

## **INQUEST – first part**

### **Death Secret Of Locked Room Recluse Sisters Explain**

**July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1938 - Gazette**

### **Mother's Body Kept Nearly Three Months**

“My mother used to say she had a horror of passing away and being shut up in a box and put under the ground with insects. We wanted to keep her always. We did not do anyone any harm.”

This explanation of why the body of Mrs. Florence Matilda Ward was preserved for nearly three months in a padlocked room at Homefield, Minnis Road, Birchington, was given to the Margate Coroner (Mr S. J. Wilson Price) by Miss Beatrice Ward, the dead woman's elder daughter, when the inquest was opened at Margate Town Hall on Monday.

Mrs. Ward and her two daughters lived a secluded life at 'Homefield' for thirty years, and on April 21<sup>st</sup> Mrs. Ward, whose age is unknown, died after an illness of six weeks.

On Tuesday last week Mr. David Hutchings, who had worked for them for years, entered a room that was normally kept padlocked and saw the body. Evasive replies had been given to him when he had inquired about Mrs. Ward.

### **Reason for Seclusion**

Both daughters gave evidence at the inquest, at which one of them attributed their secluded life to the fact that she was once nearly run over by a motor car.

The two women were brought to Court in a taxi with drawn blinds. Dressed in black 'from hats to shoes' they stared about them with wondering eyes as they were ushered into the Court Chamber, where the inquiry was held. Small though it seems to others, the Town Hall must have been the biggest and most imposing building they had entered since childhood thirty years ago.

Well spoken and quick to appreciate the questions addressed to them, there was nothing extraordinary in their appearance beyond the unnatural pallor of a sunless life.

Just before the inquest opened Miss Beatrice Ward stepped from her seat at the back of the Court and confronted the newspaper reporters. “If you put anything in the papers about us I will have you all up” she said.

“I think you had better sit down,” said the Coroner.

### **Doctor's Story**

The first witness was Dr. Alan M. Bowie, of Birchington. He related how Mr. Hutchings came to see him on Tuesday last week and asked him to go to Homefield. He seemed distressed, “I entered the house with him,” said Dr. Bowie. “I fancy he had a key, but at any rate, he let me in. I there saw the Misses Ward, and the elder sister (Miss Beatrice) told me they had concealed the death because of her mother's wishes. Miss Beatrice gave me the time of death as six a.m. on April 21<sup>st</sup>, and told me her mother had been ill in bed for

some weeks previously. She said that finally her mother became very weak and refused to eat. I fancy she must have been ill six weeks, for Miss Ward said her mother always answered the door, but had not done so for that time."

### **Padlocked Room**

"I then went upstairs with Mr. Hutchings and entered a padlocked front room. A bed against the wall was piled high with bedclothes and several sheets of brown paper. I removed the paper, blankets, sheets and pillows, and underneath found the body of an elderly woman. It was obvious that she had been dead some time. I told the daughters that I would have to inform the coroner."

Dr. Bowie went on to say that later he examined the body at the Borough Mortuary. It was not possible to carry out a detailed post mortem examination. He found no sign of external violence, but did not think it possible to say the cause of death was beyond natural causes.

The Coroner: "I am not suggesting otherwise, but can you rule out poison or anything like that?"

Witness: "I don't think one could. I just cannot say."

With her solicitor, Mr. Malcolm Borg, beside her, Miss Beatrice Sarah Greatrex Ward, the elder daughter, was given a seat opposite the Coroner, and was shown how to take the oath. She gave her address as 4 Westfield Road, Birchington<sup>1</sup>, and stated that until a week ago she lived at 'Homefield', Minnis Road.

The Coroner: "Do you know how long you lived there?"

Witness: "We went to 'Homefield' on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1908 – in the evening.

### **Other Names**

Asked whether her mother sometimes used other names, witness said she used the name of Mrs. J. Morris in sending for parcels from shops. "It was because at these shops, if you do not pay on the nail, you never get your goods," witness replied when asked why the other name was used. "Then I found the parcels did not come quick enough, and took the name of Mrs. Atkins. My sister took the name of Mrs. Atwill, so we knew which parcels were for which. My mother only used the name of Mrs. J. Morris, and only used that in ordering parcels."

Coroner: "Do you know your mother's age?"

Witness: "No. She was very reticent about ages, and I never knew what it was". Later she explained that her mother did not have birthdays, or anything like that, and that they never talked about ages.

"Did you know your father's name?"

"John Ward, so far as I know."

"Did you know his occupation?" – "He was an independent gentleman, so far as I know."

"Where have you got the information that his name was John, and that he was independent?" – "That is what Mrs. Ward told us."

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<sup>1</sup> The numbering for the road was only for houses on the north side as there were none on the south side for many years. The house is now number 8.

