

ISLE OF WIGHT OBSERVER Saturday 12 July 1884

SHOCKING DEATH BY BURNING

A reprehensible practice

On Saturday morning a shocking accident occurred at The Bracken, Partlands Avenue, the residence of Mr. H. R. JAMES. It appears that the cook, **Mary Ann MAXWELL**, arose to light the kitchen fire about half-past 7 in the morning. She was a trifle late, and doubtless with the object of hurrying up the kitchen fire and making it burn brisker, poured some paraffin oil from a large can upon the fire. Whether the blaze thereby created caused her to drop the can is not known. At all events its contents exploded, scattering paraffin all over the unfortunate domestic and the kitchen. The poor woman's clothing was soon in a blaze, and her agonised cries soon brought her master on the scene, who extinguished the flames by wrapping his dressing gown round her and pouring water over her. In doing this he received severe burns upon his foot, hand, and head. After swathing the poor woman in oil and cotton wool, he had her removed to the Infirmary, where death terminated her sufferings by the evening.

An inquest was held at the Infirmary on Monday afternoon, before Mr. F. BLAKE, coroner. The jury, of which Mr. E. BRIGGS was the foreman, having reviewed the body, the following evidence was taken:

Henry Ridley JAMES, whose foot and hand were bandaged, deposed – I live at The Bracken, Partlands Avenue. The deceased was my cook. About half-past 7 on Saturday morning I was awoke by the sounds of a dull explosion and the fall of some tin utensil on the kitchen floor, followed by cries of distress. I rushed down to the kitchen. I found the kitchen a mass of flames, and the deceased was walking up and down the kitchen in flames from head to foot. I had my dressing gown over my arm (I did not stop to put it on), and this I threw round her and wrapped her in it. That extinguished the flames round her body. I poured water over the rest of her body. I then called loudly for scissors and cotton wool. The housemaid next came down and I sent her for a carriage to take deceased to the Infirmary. Deceased was removed there. Further service came before that, and her clothes were cut off, and she was covered with cotton wool and oil as well as we could do it. She was perfectly conscious. She tried to speak, but the only thing she said was “I hope you are not angry with me”. After she was attended to I returned to the kitchen with water to extinguish the flames. I found on the upper part of the hot plate the portion of the paraffin tin produced; the other part was on the floor of the kitchen. She had evidently been pouring paraffin on the fire, and the can had burst, saturating her and everything else with lighted paraffin. I should think she poured the paraffin on the fire to make it burn up, I was not a witness of that, but I should think that was the case. There was a piece of linoleum in front of the fire and that was covered with paraffin. The kitchen carpet was saturated with it also and burning. Deceased had been with me about three years. I never knew she so used paraffin but it seems it was often done. Other people in the town, it seems, so use it; it is a quick fire lighter. I should think there was a gallon of paraffin in the can, and it had burst, sending the paraffin over everything. My injuries are from putting out the flames.

The Coroner said he thought very great credit was due to Mr JAMES for the promptitude he displayed. He was sure nothing could have been done quicker.

Mr JAMES. – I should think it was all over in a minute.

Mr John Walker HOPKINS, house surgeon at the Royal I.W. Infirmary, deposed – Deceased was brought to the Infirmary about 8 o'clock on Saturday morning. She was extremely burned all over the body except a small portion of the chest and back. The clothes had been burnt and cut off her. She was conscious but very much exhausted and in a state of collapse. She could not talk owing to her mouth having been burnt. Some of the paraffin had got into her mouth. She was in such a state that I was morally certain she would die when I first saw her. She died about quarter past eight in the

evening. She died of congestion of the lungs and brains, owing to the burns. She did not die of the shock. The face was burned, and a good part of the hair burned off too.

The Coroner said although there were no witnesses of the sad occurrence, there could be no doubt the accident occurred in the manner which had been described by Mr JAMES, and that the deceased, for some reason or other, was trying to make the fire burn brisker by pouring on paraffin, a most reprehensible practice, which he could hardly believe was general.

A juryman thought deceased must have put the can on the hot plate. It could not have exploded through simply pouring some on the fire.

Mr JAMES thought the plate, as the fire was just lit, could hardly have been hot.

The Coroner said there was no doubt as to there having been an explosion of the can, which must have been an accident.

A verdict of "Accidental death" was returned.
