Walter Horsford and the St Neots Poisoning Case

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In June 1898, a Huntingdonshire jury convicted the 26-year-old Spaldwick farmer Walter Horsford of murdering his cousin Annie Holmes with strychnine. The case combined an alleged intimate relationship, a recent marriage, letters hidden beneath a bed, packets of poison, a chemist's register and a false statement at an inquest. It ended with Horsford's execution at Cambridge Gaol. According to a statement authorised by the Home Office, he left a written confession to Holmes's murder that made no allusion to any other crime. Some newspapers had connected him with three earlier deaths; those allegations have never been substantiated.

This account is based principally on detailed contemporary local reporting, above all the Hunts Post's accounts of the committal proceedings and the five-day trial, which correct several errors repeated in modern retellings. It distinguishes evidence given in court from prosecution argument and later speculation.

Annie Holmes before St Neots

Annie Holmes was born Annie Mash in 1859, one of four children of a farming family from Southwick, near Oundle, closely connected with the Horsfords: a contemporary report said that her mother was a sister of Walter Horsford's father, Cornelius. In 1881 she married Robert Holmes, a coal merchant from Catworth. Their son Percy was born in 1882 and their daughter Annie early in 1884, only weeks before Robert died. Still in her twenties, Holmes carried on the coal business for some years while bringing up her children. One report says she kept it until 1893; another says it did not pay and that she became caretaker at Thrapston Wharf, where she lived for some years.

One contemporary report stated that it was 'understood' she had lost 'a very considerable part of her money' in the Liberator frauds. By the mid-1890s she was living at Stonely, near Kimbolton, and in January 1897 she had a third child, a baby son. On 18 October 1897 she moved with her children to a small rented cottage in East Street, St Neots. Her teenage son earned six shillings a week, and she received small sums from relatives and a regular ten shillings a month from another source.

Holmes’s 14-year-old daughter told the court that Horsford had visited her mother several times at Stonely and later at St Neots. The prosecution said that Holmes and Horsford had been intimate and that, in December 1897, Holmes believed she was pregnant. The alleged relationship and pregnancy were parts of the Crown’s case; neither should be presented as independently established fact. Medical evidence later showed that Holmes was not pregnant.

Sources: Hunts Post, 29 January and 11 June 1898; Peterborough Advertiser, 29 January 1898, p. 7; other contemporary newspaper reports; FreeBMD civil registration indexes. Details affecting the privacy of descendants have deliberately been omitted.

Horsford of Spaldwick

Walter Horsford was born in 1871 and came from a substantial farming family at Stow Longa. He was apprenticed to a grocer-local reporting named Mr Emmett of Huntingdon, while other papers said Godmanchester-but soon returned to agriculture, working with his father Cornelius and dealing in cattle. Contemporary reports said he had been educated at Spaldwick School and Kimbolton Grammar School, and described him as a keen cricketer, rider and cyclist, 'a sportsman par excellence' among the young men of Stow, Spaldwick and Barham.

From Michaelmas 1897 Horsford occupied a farm of about 200 acres at Spaldwick. The local Hunts Post described it as one of his father’s farms, although syndicated reports called it a farm of his own. Its name and precise location remain to be established from rate books or electoral registers. On 14 October 1897 he married Eliza Elizabeth Mash, known as Bessie, a cousin of both Horsford and Holmes. The prosecution argued that he feared his relationship with Holmes would become known to his wife. The defence replied that there was no evidence that his wife knew of it.

The purchase at Thrapston

On Tuesday 28 December 1897, Horsford visited Joseph Hinde Paine’s chemist shop at Thrapston. Paine did not know him and therefore required a known witness before selling scheduled poisons. Horsford fetched Walter Pashler, a Catworth farmer who had known him for five or six years. Pashler watched Horsford sign the poison register and countersigned it.

The register recorded the purchase of 90 grains of powdered strychnine, one pound of arsenic, one fluid ounce of prussic acid and 16 ounces of carbolic acid. Horsford said he was overrun with rats and intended to mix the poisons with meal or corn. Paine testified that a farmer’s purchase of this kind did not seem unusual and that Horsford’s behaviour aroused no suspicion. The strychnine was wrapped and clearly labelled as poison.

