

A FAMILY UNDERTAKING

Memoirs of a St Pancras funeral furnisher by Basil Leverton

There have been seven generations of my family in what is probably the oldest firm in St Pancras, Levertons the funeral undertakers. It was started in the parish in 1789 by John Leverton, who had come from Devon, where the family has been traced back to the sixteenth century for a further seven generations. There are records of the family farming there in 1661. The name Leverton is derived from the Anglo-Saxon Leofa's tun, meaning homestead of a man of the rushes.

St Pancras was a village on the outskirts of London when John Leverton set up business at the age of 26. He not only made coffins but 'undertook' to look after other problems of the bereaved. Like many 'undertakers', he combined this business with carpentry and building.

Leases in the Middlesex Land Registry show that John Leverton, in partnership with Geo. Goodrich and Richard Pearson (the latter from Richmond), bought from Dr Joshua Brooks, a well-known botanist, a site in Brook Street (now Stanhope Street) and built houses there. His workshop was in nearby Henry Street (now demolished), where he lived.

In 1794 John Leverton married Betty Skinner at St Luke's, now Chelsea Old Church. Their third son, Henry, born in the year of the Battle of Trafalgar, was a carpenter of great skill, judging from the wooden pulpit which he made for All Souls, Langham Place, recently replaced, alas, by a mobile metal successor. The workshop was moved in 1834 to the other side of Euston Road, to 26 Hertford Street (later 139 Whitfield Street).

John Leverton died in 1843 at the age of 80. He was buried in the St James's Burial Ground, Hampstead Road, only to be moved elsewhere with many others when that part of the ground was needed for building Cardington Street. The railways were moving in at the time. Luckily the tombstone—pictured here—was placed with others round the perimeter, where I found the top 2ft protruding, thanks to a kindly gardener there. He had remembered the name and location—though my father had searched and failed to find it in his youth. Removed for relettering after our find, it was reinstated in the gardens and is still

to be seen set in the lawn in commemoration of the bicentenary in 1963 of John's birth.

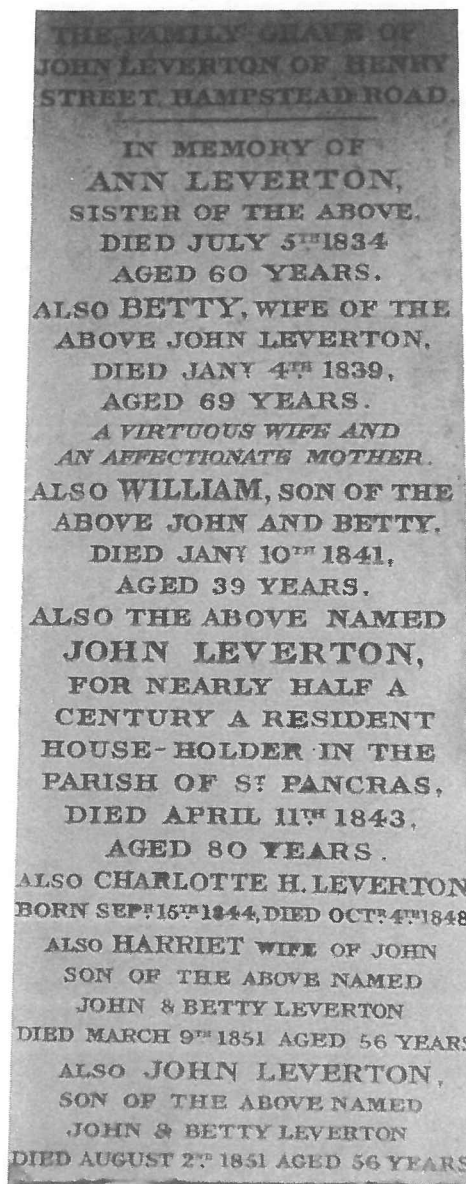
Henry Leverton's only son, Henry Edward (1832-89), represented the third generation in the family business. Their account, sent in 1862 to the Executors of Mrs Pitman, which is here reproduced in part and transcribed in full, illustrates the variety of services provided by Henry Leverton, who styled himself 'Carpenter, Undertaker &c'. As will be

seen, the printed heading includes carpenters' compasses on the left and three tents on the right. The tents were the symbol of an upholder or upholsterer, a trade often linked with funerals. In 1465, Edward IV granted the Upholders' Company the exclusive right of burial within the City. The Company's charter arms have the shield incorporating three ornate tents, each supported by a central pole—the upholder. Taking their name from these supports, the members of the Upholders' Company were in effect a quartermasters' branch of the medieval army, providing tents and their furnishings and sometimes even hay for the horses of battle: they also buried the slain. The Worshipful Company of Upholders is one of the City of London's Livery Companies. (My brother Ivor, our Chairman, is a Liveryman of this Company).

