

The Woman Beneath the Parachute

Following the end of hostilities in November 1918, Richmond Park remained a busy place with a hospital, army camp, Royal Air Force (RAF) depots and continuing crop production. At the end of 1918 and beginning of 1919 the RAF's No 2 Balloon Training Depot, situated near the Experimental Grounds in the park, was being used to carry out tests on various types of parachute. Supervising these tests was Major Thomas Orde Lees RAF, secretary to the Parachute Committee, a group set up in June 1918 tasked with organising trials on various designs and reporting on their effectiveness. Previously to this appointment, the then Captain Orde Lees was a member of Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914. In 1917, a year after his return, the now Major Orde Lees joined the Balloon Corps of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and it was from here that he began to show an interest in the use of parachutes to save the lives of airmen.

One of the early parachute pioneers was Everard Richard Calthrop whose company ER Calthrop Aerial Patents Limited of London produced the 'Guardian Angel' design. This was one of the first 'closed' parachutes that was able to be rolled into a pack and deployed by the weight of the user falling through the air. On 4 September 1916 trials were carried out to test three types of parachute (Spencer, Guardian Angel and French Air Service) at the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) station at Roehampton. However, the experiments were not sufficiently complete to be satisfactory and it was recommended that a further series of experiments should take place in Richmond Park where there was more open ground. These trials took place on 6 and 26 September, presumably at the newly-erected balloon depot situated by the Beverley Brook and the Experimental Grounds.

Major Orde Lees became a champion for parachutes in general and the Guardian Angel type in particular. On 7 March 1919 Parachute Progress Report No 17 was issued for the Parachute Committee by Major Orde Lees. In it he reported on a series of tests sanctioned by the Air Council on the feasibility of steering parachutes. On 28 February seven drops had been made from a tethered balloon in Richmond Park by two experimenters; three by a Mears parachute and four by Calthrop's Guardian Angel parachute. What was not included in the report, but was widely publicised in the next day's newspapers, was that one jump was by the first woman to dive 1,000 feet from a balloon using a closed or folded parachute. Her name, given in 'The Daily Chronicle' was Sylva Boyden, aged 19, "*the first of her sex to hazard the experience*". Her feat was subsequently reported around the world.



Sylva with the dark parachute jumping from a tethered balloon in Richmond Park 26 March 1919. Image courtesy of Alanna Pritchard

But why was Miss Boyden at Richmond Park on that day? She said that the descent was not pre-arranged, but that she went to watch some tests and the chance was offered. There is, however, more to the story than is reported in the newspapers. In 'The Silken Canopy', John Lucas states that Major Orde Lees met her at an aero-engineering course at Chatham, introduced her to parachuting and taught her to jump. This was possibly correct as Sylva stated she was a student at the Calthrop works and could possibly have been sent to RNAS Kingsnorth, a training school for airship captains and technical staff. At that time, she would have been about 18 years old. On 6 December 1918 Everard Calthrop wrote a letter replying to Major Orde Lees on his suggestion that his "*girlfriend*" desired to make a parachute drop in one of Calthrop's parachutes; a request that Calthrop called "*most interesting*". He saw no good reason why she should not do it and be the first lady passenger to make a descent with his parachute.

It appears from correspondence at the time with Calthrop that Major Orde Lees employed Miss Boyden as his assistant on secondment from Calthrop. In early February 1919 Miss Boyden was off work with an illness and Calthrop agreed that Major Orde Lees could “*keep Miss Boyden for the other four days that you require her to complete your work*”. It seems likely that Miss Boyden travelled with Major Orde Lees to various trial events and this led to her being at Richmond Park on 28 February. How she managed to persuade the authorities to let her be taken up in a balloon basket, whether as one of the “*two experimenters*” mentioned in the trial report or on an unofficial drop, may never be known. Calthrop’s agreement to such a drop by a woman using his equipment and the apparent friendly relationship with Major Orde Lees, who oversaw the trials, certainly would have been major factors.