Sources: Hunts Post, 29 January 1898, p. 8; Hunts Post, 11 June 1898, p. 6. Evidence of Joseph Hinde Paine and Walter Pashler.

Letters and packets

The prosecution reconstructed a sequence of correspondence between Holmes and Horsford during December 1897 and early January 1898. Letters found beneath Holmes's feather beds after her death included one said to be in Horsford's handwriting. A paper bearing the address of Dr Mackenzie of Raunds was also attributed to him, supporting the claim that Holmes had consulted Horsford about her supposed pregnancy.

The court heard that Holmes received a letter from Horsford on 5 January. Two packets were found with the letters beneath her bed. One, a buff packet, contained about 33 grains of strychnine, the quantity stated in the prosecution opening. Instructions attributed to Horsford included 'one dose take as told' and, on another paper, words to the effect that the contents were harmless and should be taken in a little water. The prosecution also relied upon impressions found on a blotting pad in Horsford's house and upon handwriting comparisons. These details were central to a case that otherwise depended on circumstantial evidence.

The death of Annie Holmes

On the evening of Friday 7 January 1898, Holmes ate supper and went to bed at about 9.30. She had complained of neuralgia and took a glass of water upstairs. Her daughter, who shared the bed with her mother and baby brother, soon noticed violent and unusual movements. She called her brother Percy and a neighbour, Mrs Hensman. A doctor attended, returned to prepare medicine, and was told on his way back that Holmes had died.

The symptoms immediately raised concern. The police searched the house that night but found nothing. After the inquest opened, Mrs Hensman and another woman, laying out the body, found letters and packets marked 'Poison' beneath the feather beds. They gave them to Holmes's brother, Benjamin Mash, who handed them to the police. At the first post-mortem, the stomach was removed. The county analyst reported finding two and four-fifths grains of strychnine. Holmes was buried at Stow Longa on 11 January in a coffin whose plate recorded her age as 38.

The inquest and arrest

Horsford attended part of the inquest and gave sworn evidence after the coroner warned him that the testimony already heard might implicate him. His signed deposition was later read at the trial. He said that he had known Holmes all his life, had visited her twice at St Neots, had never written to her or sent her anything, and that there had never been familiarity between them.

The police evidence challenged almost every important part of that statement. Inquiries at Thrapston revealed the poison purchase and the signed register. Letters, packets and handwriting evidence connected Horsford with Holmes. He was arrested initially on a charge of perjury, while the adjourned inquest returned a verdict of wilful murder against him.

At the Treasury’s request the Home Secretary authorised exhumation. On 26 January Dr Thomas Stevenson, the eminent Home Office analyst, attended Stow Longa churchyard with Dr Anderson, senior police officers and constables. Further parts of the body were removed for examination. When Horsford appeared again before the St Neots magistrates the following day, the murder charge had become the centre of the proceedings.

Source: Hunts Post, 29 January 1898, p. 8, “The Alleged Murder at St Neots”; Hunts Post, 11 June 1898, p. 7.

The five day trial

Horsford was tried before Mr Justice Hawkins at Huntingdon Assizes. The trial opened on Wednesday 1 June and ended on Monday 6 June 1898, sitting for five days. Mr Rawlinson QC and Mr St John Raikes prosecuted; Ernest E Wild and W Freeman Barrett appeared for the defence. Horsford pleaded not guilty.

The prosecution case

The Crown did not claim to have an eyewitness to the administration of poison. Its case was a chain of circumstances: the alleged relationship; Holmes's belief that she was pregnant; Horsford's recent marriage; his purchase of a large quantity of strychnine; correspondence and instructions in his handwriting; poison found in Holmes's room; impressions on his blotting pad; and the demonstrably false denials in his inquest deposition.

The prosecution suggested that Horsford sent the poison intending Holmes to die. It also addressed an alternative explanation: that he had sent something to procure an abortion. Medical witnesses said the poisons supplied would not achieve that purpose. The judge directed that deliberately supplying a dangerous poison to procure an unlawful abortion could still amount to murder if the woman died. Medical evidence showed that Holmes was not in fact pregnant; the judge said this made no difference to the charge.

