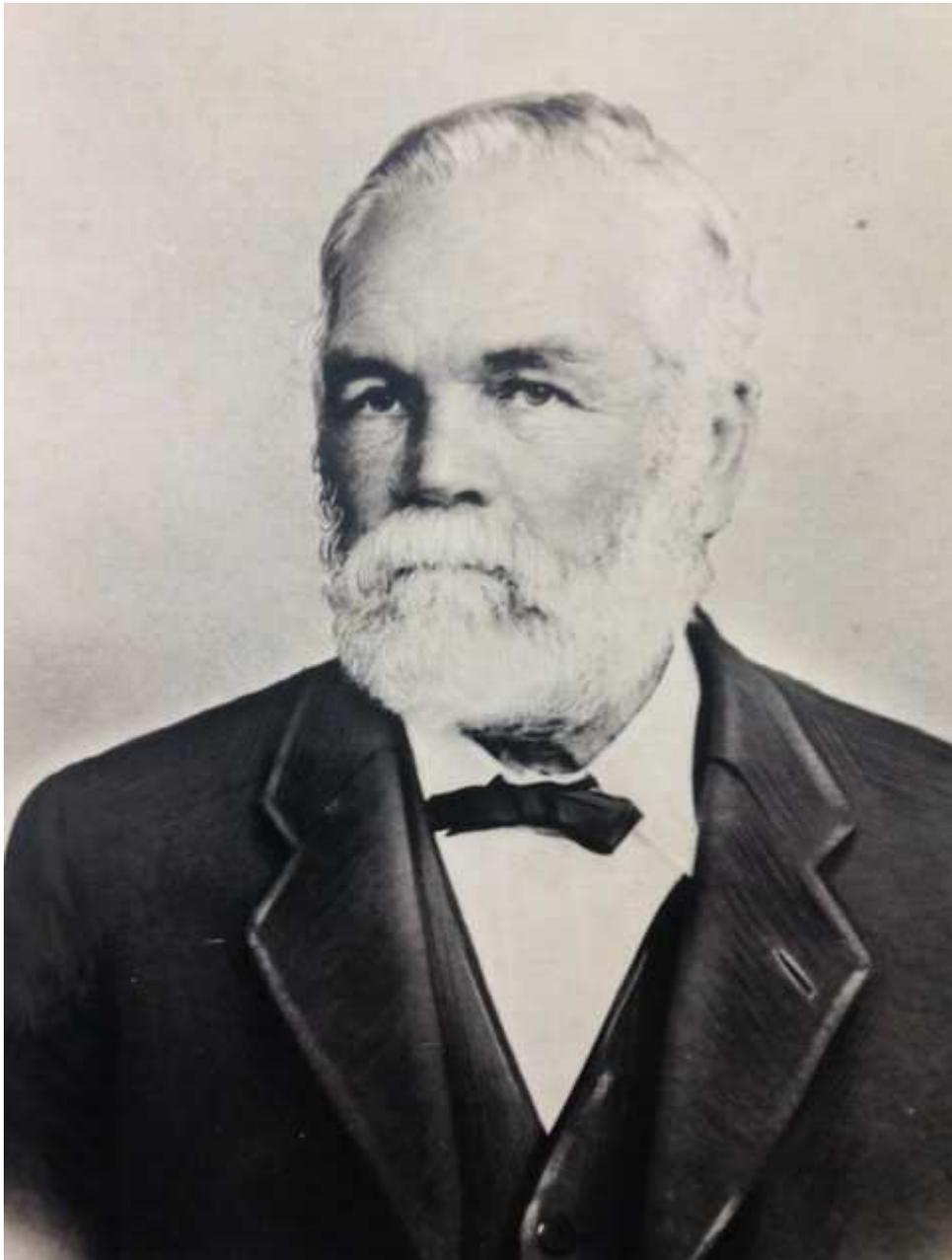


**SIR MATTHEW HARRIS (1841-1917)**

By his great-great-nephew John Harris

2017



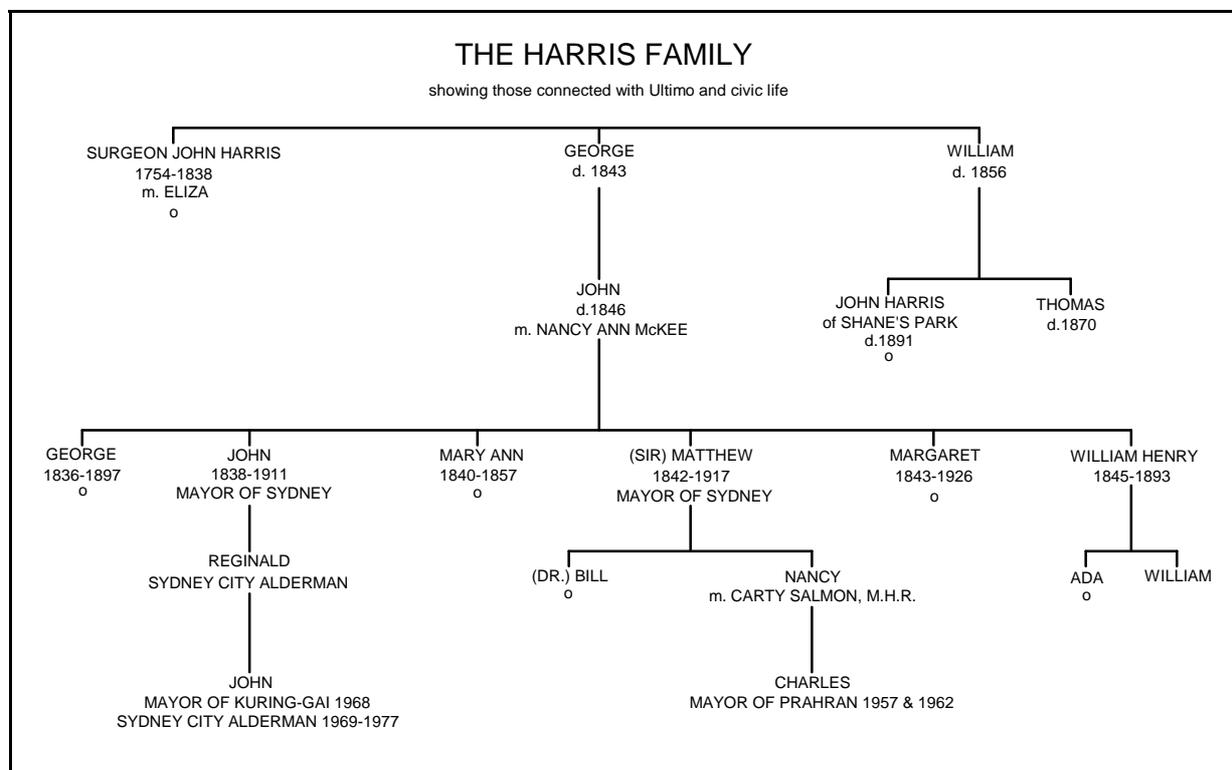
Sir Matthew Harris is perhaps the best known of the descendants of the pioneer Surgeon John Harris (1754-1838) whom I call 'John I' in this essay.

Matthew was born in 1841, the third of the six children of my great-great-grandparents, John Harris II who died at Ultimo in 1846, and his wife Nancy Ann McKee, who died at Ultimo in 1873.

John II was one of the two nephews of John I to whom John I in his Will in 1838 had left his 232-acre estate at Ultimo-Pyrmont in equal half shares. These two nephews were first-cousins and were both named John. Therefore I call them John II and John III.

So by the Will, each nephew named John inherited 116 acres within the official boundaries of the City of Sydney - a fantastic inheritance by any standards.

John II (Matthew's father) came out from Ulster in 1844 with Nancy Ann and their young family to take up their inheritance, but he died two years later at the early age of 46, leaving Nancy Ann to bring up their six children alone. And she did a very good job of it too, according to the trustee of John II's will, the Reverend Dr James Fullerton (who is remembered in the Fullerton Memorial/Chinese Presbyterian Church in Surry Hills).

