

Charles Edwin Brown

Isle of Wight County Press – 2 April 1927

ISLAND CLIFF TRAGEDY.

NEWPORT MAN'S STRANGE SUICIDE.

"BEATEN BY THE HORSES."

After being reported as missing from his home at Clifford-street, Newport, since the previous Friday afternoon, the body of Charles Edwin Brown, 33, a married man with one child, was found lying at the foot of the 150ft. cliff at Walpan, Chale, on Sunday morning. The deceased had been a member of the male nursing staff of the County Mental Hospital at Whitecroft for 11 years.

The Deputy Coroner (Francis A. Joyce, Esq.) held an inquiry into the sad occurrence at Walpan Farm, to which the body had been removed, on Monday evening. P.S. Snow (Ventnor) and P.C. Fay were the police officers present.

Grace Marian Brown, the widow, said she resided at 9 Clifford-street, Newport. Her husband was 33 years of age. On Friday morning of last week her husband returned off night duty at the Mental Hospital, reaching home about 7.40 a.m. He had breakfast and then went to bed. Witness called him about mid-day and they went out together with the baby. Witness then left deceased to go to her mother's for the afternoon. Deceased said he was going to have a drink and then return home, and that he would then either return to bed or listen-in until he had to go on duty again after tea. Witness returned about 4.45 p.m., and finding the door unlocked presumed her husband was in bed. She took a cup of tea to his room and then found he was not in the house. As that was strange and she heard nothing more of him during the evening she reported the matter to the police.

At this point the Coroner produced a note written on a rough piece of paper found on the body (in an envelope addressed to the police), which read "The horses have beaten me. For my family and those I owe money to I am sorry. Good-bye all. – Charlie."

The Coroner: Do you recognise that as being the handwriting of your husband? – Yes. – Q. You are quite sure? – Yes. – Q. Do you know whether your husband has been in the habit of backing horses? – No, sir. I know nothing at all of his business. – Q. Was he bothered about debts owing to other people? – That I cannot say. He has never told me anything about it. We have always lived very happily together, and I don't owe one farthing to any one. I cannot understand it. – Q. Has your husband been in poor health? – Yes, very poor. He has frequently complained of his head, and he recently had an attack of influenza. He also suffered with his heart and had been rather quiet and depressed of late. The tablets produced (found in his pockets) were those he always carried to take when he had a heart attack. He had always been a devoted husband, and she could offer no explanation for his act, except his health. He knew that locality well because his parents formerly kept the New Inn at Chale-green, and during the early part of the war he was amongst the troops guarding the coast there.

Dr. W. J. A. Erskine, medical superintendent of the County Mental Hospital, Whitecroft, gave evidence of identification and said deceased had been a male nurse at the Hospital since 1916. He had never been in the slightest trouble with regard to his work; in fact, he was a very good official, who held the medico-psychological certificate. Asked if he knew whether he made a practice of backing horses, Dr. Erskine said he did not know personally, but as it was Grand National day when he was missed he had made inquiries amongst his friends at the Hospital, who informed him that he "put very little on."

The Coroner said that bore out the evidence of records of bets found in his pockets. According to those he had only 6d. each way on three horses. Other slips showed that there was no stake of more than 1s., which was very humble betting. He could have understood a man who was betting heavily, far beyond his means, being affected by the disappointment of losing, but in that case the commitments were very small.

Dr. Erskine: But still it would be disappointing.

Mrs. Brown said deceased had constantly complained of tiredness and of his head, and in her opinion that was the real cause. She knew of no money matters to worry him.

Albert George Betts, a seaman, living next door to deceased, said he met him in Nine-acres, going towards Elm-grove, at 3.55 on Friday afternoon. Witness asked him the winner of the National, and the deceased told him, but said he did not know the second. They had no further conversation and he passed on. He thought deceased was looking rather serious and depressed. He took it that he had heard the news of the result of the race on the wireless.

Mrs. Brown said he had evidently used the wireless set. She got it ready for him before she went out, and it was not put back in its usual place, although he had disconnected the wires.

The witness Betts added, in reply to the Coroner's question, that he did not know if the deceased was in the habit of betting.

The Coroner: Well, it seems to me to be a most inadequate cause for suicide; if he had been deeply involved with bookmakers it would have been a different matter.

Alfred John Perkins, cowman of Walpan Farm, said when driving the cows on the cliffs about 9.15 on Sunday morning he looked over and saw deceased's body and informed the police.

P.C. Fay said the body was lying at the foot of the cliffs, where there was about 150ft. sheer drop. The head was lying pressed against a rock. He had evidently been dead some time. He found the note, slips, and other articles produced in the pockets. There was no sign of the deceased's hat, and a search had failed to discover it.

Dr. R. Armstrong, of Blackgang, described the injuries, which included a fracture of the base of the skull, and said death must have been instantaneous.

P.C. Fay said he had made inquiries, but had failed to find any one in the village who saw the deceased.

The Coroner said deceased evidently walked out from Newport that evening and ended his life. It was a very sad case. His first impression, based on the note he left behind, was that he had been betting beyond his means and had become deeply involved, but having regard to the statements of his wife and the very small sums recorded on the slips he could not say that was the case. The bets were such as any man in his circumstances might make on a national event and could in no sense be described as gambling on a serious scale. It might be said that if a man gambled largely and beyond his means it was perhaps evidence of defective reasoning power; that the man had little mental stability and would be unlikely to have sufficient fortitude to withstand the results of his rash speculations, but that scarcely applied in that case, as the bets were very humble ones. He did not think such a minor disappointment as he sustained over the result of the race would alone be sufficient to unhinge his mind. He rather thought the primary cause was his bad state of health. He was evidently worried about it and became depressed. The note proved conclusively that the act was his own, and he therefore returned a verdict that he committed suicide by throwing himself over the cliff and that he was temporarily of unsound mind at the time.

The Coroner added a word of sympathy with the widow, and this was endorsed on behalf of the officials and staff of the mental Hospital by Dr. Erskine.

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The funeral took place on Wednesday afternoon at Carisbrooke Cemetery, the Rev. J. W. F. Wayet (rector of Gatcombe and chaplain at the Mental Hospital) officiating. Dr. W. J. A. Erskine (medical superintendent), Mr. J. H. Green (clerk), Mr. H. C. Cross (farm bailiff), Mr. J. W. Russell (head nurse) and a number of male and female nurses from the County Mental Hospital followed, four of the deceased's fellow nurses (Messrs. Sykes, Symons, Kilmartin, and Davies) acting as bearers. In addition to relatives those present included Mr. B. Sanders, C.C. (representing the Mental Deficiency Committee of the County Council) and Mr. A. J. Symons. There were a number of beautiful floral tributes, including one from the officers and staff of the Mental Hospital and one from neighbours in Clifford-street.

Transcription by Bob Jacobs for the Friends of Newport and Carisbrooke Cemeteries,

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