

DEATH SECRET
Kept by Daughters for Three Months
July 16th 1938 – Gazette – General report

Body in Birchington House

Police officers called to Homefield, Minnis Road, Birchington, on Tuesday found in a bedroom, the body of Mrs Florence Matilda Ward, eighty four years old widow, and learned that it had been preserved by her two daughters, with whom she had lived in strict seclusion, since she died on April 21st, nearly three months ago.

For thirty years Mrs. Ward and her two daughters barred themselves from the world, and their gloomy, detached villa in Minnis Road, with windows painted against prying eyes, was a local mystery which Birchington grew to accept and respect.

Spoke Through Letter Box

Very few people had ever seen the three women, for their only exercise was taken at night in the walled garden of their home, and usually they communicated with traders by writing, speaking through the letter box or through the agency of a local friend who undertook errands for them. Neighbours never saw them.

One of the small number of people admitted to the mystery house was Mr. David George Hutchings, of 5 Westfield Road, who has been doing odd jobs for the family for twenty three years, and it was through Mr. Hutchings that the death of Mrs. Ward came to light.

Padlocked Room

Mr. Hutchings had been engaged on cleaning and decorating the house with the help of a man named Spain, and on Tuesday afternoon he noticed that the door of an upstairs room, padlocked whenever he had seen it previously was unfastened. Entering the room, he saw the shrivelled body of Mrs. Ward, dressed in a nightgown, on a bed under sheets of paper. There were squares of camphor around the body.

Mr. Hutchings immediately communicated with Dr. A. M. Bowie, who informed the Police. Sergeant May and Police Constable Giggins, went to the house with Mr. Hutchings, in the evening to take the body to the mortuary. The ambulance men found their way to the bedroom by the light of a candle.

Those who went to the house on Tuesday – the first strangers to be admitted for thirty years – found it as extraordinary as its occupants. It was almost bare of furniture, and in cupboards were a large number of brown paper parcels. In one room were a number of seatless chairs.

The daughters, Miss Beatrice Sarah Greaterex Ward and Miss Gertrude Victoria Greaterex Ward, described as ghastly pale and dressed in black, were escorted to Mr. Hutchings' home, where they are remaining.

An oil lamp was burning in the ground floor front room, and the Misses Ward would only leave the house when they were promised that it would be kept burning.

Neither woman knows her age, but the elder, Miss Beatrice Ward, believes she is forty three. She can barely remember her father, but thinks he died at Eastbourne before they came to Birchington in 1908. She stated that

her mother was taken ill about last Christmas, and kept to her bed from March 12th until she died on April 21st.

Natural Causes

An autopsy held by Dr. Bowie yesterday (Thursday) is understood to have confirmed that Mrs. Ward died from natural causes, but in the circumstances the Margate Coroner (Mr. S. J. Wilson Price) will hold an inquest. This is likely to take place tomorrow.

Birchington is agog with theories to account for the secluded life led by the women for three decades, but all that is known is that Mrs. Ward had a horror of motor cars and feared that she would be killed by one. Whether she felt that by venturing into the street or allowing her daughters to do so she would endanger their lives can only be conjectured.

But whatever reason there may have been for their retirement, it was a harmless indulgence which gave offence to no-one, and Birchington people deeply resented the occasional publicity given to their lives by sensational newsmongers.

The family were generous with monetary gifts, whenever cases of distress in the village came to their notice, and trades people had no cause for dissatisfaction in their dealings with 'Homefield'.

Mrs. Ward and her daughters did not spend the whole of the thirty years at Homefield. At one time they had another house nearby, and old residents recall that they were driven from it by a fire. Their life in the other house was similarly secluded.

It is also within memory of some residents that the three women were accustomed to take night bicycle rides.

Lately some change has been apparent in the exterior of Homefield. Wire netting has been removed from the windows and the house has been painted.