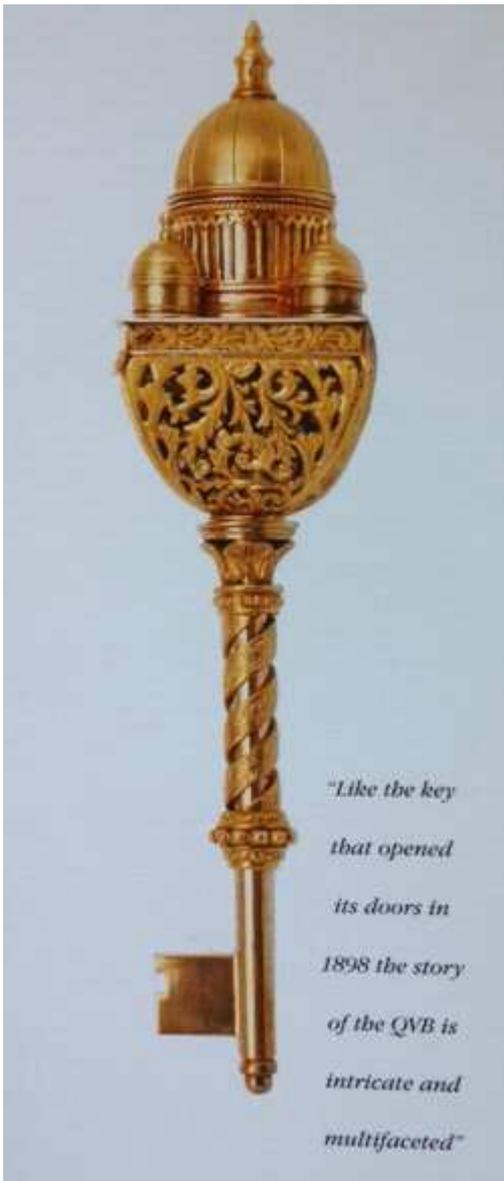




*John IV*

In my family it is said that John II died “from the drink”, and that Nancy Ann made her 8 year-old son John IV (my great-grandfather) swear on his father’s corpse that he would never drink, and indeed I know he never did, even when as Mayor of Sydney in the 1880s he gave grand receptions at the Sydney Town Hall and the Exhibition Building.

Whether Nancy Ann extracted the same bedside promise from 5-year old Matthew I do not know. But Matthew too held grand receptions when he in turn was Mayor later in the 1890s, especially the wonderful Ball he gave on the day in 1898 when he opened the Queen Victoria Building. However both brothers did not stint their guests at their receptions.



*“Like the key  
that opened  
its doors in  
1898 the story  
of the QVB is  
intricate and  
multifaceted”*

*Key to Queen Victoria Building, held by a great-grandchild*

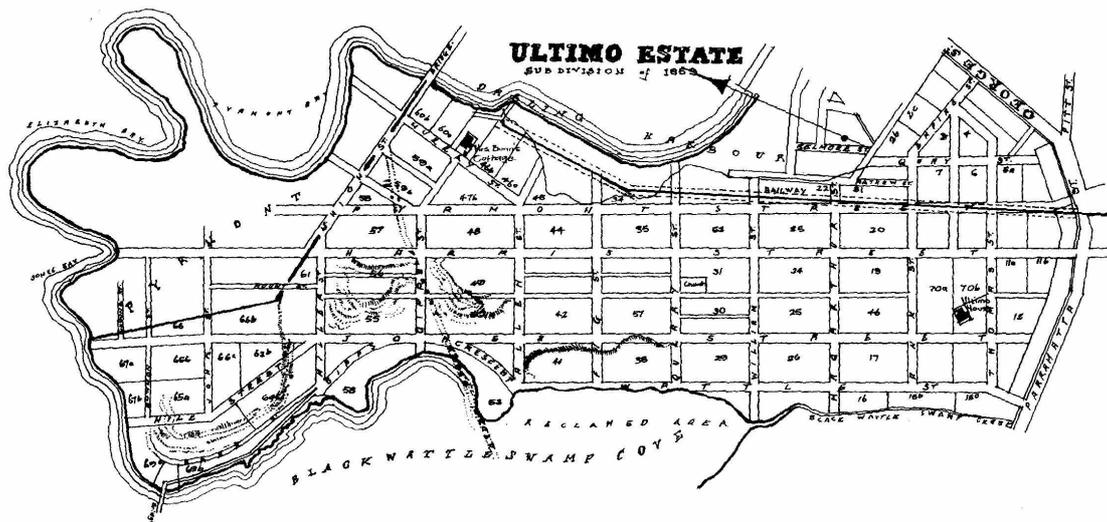


*Matthew's Invitation to the Ball , held by me*

Actually, there is some later evidence that perhaps Nancy Ann was more lenient with little Matthew back in 1846, or at least if she did make him promise, he did not stick to it like his older brother. When Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the famous Fabian Socialists, visited Sydney in September 1898 and called on the Mayor and Aldermen at the Town Hall for lunch, Beatrice wrote disapprovingly in her diary (published by Pitman in 1964 and held in the State Library of NSW) that “the Aldermen were the same sort as the Mayor, heavy common persons: ripples of whisky-laden atmosphere reached us whenever one of them moved or spoke”.

