

Coroner to investigate cancer death cluster around historic nuclear lab

By Francis Beckett

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Dr John Clark died of a brain tumour in 1992, aged 62

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An inquest is to be opened into the deaths of two Manchester University academics who died of pancreatic cancer after working for years in the building where Ernest Rutherford, the father of nuclear physics, conducted his experiments.

The Manchester coroner, Nigel Meadows, has acted after hearing from the families of the two academics that their deaths may be linked to deposits of nuclear materials still contaminating the building in which the pioneering scientist worked, now known as the Rutherford Building. These materials include polonium, which killed Alexander Litvinenko, as well as radon and mercury.

The academics on whom Mr Meadows will hold inquests were both psychologists: Dr Arthur Reader, who died a year ago, at the age of 69, and Professor Tom Whiston, who died in April this year, aged 70. Both men for many years occupied a room that is two floors below where Rutherford worked in the early years of the last century. Other cancer deaths of academics in Rutherford's building are being reported to Liz Graham, the solicitor for the families. They include Dr John Clark, who died of a brain tumour in 1992, aged 62. Another psychologist, Dr Hugh Wagner, who occupied Rutherford's own room, died in 2007 of pancreatic cancer aged 62.

The university held its own inquiry, under Professor David Coggon of Southampton University, which reported that the rash of cancer deaths among former occupants of the building was probably a coincidence. But Mr Meadows has told the families that Professor Coggon's remit was narrow, whereas the coroner can and will investigate all aspects.

Mr Meadows has promised to look into whether the university should have told staff of its concerns earlier. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was concerned enough to be taking regular radiological readings in the building. But even when staff were moved out of the building for remedial work in 1999, they were not told of the university's real concern. "We were told it was because of work going on in the next-door building," said Dr Pat Hartley, a retired Manchester University psychologist. "A technician used to talk of putting on protective clothing and removing materials, and the materials being taken to Cumbria for burial," she said.

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