

Deaths in Parliament: a legend re-examined

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The terrorist attack staged by Khalid Masood on 22 March 2017, in which he attempted to enter Parliament, raised some questions. Most interesting, to my mind, was the matter of how he managed to arrive with such precision at the moment when the Carriage Gate to the South of the parliamentary estate was not only wide open but with just its regular unarmed, and low-key, uniformed police presence as a guard. In fact, were it not for the fortuitous presence at the scene of the armed bodyguard of Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, Masood would undoubtedly have got further with his attack than he did. It was widely reported Masood had been using the popular encrypted instant messaging application WhatsApp on his mobile in the immediate lead up to the attack.¹ Since it seems improbable that he was chatting casually about nothing in particular as he drove to his certain death, the presence of irretrievable messages suggests some kind of coordination. From that arises almost automatically the hypothesis that Masood had a source in the parliamentary estate, steering him towards the right place and time to penetrate Parliament's defences.

All these puzzles are as yet unanswerable. However, they did prompt me to take a proper look at a historical mystery invoked by Masood's onslaught. Since he plainly intended to invade the House of Commons, presumably to murder as many people as possible once inside, the question arises of how deaths in Parliament are handled.

There has been a rumour for many years that anyone who dies in the Houses of Parliament is officially declared to have died elsewhere, namely at St Thomas's Hospital, Lambeth, just across Westminster Bridge. This (so the rumour goes) isn't for any particularly sinister reason. It's because Parliament is a Royal Palace and recording the death elsewhere is more convenient. There are at least two explanations of why this should be the case.

The first is the notion that anyone who dies in a Royal Palace is entitled to a state funeral. To avoid this embarrassing constitutional

¹ <<http://tinyurl.com/kcgyxlp>> or <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/khalid-masood-whatsapp-westminster-london-attack-parliament-message-isis-terror-network-contacts-a7649206.html>>

mishap, corpses are bundled out of the borough of Westminster, across the Thames, and declared dead in neighbouring Lambeth. In some variants, this is embroidered into a claim that it is actually illegal to die in Parliament. This sounds a bit too good to be true, and in fact it was debunked in 2013 by the Law Commission, which reported: 'We have not been able to trace any such law, and neither have the House of Commons authorities. Under the Coroners Act 1988, the coroner of the Queen's household has jurisdiction over an inquest into a death in a royal palace. However, state funerals are not mandatory.'²

Although the Commission does highlight four historically documented cases of deaths 'in the grounds of the Palace of Westminster', this isn't the end of the matter. It doesn't mention the suspicion that deaths in Parliament could be recorded elsewhere. This is tantalising in itself, since we might infer that the Commission was deliberately shying away from mentioning it, perhaps to avoid making an embarrassing revelation about the illegality of the practice. And it would be illegal, tantamount to the Crown subverting the law for the sake of convenience. It has a sort of '*L'état, c'est moi*' air of grandeur and corruption that appeals to anyone interested in the mystique of the Monarchy.

The idea of 'moving' the scene of death seems to make a certain sort of *prima facie* sense. Would the Coroner of the Queen's Household really want to be called upon to investigate the death of a 'commoner', when (as the job title suggests) that isn't really what he or she is there to do?³ A further consideration is, that for a more complex set of circumstances, the Queen's Coroner might have to convene a Royal Jury – that is, one consisting of members of the Queen's household. Outlandish as this situation might seem, it is precisely what arose in 2008 in the case of the long-delayed inquests into the deaths of the Princess of Wales and Dodi Fayed. It is easy to imagine, therefore, that some quasi-legal fudge might have been contrived to get round the boring procedural necessity of full-ceremony Royal inquests for non-Royals.

Beguiling as the idea is, there appears to be no obvious way of testing it, since the whole point of the supposed set-up is to surreptitiously circumvent normal legalities and non-Royal deaths in palaces are vanishingly rare in any case.

² <http://www.lawcom.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Legal_Oddities.pdf>

³ Or was there for, the position having been abolished under the Coalition Government of 2010-15.

But, as it happens, there has been a death in the House of Commons during the lifetime of the modern St Thomas's Hospital in Lambeth. The hospital's history stretches back around 1,000 years, but it was originally based further south of the Thames, in the borough of Southwark and only moved to its present site in Lambeth during the 1860s. So from this point onward, the hospital is in the frame for any plan to shunt inconvenient parliamentary deaths across Westminster Bridge.

