

DERRICK FRANCIS DOUGLAS CHRISTOPHERSON

by Angus Edmonds

... someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

From *Church Going* by Philip Larkin

Shortly after moving to Coates in 2014 while looking through St Matthew's Churchyard, I came across the headstone of the former warden of Bledisloe Lodge, Derrick Christopherson. Having been the head of a university residential college, I was intrigued when I read the words inscribed on the headstone, especially noting his early death at age 48, and wondering if the 'poor man had been driven to an early death by his boisterous student residents.' I had heard stories of the sometimes outlandish and extravagant behaviour of Cirencester's 'Ag' students – and indeed, the world over, agricultural students have a reputation for being 'lively' - if also rather lovable! I have recently tried to research into the story of this man, who throughout the 1950s was a significant person in our area, and this August marks the 60th anniversary of his death.



The headstone depicts a Latin Cross in the style of the Cross of St John (i.e., slightly widened at the outside arms) above the inscription:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
DERRICK FRANCIS DOUGLAS
CHRISTOPHERSON
1911 - 1959

Warden of Bledisloe Lodge
Royal Agricultural College



Derrick Christopherson was born in South Africa in 1911, just a year after the Union of South Africa was created as a self-governing country under the British Crown, unifying the two British colonies and the two Boer republics following the Anglo-Boer Wars (1899-1902). He was probably born in Johannesburg in the Transvaal province where his father, Douglas Christopherson, was a director of the London-based mining company, Consolidated Goldfields. Although thoroughly English, it is likely that the family was originally Scottish as not only was their father called Douglas, but they had an uncle Kenneth, and a cousin Malcolm. The Christopherson family was 'comfortably' middle-class, with a London residence in a white stucco house on a grand terrace in Lowndes Square, Belgravia, and a home at Belmont Paddocks, near Faversham in Kent.



Lowndes Square, Belgravia, London

Derrick and his one-year younger brother, Stanley, who was also born in South Africa, attended Locker's Park preparatory school, where one of their many uncles, was headmaster, before they both completed their schooling at Winchester College.

[The photograph taken in December 1919 shows Derrick, age 8, (right) with his brother, Stanley, age 7, and their mother, Alma Christopherson. Derrick appears to be smaller in stature than his younger brother who was certainly more athletic and academically able. In fact, although Derrick was the older brother, he seemed to live his life in the shadow of his younger brother, and subsequently one might say, he was outshone by his younger brother's achievements. So, there was a role reversal from the norm, with Derrick being more non-conformist and mischievous than his younger brother Stanley who seems to have taken the more responsible and sensible role usually associated with the oldest child. Even this photograph of the two as young boys shows Stanley standing more erect and tidy than Derrick – and on the right side of their mother, traditionally – and the family seems to have adhered to the 'accepted' upper class norms – the right hand side reserved for the eldest or most favoured son. [The photograph is taken from *An Englishman At War: The Wartime Diaries of Stanley Christopherson DSO. MC, TD.*, ed. James Holland, Bantam Press 2014]



[left to right] Stanley, Alma, Derrick

In his twenties and having foregone at place at Oxford University for a career as a stockbroker in the City, Stanley used to ride a horse in Hyde Park before going to work and attended house parties at weekends. Such was the life of a well-to-do businessman. After the war, he spent ten years in South Africa following his father's footsteps and working for Consolidated Goldfields before returning to London to resume his career as a stockbroker. After his marriage to Cynthia Smith-Dorrien in 1959, he purchased a large house in Wye, Kent, commuting to London, his marriage blessed with a daughter, Sara Jane, and a son, David. However, in 1965, he converted half the house into a preparatory school and retired from stock broking and became very involved with his local church and community. Stanley died in 1990, respected and admired, the church full to overflowing with friends and neighbours and war-time colleagues from far and wide.



Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Christopherson

To what extent Derrick also followed his brother's pre-war lifestyle, we are not certain, but it is likely. His brother Stanley was a high achiever, academically and in sport, and would later have a stellar military career during World War II, joining the Nottingham Yeomanry (aka the Sherwood Rangers) as a junior subaltern in September 1939 and rising through the officer ranks to become colonel and

commanding officer of his regiment shortly after the D-Day landings in 1944. He took part in no less than thirty battle honours and was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO), two Military Crosses (MC), and an American Silver Star, as well as being Mentioned in Dispatches four times.

Derrick also served in the Army during World War II. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in October 1940 in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC). He saw action in North Africa, including the two battles of El Alamein (1942), the battle of the Mareth Line and the Tunisian campaign (1943). It is not known why he gave up or lost his commission. In any event, Derrick joined an armoured regiment, 'The Bays' (The Queen's Dragoon Guards), as a guardsman (private), and was deployed on the Italian Front in May 1944, taking part in the Battle of the Argenta Gap in April 1945 during the final offensive of the Italian Campaign. He was promoted to corporal and rose through the ranks of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to become a sergeant-major before war's end.

