

## No Flies On Me! – The Famous Liverpool Flypaper Murder

### Piece for Fortean Times Forum – Rob Gandy

Having arrived by train, when you step out at the front of Liverpool's Lime Street station you are greeted by the sight of the majestic Parthenon-like St George's Hall. Opened in 1854 it was built to accommodate the local triennial music festivals, meetings, dinners and concerts. At either end were the city's main law courts; one for criminal cases (at the south end) and one for civil cases. They are no longer used for these purposes ever since the opening of the Queen Elizabeth II Law Courts in 1984, although they host film and television courtroom dramas, often doubling for the Old Bailey.

Arguably the most famous case tried in St George's Hall was that of Florence Maybrick in 1889, who was accused of murdering her husband, James Maybrick, using flypaper! Florence Chandler was a 17-year old American when she met cotton-broker Maybrick, 23 years her senior, in 1880; they married the following year<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently Maybrick had a mistress in London, where he frequently travelled on business, and the deterioration of their relationship accelerated when Florence met another man in Liverpool; upon discovering her relationship Maybrick assaulted her and announced his intention to seek divorce.

Now when I first became aware of the 'Flypaper Murder' I had all sorts of Hunt Emersonesque images flash into my mind! But Florence was accused of purchasing twelve dozen flypapers (How gross!), soaking them to obtain arsenic from them, and then poisoning Maybrick. His health had deteriorated rapidly before his death and the post-mortem detected a presence of arsenic in his system. Florence denied murder claiming that she had extracted the arsenic for her complexion. Now before modern-day readers think that this is a totally bonkers defence it should be pointed out that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century flypaper was not sticky like it is today. The paper could be readily bought from a chemist, and was soaked in water, with a little sugar added to attract the flies<sup>2</sup>. Also, toxins were regularly used and prescribed, in small doses, for medicinal and cosmetic purpose, partly because they were thought to be invigorating<sup>1</sup>. Opiates were not illegal and were frequently used. In 1883 a senior doctor said 'if a law were passed, compelling physicians to confine themselves to two remedies only in their entire practice, arsenic would be my choice for one, opium for the other'<sup>1</sup>.

Now James Maybrick's health was not good. He had always been a hypochondriac, and increasingly self-medicated with an array of patent medicines; many of his preferred tonics contained strychnine, belladonna, phosphoric acid or arsenic<sup>1</sup>, and he purchased arsenic on a regular basis<sup>3</sup>. Doctors prescribed further quantities of poison, such as a supposed digestive aid containing prussic acid (hydrogen cyanide). Therefore it was perhaps unsurprising that these substances took their toll on him and, when he died in the Spring of 1889, arsenic was found in his system. The cause of death was unclear, but when a nursemaid surreptitiously opened one of Florence's letters to her lover, the family and some domestic staff suspected a motive for murder<sup>1</sup>.

Florence stood trial in July 1889 under Judge James Fitzjames Stephen, who was arrogant and starting to show signs of mental illness, which would soon end his career. Despite a strong defence that the confusing and contradictory medical evidence made it clear that the low levels of arsenic discovered in Maybrick's body could not be confidently demonstrated to have caused his death, Stephen gave a summing-up bitterly hostile to Florence. This focused upon her infidelity rather than

whether or not she had killed her husband! The jury of local businessmen was not persuaded by the defence's rational arguments, and found Florence guilty. She was sentenced to hang.

There was a public outcry at the perceived miscarriage of justice and the Home Office was petitioned. This resulted in the death sentence being commuted to life imprisonment; but Florence was released in January 1904, having spent fourteen years in custody. Always protesting her innocence, she returned to America where she wrote her life story. She died in 1941 a destitute recluse<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Jack The Ripper***

Now the Ripperologists amongst you will have taken notice of the names of some of the above players. Justice Stephen was the father of James Kenneth Stephen, poet and tutor to Prince Albert Victor, eldest son of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales. He is one of the (many) Jack the Ripper suspects. Allegedly he committed the murders 'out of a twisted desire for revenge' because of the dissolution of his homosexual relationship with Prince Eddy<sup>4</sup>, and his psychological profile apparently matched that of Jack The Ripper<sup>5</sup>.

But of course, the murder victim James Maybrick himself is one of the biggest suspects. It was his diary, which surfaced in 1992, which has led to claims that he was Jack the Ripper **[FT76:61; FT77:11]**. The diary's author was anonymous, but there were enough hints and references consistent with Maybrick's established life and habits to suggest that he was Jack. Whether the diaries were forgeries is still debated<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly the Whitechapel murders took place from late August to early November 1888, and it was in early 1889 that Maybrick took seriously ill; there were no more Jack The Ripper murders after his death.

Irrespective of the merits of the cases against Stephen and Maybrick, it is notable that the Flypaper Murder trial involved the father of one Jack The Ripper suspect as the judge and another Jack The Ripper suspect as the victim. Maybe the only conclusion is that Jack probably came to a sticky end!

### **References**

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/25/did-she-kill-him-kate-colquhoun-review>
- 2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34464509>
- 3 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/liverpool/localhistory/journey/lime\\_street/georges\\_hall/courts.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/liverpool/localhistory/journey/lime_street/georges_hall/courts.shtml)
- 4 Harrison, Michael (1972). *Clarence: The life of H.R.H. the Duke of Clarence and Avondale (1864–1892)*. London and New York: W. H. Allen. ISBN 0-491-00722-1
- 5 Abrahamsen, David. *Murder and Madness, The Secret Life of Jack the Ripper*.
- 6 <https://www.jack-the-ripper.org/james-maybrick.htm>

Picture for possible usage.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34464509>

