

Death of Donald Biles - killed by a Bull at Week Farm July 1932

by Sam Biles



Donald Biles at the wheel

Horace Henry Biles – known as Donald – was born in 1903, the 4th son of Charles Henry ‘Fred’ Biles and the 2nd son of his 2nd wife Mary. After school he joined his father’s business. He tragically died on Thursday 28th July 1932 aged 29 from injuries sustained in an attack by a Guernsey Bull at Week Farm near Ventnor the previous day. He had been married for less than a year to Dorothy (nee Nicholls) and they lived at Uplands on Forest Road Newport. He was a powerful and capable man well-used to the sometimes hazardous process of transporting livestock by lorry. He was a driver for the Newport Territorials and a member of both the Newport Liberal and IW County Coursing Clubs.

The Deputy Coroner (Francis A. Joyce Esq.) held the inquest promptly on Friday 29th July. Harold Biles who had identified his brother’s body said that his brother “knew as much about the management of beasts as anyone in England.”

On Wednesday 27th July it had been decided that Donald with Robert West who worked for the family, would take a young shorthorn bull from Park Green Farm to Mr Russell’s at Week Farm, between Whitwell & Ventnor, and bring another bull, a 2 year old Guernsey back. Mr Russell had had the Guernsey at Week Farm since September 1931 and it was the 6th bull he had hired from Fred Biles. West drove out to Week Farm with Donald and they were met by Oliver Colenutt, a farm labourer and by James Harper, Mr Russell’s cowman, who declared that the Guernsey bull had never been troublesome. The shorthorn was unloaded and tied up in the cowshed. Donald tied a rope over the horns of the Guernsey and down through its nose ring, he then fixed a lead stick (a pole with a hasp loop on the end commonly used for leading bulls by attaching the hasp to the nose ring)

he released the chain tying the bull to the wall; West took the rope and led the bull away with Donald holding the lead stick

After walking a short distance the bull had put its nose to the ground, lunged forward, throwing the lead stick over its horns and jamming poor Donald up against the wall. He shouted out:

“Catch hold of this rope, the Bull’s killing me!” It charged him several times. Afterwards Donald said “He’s nearly killed me.”

West took the rope and tried to lead the bull out of the cowshed but, as the others were taking Donald out, the bull turned round and rushed back in. They caught the rope; tied the bull up and it became quiet again.

At the inquest West said that “it was all over before you could speak”. They carried Donald into Mr Russell’s house and sent for a Doctor. Donald was later taken over to the Royal County Hospital at Ryde with his brother Harold who had come over to help. At the hospital he was attended upon by Mabel Cooke and Drs Pridmore and Straton who later operated upon him. Donald told Cooke that “He got me against the wall and hit me in the stomach several times. It’s a wonder he didn’t kill me”. The operation revealed that the muscles of the abdominal wall were spilt right across and that his spleen had ruptured. Donald died at the hospital at 3.30 am the following morning Thursday 28th July 1932.

The Coroner wondered if the new bull had caused the old one to behave as it did and Harold agreed saying “it was quite likely that the older bull had smelt the younger one.”

The coroner said that it was a sad case where an experienced young man had met with a tragic death. He had taken appropriate precautions to no avail. It was a death that did not often happen; they had enjoyed immunity from that form of accident in the Isle of Wight for a great many years. He recorded a verdict that the deceased had died from injuries inflicted by a bull, adding that no blame attached to anyone.

Donald Biles’ funeral took place on Sunday 31st July at St Johns Church, Newport at 3:30 pm. Rev WH Mackinnon officiated and at the burial thereafter. The County Press reported: “Seldom have there been more demonstrations of respect and sympathy at an Island funeral than those which attended the obsequies at Newport afternoon of Mr Donald Biles”. Every seat and all available standing room was occupied. There must have been at least 800 people in the Church and about 180 floral tributes which covered the coffin and the hearse and filled two motor lorries. Crowds of people watched the cortege to Mount Joy Cemetery, Carisbrooke in spite of heavy rain and there was another large gathering around the grave. Farmers, dairymen and business people attended. Flags were at half-mast on the Liberal and Conservative Clubs and there had been a two minute silence at Newport Greyhound Stadium¹ the previous evening, where Donald had run dogs in the past. The County Press listed many of the mourners. The farmers were listed by name and farm and it reads as a veritable ‘Who’s Who’ of the pre-war Island farming community. His grave is marked by a large granite cross next to an identical one marking that of his parents. It also accommodates the remains of his wife Dorothy who survived him by 53 years until 1985.

Note 1. The Newport Greyhound Stadium referred to was probably at the 1930’s Newport Football Ground, located to the east of Church Litten - approximately where Marks & Spencers/Morrisons car park are (2018).



The coffin leaving St John's Church



On the way to the grave at Carisbrooke Cemetery



Floral tributes at Carisbrooke Cemetery