

Present at the Birth

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You know, of course, that live babies have to be registered at birth. It's a happy moment. I saw such a happy moment on Tuesday, when the mother swung her pram into Hammersmith Register Office, asked the porter to mind the cargo and trotted off upstairs to bestow officialdom on her infant Darren bawling in the foyer.

It's a neat foyer, prim, delicately shaded by long net curtains. Please keep off the grass signs lead you up to the Maplewood double-fronted doors. It is quiet; there are handy waiting-rooms and excellently hushed tones for those waiting to enter a death. Babies that die have to be registered too.

But babies that never even become babies also have to be entered in the register (of stillbirths) if they were in their mothers' wombs for more than 28 weeks.

"Heh-hum" coughed the Registrar politely but softly. "Would you care to come this way?" The man in new blue jeans and a good shirt didn't really hear. "Hmmm, would you please come in?"

He entered a small tidy office not really big enough to house the two Borough employees busily facing him.

"Have you got the certificate?" The man in new jeans pushes the buff envelope across the rosewood table and the Under-Registrar extracts from his desk the thin buff-envelope-opener and purposefully slits the flap. He gathers three forms all headed Register of Still Births in front of him. The Death Certificate is perused.

"Oh look, it's one of the missing 68's. I wondered where that lot had gone. We're not doing these numbers any more. I hope the computer can cope. Can I have your full name?" He asks the question while tastefully glancing at the prominent yellow plastic sign on the table. It warns all respondents how offensive it is to perjure themselves in these hallowed surroundings by uttering anything but the truly helpful truth. Penalty to be decided by the magistrate.

The Under-Registrar writes in his eternally-legible hand the full Christian names, properly spelled, of the gentleman in jeans, and then copies down his surname: "H-O-D-S-O-N. And now the mother's name?"

When he has copied on to his form a complete collection of names for both the father and the mother, it registers on his bureaucratic brain that the mother's surname 'Hooper' differs a little in form and style from the father's name 'Hodson' staring out in clarity immediately above it. "But they're different. They're not the same!"

"No", says the youngish man in blue jeans.

"Then you're not married", says the Under-Registrar.

"No", says the man again.

"Oh, I see", says the Under-Registrar, and looks powerfully at the full Registrar standing beside him. "They're not married so the names are different".

“Ah, I don’t think we can do this. Let me look at Regulations. No, unless the mother’s present too, and unless the father and mother are married, then the birth cannot be registered. I mean the death... But wait a minute. Were you present at the birth?”

“Yes”, says the man in blue jeans. “I was present at the birth”.

“In that case, we can have you register the birth as ‘Present at the Birth’ instead of ‘As the father but married to the mother’. Write out a new form leaving blank spaces four, five and six”.

The Under-Registrar proceeds to cover a new form with the Full Registrar’s incisively-issued instructions then drops his Parker pen in a fit of pique. “But Space Eleven clearly states ‘Under present at the birth enter full names if not the father or the mother – but he is the father!’” Silence.

“Does it say anything in Regulations about the rules governing Space Eleven, because Titchfield Head Office will be mad as anything if this is wrong?”

The man in blue jeans re-crosses his legs and thinks very briefly of the moment last Friday when the dead baby finally slid from his lover’s body, a stiff little no-hoper. Thirty-one weeks of waiting; several years of detailed planning. Not to mention a certain emotional investment.

“Let me see.... No.... I think we’ll have to phone General Register London to see what they advise...”

An outside line is dialled. There is formal presentation of the ‘little query’. General Register Office London is informed by Register Office Hammersmith that Still Birth Form No 1 doesn’t provide for a case where the father isn’t married to the mother but was Present at the Birth and therefore is entitled to register the death (meaning Birth) but he shouldn’t be the father if we’re following strictly the provisions of Space Eleven which governs entries for still birth.

“Yes. No. I’ve never met it before either. No. Not in forty years. The only qualification for this job is experience. There’s no substitute. No. Yes. Yes. Yes. You mean you’ve never encountered it before either. No, there’s nothing in Regulations to cover it. But he is entitled to sign the register because he was Present at the Birth.

“No, it’s not like ‘In charge of the baby’. I mean I’ve heard of being ‘in charge of a live baby’. But who’d ever be ‘in charge of’ a still birth? I imagine the hospital will do the disposal so there wouldn’t be anything left to be ‘in charge of’ would there? Just put his name in Space Eleven and leave four, five and six blank then? OK. Yes, it is interesting, isn’t it?”

So General Office and the Registrar break new ground and the man in blue jeans is left to the finishing touches of the Under-Registrar and his 14-carat Parker.

“It’s funny, you know”, says the Under-Registrar. “I haven’t done a still birth for ages and now I’ve had three in two days. Isn’t it amazing? No, you have to use my pen. It’s got Registration Ink in it”.