And on 9 July 1907 an MP called Sir Alfred Billson was taken ill and died in the House of Commons. There was no immediate cover-up of the circumstances. His death was immediately announced in the House of Commons chamber.⁴ But what happened behind the scenes? I ordered his death certificate from the General Registry Office to find out (see below). The result appears to put to bed at last the long-standing rumour about St Thomas's Hospital. Sir Alfred's death – from coronary heart disease – is recorded as having taken place in the House of Commons, in the district of St George Hanover Square, in the sub-district of St Margaret and St John, on 9 July 1907. Barring the emergence of strong evidence to the contrary, we can consider the myths about deaths in Parliament as debunked.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH



GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number 8202193-1

REGISTRATION DISTRICT	ST GEORGE HANOVER SQUARE
1907 DEATH in the Sub-district of St Margaret and St John	in the County of London

Columns:- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
 No. When and where died Name and surname Sex Age Occupation Cause of death Signature, description and residence of informant When registered Signature of registrar

10	9th July 1907 The House of Commons Westminster	Alfred Billson	male	68	a Member of Parliament residing at 10, Whitehall Westminster	Sudden Heart Disease	Edgar L. Billson son 32, Albany Road Haywards Cheshire	Edwards July 1907	E. O. G. Horton Registrar
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CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 12th day of April 2017

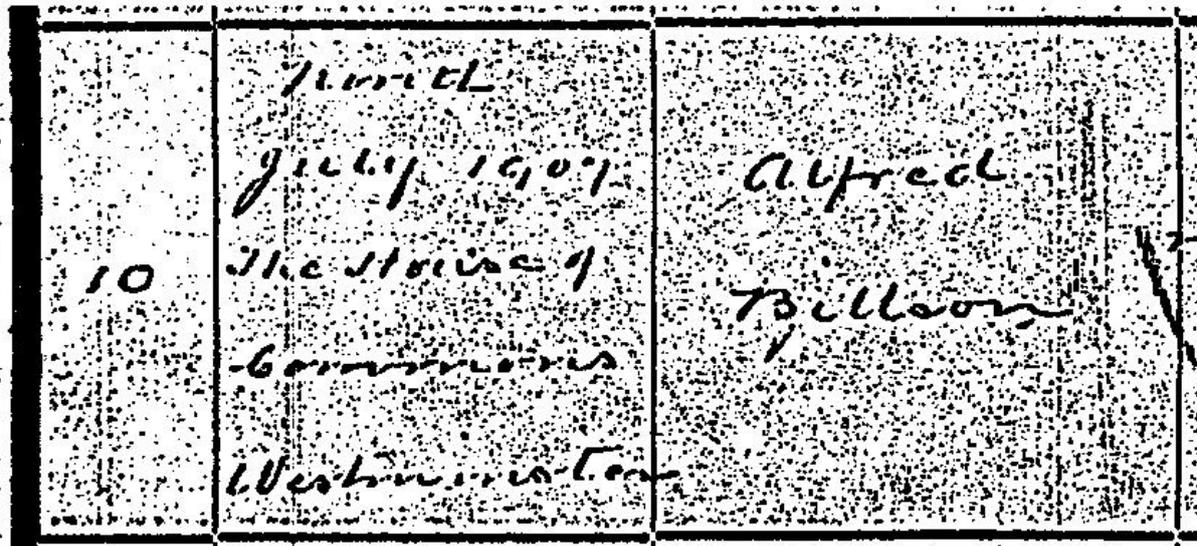
DYE 159398

See note overleaf

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 WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.



That section on the certificate under the heading 'When and where died' is this:⁵



Postscript

Could the the myth that it is illegal to die in a Royal Palace be a garbled version of some real-world fact? Separately from the above research, I approached the General Register Office to inquire about obtaining the 1936 death certificate of King George V, who was killed with an injection of heroin administered by the Royal Physician, Viscount Dawson of Penn. Although it was kept from the public at the time, this fact is not in dispute and Lord Dawson's notes, published in 1986, constitute a 'signed confession'. It transpires that the death of a Monarch is never recorded on a formal death certificate. Is this the origin of the 'illegal to die in a palace' factoid? The General Register Office's reply sets out the reasoning behind this surprising fact and is reproduced here in full.

'The Marriage Act 1949 does not apply to members of the Royal Family and marriages solemnised other than in accordance with statute are not registered and subsequently indexed in the same way.

Marriages of members of the Royal Family are governed by the Royal Marriage Act 1772 which requires all descendants of the Royal Family to obtain the sovereigns consent before marriage. Registration of

⁵ Image Crown Copyright.

Royal Marriages takes place in a Royal Marriage Register and because the registration is not made in accordance with the Marriage Act 1949 there is no facility to index and subsequently issue certificates. Customers can however obtain a certificate for Prince Charles & Camilla Parker-Bowles marriage from Windsor Register Office. This is because as the ceremony took place in a register office it is classified as a civil marriage in accordance with the Marriage Act 1949 and therefore the records are kept in the public domain.

The death of a sovereign has never been registered under the Registration Acts. The distinction made between the sovereign and other members of the Royal Family takes us right back to the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836. That Act provided for registration of births and deaths "of His Majesty's subjects in England" which meant that the sovereign was exempt but other members of the Royal Family were not.'