

# LEIGHTON & DOROTHY DENE



Dorothy Dene

Leighton's relationship with the model and actress Dorothy Dene was the most significant of his later life, giving rise to speculation in the press that they were to marry.

Dorothy was born Ada Alice Pullan in 1859. Leighton's neighbour and biographer Mrs Barrington tells how in 1879 she noticed 'a young girl with a lovely white face, dressed in deepest black, evidently a model' standing outside one of the small studios that were opposite Leighton's house. She reported this sighting to Leighton who tracked her down and asked her to model for him.

She became his principal model and muse for the rest of his life. Amongst many others pictures, she was the model for *Bianca* hanging on the staircase, *Desdemona* in the Silk Room and for *Clytie*, Leighton's last work which hangs in the studio. Her sisters Hetty and Lena also modelled for Leighton.

Leighton supported Ada's ambitions to become an actress, paying for her to have elocution and drama lessons. She changed her name to Dorothy Dene and made her debut in London in 1885. For a few years she established a reasonably successful career, including performances in New York. Leighton supported her throughout, but in the end her career faltered. The critics recognised her beauty and stage presence but were less certain of her acting talents.



Dorothy with her sisters

Leighton was often seen in her company at events and exhibition openings around London where Dorothy's beauty and fashionable clothes attracted much comment. The press reported how relaxed and comfortable they appeared in each other's company. Originally living in Clapham, Dorothy and her sisters moved to a flat in Avonmore Mansions just a few minutes' walk from Leighton's home. She was reported as spending a great deal of time with Leighton here at the house. Not surprisingly, their relationship gave rise to repeated speculation in the press and amongst Leighton's friends, but Leighton insisted to his sisters that there was nothing to these rumours and they never became engaged.

Dorothy was one of those admitted to Leighton's bedroom to take leave of him as he lay dying. She received a significant sum from Leighton's sisters after his death, but her own health rapidly deteriorated and she died of peritonitis just three years later in 1899.

There is speculation that the playwright George Bernard Shaw who knew both Leighton and Dorothy, drew on their relationship for the characters of Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle for his play *Pygmalion*.