

Robert Percival Woodhouse Atkins

Isle of Wight County Press – 20 March 1909

NEWPORT SOLICITOR'S SINGULAR DEATH.

We regret to record the death, which took place under singular and specially sad circumstances, early on Sunday morning, of Mr. Robert Percival Woodhouse Atkins, solicitor, of Newport, in the office of Messrs. Buckell and Drew, of Newport and Ventnor. Mr. Atkins, who was only 32 years of age, resided with his grandmother, Mrs. Simpson, at Rosebury, Watergate-road, Newport, and he had been in somewhat indifferent health for some time. Late on Saturday night he walked home from the I.W. County Club, and, as arranged with the servants, let himself in with a latch-key, his relatives being away from home. When the servant went to call him on Sunday morning she found that he was not in his room and that his bed had not been occupied, and on going to the breakfast-room she saw Mr. Atkins lying dead on the floor. Appearances indicated that whilst in the act of turning up the gas on entering the room the deceased gentleman had been seized with a fainting fit and fell in such a way that the pressure on his throat by a high stiff collar had produced asphyxiation during unconsciousness. The late Mr. Atkins was a member of the I.W. County Club and the Newport Golf Club and he was much esteemed by the members of these clubs, by his professional brethren in the Island, and by all with whom he had been brought into contact, and the greatest sympathy is felt with the relatives in their bereavement. The late Mr. Atkins was educated at Malvern, he was articled to a well-known Midland firm, Messrs. Owstong, Dickinson, and Simpson (Leicester), he was admitted a solicitor in July, 1901, and came to Newport as manager for Messrs. Buckell and Drew in February, 1903.

On Monday afternoon the Acting Deputy Coroner (James Eldridge, Esq.) held an inquest at Rosebury, Mr. A.J. Snellgrove, J.P., being chosen foreman of the jury. Mr. A.W. Drew was present with relatives of the deceased, and Inspector Cass and P.S. Hawkins also attended.

Mr. REGINALD COSTER ATKINS, of Chitten Farm, Hambledon, Hants, farmer, identified the body as that of his brother, Robert Percival William [sic] Atkins.

MARGARET HARVEY, parlourmaid at Rosebury, said that on the previous Saturday evening deceased was home to dinner at 7.30. At 8.45 witness took him some coffee, and deceased went out between 9.15 and 9.45 and gave witness orders to make up a good fire in his bed-room and in the breakfast-room. They did not sit up for the deceased; witness went to bed about 10.15. Deceased usually let himself in with a latch-key. Witness did not hear him return, and she heard nothing during the night. At 8.45 on Sunday morning witness went to deceased's bed-room to call him, and found he was not there. She waited till 9.30, and then went to the breakfast-room, where she found him lying dead between the table and the sideboard. She at once sent for the doctor, and the deceased was not moved till the doctor's arrival. Deceased's bed had not been slept in. The gas was turned off when she went to bed, and it was not turned up in the morning. The table-cloth had been drawn off by deceased in falling. About 7 o'clock on Saturday evening deceased complained of feeling queer about the chest. He often complained of feeling tired, and on Saturday morning he said he must have fainted in his bed-room.

By Mr. DREW: Witness left a candle on the side-board, and several matches had been struck.

HENRY COURT, steward of the I.W. County Club, said deceased sometimes spent part of the evening at the Club. On Saturday he saw deceased there at 10.30 p.m., and again at other times.

Deceased left about 12 o'clock; witness was standing in the hall at the time and wished him "Good-night." Deceased replied "Good-night." He appeared in his usual health. Deceased walked away towards Nodehill in the direction of his home.

Mr. FRANCIS ALBERT JOYCE, of Shide House, Deputy Coroner for the Island, said that at about 12 o'clock on Saturday night he walked up with deceased from St. James's-square to the Medina-avenue corner. Deceased seemed quite bright and cheerful. He had been playing bridge with the members of the Club, and he talked about his "hands" of cards and how he had played. Witness saw nothing the matter with deceased, who seemed quite in his usual health. Deceased had often complained of his health of late. Witness said "Good-night" to deceased at the Technical Institute corner, and deceased went on up the hill, whilst he (witness) went along Medina-avenue.

