

WHO KILLED ALDERMAN SIR ALFRED NEWTON?

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President and fellow historians, in this paper I shall give a brief account of the life of Sir Alfred Newton before describing the circumstances of his death and the findings of the subsequent Coroner's Inquest.

Alfred James Newton was born in Hull on 19th October 1849. He was the son of George Beeforth Newton, gentleman, of Kottingham, near Hull, East Yorkshire. Alfred's grandfather was engaged in the Arctic seal and whale trade and his father was connected with the shipping industry.

In 1868, aged 19, Alfred started as a yeast merchant at Burton-on-Trent and rapidly built up a considerable export trade, mainly to France and Belgium. Ultimately this business was merged with that of Messrs H. Love and Co., of Southwark and in 1880 Alfred Newton went into partnership with his brother and became a ship owner. Initially based in Hull, the business extended to London and offices were taken at 8 Leadenhall Street. Later Alfred Newton was chairman of both Harrods Stores Ltd and D. H. Evans & Co., Ltd.

On 24th June 1874 at St Mark's Church, Kennington, Alfred married Elizabeth, eldest daughter of Joseph Watson of Mill House, Mitcham Common. They had a daughter, Muriel, and a son, Harry. In London they lived for many years at 17 Cumberland Terrace, Regent's Park, London NW1 and their country residence was Kottingham House, Burton-on-Trent. Elizabeth, Lady Newton, lived until 1945.

From its outset, Alfred Newton's civic career was controversial. In 1888 he was elected as one of the Sheriffs of the City of London and Middlesex, despite the fact that some liverymen expressed their opposition to his candidature on the grounds that he was not versed in public matters and had no knowledge of municipal affairs. Commenting on this a decade later, Alfred Newton declared that in his opinion, "there was no absolute necessity for a Sheriff of London and Middlesex to be mixed up in the mysteries of vestrydom".

When referring to the criticism of Alfred Newton's candidature for the office of Sheriff, a City Press journalist subsequently commented on his shrieval year as follows:

"In justice, however, not only to him, but to the Lord Mayor (Sir James Whitehead) whose Lieutenant he was, it may be mentioned that the year was one of the most brilliant on record in the annals of the Corporation.

Events of interest and national importance followed one another in rapid succession and at the close it was the unanimous consensus of opinion that the year, to quote the words of the City Press, had been useful to an extent probably without parallel in the history of the City of London."

Newton's association with Burton-on-Trent and his abiding popularity in that town are indicated by the fact that his shrieval chain of office and badge were presented to him, as a mark of esteem, by those who had known him there in his younger days. He was the last Sheriff of London and Middlesex, for in 1889 the County of London was created and the County of Middlesex separated from it, following which each had its own High Sheriff.

On 12th March 1890 Alfred Newton was successful in a contested aldermanic election in the Ward of Bassishaw. He served as Lord Mayor in 1899-1900 and was highly successful in raising money for the relief of suffering caused by the Indian Famine and the South African War. His National Appeal raised the remarkable and, at that time unsurpassed, sum of £1.6 million.

During his mayoralty Sir Alfred Newton founded the City of London Imperial Volunteers for active service in the Boer War and for the equipment of this force he raised a further £120,000. The popularity and success of this initiative was emphasised in the Vote of Thanks to the Lord Mayor contained in the minutes of Common Hall on 29th September 1900.

Following the formation of the City of London Imperial Volunteers, the Lord Mayor was created a baronet on 18th May 1900.

During his mayoralty Sir Alfred received foreign honours and decorations from Belgium, Persia, Serbia and Sweden. He was also appointed an Honorary Freeman of the Royal Borough of Scarborough and the City of Londonderry.

After his mayoralty Sir Alfred Newton continued to have an active role in the City of London Corporation. In 1906 he was appointed Governor of the Honourable the Irish Society, an office that he held for fifteen years and from 1906 to 1911 he was chairman of the City of London Police Committee. In 1920 he became the Senior Alderman and transferred to the Ward of Bridge Without.

On the 20th June 1921, Sir Alfred, aged 75, collapsed and died in his car outside Harrods. According to a witness, Sir Alfred had been quite cheerful while driving to the store with Lady Newton, but he had complained about the nasty taste of his indigestion medicine. He said he had taken a dose out of a new bottle, which had not previously been opened. When the car stopped he tried to rise from his seat but could not move. His doctor, who arrived promptly in response to a telephone message, found him to be dead.

An inquest at Chelsea on 22nd June 1921 was twice adjourned to permit detailed investigation of the cause of death. The deceased's medicine for indigestion had been dispensed at Harrods Pharmacy Department. One dose had been taken and Sir Alfred had complained that it tasted unusually bitter. On analysis, the bottle was found to contain a considerable quantity of strychnine and the drug was subsequently found in Sir Alfred's body. According to Professor John Addyman, the toxicologist at St George's Hospital who had analysed the contents of the bottle of medicine and also the contents of the stomach and other organs of the deceased, so much strychnine was found that there was no doubt as to the cause of death, as it would have been a lethal dose for a man in delicate health. Apparently, the ingredients used in the preparation of the medicine (sodium bicarbonate, bismuth and water) had no trace of strychnine in any of them. Harrods dispensary was thoroughly up-to-date in its procedures and all poisons were kept on separate shelves. He did not think that strychnine had been put in the medicine by mistake.

