

The story of Phoebe Hessel is one of the most remarkable in the whole of Brighton's turbulent history. Born in Limehouse in 1713, she wanted to join the Army and had to pretend to be a man in order to do so. Her brave deceit was not found out for many years.

Phoebe was at that time married to a soldier called William Goding and enlisted to be with him when he served in the West Indies. When her husband was wounded and invalided out, Phoebe revealed her sex to the commanding officer and was discharged. Goding died and Phoebe married a William Hessel after moving to Brighton.

He died when she was 80 but she was not finished yet. She received three guineas from the parish with which she bought a donkey and hawked fish and other goods. She became a character in Brighton and sold gingerbread and apples in Old Steine in 1800 when 87, and in 1808 received a pension from the Prince Regent of half a guinea a week (not a bad sum in those days).

In October 1792, Hessel, whilst taking refreshments in the Red Lion public house in Old Shoreham overheard two men - James Rook and Edward Howard - discussing a recent robbery of a mail coach. Convinced that they were the perpetrators, Hessel took her information to the constable. Upon conviction - although little of worth was stolen - the two men were hung at the site of their crime, and their bodies were "encased in an iron skeleton and gibbeted" where they remained for some time as a warning to others.*

Blind and aged, she attended King George's Coronation celebrations in 1821 but died the same year on 12 December. She lived to the remarkable age of 108.

* Source and quotation - History of Brighton' John Ackerson Erridge

In memory of PHEOBE HESSEL who was born at Stepney in the year 1713. She served for many years as a private soldier in the 5th regiment of foot in different parts of Europe and in the year 1745 fought under the command of the Duke of Cumberland and at the battle of Fontenoy when she received a bayonet wound in her arm.

Her long life which commenced in the time of Queen Anne extended to the reign of George IV, by whose munificence she received comfort and support in her latter years. She died at Brighton where she had long resided on December 12th 1821 aged 108 years