

Key People

Alice Wheeldon

Derby born, well-known and well-respected, ran a successful second-hand clothes business. A feisty principled woman, she believed in universal suffrage and in the importance of education for her four children. She was also a fierce opponent of the war. Alice and her family were members of the No-Conscription Fellowship (N-CF).

Hettie Wheeldon

Hettie was a school teacher in Ilkeston and member of the Clarion Club. Leslie Smart, a CO, was secretary of the Derby N-CF; on his arrest, Hettie stepped into his place. Hettie was arrested for conspiracy to murder but acquitted.

Winnie Mason and Alf Mason

Alice's youngest daughter married Alf Mason in 1915 and they lived in Southampton. Winnie worked as a teacher, Alf as a chemist. At Alice's request, he supplied the poison (strychnine and curare) for guard dogs.



William Rickard aka "Alex Gordon" the spy (photo which he gave to the Daily Herald newspaper)

A convicted criminal with a history of mental health issues he was recruited by MI5. In Derby, he posed as a CO on the run and, in this guise, wheedled his way into the Wheeldon and other Derby and Sheffield households.

Reuben and Florence Farrow

Florence and Councillor Reuben Farrow were Ethical Christian Socialists and helped set up the Derby Branch of the Independent Labour Party. Reuben, another CO, was imprisoned for 'prejudicing recruitment', an offence under the Defence of the Realm Act. The Farrow family also gave "Gordon" a bed for the night.

Florence Marsden

Donated money to help fund the defence of the Wheeldon and Mason families. She chaired Derby's committee of groups opposed to war and conscription.

Dorothy Robinson "Dolly"

Friendly with the Wheeldon daughters. Her family owned and ran a health food shop and wrote to the family in prison. Dorothy later married Arthur Groves who was a CO, imprisoned in Dartmoor Prison during the war.

Lydia Robinson

Lydia was Alice's close friend in Derby and one of the people to give "Alex Gordon" a bed during his time in Derby. Lydia wrote to the family in prison and sent cakes - Alice wrote back to her as "Aunt Lid". When Alice and Hettie were arrested, Lydia protected Nellie from persecution.

Cyril East

A CO who had exemption from military service, working at Rolls Royce met "Gordon" at the Clarion Club.

David Lloyd George

The Prime Minister during the First World War and target of the fabricated murder plot.

Herbert Booth

"Alex Gordon"'s superior at MI5. Booth was the lead prosecution witness. "Alex Gordon" was not produced in court nor was his identity revealed - a scandal among part of the community then and now!

The Alice Wheeldon story in a nutshell

The "plot" to murder Lloyd George & Arthur Henderson, 1916-1917 in England during the First World War. In 1917 Alice Wheeldon and her daughter Winnie Mason and son-in-law Alf Mason, were convicted and imprisoned for conspiracy to murder the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and Chairman of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson. Hettie Wheeldon was acquitted. The appeal was refused. They had been set up by two undercover agents. The family argued that the murder plan was fabricated: a fantasy "a story so strange that it seems hardly to relate to the world or reality"¹. Today there is a well-supported campaign to clear their names.

What happened?

On Boxing Day 1916, Alice was at home with her husband and daughters, Nellie and Hettie, and Alexander Macdonald, a friend and a Conscientious Objector (CO), was staying with the family.

Alice's youngest daughter, Winnie, had married Alf Mason (a chemist) in 1915 and had moved to Southampton; there they supported Will Wheeldon, Alice's son, a CO, due to appear again before a military tribunal. That night, "Alex Gordon" came to the door posing as a CO needing shelter. After dinner/tea, Hettie referred him to Florence Marsden and the Robinson family with whom he spent the night. Over the next days during their conversation, Alice told him her worries about Will, her CO son.

¹ Report of the Attorney-General's opening address before the Mayor of Derby, presiding: Manchester Guardian 5 Feb 1917

Additional Information

www.alicewheeldon.org

Detailed information, gallery, reading room and other media.

www.derbypeopleshistory.co.uk

Primarily dedicated to keeping Alice's name alive, and maintaining interest in people who have had an impact upon the history of Derby.

The Corn Exchange

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corn_Exchanges_in_England#Derbyshire

The Lock-Up Yard and Guildhall catacombs

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derby_Catacombs

Made in Derby

www.visitderby.co.uk



Follow the Made in Derby walk of fame to discover the people who have played a part in putting Derby on the map. App available in Google Playstore.

Derby City Council

The Council House, has dedicated a public meeting room to Alice Wheeldon, where there is information and photographs of Alice. www.derby.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/your-council/council-house-facilities/meeting-rooms/

Derby Arboretum

www.visitderby.co.uk/things-to-do/parks-outdoors/derby-arboretum/
www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/derby-arboretum-how-britains-first-public-park-inspired-open-spaces-around-the-world-10478207.html

"Gordon" told her of an emigration route/an 'underground railway' from Liverpool to the USA possible for use by COs. He offered to introduce her to the escape route to the USA for her "three boys": her son, Will, son-in-law Alf Mason, and Alexander MacDonald.

