

= Black Widows of Liverpool =

Catherine Flannagan (1829 ? 3 March 1884) and Margaret Higgins (1843 ? 3 March 1884) were Irish sisters who were convicted of poisoning and murdering one person in Liverpool , Lancashire , England and suspected of more deaths . The women collected a burial society payout , a type of life insurance , on each death , and it was eventually found that they had been committing murders using arsenic to obtain the insurance money . Though Catherine Flannagan evaded police for a time , both sisters were eventually caught and convicted of one of the murders ; they were both hanged on the same day at Kirkdale Prison . Modern investigation of the crime has raised the possibility that Flannagan and Higgins were known or believed by investigators to be only part of a larger conspiracy of murder @-@ for @-@ profit ? a network of " black widows " ? but no convictions were ever obtained for any of the alleged conspiracy members other than the two sisters .

= = Deaths = =

In the early 1880s , unmarried sisters Catherine and Margaret Flannagan ran a rooming house at 5 Skirving Street , Liverpool . The household in the final months of 1880 consisted of the two sisters , Catherine 's son John , and two lodger families ? hod carrier Thomas Higgins and his daughter Mary , and Patrick Jennings and his daughter Margaret . John Flannagan , 22 and previously healthy , died suddenly in December 1880 . His death did not raise any particular comment ; Catherine collected £ 71 (worth roughly £ 5984 in 2012 pounds) from the burial society with which he had been registered and he was interred shortly thereafter .

By 1882 , a romance had sprung up between Margaret and lodger Thomas Higgins . The pair married in October of that year . Thomas 's daughter Mary , 8 , died within months of the wedding after a short illness . Once again , the burial society payout was collected upon death , this time by Margaret Higgins .

In January 1883 , Margaret Jennings , 19 , died . Her burial payout was collected by Catherine .

In the face of neighbourhood gossip about the death rate in the home , Catherine , Margaret , and Thomas moved their household to 105 Latimer Street and then again to 27 Ascot street . In September 1883 , Thomas Higgins , then 45 , became yet another member of the household to fall mysteriously ill . His stomach pains were severe enough that Doctor Whitford was called ; the doctor attributed Higgins 's illness to dysentery related to drinking cheap whiskey and prescribed opium and castor oil . Higgins died after two days of illness . Days later , the same doctor was contacted and asked to provide a death certificate . He did so , attributing the death to dysentery .

= = Investigation = =

Though Thomas Higgins 's death by apparent dysentery raised no questions for the attending doctor , Higgins 's brother Patrick was surprised to hear that his brother , who had been strong and in good general health , could have succumbed so easily to illness . When he also discovered that his brother has been insured with five different burial societies , which left his widow with a profit of around £ 100 , he pursued the matter with the authorities . A postmortem examination was ordered on Higgins 's body . To the surprise of mourners , the coroner arrived at the home to perform the examination during the wake being held there for Higgins . Catherine Flannagan , upon hearing that a full autopsy was to be performed , fled the home .

When a full autopsy of Higgins 's body was carried out , evidence of arsenic poisoning was found : Higgins 's organs showed traces of arsenic , in quantities indicating the poisoning had taken place over several days . Evidence from the home , including " a bottle containing a mystery white substance and a market pocket worn by [Margaret] " was examined by poison expert Dr Campbell Brown , who verified the presence of arsenic ? dust in Margaret 's pocket , and an arsenic solution (containing unusual adulterants) in the bottle .

Margaret Higgins was arrested immediately ; Catherine , after moving from one boarding house to another to avoid police for nearly a week , was taken into custody in Wavertree . On 16 October

1883 , the sisters were formally charged with the murder of Thomas Higgins .

Orders for the bodies of the previously @-@ deceased members of the household to be exhumed were issued when it became clear that arsenic was the mechanism of Thomas Higgins 's death . The bodies of John Flannagan , Mary Higgins , and Margaret Jennings all showed evidence of minimal deterioration ? a quality associated with arsenic poisoning ? and traces of arsenic were found in the remains of all three .