Parachute Progress Report No 18 to the Parachute Committee gave the results of trials in Richmond Park carried out on 26 March 1919 in the presence of American, Canadian and Japanese officers. Miss Boyden again used the opportunity to carry out three more parachute drops with the Guardian Angel parachute, and again the event was publicised all over the world. They called Miss Boyden “*a cheerful little woman, who was dressed in a flying kit with a fur lined helmet, made three descents during the day for the love of the experience*”.



Sylva in mid-air Richmond Park 26 March 1919. Image courtesy of Alanna Pritchard

Shortly after this, on 7 April 1919, Major Orde Lees left the Parachute Committee and returned to Corps duties. On 25 April he resigned his commission, reportedly before he was court marshalled over his involvement with a sponsored women’s parachute course. It appears that Major Orde Lees could be a difficult man to get on with. In December 1918 Lieutenant Colonel Tizard, Assistant Controller (Experiments) at the Ministry of Munitions, had to intervene in an argument between Major Orde Lees and RNAS Orford Ness over parachute trials. It was also reported in ‘The Sunday Post’ on 6 April that arrangements were being made by Calthrop to take Miss Boyden and Major Orde Lees to America in July 1919 to demonstrate the Guardian Angel parachute. Perhaps it was this that became the catalyst for his change in status.

Miss Boyden and Orde Lees continued to work together in civilian life promoting the Guardian Angel parachute. Between 18 and 21 April Miss Boyden demonstrated the parachute on flights organised by Handley Page, an aircraft manufacturer, whilst giving rides to the public in one of their bombers that was reconfigured to civilian use. By 12 May

Miss Boyden had made six jumps from the aeroplane; on that day she and Orde Lees were on a flight, sponsored by ‘The Daily Mail’, to deliver newspapers by parachute to cities on a route from London to Aberdeen. However, due to bad weather, they were involved in a crash near Carlisle. Following this they both travelled to America to demonstrate the Guardian Angel parachute. On their return they continued to travel around Britain and Europe jumping from aeroplanes at air shows. Miss Boyden carried on jumping with Handley Page and on 3 July 1920 was the first women to parachute at an RAF pageant. In all she made around 150 jumps in her career, but who was she?

An interview in ‘Sports Parachute’ in 1966 stated that in 1965 Miss Boyden had become Mrs Marley, was 65 years old and lived in Southampton. She said she had used her grandmother’s

name in 1919 as “*she did not want her parents to know at that point of her unlady-like pastime*”. This was all the information we had to begin our search for the real identity of Sylva Boyden.

Mrs Marley told ‘Sports Parachute’ that “*A friend of her family invited her to the Park to watch members of the Royal Flying Corps testing a new parachute*” and that “*straight away she asked if she could have a go.*” This we know is not entirely correct as she was already in contact with Major Orde Lees who was overseeing all parachute trials.

Assuming that Mrs Marley might have continued to live in the same area, a search of death records revealed that Grace Ellen Marley, who was born on 24 April 1899, died in Southampton in 1984. Looking through the 1939 Register, in which are recorded details of every man, woman and child in the UK at the start of the Second World War, it was found that Grace E Mortimore (born 24 April 1899) was living at 5 Headley Avenue, Wallington, Surrey. It was also noted that she later married to become Mrs Marley. Grace’s occupation was given as “*unpaid domestic duties*” and she was a member of the civil nursing reserve. Living with Grace was William B Mortimore (born 14 December 1892) who is shown as “*National Air Communications, Civil Aviation Administrative Manager, Publicity and Traffic Control*”. As Headley Avenue is located very close to Croydon Airport, the UK’s major international airport at that time, it seems likely that William worked there. Although both William and Grace are shown as being married, no record of a marriage between them has been found.

From British Army World War 1 records, it seems that William Beresford Mortimore was a Private in the King’s Royal Rifles who later transferred to the Royal Air Force and became a Flying Officer. He left London for Sydney, Australia in 1960 and appears on an electoral roll in New South Wales in 1968.

