

THE MAYBRICK 'DIARY'

BLUE IS THE COLOUR? A QUESTION OF THE INK

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We all know how the ink analysis concerning the so-called Maybrick Diary can bore us to tears with their seemingly contradictory findings and incomplete conclusions. It would seem that scientific analysis, in the Maybrick Diary's case at least, is unable to provide the required answers that may provide a conclusive judgement one way or the other.

Below is a rather interesting series of exchanges I had a number of years ago with the author and researcher Martin Fido in which he made a rather interesting observation.

In September 2001, when the then *Cloak & Dagger Club*(1) organised the *Jack the Ripper Conference* held at Bournemouth, many of the talks were devoted to the Maybrick 'diary' and to the fob watch, then owned by Albert Johnson, and other associated issues surrounding the 'diary'. As always, there were ample opportunities for questions at the end for delegates to ask. After a pretty illuminating panel discussion concerning the 'diary' itself held on Sunday 30th September in the Dickens Room on the third floor of the labyrinthine Suncliff Hotel, I was able to ask a particular question concerning the ink in the 'diary'.

The discussion panel included the authors *Shirley Harrison* and *Melvyn Fairclough*, the owner of the 'diary' *Robert Smith* and the owner of the watch, the late *Albert Johnson*. As I said, I was in a position to ask a question concerning the ink. Obviously, such questions can seem arcane and complicated to anybody who has not followed the story of the 'diary' from a very early stage, yet my question did not restrict itself to the scientific evidence, but was based more on the opinion of a respected historian who has had many years of dealing with historical documents and old, mainly 19th century, handwriting. The historian and academic in question was of course the well respected Ripperologist, *Martin Fido*, author of the well regarded *Crimes, Detection and Death of Jack the Ripper* and the indispensable *Jack the Ripper A-Z* with co-authors, *Keith Skinner* and *Paul Begg*. As part of his original post-graduate research Martin said that this involved research on old Victorian handwritten documents that "*comprised going right through Disraeli's correspondence (to and from), which at that time were in shoeboxes at Hughenden. So I have a reasonable exposure to Victorian handwriting and ink.*"(2)

TOO BLUE

On Saturday 7th February 1998, at the *Cloak & Dagger Club* meeting held in the upstairs function room of what was then the old *City Darts* public house in Commercial Street, *Paul Feldman* (*Jack the Ripper – The Final Chapter*(1997)) was giving a talk defending his assertion of the Maybrick 'diary's' authenticity. At the end of this talk I managed to engage Martin Fido at the bar to catch up with things. Soon our conversation moved onto the 'diary' itself and I postulated that Indian ink may have been used in the writing of the 'diary' as its ingredients might conform to the properties of an old type of ink. Of course, my knowledge of ink construction was zero, and I was only proffering this as a form of reconciliation with the contradictory separate reports on the ink that was present in the 'diary'.

Martin felt that this was wrong and that he found that the ink in the 'diary' when he was first shown it was "*too blue.*" He then said that it was too consistently blue throughout. He also added that he would have expected to see an ink type in a purportedly old document to be black turning brown, or blue with a coppery sheen on it. What Martin maintained he saw when he first encountered the 'diary' was clear blue going right through the text that *was* faded, but, Martin told me, this could be done by adding water to the ink as the late *Melvin Harris* had earlier suggested.

An interesting aside to this were the findings of the *Baxendale* report that was the first commissioned to analyse the ink present in the Maybrick 'diary'. Baxendale's conclusion was that the ink had no iron present in it. Some of the following reports, including ones conducted by Parker Pens and the University of Leeds, said that iron was present in the ink.

One would say, if one wanted to go down the 'modern forgery' route, that to replicate an old ink – Victorian ink – you would be looking at getting an ink that has iron in it that would aid ageing one would imagine. Yet, when I first saw the 'diary' in the flesh on Saturday 3rd April 1999 at the *National Film Theatre*, the writing looked dark, grey and faded.

If Martin's initial analysis was right, that the ink in the 'diary' was blue, but faded, then one has to say that the changing of the ink's appearance over a relatively short period of time is indicative of a document that could not have been written in the late 1880s.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

When I asked my question to the assembled panel at the *Jack the Ripper Conference* in Bournemouth in 2001, it was to inform the audience and panel what Martin Fido had told me about his recollections of the ink. The response was fairly impassioned considering the panel that was sat before me, yet I could only convey what Martin had told me, that, essentially, the ink colour in the 'diary' was too blue for the type of ink colour one would be expecting for a document from that period considering the ink's appearance now. The panel were quite certain that Martin Fido was not of this opinion. Without the reliance on notes I had made for my own amusement after the Paul Feldman talk almost three years before, and other information relevant to this debate, I could not add anything more substantial to this course of questioning.

To be fair to both *Keith Skinner* and the Maybrick 'diary' owner, *Robert Smith*, after the initial excoriation from the panel, they both indulged me in conversation after the panel discussion was over and maintained that the ink in the 'diary' had always been the colour it presently was in September 2001, and probably is now, and they showed examples of old handwriting to illustrate this case. They were both charming and professional. In May 2007 the 'diary's' owner, *Robert Smith* would reiterate this point by saying:

"I saw the diary in 1992, I've probably seen it a hundred times since over those years and – categorically – I can tell you that it hasn't changed colour one little bit...It never was blue and it isn't blue now...Basically, it is a black ink, the overwhelming colour there is grey and black – not jet black."(3)

Yet, the colour of the ink in the 'diary' as Martin Fido saw it on his initial examination was not the colour it is today, or, for that matter in 1999 when it was put on public display in the National Film Theatre. Opinions therefore differed and Martin's initial observation conflicted with others' view of the ink.