### **Saw Father in A Cab**

Further questioned, she said she remembered seeing her father in a four-wheeled cab in London when she was very small, about six or seven years old. So far as she knew he never came to Birchington. She believed they had a house in London, but did not know the address and had never heard her mother mention it. She thought he died at Brighton in 1895.

Interrupting the Coroner's questions, Miss Ward asked whether they had anything to do with the case.

"Yes," replied the Coroner. "I have to register the death, and I want to know your mother's name and your father's name and occupation."

"If it is relevant to this case, that is all right," said Miss Ward.

She went on to say that her mother died on April 21<sup>st</sup>. She had influenza two or three times, and it left her very weak. She stayed in bed, but, although she got up again, she never seemed to recover properly. Miss Ward told the Coroner that the worst of her mother's influenza attacks was in 1894, and the last was late last year.

The Coroner: "Was she ill just before she died?"

Witness: "Very ill indeed. She must have gone to bed about March 12<sup>th</sup>. She said no doctor."

### **Did Not Like Doctors**

"Why didn't you get a doctor?" –

"We seemed to be doing all that we could, and could not see that a doctor would be able to do more. She did not seem to be in any pain, and she did not like doctors."

"Did you suggest to her about having a doctor?" –

"No. It never occurred to us to have a doctor."

Witness said her mother never seemed to eat very much, and eventually turned right against food. She died in the position in which Dr. Bowie found her, resting against pillows with her knees slightly up. All the time she was ill she was in a small back room.

The Coroner: "Why did you not have her buried?"

Witness: "Because she used to say she had a horror of passing away and being shut in a box under the ground with insects. We knew she would not like it and tried to stop it and keep her."

"Was that the only reason?" –

"That was all - because she had such a horror of it."

"After death did she remain in that room all the time?" –

"No. She was in that room until July 2<sup>nd</sup>, when we took her out of it into the small front room where Dr Bowie found her. Miss Gertrude and I did that.

Miss Ward excitedly protested when the Coroner asked whether anyone helped them. "Do you think I would go and get outside help, if I didn't want it to be known?" she said.

### **Reporters' Notes**

Noticing that reporters were taking notes, she demanded to know whether they were to put anything in the newspapers.

The Coroner said, "That is not for me to say."

"If they do, I will have them all in Court and summon the whole lot. I notice that some have sense and are not taking notes."

Asked by the Coroner whether Mr. Hutchings knew about her mother's death, Miss Ward said he knew nothing about it.

The Coroner, "Did he ask any questions?"

Witness, "He bothered me to know where Mrs War was and why she didn't talk to him. He made himself a regular nuisance."

"What did you tell him?"

"I kept on putting him off. If the weather was fine, I said it was better for everybody, and if it was bad, I said it was bad for everybody. He thought she could not be well."

"Did you tell him she was ill?" "No. Sometimes I said she was asleep."

"Did you keep the door of the back bedroom locked?"

"Of course I did. I had the key right enough."

Questioned about Mr Hutchings services, Miss Ward said he was doing the spring cleaning, as he had done for many years. He would do no more work in the house after finding the body. She mentioned that she had fresh boarding put in where rats had eaten holes in the woodwork. Mr. Hutchings had a man named Spain to help him.

### **Had Left the House**

The Coroner: "Have you ever gone out of the house at all?"

Witness: "Yes. Of course I had."

"Within the last year?" –

"Yes, several times."

"When did you go out?" –

"I went out in the evening."

"Never during the day?" –

"I cannot say never. I have been out sometimes during the day."

"I would like to know why you went out in the evening. Was it always after dark?" –

"No. In the summer it does not get dark until 10 or 10.30 p.m., and I would not want to go out at that time of night."

"You rather cut yourselves off from the world and led a secluded life?"

"What do you call secluded?"

"You did not go out very much?" –

"Not very much"

### **Simply Detestable**

"Had you no friends in the town?" –

"I am told that we have unknown friends. The common people are simply detestable and I did not know the upper classes. They may be better. I visited Mr. and Mrs. Hutchings, but there was no one else worth knowing in Birchington of our class. Mrs. Curtis was very kind."

"I am wondering how it was that you never got to know anyone?" –

"No one came to visit us, and as we came last it was not our place to go poking round."

"Did your mother want you not to go out?" –

“One day I was nearly run over by a motor car, and she did not want me to go out.”

“So that was why?” –

“That was chiefly the cause.”

“Did your mother go out?” –

“Not very much.”

### **Threw Stones**

Questioned about the recent removal of wire netting outside the house, Miss Ward said there was no longer need of it. It was put up because an article published in a Sunday newspaper on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1932, caused people to come to the house and throw stones. “They made us shut ourselves in a kind of prison.”