Matthew, like John IV, attended Thomas Aitken's Normal Institute at Haymarket for his early education, but Matthew was still young enough to get in his last couple of years at the reconstituted Sydney Grammar School in 1858 and 1859 (where he is number eighteen on the School Roll) before going on to the newly founded University of Sydney where he graduated Bachelor of Arts in 1863.

John II and John III's grand inheritance of 116 acres each at Ultimo-Pyrmont remained intact and un-subdivided through the 1840s and 1850s until in 1859 a subdivision of 70 blocks and streets was finally agreed and registered.



As each child of John II came of age, he/she inherited one-fifth of their father's 116 acres (one-fifth because the sixth child Mary Ann had died in 1857 aged 17 - the family gave her name to Mary Ann Street in the subdivision).

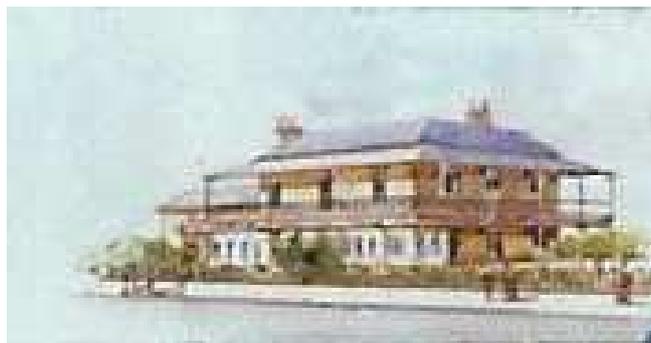
So Matthew got about 20% of 116 acres, i.e. about 23 acres. This was roughly the same size as CSR's later holding at Pyrmont. Like the British landed aristocracy whom he greatly admired, he did not pursue a profession, but instead managed his landholdings.

In 1868 he married Frances Lane of Windsor, a pretty, friendly woman and much-admired in the community, and they had 11 children, 9 of whom survived to adulthood. They lived at first at Bismarck House, Crown Road, and from about 1880 at Warrane, Crown Road.

(Crown Road was later renamed Bulwara Road). Warrane was on the eastern side of Crown Road between Mary Ann and Macarthur Streets. This pretty drawing of Warrane was made in 1901 and probably the passers-by in the street are students at the Technical College nearby in Mary Ann Street.



*Frances, wife of Matthew Harris*



*Warrane - the home of Matthew and Frances Harris*

In the tradition of his admired English aristocracy who saw it as their public duty to serve a term or two on their local council (or even in Parliament), Matthew went into local government at the age of 43 becoming an alderman of Sydney Municipal Council for Denison Ward in 1883. His name appears as ward alderman on the 1896 Pymont drinking fountain which stands at the corner of Pymont Bridge Road and Pymont Street.



*Drinking Fountain, Pymont*

He was elected Mayor of Sydney in three consecutive years 1898, 1899 and 1900 until his shock defeat at the Elections of November 1900. In Council he pursued a policy of reform, as evidenced in the congratulatory letter he received in 1897 from Lord Hampden, ex-Governor of NSW, which is in the Sir Matthew Harris Papers, Mitchell Library. However, like beauty, reform must be in the eye of the beholder because only 3 years later, when Matthew and his Council were resoundingly defeated at the November 1900 Elections (as a result of the council's slow response to the bubonic plague a few months earlier and as a result of a recently broadened franchise including women), Sydney newspapers spoke of the new mayor Dr James Graham being elected on a policy of reform! Sir Matthew's bitterness at his defeat stayed with him, as evidenced by his caustic letter in the Sydney Morning Herald on 23 August 1901 about Mayor Graham.