By 1946 the electoral roll for Surrey shows Grace E Marley living at 5 Headley Avenue with Michael Marley. A search of marriage records shows that on 19 November 1941 at Epsom Register Office, Surrey, Michael Marley married Grace Ellen Bough. Both were living at 5 Headley Avenue and were over 21 years old. Michael was a bachelor and a guardsman in 1st Parachute Battalion. Grace was shown as a widow and a nurse, and her father was named as Henry Potheary.

The UK Midwives Roll of 1935 lists Grace Ellen Bough as practising, and living at 44 Bishop’s Road, Itchen, Southampton. A further search of marriage records showed that on 5 May 1927, at Southampton Register Office, John Bough was married to Grace Ellen Caille. John was a 26-year-old bachelor and musician of 13 Compton Walk, Southampton. Grace was shown as a 27-year-old widow living at 44 Bishop’s Road, Itchen whose father was Henry Potheary. No other record of Grace Caille has been found.

John Bough was born in Windsor on 11 December 1900 to Samuel and Harriett. In the 1901 Census 4-month-old John was living at 9 River Street, Windsor with his parents, who ran a lodging house and shop, and three older siblings. Harriett died later that year and Samuel passed away in 1907. By the 1911 Census 10-year-old John was one of 180 boys attending the Mayfield Industrial School at Woking, Surrey. As a 14-year-old, John applied for permission to join the Army as a bandsman and the forms were signed by his guardian, James William March, the Superintendent of the school. In the 1939 Register John Bough was living in Hastings and described as married, although Grace was living in Wallington with William Mortimore. John was working as area manager for an electric lamp company and was also a special constable. No record of his death has been located.

From the two marriage certificates, it seems that Sylva Boyden (later Mrs Marley) began life as Grace Ellen, the daughter of Henry and Alice Jane Potheary of 100 Hartington Road, Lambeth. She was baptised at All Saints, South Lambeth, on 21 May 1899 and Henry was shown as a carpenter. By the time of the 1901 Census, the Potheary family had moved to 35 Chestnut Road,

Twickenham and 2-year-old Grace had a 2-month-old brother, Cecil. It showed that while Henry and Grace were both born in Lambeth and Cecil in Twickenham, Alice was born in Suffolk. Henry Potheary had married Alice Jane Murkin in Lambeth in 1898. Despite extensive searches, no record has been found of the family in the 1911 Census.

Grace's mother, Alice Murkin, spent her childhood in Cambridge where her father, Charles, was a labourer in the brickfields. Alice was the eldest of 15 children born to Charles and Ellen. Records show that in 1868 in Thingoe, Suffolk, Charles Murkin married Ellen Cordelia Boyden. So, it seems that Grace's grandmother's surname was Boyden, even if her first name was not Sylva!

In May 1919 Major Thomas Orde Lees, then aged 40, travelled to New York to demonstrate Calthrop's parachutes. Sailing with him on the SS Australind, a cargo ship, were Grace Potheary, aged 20, and Ada Eliza Frances Thomas who gave her age as 45. Both Major Orde Lees and Miss Potheary stated their occupations as parachutists. Grace's contact in the UK was given as her mother, Alice Potheary, living at 44 High Street, Itchen, although there does not seem to be a road of that name in Itchen. Ada Thomas was a widow from Essex who was actually 55 years old and seems to have been acting as chaperone to Grace.

A report in 'The Times' of 5 July 1920 regarding the RAF's Hendon Air Pageant described Miss Boyden as; *"a slender fair-haired girl of 21, the daughter of an Officer in the Mercantile Marine, has given her services voluntarily to the RAF, and has been of great assistance to Major Ordre (sic) Lees in the testing of the parachutes"*. Henry Potheary is listed in the UK Naval Medal and Award Rolls as a greaser on the 'London Belle', a paddle minesweeper in the First World War which went through the conflict unscathed.

Our research suggests that the female parachutist calling herself Sylva Boyden was born Grace Ellen Potheary in 1899; married John Bough in 1927, saying she was a widow named Grace Ellen Caille; gave her name in 1939 as Grace Ellen Mortimore; and married Michael Marley in 1941, saying she was a widow called Grace Ellen Bough.

Researched and compiled by Claire and David Ivison, February 2019