

William Theodore Darby Littleboy

Death On The Railroad



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In St Peter's Church, Hook Norton, a commemorative plaque can be found on one of the pillars. Nothing unusual in that, you might think, as there are countless similar plaques in churches the length and breadth of the country. This particular one is in memory of Theodore Littleboy who was killed in an accident in June 1928.

The location of his death intrigued me. Valparaiso, Indiana, was where he died on 10 June, four months short of his 27th birthday. Who was he and what was he doing there?

The Littleboys in Hook Norton

William Theodore Darby Littleboy was born on 24 October 1901 at Sibford Ferris, Oxfordshire, three miles north of Hook Norton. As the 1901 Census was taken in April he naturally does not appear on it but his parents do, albeit in differing locations. His expectant mother, Janet, was staying with her parents William and Jeanette Newton at Crowmarsh Battle Farm near Benson in south Oxfordshire. William was a farmer and land agent.

To find Theodore's father we have to travel north west to Brymbo, near Wrexham in north Wales. William was staying with John H Darby, his brother-in-law at a house named Penygarth. His occupation was listed as manager of an iron ore mine.

The name Brymbo is well known to those with an interest in Hook Norton's history as the Brymbo Company operated the ironstone workings. It is no surprise to find the Littleboy family living in The Moors, a substantial house to the east of the village close to both the ironstone works and the railway in the 1911 Census. William, aged 42 and the manager of the ironstone works, was listed as head of the household. As he was away that night his entry has been scored through and his wife Janet elevated to head of the household. At that time Theodore was nine and his sister, Joan, was four. Other residents were the governess Francis Beechey and two servants, Florence Cook and Annie Berry. Another governess, Margaret Giles, was visiting. Two nieces, Edith and Francis Walker, completed the household entry.

William Littleboy was at the Bushey Hall Hotel near Watford that night, as was John H Darby with whom he was staying at the time of the previous census. Perhaps the two cousins and brothers-in-law were on a business trip.

Theodore's trail is picked up nine years later on a list of passengers from Liverpool to St John, New Brunswick, in Canada.

To the New World

Theodore aged 18 left the UK on 9 December 1919 on the "Empress of France". The voyage took ten days. It seems to have been a well travelled route for immigrants to the American states south of the Great Lakes.

Theodore was fortunate that his uncle, Thomas Newton, was already established in the New World. The 1910 US Census lists Thomas, a cattle dealer, his wife Annie and his family of three daughters, Nellie, Muriel (or Mary) and

Margaret, as living near Chicago. The Newtons seem to have been successful as they are recorded as having made a return journey from Liverpool to New York in October 1912 on board the Mauretania. Only six months had elapsed since the tragic sinking of the Titanic. I wonder what thoughts these passengers had as they crossed the Atlantic.

In 1920 Theodore was working as a labourer for his uncle, Thomas Dodd Newton, in a packing company in Cook County in Illinois:

A short time afterwards my nephew, Theodore Littleboy, came to Chicago from England. He worked for me a while at the Yards and then went on a farm I bought near Hebron, Indiana...

Theodore did very well on the farm; he was a good hand with young horses.¹

The Newton family lived close by. Thomas was still dealing in cattle and Chicago was the largest meat-packing centre in the US, due partly to the good railway links.

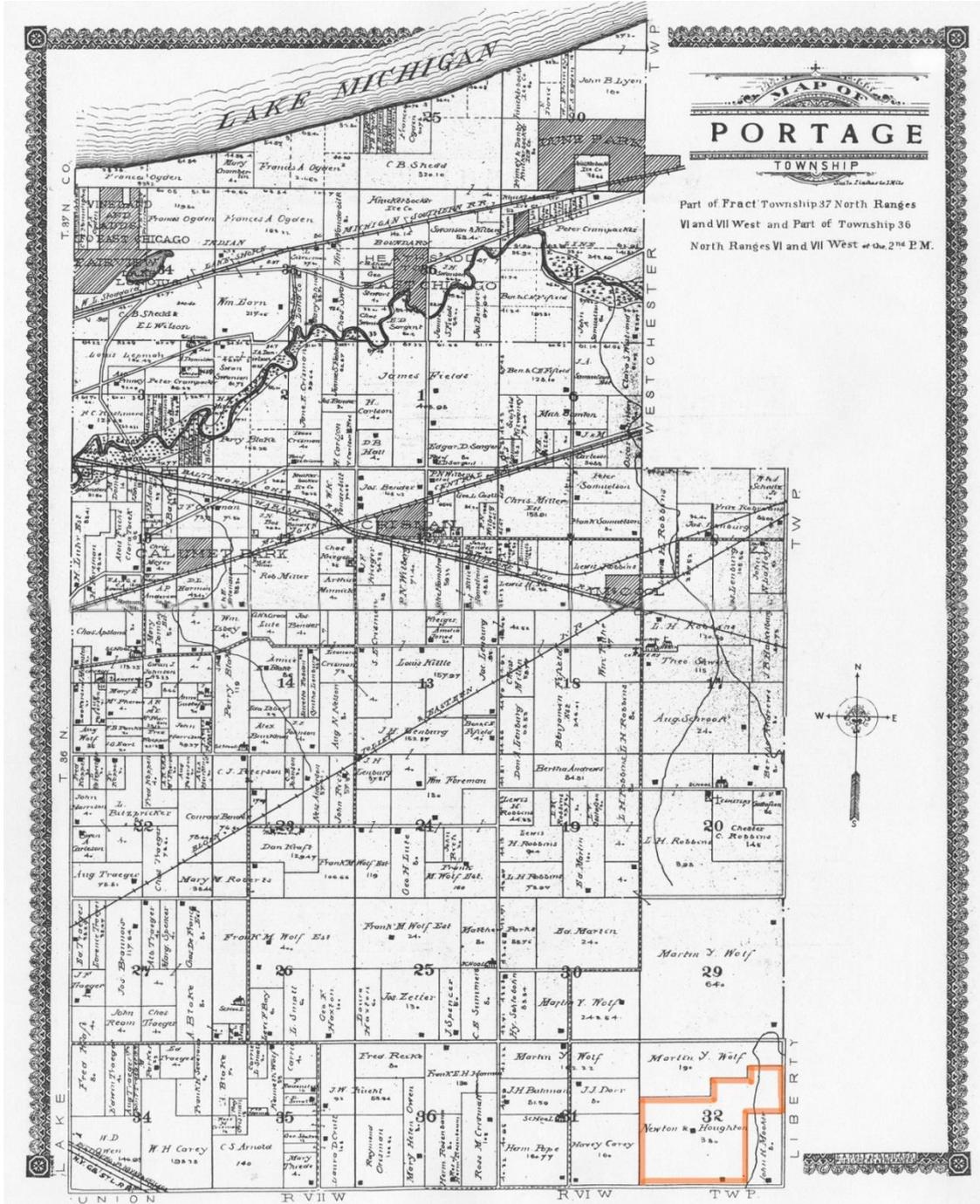
The Newton girls had all been born in Illinois and a search of passenger lists reveals that Mrs Newton and Margaret had made a journey back to the UK at some point. They were recorded as sailing from Liverpool to New York in September 1925.