Dr. HUTTON CASTLE said he had attended the deceased since he came to Newport, some six years ago. Deceased's health had not been at all good of late; witness had attended him off and on for the last year. Deceased had influenza a year ago. About 9.30 on Sunday morning he was called, and he attended as quickly as he could. On opening the door of the breakfast-room he saw deceased's body lying on the floor in a peculiar position. Deceased's body was lying on his left side, with his knees bent up, his arms bent, and his head towards the door. The back of his neck was pressing firmly against the leg of the table, forcing his face downwards towards his chest. The face was swollen and greatly discoloured – very livid. The tongue was protruding from the mouth. Witness was struck by the position of deceased's collar, which was a very high and stiff one and was pressing so much into his neck that, whilst the body remained in the position in which he found it, witness could not put his finger between the collar and the neck. On removing the collar witness saw a very distinct indented line right across the neck from one end of the jaw to the other. There was no other mark on deceased. – (The Coroner measured the collar, which he said was about 2 3/4 in. deep.) – Judging from the *rigor mortis* he concluded that deceased had been dead for from six to eight hours at least. The body was quite warm except the hands. The table-cloth was off the table and partly under the body. Witness's idea was that deceased was about to turn up the gas, which was over the table, with a view to lighting his candle, and was seized with a fainting fit and fell on the edge of the table, dragging the cloth off as he went down. Such a fall would have been caused by sudden fainting and loss of consciousness. Whilst in a state of unconsciousness the pressure on the windpipe by the collar caused suffocation. If there had been any one present to have moved him a fatal result might have been averted, but witness could not say for certain. From what he knew of deceased's general health and constitution he was not surprised the deceased should have a fainting fit. He had previously had such a fit in his bed-room in December last.

Mr. QUINTON (a juror) asked if it was usual to find a body warm eight hours after death.

The DOCTOR said that was one of the most important signs in cases of suffocation. The body remained warm for some hours after. As to the cause of this fainting, coming out from a warm room into the cold air and walking up to Rosebury – which was uphill practically all the way – might have had something to do with it.

Dr. THOMPSON, who made a post-mortem examination, said he noticed the indentation caused by the collar and that the body was unduly warm. The right side of the heart was full of blood and the [????] of some fatty degeneration. The left side of the heart was empty, the ventricle being unusually thick. Both the lungs were engorged and full of frothy fluid. The stomach was quite empty, and witness concluded that death was due to asphyxia, these being the classical symptoms of asphyxia. He should think that deceased either fainted or had an attack of syncope, which caused him to fall down,

and that the collar constricted the neck and caused asphyxia. The fatty degeneration of the heart might have produced syncope.

The CORONER said the sudden and unexpected death of their young fellow-townsmen was very sad and much deplored by them all. The circumstances of his death seemed perfectly clear. Unfortunately, he had a fainting fit, and fell in such a position as to asphyxiate himself by the pressure of his collar on his neck. The evidence showed that the death was entirely accidental. They all felt the very greatest sympathy with the relatives and friends, who had experienced such a sudden and distressing bereavement.

The FOREMAN said they agreed with the Coroner as to the death being caused by the pressure of the collar after the deceased had fallen in a faint. If any one had been there to have removed the collar deceased's life might have been saved, but of course they could not say for certain.

The jury returned a verdict of "Accidental death from asphyxiation," in accordance with the medical evidence, and endorsed the Coroner's expression of regret and sympathy.

Mr. A.W. Drew said, on behalf of the relatives, he wished to thank the Coroner and the jury for their expression of sympathy in the bereavement which had so suddenly befallen them.

The funeral took place on Thursday. The first part of the service, which was chorally rendered, was held at the Newport Parish-church, the Vicar (the Rev. H. Edmund Sharpe officiating, assisted by the Rev. C.C. Sharpe. The organist played "O rest in the Lord" before the arrival of the cortege. The personal mourners were Mr. and Mrs. R.C. Atkins (parents), Mr. Reginald C. Atkins (brother), Mr. Edward Jackson (brother-in-law), Mrs. Jackson (sister), and Mrs. R. Atkins (sister-in-law), Mr. A.W. Drew, and Dr. Castle. Among the other mourners were Prof. Milne, D.Sc., F.R.S. (president of the Newport Golf Club), the Rev. Cyril W. Combs, Major C. Mackenzie Edwards, C.C., T.C., Mr. and Mrs. Alex. Sharp, Messrs. R. Roach Pittis, J.P., F.A. Joyce (Deputy Coroner), E. Wilson (representing the I.W. Law Society, of which deceased was a member), J. Eldridge, R.J. Eldridge, J. Stacley. J.P., G.A. Brannon, J. Carr, W.D. Way Buckell, Worsley Waterworth, S.J. Hinds, Granville Sharp, T.C.V. Shortland, Arthur Wood, E.F. King, and J. Howard Burgess (hon. secretary of the Newport Golf Club) and the professional of the Newport Golf Club, and Messrs. A.E. Hayles, W.H. Urry, J.W. Raeburn, and E.F. Barnes (Newport staff of Messrs. Buckell and Drew). The hymns sung were "Just as I am, without one plea," and "Now the labourer's task is o'er." Chopin's "Marche funebre" was played on the organ by Mr. Cushing as the coffin was borne from the church. The interment was at Carisbrooke Cemetery. Beautiful floral tributes were sent, in addition to members of the family, by Mr. W. D. Way Buckell, Mr. and Mrs. Alfred William Drew, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Sharp, the maids at Rosebury, the staff of Messrs. Buckell and Drew at Newport and Ventnor, the members of the Newport Golf Club, and the members of the Isle of Wight County Club. Mr. C. Webb carried out the funeral arrangements.

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