

Mary Dormer Harris 1867 - 1936

Mary was born in 1867 at Dale House Farm in Stoneleigh and was educated privately in Kenilworth then Richmond and finally at Twickenham High School.



Mary Dormer Harris



Dale House Farm

After travelling extensively in France and Germany, learning languages and sketching, she returned to England and enrolled at Lady Margaret Hall Oxford. From 1886 to 1888 she studied English Literature but wasn't officially awarded a degree as she was a woman. Indeed, it wasn't until October 1920 that Oxford University granted women full membership and the right to take a degree course.

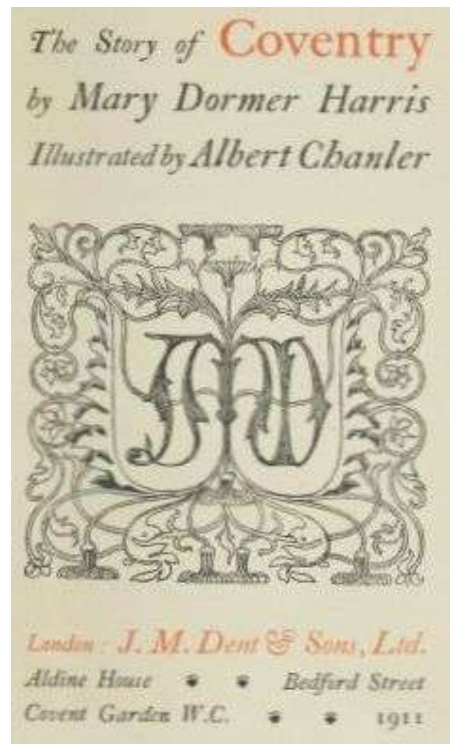
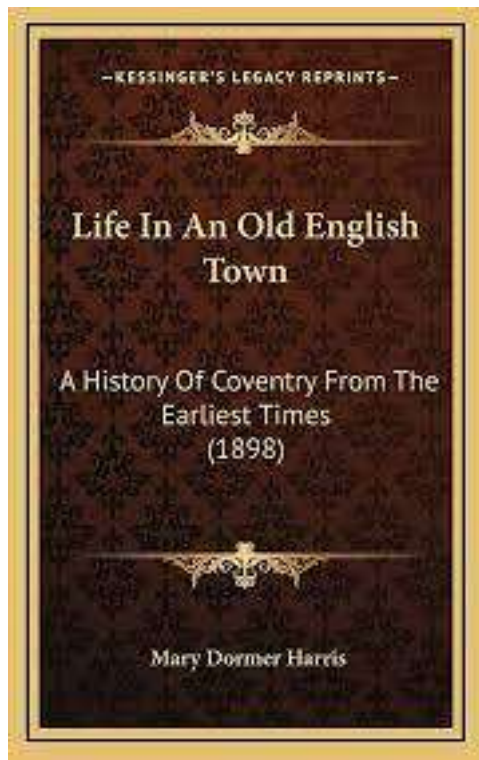
She had lodgings in Coventry during her holidays and became interested in the city and its history. In 1890 she wrote a Coventry history story for a competition. Over the next few years she expanded it until it was finally published in the English Historical Review of 1894.

A revised version was included in her book *"Life in an Old English Town"* in 1898. This was the year that Mary joined the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Although she spoke and wrote to Christabel Pankhurst she was a suffragist not a suffragette, believing in the cause of women's rights but not in the use of violence as she was a pacifist.

Mary had first hand experience of prejudice against women but triumphed in 1899 becoming the first woman to address the Birmingham & Warwickshire Archaeological Society reading the *"Manuscript Record of Coventry"*. Four years earlier she had been barred from presenting to the Society of Antiquaries, her paper having to be read by a man.

Possibly her most important work was the transcription of the Coventry Leet Book entries from 1420 to 1555. Commencing in 1904 it took a little over ten years to complete this work.

Some of this material was used both in *"The Life of an Old English Town"* and *"The Story of Coventry"*. Coventry's town planners wanted to demolish a number of medieval buildings in the city centre to widen roads and introduce shops. This was met with strong opposition from Mary and a number of others but to no avail, they disappeared anyway.



Drama was an important part of her life and in 1922 she became a founder member of the Warwick & Leamington Dramatic Study Club which later became the Loft Theatre. For about three years she was Vice President of the club. Her plays were performed by the theatre company with the first being "*The Waters of Forgetfulness*", a full length play.

Her script writing skills were not limited to supporting the Loft Theatre Group. After collecting "*The Christmas Mummers at Stoneleigh*" she published the play on 17th January 1925. Every Boxing Day since 1975 she has been remembered in Stoneleigh and Ashow where the Coventry Mummers perform it. Mary had a great love and affinity with this area. Her father's family was from Stoneleigh and her mother's was from Ashow.

In 1927 Mary became a lecturer at Birmingham University teaching local history, a post she held until 1932. Her tragic death on 3rd March 1936 was the result of a road accident. After a meeting one evening she was returning home and was hit by a car while crossing the road.

By this time her eyesight was failing, not helped by years spent studying ancient manuscripts.

This could have been a contributory factor in her death. Mary was buried at Milverton Cemetery.

Some years later on 1st February 1938 the *Mary Dormer Harris Bursary* was founded at a public meeting at Leamington Town Hall. It was funded by public subscription and commemorates her life. Awards are made to students about to enter higher education.

Mary Dormer Harris was a remarkable person regarded with affection by her students, colleagues and friends. A lady of many talents who was a historian, writer, lecturer, actress, playwright, heritage campaigner and strong supporter of women's suffrage. Parties which were held at her house in Leamington were well attended by both young and old and renowned for being good fun.