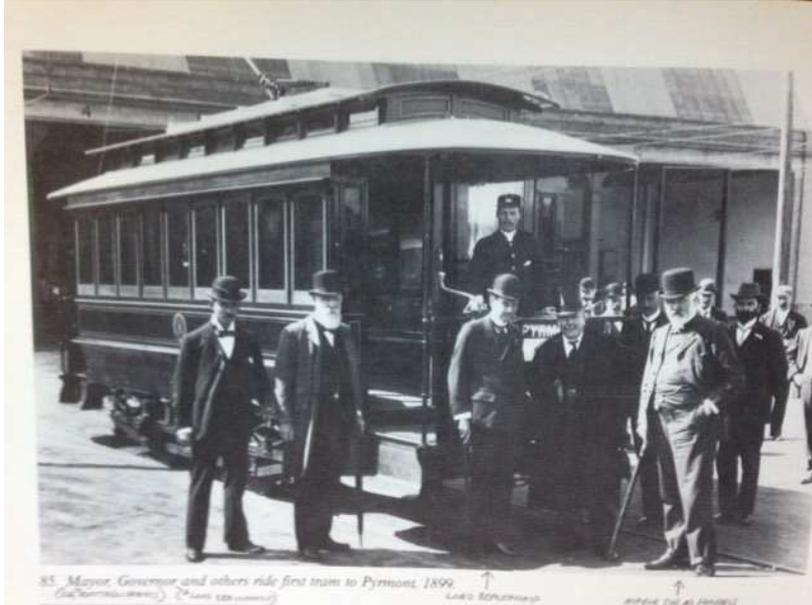
As one of his last mayoral acts, on 15 December 1900 at Farm Cove, he officially welcomed the Earl of Hopetoun to Sydney in preparation for the Inauguration of the Commonwealth on 1 January 1901, but the privilege of being the Mayor at the inauguration had slipped by him.

Matthew also served two terms in the NSW Parliament, 1894-1901, and chaired the Wanset Commission of Inquiry during that time.

He was a well-known President of Sydney Hospital from 1912 to his death in 1917, having been a director since 1896 and a regular attender at their weekly meetings. His wife, Lady Harris, was President of the hospital's Ladies' Committee. A family story is that she came one day to the Hospital to see her husband who was chairing a Board meeting. A nurse stopped her at the door, saying "You can't go in there – there's a meeting on. You'd better take a seat here." "But I'm Lady Harris" said Frances. "Oh in that case take two seats", the nurse replied. Frances is said to have enjoyed the cheeky retort, but I suspect Sir Matthew would not have.

Matthew was knighted in 1899 and was dubbed by the then Governor Lord Beauchamp at Government House before a private lunch attended by Beauchamp and his sister Lady Mary Lygon and by Matthew and Frances and their daughter Nancy (who was soon to marry Dr Carty Salmon, subsequently Speaker of the House of Representatives). (Beauchamp's letter of invitation is in the Sir Matthew Harris Papers, Mitchell Library).

Matthew was a prominent collector of objets d'art, fine furniture, rare books and Australiana. Many of these he gave to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Harris Street, Ultimo shortly before he died (including Peter Lalor's sword from the Eureka Stockade, which was stolen while on display in 1962 and has never been recovered). He also gave a large wood model of a Japanese temple which is still a prized possession of the Museum.



Matthew and Lord Beauchamp both loved fine things and the two used to meet during Beauchamp's short-lived governorship to talk about their shared artistic and collecting tastes. At ages 59 and 29 respectively it was an unusual friendship. The photo of them with others at the inauguration of the tram service to Pyrmont in 1899 shows the young Governor as almost deferential to the portly Mayor.

Matthew was Vice-President of the Royal Agricultural Society, President of the Wentworth Park Trust, and President of the Australasian Pioneers Club. In 1908 he was chosen by the newly-formed Rugby League of NSW to become their inaugural Patron which he was very pleased to do. Two of his nephews Vic and Wal Harris (my grandfather's brothers) played for the inaugural Glebe League team.

Matthew owned a horse stud called Nancy Vale at Cabramatta and was prominent in racing circles in Sydney and Melbourne. A sepia drawing of Carbine, the great Melbourne Cup winner of 1890, drawn in August 1902 was sent to him by Carbine's then owner the racing Duke of Portland and has passed down to me.