'Alex Gordon' claimed he wanted to free his friends from a detention camp, guarded by dogs, and asked her to get him poison for the dogs. At Alice's request, Winnie and Alf sent poison (strychnine and curare) for the dogs. 'Gordon' gave her the letter of introduction. Alexander MacDonald went to Liverpool to investigate the emigration route, returned to Derby with news that it had been discovered by authorities and suspended.

Two days later, "Alex Gordon" introduced his friend, Herbert Booth, another undercover agent, and wrote the letter of introduction for the emigration scheme, and Alice gave the poison to "Gordon" (on 4th January 1917).

In front of press cameras, the family were arrested at the end of January 1917 - instant "tabloid villains". "Alex Gordon" was not produced in court. Only Herbert Booth took the stand as a witness. The trial was widely publicised and used as propaganda to continue the war to the bitter end, to demonise the peace movement. Alice Wheeldon, Winnie and Alf Mason were convicted. In prison, Alice went on hunger strike protesting her innocence. In December 1917, she was released on licence. Daughters Hettie and Nellie escorted her back to Derby where, as an invalid, the Robinson family cared for her until her death in February 1919.

Walk in the footsteps of

Alice Wheeldon



(1866 - 1919)

A 90 minute walk through a history of Derby



November 2019

The Route

The walk begins at **Site 1. The Guildhall** in the Market place. Here Alice Wheeldon, her daughter Hettie and her daughter and son-in-law Winnie and Alf Mason, were brought before Magistrates to be committed for trial. The trial was held at the Old Bailey, London, and not in Derby. Turn Left into Cornmarket and pause at the opening to **Site 2. Lock-up Yard** on the left. This is where the accused were held in cells which were linked underground to the Guildhall.



Right to left: Alice Wheeldon, her daughters Hettie and Winnie and matron Eliza Waldman, Derby Borough lock-up.

If the Market Hall is open, enter through Lock-up Yard and turn right to exit via Osnabruck Square, crossing the road to enter Albion Street, observing the Corn Exchange Grade II listed building on the left corner. Here the Derby Walk of fame begins, honouring icons from Derby's past, indicated by Stars in the pavement. **Site 3. Alice Wheeldon's star** is next to Philip Noel Baker's (Socialist, CO, Olympian, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Labour MP for Derby in the 1920s and '30s).

(If the Market Hall is closed follow the Cornmarket and turn left into Albert Street to bring you to Albion Street).

Retrace your steps to Albert Street, turning left into East Street. **Site 4.** On the north side, in 1916, the Derby Co-operative Society had a shop here where Nellie Wheeldon worked. After the War, the Co-Op expanded to the whole of East Street to the corner. Turn left into St Peter's Street, up the hill and right up Babington Lane, crossing Lara Croft Way at the top (another Derby icon!).

Here is **Site 5. Unity Hall** (site of). Built by the Order of Oddfellows, it was here the No-Conscription Fellowship (N-CF) rented number 9 room for their meetings. Dorothy Robinson said that in number 1 room, there was "a secret printing press where new identity cards were made".

Turn left into Normanton Road then left into Charnwood Street to see **Site 6. number 9, Charnwood Street**. Florence and Councillor Reuben Farrow lived here. Florence took in paying guests for income when her husband, another CO, was imprisoned. The Farrow's gave "Alex Gordon" a bed for one night.

