

FILM

Tom Barber Duffy as  
T.E. Lawrence

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# LAWRENCE: AFTER ARABIA

A new film, shot on location in Dorset,  
explores the final years of the enigmatic  
and mysterious T.E. Lawrence

WORDS: Jeremy Miles

Eighty years after his death following a motorcycle crash near his Dorset home Clouds Hill, the truth of what really happened to Lawrence of Arabia remains a mystery.

Conspiracy theories abound. Did T.E. Lawrence, the author, soldier and reluctant hero of the Arab rebellion die after his powerful Brough Superior bike swerved to avoid two boys on bicycles or was he assassinated by the British secret service?

Why did witnesses tell police that they had seen a large black car at the scene of the accident but then change their statements? What was Lawrence up to?

A new film, *Lawrence: After Arabia*, examines his final years, his powerful friends and dangerous enemies. Shot in Dorset with a largely local cast and crew supporting a line-up that includes Brian Cox, Michael Maloney and Hugh Fraser, the film focuses on events that led up to the fatal crash near Bovington Camp on 13 May 1935. Bournemouth actor Tom Barber Duffy takes the title role.

Maybe it will help unearth the truth. The movie has been a labour of love for writer and director Mark JT Griffin who has

been fascinated by Lawrence of Arabia since childhood.

"I used to holiday every year with grandparents in Wareham. One day when I was about 10-years-old my gran went into the butchers and sent me to look around the church over the road."

It was there in the 1,000-year-old St Martin's on the Walls that he saw the war-artist Eric Kennington's famous Lawrence effigy and fell into conversation with a man who was cleaning it.

"I was fascinated by this figure of Lawrence seemingly dressed as an Arab prince and as I looked at it the guy told me bit about him and said that he'd died in a motorcycle crash. I asked if it was an accident and he said: 'Well not all accidents are accidental'. That planted a little seed in my mind and, over the years, I got to know more and more about Lawrence."

Before long the young Griffin was visiting the crash site, Wareham Museum and Lawrence's cottage at Clouds Hill, devouring everything that he could about this enigmatic character and his strange life.

Mark JT Griffin would grow up to become a professional writer, penning six novels and a biography of the Greek musician and composer Vangelis. His



Tom Barber Duffy as Lawrence outside the house at Clouds Hill

interest in Lawrence continued to percolate in the background and eventually he wrote a radio play on the subject.

He soon realised that the T.E. Lawrence of the public's imagination is largely based on David Lean's Oscar-laden 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Even though it's now nearly 60 years since that epic film hit the screens, if you mention Lawrence to the average man or woman in the street they will invariably visualise its star, a strapping blond-haired, blue-eyed, 6ft 2-inch Peter O'Toole.

In reality Lawrence, the

**RIGHT:** Lawrence races the Gypsy Moth at Compton Abbas airfield

**BELOW:** At the funeral (from left): Jo Simons as Clemmie Churchill and Derek Herbert as Winston Churchill, Debbie Tarrier as Lady Astor, Hugh Fraser as Lord Allenby, and Cella Muir as Florence Hardy







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illegitimate son of an Anglo-Irish landowner and a guilt-ridden governess, was just 5ft 4inches in his stockinged feet and an oddly intense looking individual.

Not only that but Lean's film, magnificent as it was, glossed over the final years of Lawrence's life. The same was true of the 1992 Ralph Fiennes movie *A Dangerous Man*. "I felt they'd just

**ABOVE:** Filming at St Martin's-on-the-walls, Wareham with i-r Rufus William, Simon Lawrence, Jack Lawrence, Mark Griffin, Kirsten Sare, Mervyn Stutter and the effigy of Lawrence

scraped the surface. There was a lot going on in those last couple of years that hadn't been dealt with at all," says Mark.

His radio play gradually morphed into a full-blown screenplay which he sent to 60 different production companies. "There was plenty of positive feedback but no one was willing to take the project on, so I

decided to do it myself."

Shot over six weeks at locations like St Martins, Bovington and Clouds Hill, *Lawrence: After Arabia* is now set for a number of screenings across Dorset. There were plans for a red-carpet world premier at Lighthouse in Poole in May, though with the current coronavirus situation this has now been put back to September, along with the other Dorset screenings.

As well as many instantly recognisable Dorset locations, the film features a soundtrack by music legends Rick Wakeman and Bruce Woolley (ex-Buggles), Guy Protheroe of the English Chamber Choir and composer-musician Clifford White. Their musical collaboration provides a fitting musical backdrop to the compelling story which re-examines the circumstances of Lawrence's untimely death at the age of just 46.

Speaking of his personal view of the crash, Griffin says: "For years I sat on the fence but the more contact I've had with people in Dorset the more I feel it is probably 60/40 in favour of an



Filming on the road to Wylch Farm and Perenco near Corfe. A mysterious black car was seen in the area at the time of Lawrence's fatal motorbike accident.

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*'Lawrence was an  
agitator and he didn't  
care whether people  
liked him or not'*







Tom Barber Duffy as Lawrence on his Brough Superior motorcycle admires the view of Corfe Castle

assassination. The family of the coroner Ralph Neville-Jones told me he was under a lot of pressure to wrap up the inquest neatly and draw a line under it."

The film explores why the State might have wanted Lawrence out of the way. "He was an agitator and he didn't care whether people liked him or not. He just did what he wanted to do," explained Griffin.

### *'Lawrence was not somebody who could be controlled'*

"He could have been extremely embarrassing to the authorities. He was very charismatic, the Princess Diana of his era, everyone wanted to know what he was doing."

Unfortunately what Lawrence was doing wasn't the kind of thing the powers that be considered suitable for public consumption.

"Lawrence was friendly with Churchill who knew that war was coming and was keen to shake up the Secret Service; this had been run by a guy called Kell since before World War One.

"I think Churchill wanted to throw Lawrence in there as a kind of hand grenade to sort it out."

Through his friend Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter*, Lawrence was also thought to be connected to the Black Shirts and Oswald Mosely, the leader of the British Fascists.

"Williamson was trying to arrange with Mosely for Lawrence to meet with Hitler and that again would have been very embarrassing."

Griffin believes that, far from being a fascist sympathiser, Lawrence may have been trying to infiltrate the Blackshirts to get information about Hitler back to Churchill.

"He didn't care what people thought. He'd just go off and do it. Lawrence was not somebody who could be controlled." ♦

### SCREENINGS OF LAWRENCE: AFTER ARABIA

The World Gala Premier of *Lawrence: After Arabia* was due to happen in May at Lighthouse Poole but this has been moved to 18 September with general nationwide release on 16 October, and preview screenings across Dorset between these dates. You can watch a trailer of the film at [lawrencethemovie.com](http://lawrencethemovie.com).

