

LOCAL HISTORY NOVEMBER 2021 "CROSS-DRESSED TO KILL"

This month's talk was by author Vivien Morgan who enthralled us with stories and extracts from her book :



The book is a unique collection of cross-dressing women's stories. It tells why and how hundreds of young women worldwide dressed as men in the 17th to 20th centuries.

What inspired Vivien to write the book? In her career Vivien has produced and directed documentaries and has been a national TV news reporter. Her work has led her to adopt assumed identities in order to bring back news stories from closed communist countries including eastern Europe, Russia, Tibet and Burma.

Vivien stumbled across an early 19th century book on three women adventurers who cut off their hair, found men's clothes, bandaged their breasts and, by hiding their sex, went off to enlist as soldiers. Her journalistic curiosity was piqued to find out whether it was just these three women or were there more? After a great deal of research Vivien discovered that there were hundreds of women across the world who did the same thing from the 17th century right up until the first World War – over 300 years of constant war that these women lived through.

We heard the extraordinary stories of some of the 21 women featured in the book - women of English, Irish, French, Prussian, Russian, Spanish, American and Israeli nationalities.

Aged between 14 and mid-20's, usually working class, these were women who shared a common drive to DO something. They were patriotic and wanted to answer their monarch's call to defend their country; they stood at their garden gates and doorways and watched their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons head off to war –they wanted to be there too. Were they lesbians or transsexuals? Some perhaps but not all; they all had a the strength and courage to follow their desire to play their part.

Disguising themselves as men was not too difficult – uniforms were loose and ill-fitting and cutting their hair short went a long way. Vivien shared details of how these women kept their disguise and their sex secret for so long; we had tales of these women’s “affairs” with women but also of how they protected other women from abuse whilst masquerading as men.

Were they early feminists? They certainly crossed the gender line and risked prosecution for cross-dressing was a criminal offence punished by a jail sentence, whipping or even execution yet they ignored all of these in order to fight, kill and die in battle. They travelled to the fields of Flanders, the West Indies and India to fight for their country - as sailors, soldiers and pirates too.

Some of the women mentioned were :

Mary Read born in the late 1600s was dressed by her mother as a boy and hired out as a servant; she joined the Army of Flanders and later sailed on a Dutch ship for the West Indies and joined the pirate crew who captured the ship.

Hannah Snell – an Englishwoman who joined the military in the mid-1700s under the name of James Gray initially to find the husband who had deserted her; she served in General Guise’s regiment in the army of the Duke of Northumberland and subsequently in the Royal Marines.

Eleonore Prochaska – a German woman joined the Prussian army in the early 1800s as a drummer and later joined the infantry.

Margaret Bulkley better known as Dr. James Barry a renowned Irish military surgeon during the early to mid 1800s whose biological sex was only discovered after a post-mortem examination.

Many gained military awards and recognition for their acts of bravery and the most decorated female combatant in the history of warfare is the Serbian heroine Milunka Savic who fought in the Balkan wars and World War 1. She was twice awarded the French Légion d’Honneur as well as the Russian Cross of St. George, the British medal of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael, and the Serbian Miloš Obilić medal. She was the sole female recipient of the French Croix de Guerre with the gold palm attribute for service in World War 1.

All in all, an extremely fascinating and informative talk.