Meanwhile, Theodore too had made a trip back home as he is listed on the "Carinthia" bound for New York from Liverpool in August 1926. This was probably the last time he saw his family before his tragic accident. A newspaper report published just after his death stated that he had returned to the UK in 1921, travelling back to the US in 1926. It is possible that he became engaged during this visit.

Thomas Newton, in the meantime, had diversified and had taken ownership of a farm in Porter County across the state border in Indiana, still less than 50 miles from Chicago. Porter County includes the city of Portage and the town of Hebron; the county seat is Valparaiso.

¹ From a typescript: Thomas Dodd Newton, *Sixty-three Years at the Union Stock Yards, Chicago, Illinois*

Thomas's holding is marked on the bottom right hand of this 1906 map of Portage Township which also shows the railway line and main arterial roads.



Death on the railroad

YOUNG MAN IS KILLED; OTHERS ESCAPE DEATH

William T. D. Littleboy, 27
Year Old Englishman,
Victim of Train Crash
at Burkhart Crossing.

OHIO WOMAN, OTHERS FIGURE IN ACCIDENTS

Driving his small auto truck in front of a fast east-bound Chesapeake & Ohio passenger train, William T. D. Littleboy, age 27, met untimely death at the Burkhart crossing, north of Porter Cross roads in Porter township, shortly after 6 o'clock Sunday morning. He was instantly killed and his truck hurled down the right-of-way for nearly seventy-five feet.

The *Vidette Messenger*, 11 June 1928

Theodore's death not only made headline news in the local newspaper, but the coverage of the accident, the inquest and the funeral provide many details of his life in Porter County.

The *Vidette Messenger* reported that Theodore, who was the manager of his uncle's farm, was making extensive improvements as he was planning to marry. He had, according to the newspaper, "perseveringly worked, tilled and planted the fields in expectation of crops in which he was interested".

At 6 a.m. on 10 June 1928 he was on his way to pick up his uncle to go to the 7.30 church service at St Andrew's Episcopal Church in Valparaiso. He must have made this journey many times as he and his uncle were regular members of the congregation and their absence was noticed. It was not until the afternoon that details emerged of the tragedy.

Theodore's route would have taken him across the railway line at Burkhart Crossing in Porter Township. A fast passenger train was approaching at speed as he attempted to cross. Though witnesses were reported as saying that Theodore should have had an unobstructed view of the express, it seems the sightlines at the crossing were poor for the engine driver. Perhaps Theodore wasn't concentrating.

Testimony was given at the inquest by the engineer of the train, Thomas Brown. As he neared the whistling post for the crossing, he said, he blew the required blast. The crossing was partially obscured by brush and he could not see the car approaching until it was right in front of the engine. Despite the air brakes being applied the train went on about 300 or 400 feet after hitting the car. Theodore apparently did not see the approaching train, and was killed instantly.

In the intervening years the route of the railway has been realigned and a housing estate lies on part of the old site.

The funeral was held on Tuesday 12 June at St Andrew's Church. There was a large attendance of relatives and friends. The floral tributes were many and plentiful. Amongst those attending were Thomas Newton and his wife Annie together with two of their daughters, Margaret and Nellie. Following the service Theodore's body was interred in Graceland cemetery.

A young life full of hope and promise had been tragically ended on a railroad crossing many thousands of miles away from his Oxfordshire birthplace.

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I subscribe to both Ancestry and Find my Past which have been invaluable in researching this article. I am also grateful to Steve Shook, the webmaster of the Porter County historical web site who provided links to maps on his site which show the course of the railroad tracks and the sites of the farms mentioned in this article.