

**THE MYSTERIOUS DROWNING CASE – OPEN VERDICT**

The inquest on the stoker, David ROBERTSON, whose body was found floating at sea on Friday, was held at the “Elephant and Castle,” Green Street, on Saturday, by the Island Coroner (Mr, E. F. BLAKE). Mr. E. J. HARVEY, Admiralty Law Agent, watched the case on behalf of the naval authorities. Mr. Robert WINDSOR was chosen foreman of the jury.

Robert HEWARD, fisherman, High Street, Ryde, said that on Friday, at 9.40 a.m., he found the body of deceased floating near the Sands Head Buoy. It had evidently been in the water a long time. Witness brought it ashore.

George BLACK, a stoker on H. M. S. “Formidable” said deceased’s name was ROBERTSON. He had been a stoker on the same ship as witness. On October 2nd they met, both being on leave. Witness had had leave before deceased. Deceased had had five or six days before then. Witness met him accidentally at the Sailors’ Home, Queen Street, Portsea, about midday on October 2nd. They were in a public-house and remained about half-an-hour. They went as far as the Commercial Road, Landport, and went into another public-house. Here witness left deceased, and went to get some dinner. He was absent about ten minutes, and on returning found deceased still there. They had another drink and came out. They got on one of the electric cars and went to Southsea. There ROBERTSON proposed that they should have a boat. They did not know where they were going. They got a boat at Southsea Pier, and started to row out round the “Creasy” lying at Spithead. When they got there deceased said “We are as near one side as the other.” Witness said “Do you know Ryde?” and deceased replied “Yes, I know all about Ryde.” Witness said he was not particular, and they started to row for Ryde.

The Coroner. – How far from Ryde were you when you missed him out of the boat? – About half-amile. Did he fall over, or jump over? – Fell over. What did you do? – I stood in the stern of the boat and waited for him to come up again. Did he rise? – He never reappeared. Then you went on to Ryde? – I must have done. Don’t you remember? – I remember nothing after that. Were you so intoxicated that you did not know what you were doing? – I beg your pardon; I was intoxicated when I woke up in the morning. Was deceased as bad as you when he got on the boat? – I can’t say anything about him. He was a man who could not stand on his legs when he was drunk. When you got to Ryde did you get out of the boat? – I don’t remember getting to Ryde. When did you come to your senses? – Next morning. Where did you find yourself? – in the Sailor’s Home, Portsea. Whom did you first tell that you had missed deceased from the boat? – I was on the road to Southsea when I met one of my “old ships.” You told him you missed this man out of the boat the previous day? -Yes. You don’t remember how you got back to Portsmouth? – I remember nothing about it.

The Foreman: Don’t you know that you tied the boat onto Ryde Pier? – I remember nothing about it. Mr HARVEY: Did you quarrel in the boat? – There was no quarrel whatever. How long had you known deceased? – Two or three years.

Edward TAIT, Jun., boatman, Southsea, said he was waiting on commission for a boat proprietor on Southsea beach. The two sailors came on the beach about 2.20 p.m. They hired a boat from LOCKYEAR, it was large enough to carry five. They got into it and rowed off.

The Coroner: Were they sober or drunk at the time? – Sober. Did they seem to be able to control the boat? – Yes, they rowed along very fast. The evidence of the man was that he was so drunk that he did not know what he was about. – No, he was not drunk. They were strangers to you? – Yes.

The Foreman: Did they appear to be friendly when they started away? – Yes. They were not inclined to be quarrelsome? – No.

A Juror: Were you near enough to know whether they were sober or not? – Yes.

Mr HARVEY: Did you see them carrying anything? – No. How do you account for the jar being found in the boat? – they could easily carry it without me seeing it.

William SIGRIST, coastguard stationed at Ryde, said he saw the boat attached to Ryde Pier, at 4 p.m., on October 2nd. It was empty, and was made fast to the steps. He did not go into the boat until next morning. He saw some clothes in the boat, a cap, collar, serge frock, pair of shoes and a knife lanyard. There was a half-pint bottle, containing whiskey. It was about one third full. There was also a box of wax matches. On the following morning, finding the boat in the same place, he examined it, thinking the clothes might belong to a deserter from the Navy. He found a liberty ticket pinned inside the cap, bearing the name “D.

ROBERTSON,” and stating that he had leave from October 1 st to October 7th. Witness afterwards saw one of the crew of the steamer that had crossed on the afternoon in question. He stated that he saw the boat about half-a-mile north of Sturbridge Bank. The two men then had their upper clothing off and were both pulling. They seemed rather unsteady, and the captain ordered that they should be given plenty of room. Witness afterwards saw the captain of the steamer, who said that he saw the boat about half-a-mile west of the “Creasy.” One man was on the foremost thwart, pulling in the ordinary way, and the other man was facing him. They were pulling “about ends.” That was about 2.45 p.m.

Dr. Alfred WOODWARD stated that he had examine the body externally that morning. It was very much decomposed. The Coroner: What did you find? – I found two lacerated wounds, one over each eye, and I noticed that the bridge of the nose was fractured. Deceased’s hands were clasped. There was a lacerated wound on the middle finger of the right hand. You cannot tell whether those injuries arose before or after death? – No. You cannot tell whether they were caused by accident or foul play? – No. From his general appearance have you any doubt that deceased died from drowning? – I have no doubt.

The Foreman: Then he does not think it was foul play. The Coroner: He does not say that. It is impossible for him to tell. Dr. WOODWARD said that the body had been in the water too long. The Corner: It is not impossible for a man to fall in the water and then to receive the injuries described? – Certainly, it is common enough. Mr HARVEY: Suppose a man fell and struck his head across the gunwale would it have caused the injuries? - Certainly.

The Coroner, in summing up, said it seemed upon the evidence of the doctor that the only verdict was one of “accidentally drowned.” There was not the slightest doubt that these two men were not in a fit state to go into the boat, although the evidence of the Commission Agent was that they were sober. From the evidence of the man himself it was evident that he was far from sober. The only strange part was that if he were so drunk as he said, they would hardly have thought he could have got away in the boat so well. A Juror pointed out that they had some liquor on board. The Coroner said that only two-thirds of a half-pint of whiskey was gone. That would not be much between two men. In conclusion, the Coroner said that if the Jury had any doubt they would return an open verdict. The Foreman considered that there was insufficient evidence to return anything but an open verdict. A Juror remarked that the boatman must have been very careless to let the men have the boat. The Foreman said he did not think a man so drunk could have tied up the boat and landed on the pier. The Coroner said they were not there to say what happened to the man after he landed on the pier. The pier collector could give no information as to how deceased met his death.

The Jury returned an open verdict

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