The symbols in the account's heading are within lozenges, which indicate another, unstated function: the provision of funeral hatchments. When the holder of a grant of arms died, the undertaker could produce the painted coat of arms within a diamond-shaped lozenge. This hatchment would be carried in the funeral procession and then affixed on the outside wall of the deceased's home for a year, before being 'laid up' for posterity in the local church. The College of Arms regarded it as their work to paint and provide these hatchments, but time and distance—and possibly cost—may well have had a bearing on who did so.

The account mentions truncheons, which were originally used by bearers as a precaution against body-snatching. In *The Tale of Two Cities* reference is made to resurrectionists being apprehended after leaving the old St Pancras churchyard. To this day, the registrar requires confirmation of burial or cremation in respect of each death registered.

My grandfather, Henry John (1858-1935), was Henry Edward Leverton's eldest son. He moved premises in December 1888, six months before his father's death, to what was then 35 Eversholt Street. The building of the present North West District Post Office on this site necessitated our moving, in 1912, a few doors along to 23-24 (this is



*Family gravestone of John Leverton
in St James's Gardens*

now 210–214, renumbered when Seymour Street vanished).

In 1909 my father, Stanley, married Daisy Hawkins who was, we think, descended from a noted family of funeral directors and bedmakers called Hawkins. An illustrated trade-card, now in the British Museum, described John Hawkins, 'at the sign of the Royal Bed' in New Bond Street, as 'Upholder, Cabinet Maker and Sworn Appraiser', who made and sold 'all sorts of Upholstery Goods and furnished Funerals Public or Private at Reasonable Rates'. Daisy's father was very much part of the St Pancras pianoforte world: the works were at University Street until Shooldbred's store expanded.

After their marriage, my parents thought of going to live in Golders Green and having a branch office there. Grandpa talked them out of the idea, explaining that just because the tube had been extended out there, you could not imagine anyone wanting to live out as far as that with (admittedly then) so few facilities. He little knew how popular that suburb would become. The Crematorium was already built, but who could anticipate the high proportion of people who, by the 1970s and '80s, would prefer cremation to burial?

My father died in December 1963, aged 80: he was still the Chairman of the company and actually conducted funerals to his final year. He had been Chairman of the St Pancras Bench for nine years, among other activities. Some years before his death, he recorded his recollections of funerals at the turn of the century: these included being employed as a mute, standing on the landing outside the room which contained the deceased.

'In the early days of Eversholt Street,' he said, 'infant mortality was very high: we carried out the funerals of babies under the age of, say, two years in the proportion of about three to one adult's. The price of a funeral with a single horse brougham was 30 shillings, plus 4 shillings cemetery fees; with a pair-horse brougham, it was £2.10s. For an adult, a funeral with a hearse and one coach was £4.10s, with an extra 30 shillings for a coffin of oak instead of elm.

Stanley's thoughts concluded: 'Fog, biting cold, snow and teeming rain, sitting beside the coachman on a box-seat behind a couple of horses was never funny, but getting home between six and seven at night, especially on a Saturday night, was wretched indeed. I much preferred a warm motor to Golders Green. But it made us tough and maybe we who went through it are none the worse.' Stanley's eldest son, Derrick Leverton, T.D. (also Deputy Chairman



Heading of Levertons' account for Mrs Pitman's funeral, etc., 1862, and a transcription of the account

