

B&W group photo: *Colonel Archibald Christie (left) with Agatha and colleagues. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

Newspaper article: *Daily Herald (London) 15 December 1926, p. 1., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

The Disappearance of Agatha Christie

How much do you know about this local, infamous thriller?

Long-term readers might remember a previous article on Britain's prolific storyteller wherein we touched on her mysterious disappearance in 1926. As we head towards Halloween and find entertainment in spooky stories, we thought we'd delve in a little deeper.

It all starts with Archie. Christie's husband had fallen in love with another woman, one Nancy Neele, and asked for a divorce in the August of 1926. There's some debate about how his relationship with Nancy developed, whether it was a friendship until the divorce was finalised or a more traitorous affair, but the intricacies remain unknown. Agatha herself was still questioning when writing her autobiography, pondering that "I must in some way have been inadequate to fill Archie's life".

It's reported that Agatha had a hard time coming to terms with the request. Shocked and stubborn, still mourning the death of her mother in April, she refused to agree for months; and so, we skip ahead to 3rd December 1926.

Accounts of the night begin with Agatha waiting at her Sunningdale home for Archie to return. The two had planned a weekend away in Yorkshire, but Archie had told her he'd be spending the time in Goldaming with friends. Still, she waited until darkness fell, and when she could stand the truth no longer, she fled. What happened next is unclear.

Her car was found abandoned at Newlands Corner – some articles say it was hanging over the edge of a cliff – with her licence (expired) and some clothes, leading some to believe she had drowned in the Silent Pool. With no signs of such a tragedy, the search continued. Thousands of police officers and volunteers searched the area and for ten days, found nothing. Fellow author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle supposedly went so far as to give one of her gloves to a medium.

180 miles away in Harrogate, Yorkshire, a Mrs Neele from South Africa was attending dances and enjoying the local, lavish lifestyle on offer. Despite her strange choice of an alias, it was here at the Swan Hydropathic Hotel that Agatha was discovered by a fellow resident and her husband was dispatched to 'collect' her. The Daily Herald announced the good news with a thrilling twist – "She does not know why she is here". The story given was that she had no memory of the event, barely recognised Archie when he arrived, and was deemed to have been in a fugue state by doctors.

It's all a little Gone Girl, isn't it? Many at the time believed it was a publicity stunt or a failed attempt at framing her husband for murder. Whatever the truth is, the Christies successfully divorced in 1928 and she remarried two years later. Agatha wrote a comprehensive autobiography and yet never discussed those mysterious days.

Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie, Lady Mallowan, DBE passed away on 12th January 1976. Sixty six detective novels and fourteen short story collections boast her name, but her greatest mystery of all went with her to the grave.

by Nicola Jacobs