

# Lawrence: After Arabia

Nick Churchill on a film with a new take on the later life and death of T E Lawrence

**ON 19** May 1935, T E Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, died from injuries sustained in a motorcycle crash near Bovington six days earlier. Was it an accident or an assassination? Why do witness statements conflict? Who would gain enough from his death to have ordered it? It is a story which, even 85 years later, continues to touch nerves, mired as it is in claims of conspiracy and cover-ups. A new feature film, *Lawrence: After Arabia*, examines the events that led up to the enigmatic figure's death.

'My hope is that the film will encourage more questions to be asked,' says the film's writer and director, Mark J T Griffin, whose personal fascination with the story dates back fifty years to when he first saw Eric Kennington's famous effigy of Lawrence in St Martin's Church, Wareham. 'As a child I spent two months of every year on holiday in Wareham. I was ten years old when my gran was shopping on North Street and sent me off to explore. I found my way into St Martin's, where an old man

was polishing the effigy, and I started to ask him questions about it – was there a body inside, what was the dagger, did he fight with it? I asked how he died and was told it happened in a motorbike crash. Then I asked if it was an accident and with an enigmatic smile the old man told me: "Sometimes not all accidents are accidents." Of course, I was hooked – who wouldn't be? I had to see the David Lean film and began buying up every book about Lawrence I could get my hands on. That really was the genesis of this film.'

Courageous and uncompromising, Lawrence was lauded for his part in the Arab Revolt during World War 1, but ultimately failed in his mission to secure independent Arab states at the Paris Peace Conference. He worked as an advisor to Winston Churchill before, seeking anonymity, he enlisted in the RAF under the name of Ross. Identified by the press and discharged, in 1923 he joined the Royal Tank Corps as Private T E Shaw and was stationed at Bovington



Tom Barber Duffy as T E Lawrence



Tom Barber Duffy as Lawrence on his iconic Brough Superior motorcycle, looking across to Corfe Castle





Lawrence races the Gypsy Moth at Compton Abbas airfield

Camp where, despite his lowly rank, he was able to rent and restore a humble brick cottage at nearby Clouds Hill. In 1925 he successfully petitioned to rejoin the RAF as an air mechanic and bought Clouds Hill to keep as a holiday home to which he retired at the end of his enlistment in March 1935, weeks before his death at the age of just 46.

On his way back from sending a telegram to the author, Henry Williamson, a dip in the road obstructed Lawrence's view of two boys on bicycles and as he swerved to avoid them, he lost control and was thrown over the handlebars of his Brough Superior SS100. That was the official account, but alternative theories began circulating in the days after the crash, adding to his mythic status. Most centred on reports of a mysterious black car at the scene noted by Corporal Ernest Catchpole, the first reach the site.

'Catchpole stuck to his story

throughout, despite coming under enormous pressure from the authorities to change it,' says Mark. 'He was transferred away from his family to Cairo, where he committed suicide in 1940. You have to wonder what drove him to that. The two boys – Frank Fletcher and Albert Hargreaves, who was knocked out – both mentioned a black car before giving official statements to say they'd not seen it. From the language it's as if those statements were rehearsed.'

A D-notice secrecy request applied to reporting of the accident and the world was allowed to learn of the crash only on 19 May, the day Lawrence died. East Dorset coroner Major Ralph Neville-Jones held an inquest on the morning of 21 May, noting the inconsistent evidence was 'somewhat unsatisfactory'. That afternoon, Lawrence was laid to rest in Moreton cemetery after a funeral service in the tiny St Nicholas' Church attended by, among others,

Winston Churchill, Lady Astor, Siegfried Sassoon, Augustus John, George Bernard Shaw and Eric Kennington.

'I'm very conscious that Lawrence remains a hot topic in Dorset and I have certainly felt its heat during the making of the film,' says Mark. 'I've been trolled to some extent on social media and accused of stirring up old conspiracies about who might have killed Lawrence and why. All I've done though is ask questions of history, interrogating the facts in the same way that led to the discovery of Richard III's body buried under a car park in Leicester. Was the death of Lawrence an accident or assassination? I'm not entirely off the fence on that, but I lean towards assassination simply because of the weight of evidence that cannot be explained in any other way.'

Henry Williamson, recipient of that last telegram, was a member of the British Union of Fascists and it has been suggested that Lawrence was a sympathiser, or trying to infiltrate the BUF, or even that he wanted to meet Hitler in an attempt to avert the war that Churchill was predicting. 'Others believe he was being prepared to head a shake-up of the Secret Service and that, too, could have made him powerful enemies,' adds Mark.

The whiff of controversy notwithstanding, *Lawrence: After Arabia* is certain to attract interest for its many Dorset locations. A well-publicised spat with the National Trust was eventually resolved and permission granted to film at Clouds Hill. Considerably less resistance was encountered at other locations, including Smedmore House, Kingston Country Courtyard, Compton Abbas Airfield, Wareham's Priory Hotel, Moreton Church and village and Bournemouth and Poole College, where the Green Screen Studio was made available in return for on-set work experience for its students.

'We have been blessed with incredible goodwill during the shoot,' says Mark. 'Clouds Hill was one of the very few locations we paid to use and the money went straight into the pot to maintain it, I'm glad to say. More typical was the generosity of the owners of the Tiger Moth and Gypsy Moth biplanes at Compton Abbas, who let us use






Boys on bikes and a black car rehearse the 'incident' scene that resulted in Lawrence's fatal motorcycle accident

them in return for a credit – we have a beautiful shot of the Gypsy Moth flying parallel to the Brough Superior on the ground before drawing up alongside.'

Keen-eyed viewers will spot that artistic licence was employed to avoid some of the later 20th-century disruptions to the Moreton village-scape of Lawrence's time, and no attempt has been made to cover up the windows by Laurence Whistler in St Nicholas' Church, installed following the destruction of the originals by a German bomb that fell near the church in October 1940. Moreover, given that King George V

Road no longer follows the same line it did in 1935, the fateful crash was filmed in Thrashers Lane near Wytch.

For all the tantalising glimpses afforded by historic documents, photographs and newsreels, not to mention the dramas of David Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*, the 1991 TV movie *A Dangerous Man*, and now *Lawrence: After Arabia*, the man remains as enigmatic as ever. 'We are all immortal. For a limited time' runs the tagline of Mark JT Griffin's film. Perhaps, though, Lawrence's time is less limited than most. 

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Having picked up plaudits at a string of international film festivals, then had its release delayed by Covid-19, *Lawrence: After Arabia* is to receive its red carpet official premiere at Lighthouse, Poole's centre for the arts, on 5 March 2021. Full details and tickets will be available at [www.lighthousepoole.co.uk](http://www.lighthousepoole.co.uk). News of other screenings will be posted when confirmed at [www.lawrencethemovie.com](http://www.lawrencethemovie.com).



The funeral at Moreton, as shown in the film