Investigators initially assumed that the arsenic used to poison the victims had come from rat poison , but when common adulterants used in rat poison failed to show up in autopsies , they were forced to come up with a new theory . It was unlikely that the illiterate sisters would have been able to acquire arsenic through the usual method of visiting a chemist , a route more open to doctors than spinsters . Eventually it was discovered that common flypaper at the time contained arsenic , and that by soaking the flypaper in water , a solution substantially identical ? including the same adulterants ? to that found in a bottle at the Higgins residence could be obtained .

= = Aftermath = =

At the time of her arrest , Catherine claimed to her solicitor that the murders the sisters committed were not isolated , and provided a list of six or seven other deaths that she claimed to be murders related to burial society fraud , as well as a list of five other women who had either perpetrated those murders or provided insurance to those who did .

= = = Alleged conspiracy = = =

Catherine Flannagan 's list of alleged conspirators to the arsenic deaths contained three poisoners other than herself , one accomplice , and three agents of the insuring groups who had provided payouts upon the deaths . Margaret Evans , Bridget Begley , and Margaret Higgins were named as the poisoners ; Margaret Potter , a Mrs Fallon , and a Bridget Stanton were the insurers ; and Catherine Ryan was alleged to have obtained the arsenic needed by one of the poisoners . According to Flannagan , Margaret Evans had been the instigator of the crime ring , beginning with the murder of a mentally @-@ handicapped teenager in which Ryan obtained the poison and Evans administered it . Though Evans did not personally receive an insurance payout from this death , there were implications that she had dealings with the boy 's father and may have profited from those . The women Flannagan alleged to have been involved in the conspiracy all appear often in accounts of suspicious deaths in this period ; Mrs Stanton , for example , was linked to the insurance policies of three of the deaths , and groups of two or more of the involved women were seen visiting those who died shortly before their deaths . In one case , when an insurance company supervisor requested to meet Thomas Higgins in the course of issuing the insurance on him , he was greeted at the Higgins home by a woman who was neither Flannagan nor Higgins , who presented to him a " Thomas " who he later realised , upon seeing the deceased Thomas Higgins , was not Thomas Higgins at all .

Flannagan 's testimony was sometimes contradictory to both herself and to what seemed to be obvious facts of the conspiracy , however ; in one case , despite Mrs Stanton 's close links to the insurance payouts of murder victims and Flannagan 's identification of her as part of the conspiracy , Flannagan " exonerated " Stanton after police arrested the woman . Ultimately it was decided by the Prosecuting Solicitor for Liverpool that while the additional deaths were , indeed , likely to be murder , it would be difficult to prove that anyone other than Higgins or Flannagan had committed them , especially considering that the primary evidence against the other women was being provided by Flannagan , who had every reason to attempt to minimise her own responsibility in such crimes . As a result , only Flannagan and Higgins were tried for the crime of murdering Thomas Higgins , despite continuing suspicion by all investigating parties that there had been more deaths than just the four household ones , and more murderers than just the two sisters .

= = = Trial = = =

At the trial in 1884 , prosecutors implicated the sisters in the three other deaths in their household , as well as that of Thomas Higgins , with which they were officially charged . Catherine Flannagan 's offer to provide evidence against other conspirators for the prosecution in exchange for leniency was refused . The sisters were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged . The sentence was carried out on 3 March 1884 at Kirkdale Prison , with the sisters attended to by a Roman Catholic priest . The deaths were witnessed by a reported one thousand people .

= = In media = =

Contemporary accounts of the Flannagan sisters referred to them as " disciple [s] of Lucrezia Borgia " or as " the Borgias of the Slums " , in reference to their use of poison and the tales of how Borgia had been known to do the same . Modern accounts of the Flannagan sisters , such as those by Angela Brabin and the television series *Deadly Women* , have focused more on the cooperative aspect of the crimes rather than the poison aspect , and tend to refer to them as " black widows " or " The Black Widows of Liverpool " , particularly in reference to the allegation that the Flannagan sisters were part of a larger murder ring . Wax effigies of Flannagan and Higgins were placed in Madame Tussaud 's Chamber of Horrors after their executions .