The defence

The defence challenged the certainty of the handwriting and scientific evidence and emphasised the absence of direct proof that Horsford had placed poison in Holmes's hands. Paine accepted that farmers commonly bought poison and that Horsford's conduct in the shop had not appeared suspicious. The defence also cross-examined Holmes's 14-year-old daughter in an attempt to attack her mother's character. The judge condemned this, saying there was no evidence that Holmes was 'a loose woman' and that she had brought up her children respectably on slender means. The defence called no witnesses, although eight were available; this allowed Ernest Wild to address the jury last.

Verdict and sentence

The local account resolves a recurring conflict about the verdict. The jury did retire. It returned at about a quarter to two after an absence of approximately 15 minutes. Each juror had written his decision on a slip of paper; all twelve read 'Guilty.' The foreman, William Sparrow Harrison of St Ives, announced the verdict. There was no recommendation to mercy.

Horsford turned pale and leaned to the side of the dock for support. Asked whether he had anything to say, he replied, 'All I have to say is that I am an innocent man.' Mr Justice Hawkins said he agreed with the verdict and passed the mandatory sentence of death.

> Source: Hunts Post, 11 June 1898, p. 8, "Verdict of Guilty" and "How the Jury Agreed". The newspaper gives a 15-minute retirement, superseding modern accounts of no retirement or 20 minutes.

Reprieve campaign and execution

Horsford's solicitors, Cranfield & Wheeler of St Neots, organised a petition for reprieve on the ground that the evidence was purely circumstantial and that the judge's summing-up was against the weight of that evidence. Copies were circulated particularly around St Neots, Eaton Socon and Spaldwick. On Tuesday 21 June the petition, bearing nearly 3,000 signatures, was forwarded to the Home Secretary, but the sentence stood. A correspondent had written after the verdict that 'Spaldwick will go strongly for the reprieve'. Horsford was held in the condemned cell at Cambridge County Gaol. William Billington carried out the execution at eight o'clock on Tuesday 28 June, assisted by Ward. It was the first execution at the gaol for more than twenty years and took place within the prison, after the era of public hanging.

Contemporary descriptions of the execution are exceptionally detailed but should be used sparingly. They record the prison bell, the chaplain’s prayers, Horsford walking steadily to the scaffold and the formal inquest afterwards. A letter from his wife, received shortly before the execution, was reportedly buried with him.

The reported confession

The strongest contemporary evidence of a confession comes from statements authorised by the Home Office. Lloyd’s Weekly reported that, on the day before his execution, Horsford gave the governor a document written in his own hand and asked that it should not be opened until after his death. The governor sealed the packet in Horsford’s presence and arranged for it to be sent to the Home Office.

On 2 July the Hunts Post printed the official correction under the heading 'What Horsford Did Confess'. It rejected as 'wholly unauthorised and incorrect' the story that the document confessed one or two further murders. On authority, the report stated three points: Horsford 'freely and fully' confessed the crime for which he had been hanged; he admitted the justice of his sentence; and he made 'no sort or kind of allusion to any other crime'. The statement added that the document contained 'a good deal of matter' that did not affect these points and that the authorities considered it would serve no good purpose to publish; it was understood that the Home Office did not intend to publish the document, in full or in part. Its criminal file, HO 144/273/A59699, survives at The National Archives but has not been digitised or examined for this master.

> Sources: Hunts Post, 2 July 1898, p. 5, 'What Horsford Did Confess' (page image checked); Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, 3 July 1898, p. 14; The National Archives, HO 144/273/A59699.

Was Horsford responsible for other deaths

Even before the execution, London newspapers were printing village gossip that Horsford had been involved with a young woman named Fanny James who had died suddenly years earlier. After he was hanged, the claims expanded into a 'startling story' of three earlier deaths. The death of a Fanny James, aged 21, was registered in the Kettering district in the first quarter of

1891, which fits the rumoured date, but it has not been shown that she was the woman named in the stories. Later reports alleged that she received a bulky letter, became violently ill and died after blaming Horsford, while an inquest supposedly attributed her death to a heavy supper. No contemporary report of that inquest or evidence of poisoning has been found.