The Coroner: “Why was it not necessary to have wire netting now?”

Witness: “Because they had left off throwing stones, and Mr. Hutchings said we did not need it now. He said that if they did it again we could put it up.”

Asked to explain how the financial business of the family was transacted, witness said all Mrs. Ward’s money was in companies, and when the dividends were sent to her she signed them and sent them to Lloyds Bank. Mrs. Ward drew cheques either for herself or for trades people, and had them changed.

The Coroner: “What happened after her death? What did you do about money?”

### **No More Money**

Witness: “I paid the bills and took on like Mrs. Ward, but I could not get any more money, apart from what she had already drawn.”

Asked whether that meant that there was a lot of money in the house, witness said there was only £3 10s, and a box of coppers. She explained how it was disposed of, mentioning that a man was to have 16s. or 17s. a week to shut the gate.

The Coroner: “How did you get the money?”

Witness: “Mrs. Ward told me that if I looked in the cheque book I would find plenty of money to carry on. I found cheques made out to trades people, and got the money changed.”

“If you had not had these cheques signed by your mother you would not have been able to buy things?” –

“No. There would have been no money.”

### **No Will**

“Do you know where your mother’s will was?” –

“She made no will.”

“Do you know whether, if it became known she had died, her money would come to you?” –

“No. I believe it would go back to her father’s family. I do not believe any will come to us at all.”

The Coroner (to Miss Ward): “Was that why you did not want it to become known?” –

“No. It was because she had a horror of being shut away. That was the only reason.”

She added that she and her sister had money of their own in the care of Trustees, but it had not been given to them.

The Coroner suggested that that might be because the Trustees could not be sure who they were, but Miss Ward insisted that there was no question of the Trustees not being able to satisfy themselves.

The Coroner: "Have you been able to let them have a birth certificate?"

Witness: "We have not got one, but I think maybe Mr. Borg will be able to find us one. He seems very clever," she added.

Questioned about the management of the house, she said it was in the hands of her mother until the middle of February, when she [Miss Beatrice] took it on. Two men did the shopping, and another man shut the gate. It was not necessary for her to go out to the shops.

### **Burial Wish**

The Coroner: "Did your mother express some wish about burial?"

Witness: "She said that if she had to be buried, let it be at Hove, near her best friend."

Witness was allowed to write the name of the friend, and said he was a physician who died in 1925. No letters passed between his widow and Mrs. Ward.

Answering the Chief Constable (Mr. W. Palmer), Miss Ward said normally her mother answered the door and dealt with outside affairs.

The Chief Constable: "Did your mother fall downstairs one day and sprain her foot?"

Witness: "No."

"Did she tell you she had?" –

"She told me and others that, to account for her weakness and why she should not come to the door, but she did not actually do so."

### **"I Forgot"**

Explaining how Mr. Hutchings came to find the body, Miss Ward said:

"Mr. Hutchings, who had the right to go in and out as he liked, walked in and went upstairs. I forgot that the door was unlocked. Previously it was locked all the time Mr. Hutchings and Mr. Spain were there. When they went out to dinner I unlocked the door to air the room. I fixed the padlock to the door."

The Chief Constable: "Why didn't you register the death?"

Witness: "Because I did not want anybody to know. I did not want her taken away. I wanted to keep her always. There was no harm in it. We did no one any harm."

In further reply to the Chief Constable, witness said she believed her father died in a nursing home at Brighton. She could not recollect her mother ever having a doctor.

The Coroner called Miss Gertrude Victoria Greatrex Ward to the witness stand, but asked her only one question.

"How many people knew that you mother had died?" he said.

"Just I and Miss Beatrice," replied Miss Gertrude Ward. "If we had told anyone else, we could not keep her as long as we could."

The Chief Constable shouted some questions in the ear of Henry Spain, the next witness, who gave his age as nearly eighty and said he lived in Gas Row, Birchington.

He knew the late Mrs. Ward for forty or fifty years, he said, but never saw either of her daughters until recently. He had never seen Miss Gertrude Ward before the inquest, and had not seen Mrs. Ward since he was asked by Mr. Hutchings to go to the house to work. He saw no padlocked doors.

The Coroner said owing to another engagement he was unable to complete the inquest that evening. He suggested that he should take the evidence of Mr. Hutchings on the following day, but as this was inconvenient to the witness the Coroner announced a formal adjournment for a week, saying he would arrange a date.

### **The Funeral**

The funeral of Mrs. Ward is taking place at Hove today (Friday)[23 July 1938].

The two daughters went to Hove on Tuesday and succeeded in locating the grave of a friend, mentioned in evidence at the inquest.



"Homefield", 8 Minnis Road



The photo above shows the kitchen being renovated.

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The photo on the left shows one of the bedrooms being modernised.