At some point, Derrick was wounded in action, whether in North Africa or Italy, we do not know. If in the North African campaigns, it might explain why he was back in England in 1944 before joining The Bays as a guardsman. However, if he had been wounded as a serving officer at that time, I would have thought that there would be some mention of it in his brother's diaries (as Stanley too was in North Africa before returning to Britain to prepare for D-Day). My best guess is that he was wounded in Italy (possibly at Argenta Gap) but not seriously, allowing him to continue in active service there.

There are only six references to Derrick in his brother Stanley's diaries and no references to any letters received by Stanley from Derrick, although there are numerous references to letters from many family members and friends. This paucity of references may 'speak volumes' although we note that these diaries were edited and so the originals might have contained more about Derrick.

The first reference (8 September 1940) records: '*Brother Derrick has passed his cadet exam, which means he will soon get his commission. The family are very bucked.*' Then (9 December 1940): '*Derrick has got a commission in the RASC.*' A few days later (15 December 1940): '*There seems to have been trouble with Derrick again. He had a row with Mummy before leaving to join his regiment, and neither (sic) of the family have heard from him for a long time. Daddy is rather worried and Derrick told his bank manager that his messing was costing him £5 a week!*'

There is no doubt from these entries that Derrick did become a commissioned officer – indeed from College sources, we know he was a Second Lieutenant in the RASC. Although being an officer in the Royal Army Service Corps did not match the prestige of being an officer, as Stanley was, in a cavalry/tank regiment! Despite a search of Army records, we have no record of Derrick's service as an officer or of why he ceased to be one.

There are two inconsequential references to Derrick (20 February 1941): '*The sunset was lovely – it all rather reminded me of the trip Daddy, Derrick and I made in the South African game reserve.*' Then on 2 March 1941, a reference of the death of a Lady Mickey who '*had always been terribly kind to Derrick and myself, especially when the family were away.*'

It is more than three years later that there is this entry – a summary of several weeks activity, dated D-Day 6 June 1944, but written later: *'My brother, refusing to take a commission, left for Italy soon after my return in (sic) England, but it was a great joy to see him again even for a short time, and to find that he was the same big-hearted, cheerful but completely irresponsible person I had known four years ago.'*

Whatever happened that caused Derrick to be decommissioned as an officer, we do not know. Was Derrick offered a new commission and turned it down, as per Stanley's diary entry, or is Stanley using a euphemism? By 1944, Stanley was a senior officer in his regiment, and it may have been something of an embarrassment that his brother had been reduced to the lowest rank of trained soldier. It should also be noted that Stanley, as far as we now know from his published diaries, never made mention of his brother rising through the ranks of NCOs to the highest NCO rank of Sergeant-Major. Although Derrick did not earn the medals and awards of his brother, he clearly served well throughout the Italian campaign and was wounded at some point. The fact is it was more difficult for those below officer rank to gain recognition. [I note this as fact, but it no way detracts from the awards given to his brother who completed his outstanding war service as colonel in command of his regiment that was at the front of battle throughout the European campaign.]

On being demobbed at war's end, Derrick became a student at the Royal Agricultural College on its re-opening in 1946. Derrick, now aged 35, was what we call today 'a mature age student.' However, like most other institutes of higher education in those immediate post-war years, the RAC had many ex-servicemen as students – so Derrick was not out of place. In fact, Derrick was very popular figure among his fellow students, and the following year, he was elected chairman of the Union Club. It was common in those days among those educated at independent schools to refer to each other by their surnames. Therefore, Derrick would be called and addressed as 'Christopherson' – and it speaks volumes about him that he was known by a more familiar form of his surname, 'Chris.' In an obituary for Derrick in the Royal Agricultural College Journal (1959-60, pp. 53 & 55), entitled, 'An Appreciation,' a fellow 'Aggie' from those days, Hugh Birley, wrote:

'... one of the most familiar College sounds was Chris's laugh: a bubbling, infectious laugh that was utterly characteristic of its owner: a laugh full of merriment and joie de vivre: a laugh, like its owner, just a little eccentric. For Chris, like his laugh, was different from other people. He had, however, a great affection for his fellows and an all embracing enthusiasm for all his activities.... Many activities of College life benefitted from his vigorous and practical support.'

Indeed, Hugh Birley tells us that Derrick gave his all as Chairman of the Union Club, *'a job after his own heart... radiating enthusiasm and helping to re-establish that corporate College spirit on which all ability to function depends.'* Yet, Birley also observes that behind all the 'gaiety' of Derrick's personality, he was very serious-minded. In fact, Derrick suffered from depression – whether it resulted from his war-time experiences (what we now recognise as post-traumatic depression disorder – another possible reason for his being decommissioned) or whether he was to some degree bi-polar, we can only speculate – again, the references to his being 'irresponsible' come to mind.



'Chris' Warden of Bledisloe Lodge
(photo from Wilts & Glos Standard)

The Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard (Friday, 28 August 1959) gives Derrick's age at death as 45. He died in the Cirencester Memorial Hospital on Friday 21 August 1959. An obituary the *RAC Journal* gives his year of birth as 1913. His brother Stanley's diaries, edited by James Holland, states that Derrick was the elder brother and, as Stanley was born in 1912, and concurs with the headstone at his grave in St Matthew's Churchyard, Coates, which gives Derrick's birth year as 1911, which would mean he died aged only 48 years.

