has been all but forgotten.

Dorothy's life was not an altogether happy one, but it was an important one. Although her efforts as a journalist were not properly appreciated at the time, now nearly 100 years later, Dorothy's accomplishments are finally beginning to be acknowledged. Her autobiography has been reprinted and the Imperial War Museum has included her experiences at the front of their collections.

Dorothy's desire to break the boundaries for feminine rights, ultimately ended in her making a brave contribution to socio-political history.

Having undertaken this research, I now understand how truly driven and determined Dorothy was and although her story is a little sketchy in places, I found her to be an outstanding woman, a path finder of her time.

Sandra Alexander

The following page is an extract taken from the re-printed book Sapper Dorothy:

Author's Note

I have endeavoured as far as possible in the following pages to relate the facts of my experiences as they actually occurred, but as there may be found persons who will doubt the truth of the narrative I append a letter from my chum, Sapper Dunn, whose signature has been witnessed by a Sister of the Hospital in which he was lying wounded at the time.

The original is in the hands of my publishers, as is also other evidence which I am bound in honour not to publish.

Dear Miss Lawrence,

I once more take the privilege of dropping you a few lines, hoping they find you well and hearty to receive, as it leaves me to be keeping quite well at present. Well, I have not heard anything about my operation as yet, and to tell you the truth I don't want to either, as I would like to hang on till after Christmas. Well, for the moment I did not recognize you as you came down the ward the other day. You looked so different dressed as a girl from the Royal Engineer comrade-in-arms which at Albert in September 1915 you happened to be.

When I remember you I can hardly believe, though, that three years have passed since then. It seems so short time ago since you, looking so fine as a khaki soldier, joined up in our mine laying company, and spent ten days and nights within 400 yards from the Boche front line, under rifle fire, trench mortars and "coal boxes." Often you had to be quite alone too all through a day or a night, and we never knew what intended to fall next, did we? Sometimes all three sorts fell at once!

I think that a good many of the shells were aimed at the Albert Station; you know the one that has been so much talked about. Anyhow, you and I used to get the benefit of them. I don't believe that either you or I realized till long after quite how extraordinary it was that you never happened to get knocked out. If the sergeant had not betrayed our secret you might have seen through, as a trusted soldier, the end of the first battle of Loos as well as its early stages. I can see you now stealing along that wall by moonlight, ready to fall into line for night shift, and prepared with the Buff Regimental badge as well as R.E. equipment.

Really as I think it over I cannot help laughing at what happened later on. You kept in a French convent until whatever news that you had gathered would have grown stale for use in English papers. Oh, well, you got back to Blighty in the end. Well, I think this is all that I will say at present, so I will conclude, with best wishes.

I remain, sincerely,
Sapper T. Dunn,
No. 189467, R.E.

I witness the signature of Sapper T. Dunn.

E. Warren Maunder,
Sister, Royal Berks Hospital,