Dr Robert Donaldson, the pathologist who did the post-mortem examination, reported that Sir Alfred's heart showed advanced degeneration and death might have ensued at any time. Were it not for the evidence that there was strychnine in the medicine, he would have been prepared to certify that death was due to natural causes.

Ivy Beatrice Wright, a parlour maid at the Newton's residence, said that the bottle of medicine was full at breakfast time on the day of Sir Alfred's death, but at 11 o'clock, a portion of the medicine had gone. The witness usually washed the medicine glass, but on this occasion she had noticed that someone else had done this.

The dispenser and the chemist in charge of the dispensary both stated that on the two days previous to the making up of the medicine no strychnine had been used and they were unable to account for its presence in the indigestion medicine. Evidence was given tracing the course of the bottle of medicine from hand to hand until it was delivered at Sir Alfred's house.

In the absence of Lady Newton, in respect of whom a medical certificate was presented stating that it would be dangerous for her to be present at the Coroner's Court owing to illness, the deceased's heir, Sir Harry Newton OBE, Member of Parliament for Harwich, gave evidence. He said that the event had upset Lady Newton terribly and when the Coroner asked him if the relationships in the family were of a happy nature, Sir Harry replied, "I do not think there were ever man and woman who so loved each other."

Sir Harry also stated that, as far as he knew, his father had never had an enemy and had never received threatening letters. Fellow historians, one has to question whether that last statement was made in ignorance, or whether Harry

Newton withheld the truth, perhaps to protect his father's good name. Justly or unjustly, undoubtedly there were people who believed they had cause to hate Sir Alfred.

At the time of Alderman Newton's election as Lord Mayor in 1899, his son Harry Newton was 24 years old, so it would be surprising if he were unaware that his father had been the object of personal attacks by some sections of the financial Press and by aggrieved shareholders, who criticised the methods allegedly used in the acquisition and management of the Industrial Contract Corporation Ltd. The accusations were so serious and widespread that on Lord Mayor's Day, when introducing Alderman Newton to the Lord Chief Justice and the Judges at the Royal Courts of Justice, the Recorder (Sir Charles Hall), announced that Mr Alderman Newton intended to take steps to clear his character and reputation. In his reply, Lord Russell of Killowen, the Lord Chief Justice, made reference to the serious nature of these allegations, directed against one holding the high position of Lord Mayor and expressed the satisfaction and relief of the Court with the announcement made by the Recorder. The Lord Mayor took immediate steps to clear his good name and following the observations of Mr Justice Wright in the Chancery Division it was felt that he had not forfeited the confidence of his fellow citizens.

Had these facts come to light at the inquest it would at least have raised the possibility that an aggrieved shareholder, or a member of a family who had suffered financial ruin, had harboured an intense grudge for many years and had eventually found an opportunity to exact revenge by having strychnine introduced to the deceased's indigestion medicine, either at Harrods, during delivery, or at the home of the deceased.

Unfortunately, I could not find the articles in the financial Press of 1899, which gave details of the allegations against Sir Alfred and I was also unable to trace the Industrial Contract Corporation Ltd. Perhaps there are members of this Association with greater knowledge than I have of the history of business organisations in the Square Mile who can shed some light on the Industrial Contract Corporation Ltd and its shareholders. That might reveal the names of those who had cause to hate Sir Alfred Newton.

Addressing the jury, the Coroner said that the case was one of the strangest with which he had had to deal for some time. There seemed to have been enough strychnine in the bottle of medicine to cause the death of over 60 people. As to how the strychnine came to be in the bottle, all the evidence called had not helped them to solve that question. The bottle had passed through many hands before it came to rest in the hands of Sir Alfred, but there was no evidence of neglect at any stage. On 21st July 1921 the jury returned a verdict that death was caused by:

“Syncope, due to fatty and fibrous degeneration of the heart, accelerated by strychnine poisoning, but there was no evidence to show how the strychnine came to be in the bottle of medicine, some of which was swallowed.”

Sir Alfred Newton's funeral was held on 24th June 1921 at the Royal Collegiate Chapel of St Katharine, Regent's Park and he was interred at Brompton Cemetery. On the same day, the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Sheriffs walked in procession from Guildhall to attend a memorial service at St Lawrence Jewry. In addition to Sir Alfred's relatives, others present included the Lady Mayoress, many of the Aldermen's ladies, members of the Court of Common Council, officials of the City Corporation and representatives of Harrods, Swan & Edgar, D.H. Evans, Selfridges and Dickens & Jones. A telegram, expressing the sympathy and condolences of the King and Queen, was received by Lady Newton.

To this day, the mystery of who killed Alderman Sir Alfred Newton remains unsolved.