The report by the *Standard* of Derrick's death is as follows under the heading:

Death of Mr D.C. Christopherson Member of R.A. College Staff

One of the most popular members of the staff at the Cirencester Royal Agricultural College, Mr. Derrick Francis Christopherson, warden of Bledisloe lodge, Coates, died at Cirencester Memorial Hospital on Friday. He was aged 45. Mr Christopherson has been warden of the Lodge since 1951 and had 63 students in his care. He was also librarian at the College. Very popular both with students and the staff, South African born Mr Christopherson not only took an interest in the students whilst they were at College but kept in touch with them all over the world, and helped to find them jobs.

He attended the College himself between 1946-47 when he was chairman of the student's (sic) Union Club, before leaving to gain further farming experience on a farm in Kent, but he soon returned to take up the post of Warden at Bledisloe Lodge.

Secretary and treasurer of the Royal Agricultural Association, the old student's (sic) association, Mr. Christopherson was a keen sportsman, supporting the College and Cirencester's Boys' Cub in all sports. He was also a qualified rugby referee on the County list and chairman and president of the Coates Cricket Club.

During the war Mr. Christopherson served in the Army and was wounded. He had been ill for some time and was admitted to the Memorial Hospital on Wednesday.

The report then goes on to say that Derrick's funeral service took place on Wednesday morning (26 August) at Coates in a service conducted by Rev. J.E. Tillett, Rector of Coates, followed in the afternoon by a memorial service, again conducted by Rev. J.E. Tillett, at the Cirencester Royal Agricultural College. The report lists the names of the many mourners attending, including representatives of Earl Bathurst, Mr R.T.G. Chester-Masters, the town council, Cirencester Rugby Club, the Past-Masters of the Agricultural College Beagles, the Old Pats Rugby Club, the Cirencester Boys' Club, as well as many past students and College staff. However, only three possible family members are listed: Mrs M. Christopherson (wife of his cousin, Malcolm) and Mr. and Mrs. S. Mitchell (listed as 'cousins' but Mr S. Mitchell may well have been his brother's close friend, Major Stephen Mitchell, a regimental companion since they trained together in 1939, who is mentioned many times in Stanley's diaries, and there being no mention of a cousin with the surname Mitchell). It would appear that his brother Stanley nor any other member of his family attended Derrick's funeral.

We do not why this was, but there are these few references to Derrick falling out with the family. Perhaps it is explained by his being something of a disappointment having lost his commission, his extravagant mess bills, or his being a *completely irresponsible person*, in the words of Stanley. The biggest surprise is that his brother Stanley did not attend. However, 1959 was the year that Stanley married, and it is possible that he was away on honeymoon, in Europe perhaps, in the days when travel was not as easy to arrange as it is today. When Derrick left the RAC in 1947 he returned to farming in Kent – either at the family property or that of a close family friend at Faversham. Did he disappoint when he left Kent, abandoning farming, to return to the RAC as Warden of Bledisloe Lodge? Is the fact that the *Standard* missed out his third name, Douglas, referring to him only as 'Derrick Francis Christopherson' just a journalistic mistake? Or did Derrick drop that name for use himself, given that perhaps he and his father had a falling out? Did his ailing father in 1944 just before his death express regrets about Derrick 'refusing a commission' – we simply do not know, but if he did there was to be no time for a reconciliation. Personally, I would opt for the journalistic mistake (the paper was also in error about Derrick's age), but the alternative could give a possible explanation the lack of immediate family at his funeral.

Communication with his nephew, David, son of Stanley, revealed little, indeed nothing, as he recalled little direct contact with his Uncle Derrick when he, David, was a boy; and therefore, so much remains a mystery.

However, whatever his faults or failings, Derrick Christopherson was clearly a wonderful Warden of Bledisloe Lodge, greatly loved and respected, and he was a true community person, not only in the College, but in Coates, in Cirencester, and more widely in Gloucestershire. He also served his country and was obviously highly respected when he served in the North African and Italian campaigns, seeing active service and being wounded, and rising through the NCO ranks on the Italian front to become a Sergeant-Major.

Next time you attend St Matthew's Church, or take a walk via the churchyard, pause for a moment at Derrick's grave and give thanks for his service to this country and community.

In his own way, Derrick Francis Douglas Christopherson I (ived up to his name – truly a son of St Christopher - especially in his care of young people, including the residents of Bledisloe Lodge, Coates, 'bearing' them on his shoulder, it would seem with compassion, understanding, enthusiasm, and good humour.



Acknowledgements: My thanks to Ms Ka-Yin Williams, a librarian who also acts as an archivist at The Royal Agricultural University, for supplying me with copies of the relevant edition of the RAC Journal; and to the resources of Cirencester Library where I found the *Standard's* report on the death of Derrick Christopher.

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