

Inquest - Walter & Edith Barter 1934

Distressing Tragedy at West Tisbury



The Wilts and Dorset border was shocked on Saturday by a terrible tragedy in which Walter Wilfred Barter, of Cool's Cottages, East Knoyle, and Edith Barter, his wife, ended their lives by drowning themselves in one of the ponds on Lieut Colonel J M Bennett-Stanford's Pyt House Estate, in the parish of West Tisbury.

The man had been ill for some years suffering from an incurable and progressive disease of the spine, which had rendered him incapable of further work as a labourer on the Wilts County Council road staff. He had obtained employment as a gardener at Donhead, and was to move his furniture to a new address on the day that he and his wife ended their lives.

The couple had an only child, a boy aged 14, who was forced to accompany his parents on the walk across the fields from their house to Billhay Pond, which is near the entrance to Pyt House grounds from Semley Green.

Shortly before two o'clock on Saturday the boy ran from Pyt House gates and stopped a motor-van. He was nearly in a collapsed state; he had obviously been in the water, and was very distressed, but he was able to tell the motorists that his father and mother were in the pond at Billhay. The men in the motor-van hurried to the pond, but Barter and his wife were dead when they were taken out of the water.

The tragedy was intensified by an agonising story of his dreadful experience related by the boy at the inquest conducted by the Deputy-Coroner for Wiltshire (Mr. Philip Johnson) at Tisbury Institution on Monday afternoon. He stated that his father and mother pushed him into the pond and held him under the water, but he got free and swam to the bank. The lad also stated that he waded in to try and get his mother out, but she was too heavy, and he had to give up. His vivid account of the tragic happenings caused a deep impression and aroused a feeling of admiration of his action after a long and terrifying ordeal.

Ernest George Barter, of Wootton Grove, Sherbourne, blacksmith, who gave evidence of identification, said he had not seen his brother and sister-in-law for twelve months. At their last meeting his brother was quite normal. His sister-in-law was always of a bright disposition. They were a devoted couple. Witness knew that his brother had suffered from pains in the head for several years, but had never heard of any threat by him that he would take his life. There was no financial trouble. The witness said his brother was aged 43, and Mrs. Barter 39.

Recovery of the Bodies

Charles Philips Jefferies, electrician, of 31, St. Rumbold's-road, Shaftesbury, deposed that he was travelling by motor-van from Tisbury to Semley on Saturday afternoon when he was stopped near Pyt House gate by a lad. The lad told him that his father and mother were in the pond nearby. Witness and his four companions ran to the pond, and they saw a woman floating on the water. Witness jumped into the water, but it was too deep to wade to the place where the woman was floating, and he pulled her towards the bank with the aid of a stick. The woman was dead. He raked about with the stick, and eventually found the body of the man and brought it to the bank. Life was extinct.

Dr. W H Du Pre, of Tisbury, examined the bodies shortly after two o'clock. He said the cause of death was drowning. There were no marks of external injury and no marks on the bank to indicate that there had been a struggle.

Dr. R E W Whitby, of Mere, stated that he had been attending Walter Wilfred Barter since July 29th. He suffered from an incurable spinal disease which caused intense pain in the legs, back of the neck, and back of the head. His panel record showed that he had been treated at Salisbury Infirmary for the same complaint in 1931. His condition improved with treatment. When the attacks of pain came on the man was beside himself. At other times he was absolutely rational. There was nothing to suggest that he would take his life.

In reply to the Deputy-Coroner, Dr. Whitby said the disease was known as myelitis of the spinal cords. There would be increasing paralysis of the limbs. Barter had been given to understand that he would not be better.

The Deputy-Coroner: With this complaint is it possible for a man to have such a brain disorder as to take against his nearest and dearest relatives without any other cause?

Witness: I have never seen any mental symptoms associated with it. It is a rare disease. And brain disorder does not usually follow except as a result of severe pains.

Did anything abnormal present itself in regard to Mrs. Barter?

She was unusually bright and efficient in her work. She did not show any signs of depression about her husband's condition. I do not know if she was keeping up for his sake because I never saw her except in his presence. She nursed her husband throughout the period he was confined to his bed, July 29th to August 14th.

The last witness was Norman Samuel Barter, who had undergone so poignant an experience only two days previously. He gave his evidence attended by a nurse. He said he was the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Barter, and would be 15 years of age in October. Describing the tragic event of Saturday afternoon, he said: "I left home with my father and mother. Both of them said they were going to get rid of themselves. They took hold of my arm and pulled me with them. They took me across the fields. Daddy had the intention of doing away with themselves in the lily pond, but there were some men there so he said he would not do it there. We then went to the Billhay Pond, half-a-mile from the first pond."

The Deputy Coroner: Did you struggle to get away during this time?

The boy: I did not struggle, but I said I did not want to go. Father said he would hit me if I did not go.

You went unwillingly?
Yes.

What happened when you reached Billhay Pond?

Witness: Father made us kneel down and offer a prayer to God before he did it. Then he pushed me under the wire that was around the pond and pushed me into the water. They jumped in afterwards and when they were in the water they held on to me, and held me under.

Your father pushed you under the wire; not your mother too?
They both did, sir.

Continuing, Norman said: I sank under the water and on coming to the top I felt someone clinging to me, but I freed myself, and as I can swim a little bit I swam to the bank. I could hardly see Mummy. I kicked off my boots and waded into the pond as far as I could to try and get Mummy. I got hold of her, but she was too heavy to pull. I tried to pull her out but had to give up. I returned to the bank and fell down. I do not know how long I stayed there, but I got up and rushed towards the road, where I stopped a motor-van.

The Deputy-Coroner: How long before you left home did you have any idea that this was going to happen?

Witness: About a quarter of an hour. Daddy wrote a note and left it in Mother's handbag. I think the policeman has got it.

At this point a brown leather handbag was handed in. Its contents included a letter, which was perused by the Deputy-Coroner, but was not read publicly.

"They wrote the note and told me what they were going to do," Norman said in reply to a further question.

The Deputy-Coroner: Nothing has happened to cause this awful tragedy that you know of?

Witness: I do not think there is anything else. My father has been in receipt of sick pay.

The Verdict

The Deputy-Coroner said he had come to the conclusion that both Walter Wilfred Barter and Edith Barter took their own lives, the cause of death being drowning, and that they drowned themselves while not being of sound mind. "That is my verdict," he added. "This case has caused me a great deal of anxiety. I am not going any further afield than the events of August 25th (Saturday), which coupled with Mr. Barter's illness led up to this tragedy.

In my opinion his serious illness and incapacity of the spine - no-one knows until they have had experience of it what an injury to the spine means - have contributed to that state of mind in which the man persuaded himself to take his own life. I feel confident that he would not have done so, with an only child of 14 years of age to leave behind, if he had been of sound mind and body. As to his wife I can only say that she was so feeble-minded as to follow her husband and therefore was of unsound mind".

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