The Ex ^{rs} of Mrs Pitman London					
	To H. Leverton, Carpenter, Undertaker &c. 26, Hertford St ^l Fitzroy Square. W.				
1862		£	s	d	
January 13	Reparing & putting new brass thumb screws to dressing glass frame new plate caster to table		3	6	
Feb 6	To two brass boultts to wire blind		2	—	
April 8	Reparing folding chair and table putting up blind new line to ditto		4	6	
June	Reparing bed steps To the funeral of M ^{rs} Ann Pitman died July 25 Aged 95 years		1	—	
	To a strong elm shell the inside lined ruffled tuft matrass pillow &c the outside covered with stout lead soldered down with leadplate of inscription inclosing ditto in elm case covered superfine black cloth finished with best burnished nails handles and grips ornaments on lid lead- plate with inscription &c use of silk velvet pall over ditto to a Hears with four horses				
					two coaches with two horses each use of velvet covering for hearse and horses (no feathers) to 10 drivers & men as porters in silk dresses—pages with truncheons wands &c
					35 — —
					To four crape bands & kid gloves for Rev ^d T Pitman I Pitman Rev ^d T Pitman Jun ^r
					I Shorter Esq ^e four silk bands & kid gloves I. Braithwait Esq ^e C Lowik Esq ^e D ^r Nairne D ^r Page
					three pr of gloves for servants in house use of 6 girls Cloaks
					Interment Fees at Kensal Green Cemetery
					5 12 —
					7 4 —
					Sept 26 Packing & Removing to and from Gloucester Place Montague Place & to Chester Terrace
					1 17 —
					To a case with china left at Chester Terrace. Reparing chest of draws putting new knobs & rejapaning ditto bamboo
					2 —
					7 —
					50 13 —
					Paid H.E. Leverton Nov 22/62

(NB: 'Tuft' is short for tufted; I. Pitman was probably not the shorthand inventor.)



Two-horse hearse in North End Road, 1920s, with Henry John Leverton (left) 'conducting', his brother Albert standing by front wheel, and his sons, Stanley and Harold, behind

of St Pancras Almshouses Committee), succeeded him in 1963. On Derrick's untimely death in 1971 aged 59, his brother Ivor became Chairman.

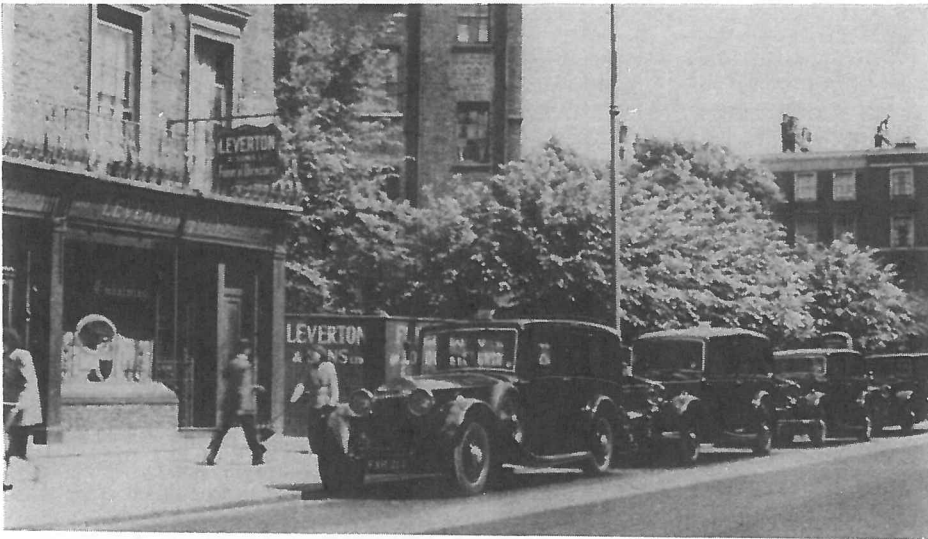
We took delivery of our first Rolls-Royce hearse, with purpose-built hearse

coachwork, in April 1933. Coincidentally, its first journey out of London, within a week or so, was to bring Sir Henry Royce from West Wittering to London for his cremation service. We now have Daimlers but retain one Rolls-Royce. Early motor vehicles used for

funerals were referred to as coaches, although no longer horse-drawn. Some elderly clients still use the terms coach or carriage today.

We continued as decorators and undertakers until 1921. By then the funeral side of the firm had increased considerably and family friends, J.H. & W. Heal of Parkway, took over our decorating work. We worked for the funeral departments of Selfridges and Thomas Wallis and took over that department of Green & Edwards in Finchley Road, Hampstead, when it closed.

Many firms of undertakers in Camden have been affected by compulsory purchase of all or part of their premises, with consequent moves. As we believe that we are about the oldest ratepayers in St Pancras, we were not amused by a suggestion at one stage that we should function from a site available at Woolwich. We remain in Camden and my brother's two sons, Keith and Clive, represent the seventh generation of the family in the firm.



Levertons' Rolls-Royces outside their premises in Eversholt Street, 1952



Funeral cortege of Mr Henry Croft, King of the Pearly Kings, 1930. Stanley Leverton leads the procession from Seymour (now Eversholt) Street, via Euston Road to St Pancras Cemetery. The four horses pulling the hearse wear velvets, which will be removed before they begin to trot. Members of the Pearly fraternity walk beside the hearse