



Made in Derby 2018 Profile

Alice Wheeldon

Alice Wheeldon is Derby's most famous suffragist and during the First World War was a fervent anti-war campaigner.

She also gained notoriety after she was charged and found guilty at the Old Bailey of attempting to poison the then Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

But according to her great granddaughter, Chloe Mason, the charges were all part of a government conspiracy designed to discredit pacifists and conscientious objectors at the height of the war hostilities in Europe.

So Chloe, who lives in Australia, and her late sister Deidrie, have been "campaigning to clear their names so that history can record that what happened to them was a miscarriage of justice".

Alice ran a second-hand clothes shop at the Wheeldon family home in the Pear Tree area of Derby during the First World War and also kept a safe house for conscientious objectors.

An undercover agent (MI5), posing as a conscientious objector on the run was looking for accommodation in Derby. A Derby conscientious objector referred him to the Wheeldons where Hettie Wheeldon, secretary of the No-Conscription Fellowship lived with her parents.

The undercover agent in conversation with Alice, struck a bargain - the agent would help Alice with an 'emigration scheme' for her son and two other conscientious objectors, while Alice would get hold of poison to kill guard dogs to assist his friends

escape from an internment camp. Alice provided the poison sent by her married daughter Winnie Mason and son-in-law Alfred Mason, a pharmacist.

Shortly afterwards, Alice, together with her daughters Hettie Wheeldon and Winnie Mason and son-in-law Alfred Mason, were arrested.

The Old Bailey jury found Alice, Winnie and Alfred guilty of conspiracy to murder, and Alice was sent to prison for 10 years. She was released on health grounds in late 1918 and died shortly afterwards in 1919. She is buried in Nottingham Road cemetery. Winnie and Alf were released a year later. Hettie was acquitted.

Chloe is an ardent admirer of her great grandmother and commitment to her beliefs.

She said: “First and foremost, she was a socialist and she believed in social justice. She worked hard to ensure her children were educated and her neighbours recognised her as a kind and witty woman.

“She was an ardent anti-vivisectionist also and so it’s hard to believe that anyone could believe that she would think of taking a life, let alone poison the Prime Minister, knowing her beliefs.”

Chloe is applying to the Criminal Cases review Commission for a review of the case and referral to the Court of Appeal.

She said: “We believe that the key undercover agent and much of the material that should have come before the Old Bailey jury was hidden by the government.

Almost immediately after her conviction, the fight against injustice began and now recently revived by the Derby People’s History Group.

Chloe added: “The interest in Alice is worldwide. Historians have helped uncover a wealth of written material; books and plays have been created about her.

“There appears to be fascination and support around the world and we are hoping it will not be long before we can get justice for her.”

A blue plaque was put up on Alice’s former home in Pear Tree Road in 2013 and it can be seen on a walk developed by the Derby People’s History Group.

The campaign website is www.alicewheeldon.org