

Tales of Olde Fransham - Murder Most Foul

Part 5

We now reach the conclusion of the tale of the death of Rosaline Fox.

Concerning the fire in Rosaline's hotel room, there seemed little evidence that it could have occurred accidentally. The conflagration and ensuing smoke was centred on an armchair in front of a gas fire but all the evidence pointed to the source of the fire as being beneath the armchair. The carpet on which the chair stood was untouched between the gas fire and the chair itself. Only the area of the carpet beneath the position which the chair had once occupied had been burned. The prosecution made the case that Sidney had started the fire himself, beneath the horse-hair filled chair, and left his strangled, or perhaps half-strangled, mother in the room. The prosecution had no doubt that Sidney had deliberately killed his mother in order to collect the insurances on her life.

Mr J D Cassels, KC for the defence was at pains to point out that the testimony that might convict his client as a forger, a liar and a cheat was in no way relevant to the accusation that he was a murderer. The evidence of strangulation prior to the fire was heavily challenged and, on the matter of the suffocating fire in Rosaline's room, Mr Cassels argued strongly that there was a total lack of evidence sufficient to conclude that the fire had been deliberately set.

The summing-up by the presiding judge, Mr Justice Rowlatt was acknowledged as a masterpiece of fairness and balance. On Friday 21st March 1930, the ninth day of the trial, the jury retired at 1.11pm. At 2.43pm they came back into court and delivered their verdict, finding the accused guilty.

Mr Justice Rowlatt pronounced sentence of death and Sidney Harry Fox was hanged at Maidstone gaol on Tuesday 8th April; it was the last execution ever carried out at this institution. Sidney was unique in that he never attempted an appeal of his sentence of death.

Subsequent to her exhumation, Rosaline Fox was re-interred at Great Fransham but none of her four sons lie near her: the eldest, William, died in Hampshire; Reginald died as the result of an accident at Woolwich Arsenal in 1915; Cecil was killed in Flanders towards the end of WW1 and Sidney was, of course, interred at his place of execution.

In this short series of articles I have only been able to include the briefest of details about the lives, and subsequent deaths, of the two Fransham characters central to this tragic story. For those wishing to learn more I would recommend the "Trial of Sidney Fox" edited by F.Tennyson Jesse in the Notable British Trials series, from which I have drawn heavily.

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