

# Tales of Olde Fransham - Murder Most Foul Part 1

Fransham Village Hall, which was originally Great Fransham School, was built around 1870. It lies adjacent to the church and I suspect that few would consider the building to be of great merit, architecturally or otherwise. It has however, a claim to fame - or notoriety - that may render it unique in the Diocese and perhaps in the whole of the county. I suspect that this school is the only such building in which the pre-eminent pathologist Sir Bernard Spilsbury has carried out an autopsy.

In early November 1929 the body of Mrs Rosaline Fox was exhumed from Great Fransham churchyard. The story of her death and subsequent exhumation was front page news in newspapers published all over the country - The Leeds Mercury carried a typical article in its issue dated Saturday November 9<sup>th</sup> 1929 :

*“Preparations were begun at Great Fransham churchyard at sunset today (Friday) for the exhumation of the body of Mrs Rosaline Fox whose death after a fire in her room at a Margate hotel is a subject of widespread investigation by the police. The coffin is to be removed from the grave by constables, who have been specially detailed for the duty. They will carry it to a room in the old school which adjoins (sic) the churchyard, where Sir Bernard Spilsbury will work.”*

Interestingly, the school is the very building where Rosaline’s youngest son Sidney, who will feature prominently in this story, was educated. The school log shows an entry for 16<sup>th</sup> May 1912: *“ Sidney Fox and Geoffrey Mason have both passed their Labour Certificate and will leave school today”*

But I am telling the story from the wrong end. This exhumation was the culmination of events that had been building for many years. Let us return to the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Rosaline was born in Great Fransham on 23 May 1866 and baptised at the church on 7<sup>th</sup> June of that year. On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1887 she married William George Fox, a Yorkshireman who was employed as a signaller on the Great Eastern Railway. Rosaline had four sons and there are no apparent anomalies with the parentage of the first three. However, I have a copy of the birth certificate of the fourth son, Sidney Harry Fox, and the certificate gives no name for the father. It is strongly rumoured, and even recorded in print, that Sidney's father was another railway employee. Whatever the truth of his parentage it became Sidney's habit to tell anyone who he thought might listen that he was the "son of a gentleman" but it is doubtful that even he believed this fiction. Although rarely with more than a few shillings to his name he went about styling himself "The Honourable S H Fox" and he had mail delivered to the RAC club in Pall Mall (of which he was certainly not a member). At one stage he claimed that his father was the owner of Fox's Flour Mills at East Dereham - a myth rather easily exploded by the fact that no such mills existed!

These fictions, which were so easily disproved, were to count against him when his troubles reached their peak but that time was still a few years off.

Sidney seems to have been a "wrong 'un" from an early age. At the age of 11 or 12 he was birched after it was discovered that he had stolen money from a charity for which he was collecting. Later he and his mother moved to London and he obtained the position of house-boy to the late Sir John and Lady Constance Leslie. He was apparently a great success as a page boy and quite a family pet. He was, however, less popular with his fellow servants whom he contrived to place on the receiving end whenever things went wrong. At the age of 16 he stole some silver from the house and made overtures to an elderly housemaid who turned her life savings over to him. His employers had to send him away but they did not prosecute.

He later worked in a bank where he developed a talent for forgery - a skill that was to serve him well for most of his life. When his misdemeanours were discovered he was given the choice of prosecution or joining the army. He chose the latter and served some time as a RFC cadet.

It was inevitable that his devious way of life would lead to prison and such was the case. He went to Brighton and made himself known to an elderly lady who knew his previous wealthy employers. He passed himself off as the grandson of Lady Constance Leslie and through the good offices of the elderly lady he cashed a stolen cheque. Fox was traced via his mother, who readily gave the information that her son "Lieutenant Fox" was a member of the Royal Automobile Club. A watch was set for him there and he was apprehended and eventually sentenced to three months hard labour for a number of offences concerning stolen and forged cheques.

Other prison sentences followed including eight months hard labour in 1919 for forgery and six months for victimising London stores by using the names of regular customers. After each of his sessions in prison Fox invariably found his mother ready to receive him. Between them they had her pension of ten shillings a week (for a son killed in the war) plus her earnings from work as a cook and charwoman plus Sidney's pension of some eight shillings a week from his army service. On this amount they lived a lifestyle that could not possibly be sustained. It would eventually lead to disaster for both of them - but for the details of their downfall you will have to wait for the next instalment!

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