The same stories described a male relative named James who allegedly became ill after Horsford gave him beer during a day's threshing, and an unnamed Peterborough servant who supposedly received a packet in Horsford's handwriting. Neither person has been identified. No newspaper report of either incident from the time has been found.

These allegations form part of the history of the case because they show how quickly rumour followed the trial. They are not evidence of further murders. No inquest record or death certificate supporting poisoning has been found, and the Home Office stated that Horsford's confession mentioned no other crime. Horsford should therefore not be described as a serial killer.

Annie Holmes as more than a victim

A publishable history should not reduce Holmes to Horsford's cousin, alleged lover and victim. She was widowed in her twenties, carried on her husband's coal business for some years and raised her children on limited means. Contemporary reports say she later lived and worked at Thrapston wharf and lost much of her money in the Liberator Building Society collapse. These details come from newspaper reports rather than surviving business or financial records, but they give her a life beyond the circumstances of her death.

Her children were witnesses to the immediate aftermath and then lost their mother to murder. That human consequence deserves at least as much space as the mechanics of the poison and the spectacle of Horsford’s execution.

What the case says about Spaldwick

The murder occurred in St Neots, Holmes had lived at Stonely, and Horsford came from Stow Longa. Spaldwick’s connection is nevertheless substantial. Horsford occupied a farm of about 200 acres in the village from Michaelmas 1897; he was living and farming there when he bought the poisons and wrote to Holmes. A police witness said he drove to Spaldwick on the afternoon of 10 January, after the first inquest. Contemporary reports repeatedly identified him as the Spaldwick farmer.

The verdict affected the village deeply. A local correspondent wrote that 'all Spaldwick was moved to tears' and that Horsford had 'enjoyed a meed of popularity in the village that would perhaps surprise outsiders'. He was active 'in all forms of athleticism' and 'one of the best known figures in the neighbourhood'. This reaction does not weaken the verdict; it shows how difficult neighbours found it to reconcile the man they knew with the evidence heard at trial.

The story also illuminates a wider rural world: market-day travel to Thrapston, legal access to lethal substances, intertwined farming families, rapid communication by post, and the intense

public attention given to an assize trial. Properly handled, it is not merely a “village murder” but a well-documented account of relationships, evidence, law and newspaper culture in late Victorian Huntingdonshire.

Source register

1. Hunts Post, 29 January 1898, p. 8, “The Alleged Murder at St Neots: Further Magisterial Evidence”. Detailed local committal and exhumation report.
2. Morning Leader, 28 January 1898, p. 8, “Walter Horsford, the Accused”. Contemporary court sketch.
3. Hunts Post, 11 June 1898, pp. 6–8, “The St Neots Poisoning Case: Horsford on His Trial”. Detailed local report of the five-day trial, verdict and aftermath.
4. Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper, 3 July 1898, p. 14, “Execution of Walter Horsford: He Leaves a Confession”. Execution, reported confession and allegations concerning three earlier deaths.
5. The National Archives, HO 144/273/A59699, Home Office criminal file on Walter Horsford; HO 140/184, after-trial calendars of prisoners tried at assizes and quarter sessions in Hampshire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Kent, 1898. Catalogue entries confirmed; original records not yet examined.
6. Civil registration indexes: Annie Mash birth, Oundle, September quarter 1859; Robert Holmes and Annie Mash marriage, Thrapston, December quarter 1881; Robert Holmes death, Thrapston, March quarter 1884; Walter Horsford birth, St Neots, June quarter 1871; Walter Horsford and Eliza Elizabeth Mash marriage, Grimsby, December quarter 1897; Annie Holmes death, St Neots, March quarter 1898; Fanny James death, Kettering, March quarter 1891.
7. Hunts Post, 2 July 1898, p. 5, ‘What Horsford Did Confess’. Home Office-authorised correction confirming the confession to Holmes’s murder and denying any reference to other crimes.
8. Peterborough Advertiser, 29 January 1898, p. 7 (Horsford's early life, 'The Dead Widow's Biography', exhumation and blotting paper); Hunts Post, 25 June 1898, p. 8, 'The Condemned Man' (petition). Other syndicated reports of January 1898 add biographical details that conflict in places.
9. Modern summaries and genealogy pages have been treated as leads only where their underlying records have not been inspected.