*Carbine*



*Charlie Hackett - 1971*

In 1971 I interviewed the late Charlie Hackett, a former Member of the Legislative Council, who lived at Macarthur Street Ultimo. He was one of six Labor MLCs who famously crossed the floor in 1959 to prevent Premier Bob Heffron from abolishing the Upper House. My father Alderman John Harris of Sydney City Council had got to know Mr Hackett and arranged for me to visit him at his home to talk Ultimo history. He told me he was a boy in Ultimo in the 1890s and could clearly remember Matt Harris often coming out onto the upstairs balcony of Warrane in Crown Road to take the air (and no doubt enjoy the view of his properties).

Similarly, in the 1970s and 80s I often dined with Captain Fred Aarons OBE, a Gallipoli veteran, who was born in 1887 and was Lady Harris' nephew. He told me Matthew's family all dined together formally but in silence, except for occasional outbursts of rage from Sir Matthew when he would "roar like a lion" at one of the boys – for no apparent reason, as far as young Aarons could tell.

The Harrises were the dominant landowners of Ultimo and half-Pyrmont through the nineteenth century. Their usual methods of development were long-term ground leases on which the lessees built terrace-houses, stone quarries, woolstores and hotels (the peninsula had 26 pubs in 1900). But in 1892 an event happened which changed the nature of the peninsula. The elderly John III, who had inherited a half share of the original estate in 1838, was killed by a train while crossing the tracks at Harris Park, another family property. No Will of his could be found, and as a result his whole estate at Ultimo (except for the little he had sold during his lifetime, such as the Technical College site in Mary Ann Street) passed into the hands of the Perpetual Trustee Company as administrator, which put it all up for sale.

Professor Paul Ashton has described how other Harrises, including Matthew, would have liked to buy back some of these properties, but could not afford to do so by then. So a large number of new owners and landlords came into the district, including the well-known Thomas Buckland Family.

Perhaps seeing the changing nature of the district, which was gradually moving away from the family's dominance and personal connections, Sir Matthew and Lady Harris in 1903 bought the grand house Etham at Darling Point and lived there until they died. But Matt's brothers and his sister Miss Margaret Harris did not share his sentiments and they continued to live at their respective Ultimo houses until their deaths, the last being Margaret in 1926.

Matthew and Frances were the only Harrises who were active in "Society" and they often appeared in the social pages attending various events including Flemington races in Melbourne, where the Carty Salmons lived. My great grandfather John IV and their sister Margaret, who was prominent as a charity philanthropist and whose portrait was painted by E Philips Fox in 1914 and is in the NSW Art Gallery, were not so attracted to Society.

In May 1901 at a reception in Sydney for the visiting Duke and Duchess of York (later King George V and Queen Mary) who had come up from opening our first Federal Parliament in Melbourne, Frances and her son Lieutenant John Harris (recently returned injured from the Boer War) were presented to Her Royal Highness. I can only imagine Frances' thrill.

Until at least the 1850s, tribes of aborigines (who in that part of Sydney would have been Cadigal people of the Eora nation) still lived on and around the undeveloped Ultimo lands.



*Painting by Cedric Flower*

Half a century later in the Town and Country Journal of October 1900, Sir Matthew recalled seeing them as a young boy, camped in the open spaces and collecting cockles from the bays near Ultimo House. (see Fitzgerald and Golder, Pyrmont and Ultimo Under Siege, 1994 page 24). So when we in Ultimo and Pyrmont today acknowledge "the traditional custodians of the land", it has a special meaning for me. In the 1980s I bought a little oil painting by Cedric Flower based on a colonial engraving by John Carmichael, which

depicts a small tribe in 1828 relaxing on grass at what is now Railway Square, with the fencing and parklike grounds of Dr Harris' Ultimo shown across the other side of the road. How evocative that is!

Sir Matthew died in 1917, two years after Frances. He left an estate valued at £32,000, and had given £250,000 worth of property to his children in 1913. He and his wife and several of their children are interred in the beautiful Matthew Harris family vault in the Old Presbyterian Section of Rookwood Cemetery.



In the report of his death, the Sydney Morning Herald of Saturday 9 June 1917 said: "There will be widespread expressions of regret that a life of such usefulness has ended".

He was truly a man of mark!