

MONUMENTS OF St MARY'S CHURCH, FAIRFORD - 10

NOELLE LESLIE, COUNTESS OF ROTHES (1878-1956)



Unlike most of the monuments in St Mary's this plaque commemorates the life of one of Fairford's more recent citizens. Lady Rothes was a leading socialite in the Edwardian era but she was also a philanthropist and a heroine in one of Britain's greatest maritime disasters, the sinking of the Titanic.

Noelle Macfie was born Lucy Noelle Martha Dyer-Edwards on Christmas Day 1878 at 5 Hyde Park Gate, London, the only child of financier Thomas and his wife Clementina. She spent some of her childhood at Prinknash Park near Gloucester and on 19 April 1900 she married the Scottish peer Norman Leslie, the 19th Earl of Rothes. The couple spent much of their time at Leslie House in Fife but their two sons were both born in their townhouse in Kensington in 1902 and 1909.

Noelle was a very lively character and devoted much of her energy to charity work on both a local and a national scale, raising money for various good causes, in particular the Red Cross. She was also a supporter of women's suffrage and chaired her local committees.



Noelle as a young woman

In 1912 her glittering career almost came to an abrupt end when she boarded the White Star liner the RMS Titanic at Southampton on 10 April on her maiden voyage to New York. She was sailing to America to meet her husband who was considering investing in a fruit farm in Florida. Accompanying Noelle were her parents, her husband's cousin Gladys Cherry, and her maid. On the night of the 14th the Titanic, then the largest passenger liner in the world and considered unsinkable, struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Carrying over 2,200 passengers and crew the ship was fitted with just 20 lifeboats, enough for only about half of her complement. Noelle, Gladys and the maid

were put over the side in Lifeboat number 8 which was only about half full. Although Able Seaman Tom Jones was in charge of the boat Noelle soon showed her leadership skills and took charge of the tiller. She also took part in the rowing and in encouraging other passengers. After spending five hours in the freezing cold the lifeboat was picked up by the RMS Carpathia soon after first light. Even then Noelle did not rest but spent her time on the Carpathia helping to take care of the women and children steerage passengers who had managed to escape. Her parents also survived the tragedy.

For her part in the Titanic rescue she became known to the crew of the Carpathia as the “plucky little Countess” and was hailed a heroine by the American and British press although she never considered herself as such and gave much of the credit for their survival to Able Seaman Jones and others on board the lifeboat. Noelle and Tom Jones exchanged Christmas cards for the next 43 years. Three years after the tragedy in which about 1,500 people died, Thomas Dyer-Edwards paid for a motor lifeboat for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution at Fraserburgh as a mark of gratitude, the boat was named ‘*Lady Rothes*’ and it took part in many rescues in the North Sea.



Noelle in later life

Noelle also played her part in the First World War. She trained as a nurse and in 1915 converted a wing of Leslie House into a hospital for troops who had been wounded in the war. She later served as a nurse at the Coulter Hospital in Grosvenor Square, London where one of her patients was her own husband who lost an eye when he was wounded in 1916. She also devoted some of her time to organising events to raise war funds.

On 29 March 1927 the Earl of Rothes died at the age of 49 and was succeeded by his eldest son Malcolm. After a fairly short widowhood, Noelle married Major Claud Macfie at Holy Trinity Church, Chelsea on 22 December 1927. Claud had been born in Birkdale, Lancashire in 1878 and lived in Airds near Oban. In 1900 he was commissioned in the Seaforth Highlanders and served in the Gallipoli campaign during the First World War. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 1918. He was put on retired pay in 1920 but in 1930 he was appointed commanding officer of the 5th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment as a Lieutenant Colonel.

By 1930 the Macfies (Noelle had retained her title as Countess of Rothes but was usually referred to in the press as Mrs Macfie) were living in Stroud; they also owned a house in Hove near Brighton. Noelle’s traumatic experience on the Titanic apparently did not deter her from long sea voyages. In 1933 the Macfies sailed to Canada and then to Argentina in 1935 and New York in 1949. By 1948 they had moved to Fayre Court in Fairford but spent part of each year at their Hove house. Noelle died of heart failure in Hove on 12 September 1956 and was buried next to the grave of her first husband in the Leslie family vault at Christ’s Kirk on the Green Churchyard in Leslie. Claud Macfie died in a nursing home in Cheltenham on 23 December 1963.

The memorial plaque in Fairford church was put in place in 1957 but only after Colonel Macfie offered to pay for the laying of 20 tons of paving slabs acquired from the recently demolished Fairford Park house to repave the church, the vicar having previously stated that no more memorials were to be erected in the church.