LAB REPORTS AND LASTING OPINIONS

One could say that Martin Fido's recollections of his first impressions of the ink when he saw the Maybrick 'diary' for the first time might be from memory. In a series of email exchanges between Martin and myself sent to me in the run up to the Chris Jones organised *Trial of James Maybrick* in May 2007, Martin was able to confirm his original opinion of the ink by going back to a lab report he had in his possession dating from the relevant time. Martin had made a marginal note on this lab report where it discussed the composition of the ink and its appearance which read; *"Perhaps this explains why some of us thought the ink looked too blue."*(4) This made Martin agree that *"evidently I did think it looked wrong."*(5) In a later correspondence Martin would admit that with the passage of time *"I can't now say from memory exactly what I saw!"* However, he would add, when considering his marginal note on the lab report, that; *"My marginal note indicates that the ink was bluer than I expected for a standard blue-black (ink) of that period."*(6)

The inference of all this - as I touched on before - is that; if the ink - was a pale blue, or at least bluer than it is now when Martin first saw it in the early 1990s, than it has changed its colour and appearance in a very short period of time. Of course, inks will change their appearance over time as they fade, and if they contain iron in them, as we discovered many Victorian inks did as analysis of the ink in the 'diary' seems to show, then they would bronze with time. On this issue Martin would conclude that *"If there has been a clear and identifiable change in the colour of the ink since 1992, I agree that this is yet further proof that we are looking at a modern forgery."*(7)

BLUE IS THE COLOUR?

Interestingly, in 1998, as part of a previous series of correspondence, the question concerning the colour of the ink in the 'diary' did arise with Keith Skinner. Whilst replying to a letter and a specific question concerning the ink, Keith received a serendipitous phone call from *Shirley Harrison* (*The Diary of Jack the Ripper* (1993)). During this phone call he asked her what colour the ink in the 'diary' was. He added the details to his reply to me;

"I (Keith) asked Shirley how she would describe the colouring of the ink, to which she immediately responded "blue" (although not very)..."(8)

This was an interesting comment as it seems pretty clear that the colour blue had been quoted by another author/researcher on first seeing the ink in the 'diary'. Nevertheless, when I had the chance to question *Shirley Harrison* about this assertion she made in 1998 at the *Trial of James Maybrick* in

Liverpool in May 2007, she said that the ink, in all its forms, were not strictly an area she wanted to deal with for honest reasons and burdening the ‘court’ with arcane discussions. She would remark in answer to my question:

“You asked just now about the ink, in fact I think I said then that I thought it was blue. It isn’t. I am wrong, it is black. It’s been black all along the line and now that I think about it, I can recall that it is black. That was a mistake on my part. There’s no doubt about it, it’s black.”(9)

In truth, Shirley was now researching more worthy historical areas than the Maybrick ‘diary’.

THE FINAL ANALYSIS

So there you have it. I would be personally inclined to take seriously Martin Fido’s initial impression of the ink’s appearance when he first saw the ‘diary’ in the early 1990s. Martin is well versed in the appreciation and study of old Victorian inks and would have been expected to note the colouration of ink in a document purporting to be old.

As Paul Begg has observed with regard to the ‘diary’ itself; it has become an “*article of faith*,”(10) certainly when there has been no conclusive resolve to its authenticity. If you believe the ‘diary’ to be genuine and thus written by James Maybrick, then you will be less inclined to accept Martin Fido’s opinions on his first impressions of the ink. If, on the other hand, you believe the ‘diary’ is not a modern document; you will undoubtedly embrace Martin Fido’s words with great relish.

In the final analysis, however, I feel arguments about the colouring, bronzing and appearance of the ink in the Maybrick ‘diary’ are ultimately academic. Considering the appalling provenance of the ‘diary’ and the undeniable fact that the handwriting in the ‘diary’ does not match James Maybrick’s handwriting, I think we can confidently say that the Maybrick ‘diary’ is a modern forgery.

The tragedy of the Maybrick ‘diary’ was that its central aim was to solve an old Victorian series of murders. This is resolutely what it has not done. This is not because there has been no effective disproving of the ‘diary’ itself, but, more tragically, there has been no widespread acceptance of the ‘diary’ as a viable and acceptable historical document by scholars and enthusiasts. That is its sad fate. It is a monotheistic artefact in a world of agnostics.

NOTES:

1, To the uninitiated this was the original name of the *Whitechapel Society* from 1995 until February 2005.

2, *Whitechapel Society Journal* - #5 (December 2005). Pg.15

3, This was said in reply to a question about the colour of the ink in the ‘diary’ at the *Trial of James Maybrick* in Liverpool on Saturday 19th May 2007.

4, & 5, Correspondence from Martin Fido. (*March 18th 2007*).

6, E-mail from Martin Fido. (*May 10th 2007*).

7, E-mail from Martin Fido. (*May 11th 2007*).

8, Correspondence from Keith Skinner. (*March 31st 1998*).

9, This was said in reply to a question about the colour of the ink in the ‘diary’ at the *Trial of James Maybrick* in Liverpool on Saturday 19th May 2007.

10, Observation made by Paul Begg during his talk at the *Trial of James Maybrick* in Liverpool on Saturday 19th May 2007.