



# CORONERS INQUESTS



## INQUEST

Howell and district was greatly shocked on Wednesday week to hear of the tragic bereavement which had befallen a prominent and respected agricultural family which had resided for many years in this locality.

On Tuesday evening Mrs Florence Bessie Drake, the wife of Mr Cyril John Drake, formerly of Newhouse Farm, Lydlinch, and now of Mitchell's Farm, Seend, Melksham, was found dead from a gunshot wound in a field on Cornford Hill Farm, Holwell, occupied by her father Mr Herbert John Foot, with whom she had been staying on holiday.

Mrs Drake, who was thirty one years of age, came for a holiday first to her brother, Mr Jack Foot, and afterwards came to stay with her father. She expressed her intention on Tuesday afternoon of going out to shoot a rabbit. When she did not return to tea her father went to look for her, and found her lying dead in a hollow of a field about 350 yards from the farm house. The upper part of the head had been blown away by a gunshot wound and a twelve bore double barrelled gun was beside her.

The Coroner for North Dorset (Mr W H Creech) held an enquiry, without a jury, at the farm on Tuesday evening.

The husband told the Coroner that his wife had been in pretty good health, but she came to Holwell for a holiday. He received a cheerful letter from her on Saturday morning in which she said she was coming back to make his cheese if could not sell his milk.

The father of the deceased said his daughter had not been well of late and came to Holwell to recruit her health. She was depressed when she came home, but seemed better a day or two after. On Monday morning she had been out fishing, and after dinner she asked if she could have the gun and shoot a rabbit. He said "I shouldn't. You'll shoot yourself". She replied "I can shoot", and knowing that she could and had done a good deal of shooting when at Lydlinch he left it at that. When he came back from visiting his son she was not there, and as he had an appointment at Sherborne at 6.30pm he went to look for her. He found her dead in a field by the copse.

In answer to Police Supt Cherrett, witness said his daughter had never threatened to take her life.

Police Constable Peach said Mr Foot reported to him that his daughter had shot herself, and when he went to the field he found her in the hollow, lying on her right side with the gun parallel with the body and the butt, on which her wrist was resting, near her head. There was a spent cartridge in the right barrel. The nearest bush was fifteen yards away from where the body was found. He agreed that it might have been fired at a rabbit.

The Coroner: Was there anything that you saw from which you could say that this was done purposely, or that it was an accident? - Nothing whatever.

Dr B S Hollick, of Sturminster Newton, said Mr Jack Foot called him on the telephone and said his sister had shot herself. When he got there the body was on its back, but inclining to the right side. Witness described the injuries to the head, and said the deceased's right hand was resting on the stock of the gun, which was near the head.

The Coroner: Did you form any theory from the butt being near the head? - It might have been either accidental or purposely. There was no charring of the face.

The Coroner said it seemed to have been assumed that Mrs Drake shot herself. There was nothing up to that point to show that it was deliberate, and he was not going to say so unless he was satisfied.

Mr Jack Foot suggested that having fired the first shot his sister might have put down the gun and walked to see what the effect had been. In picking up the gun again in the long grass it might have gone off and killed her.

Dr Hollick demonstrated with the aid of the gun that it would have been difficult for a woman only about five feet six in height to have held the gun in a position to inflict the injuries he found and at the same time pull the trigger.

The Coroner, doctor and police then went to the spot where the body was found. PC Peach lay down in the position where the body was and other experiments were tried in an endeavour to reconstruct what might have happened.

The Coroner was informed of a conversation which Mrs Baker, the housekeeper, had with the deceased before she left with the gun. This showed that Mrs Drake waited some time for the cows to be brought to the yard as she said they would have disturbed the rabbits, and also that there was a conversation about taking the dog with her.

The Coroner reviewed the evidence and said that it was possible for Mrs Drake to have fired the gun, but in view of what the doctor had said he did not think it was likely. In view of her acts and conversation on the day of the tragedy and all the circumstances attaching to it he was not satisfied that she shot herself. The whole thing was consistent with an accident, and he returned a verdict that she died from a gunshot wound accidentally sustained.

The Coroner expressed his deep sympathy with Mr Foot and the husband and other members of the family, remarks with which Supt Cherrett associated himself.

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