



31 The Close

Famous People who lived in The Close Salisbury - 31 The Close

Sapper Dorothy Lawrence WWI

Dorothy referred to Salisbury as “That dear old Cathedral City “

Dorothy was born illegitimately in 1896, in London. She was brought up in quite an unconventional household by her mother.

When her mother died in 1901, she was sent to live in Salisbury at 31 The Close with her appointed guardian Mrs. Josephine Fitzgerald. For 10 years she enjoyed the luxury of a good education which may have made her decide to be a journalist. She had a few articles printed in newspapers, but when the war came along she desperately wanted to be a war correspondent, but no-one would let a young lady do that.

Undeterred she made her mind up she would go where the action was and be a freelance reporter. She took a bike and her trusted notebook and got on the boat to Paris. She headed for the town of Creil but after 6 weeks there and not seeing the real action she craved, she came up with a plan to dress as a soldier.

Although initially she intended to go to Amiens to see the action, she ended up in Albert, due to a suspicious gendarme in Amiens; she knew she couldn't stay there.

On her way she enlisted the help of 10 British soldiers who she called her “khaki accomplices” all these men swore to keep her secret and help her out even though, if found out who knows what punishment they would have received. So they helped her with obtaining a uniform, forged papers and a Military Policeman even cropped her hair for her. To make the disguise complete she had corsets to flatten her chest, padded her shoulders to look more manly, darkened her complexion with shoe polish and shaved her cheeks to get authentic razor rash. Her new name was Private Denis Smith.

She choose a regiment where her height would not be noticeable and she was in luck as she found the Royal Engineers tunnelling division, which was the perfect regiment as lack of height was an advantage.

She also struck lucky with the soldier she found to help her get into the regiment, Lancastrian Sapper Tom Dunn of 51st Division, 179th Tunnelling Company. He later wrote a preface to her book, declaring it was all true.

She spent 10 days at the front working with explosives and mines but then started having fainting fits probably caused by the anxiety of being there, and not wanting to cause problems for the soldiers that helped her, she turned herself in.

She was arrested and cross examined by 6 British Generals who couldn't figure her out and why she would want to be in the war. Eventually she was sent back home with strict instructions not to publish a book about her adventures until the end of the war. When she finally did, it got mediocre reviews.

But by 1925 her health, both physical and mental was in decline, and it is now thought she was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. At this time also she apparently spoke out about sexual abuse from her guardian in her youth.

Possibly with her declaring that and suffering PTSD, she was deemed unstable enough to be admitted to Hanwell Lunatic Asylum, where she died 40 years later. She seemed to have no-one to speak on her behalf or even visit her.

She is buried in an unmarked grave in North London.