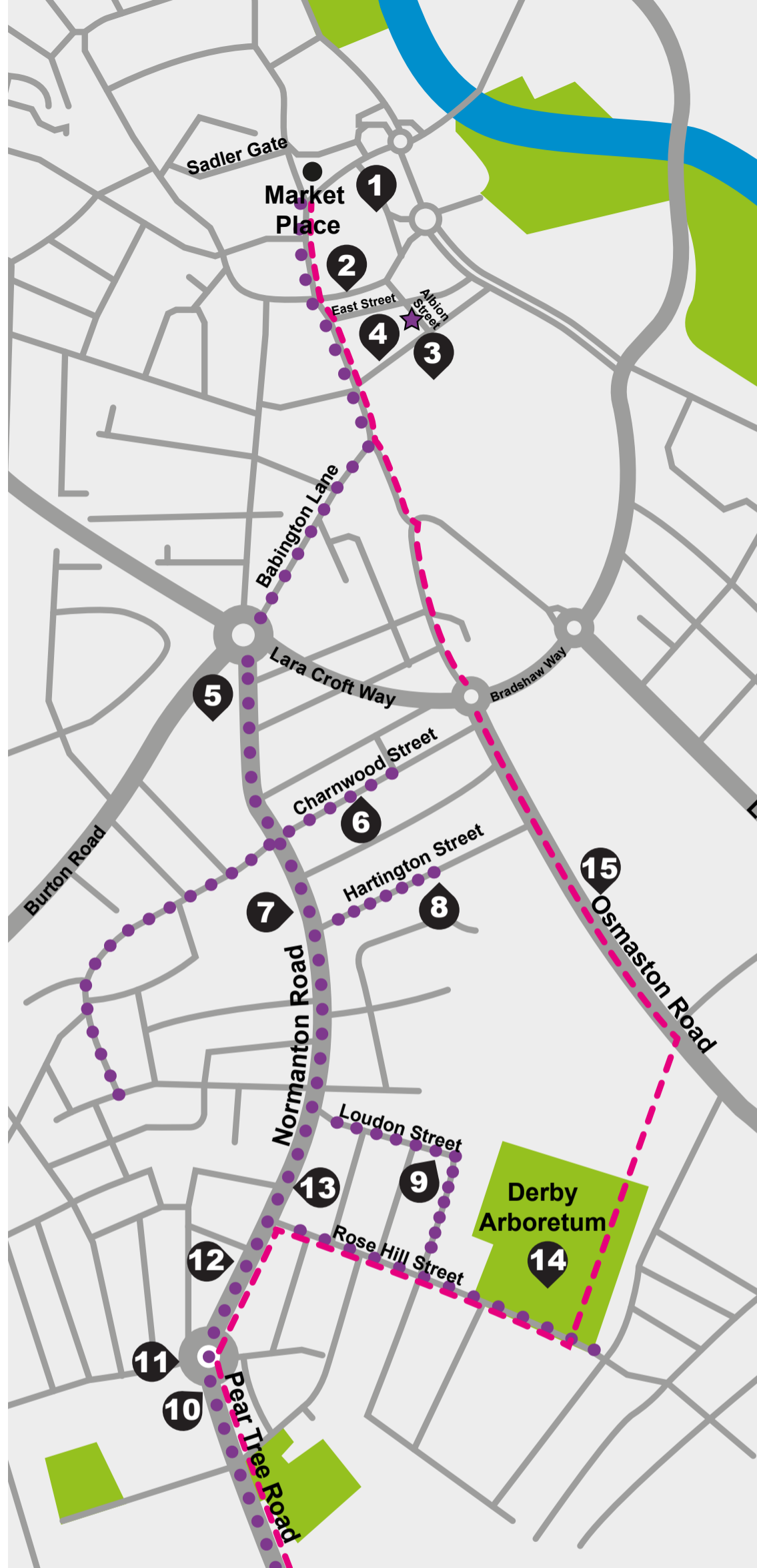
Retrace your steps to Normanton Road turning left to pass **Site 7. Dorothy Robinson's health food shop at 119**. Then left into Hartington Street. This street of grand houses was once a private road with locked gates at either end. **Site 8. number 34 was home to Florence Marsden**. Hettie gave "Alex Gordon" a letter of introduction to Miss Marsden but, finding her out, allegedly, he returned to Alice's house where Hettie directed him to the Robinson family who sheltered him for that night in Alvaston.

Return to Normanton Road, continue left, turning into Loudon Street to pass **Site 9. The Clarion Club at number 32** (no longer a club). Clarion Clubs provided a meeting place for people on the left with progressive ideas who enjoyed cycling together and also rode to villages to distribute their leaflets. Here "Alex Gordon" posed as a CO on the run looking for somewhere safe to stay. He met Cyril East, a CO who worked at Rolls Royce, who suggested he contact Hettie Wheeldon and gave him Alice Wheeldon's address.

Continue to the end of Loudon Street, turn right into Madeley Street then right again into Rosehill Street. At Normanton Road, turn left, continue to the roundabout and take the left fork which is Peartree Road. **Site 10. Alice's shop at number 12**. Look up to see the blue plaque. From 1901 Alice and her family lived here, at the front Alice's second-hand clothes shop. Alice and Alf Mason were arrested here in 1917. Hettie Wheeldon, a school teacher at Ilkeston, and her sister Winnie Mason, also a school teacher in Southampton.

Return to the roundabout. Here is **Site 11. once the Normanton Hotel**. Here "Alex Gordon" and Herbert Booth met between visits to the Wheeldons next door.

On the return route pass **Site 12. number 278 Normanton Road**, home to Ada and Arthur Hayward (a CO) who provided a temporary home to Hettie and Nellie Wheeldon in December 1917. Then pass **Site 13. 241 Normanton Road**, the site of the **Rosehill Methodist Church**, since demolished, now a business centre. This church was an active social centre attended by the Farrow family. Continue the return journey up Normanton Road, eventually retracing your steps back down Babington Lane, left into St Peter's Street and via Cornmarket to the starting point at the Guildhall, across from Tourist information and the Council House.



Key

- • • • • Outward Route
- — — — — Alternative Return Route

Derby Arboretum is approximately 1 mile from the Market Place

Or, to extend your walk from here, to include the famous Derby Arboretum and Royal Crown Derby Works, return to Rosehill Street a short distance back down Normanton Road. Continue until you find the entrance to **Site 14, the Arboretum**, a Grade II listed park, on the left. Walk in a straight line through the park to the statue of the boar just beyond which the path bears left to take you to the exit to Arboretum Street on the right, just beyond the Orangery. At the end of Arboretum Street, turn right onto Osmaston Road to **Site 15 the Royal Crown Derby works** and café on the right.

After visiting, return to the city centre along Osmaston Road, St Peter's Street and Cornmarket, back to the Market Place.