

## **Elizabeth Ellis**

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### **CAMP HILL SENSATION**

#### **SUICIDE OF PRISON OFFICER'S WIFE**

Early on Wednesday morning a pathetic suicide occurred at a prison officer's quarters, No 11 Camp Hill, Parkhurst, the victim being Elizabeth Ellis, aged 45, wife of Prison-Officer James Henry Ellis. The deceased, who lived very happily with her husband, had been in failing health for some months, and suffered greatly from mental depression. When her husband awoke at 6.30 on Wednesday morning he was alarmed to find his wife was missing from the bed-room in which both had been sleeping. He searched in vain for a clue to her whereabouts until he saw her cloak, hat, shoes, and a candlestick near the manhole cover (which was closed) on top of a large rain-water tank in the garden. He at once feared the worst, but on lifting the lid could see nothing of the deceased in the tank, which was nearly full of water. He ran to other officers for assistance, and, the water in the tank having been lowered, Officer Grist entered, and, with aid of an electric torch, found the body of deceased at the far end of the tank. Deceased was in her night attire. She had used a coal hammer and chopper to raise the manhole cover, and, after going down through the small opening (which was only 2ft. by 1½ft.) she had pulled the cover back into position, apparently bruising her right hand in so doing. As it was not known how long deceased had been in the tank artificial respiration was continued, under the direction of Officer White, for an hour after the finding of the body.

The inquest was held by the Deputy Coroner (F. A. Joyce, Esq.), at the Camp Hill Officers Recreation-hut on Thursday, when Police-Inspector Evans was present, P.C. Chisholm being coroner's officer.

Officer James Henry Ellis said his wife had been in very bad health for some time. She had been ailing since about last Christmas, and had been constantly receiving medical attention, seven doctors altogether having seen her. Dr. Craig having said that deceased must have someone with her, Miss Wright had been looking after her for about a month, and on Tuesday Mrs. Hodge came specially from Liverpool and took the place of Miss Wright when the latter had to go away. On Tuesday evening he put his wife to bed at about 8 o'clock, and he retired at about 11 p.m. He occupied the same room, though not the same bed as his wife. They had a conversation after he went to bed, and he was talking with deceased till about midnight. She kept on saying to him "Are you asleep?"; finally she said to him "Turn over pet, and go to sleep; I shan't disturb you to-night. I am going to turn over myself." Then they said "Good night" and went to sleep. At about 6.30 a.m. when he awoke, he found deceased was not in her bed, the clothes of which were just turned back, but not thrown right back. He hurriedly hunted through every room in the house for deceased, and also looked under the bed, as she was some times in the habit of hiding. For instance, when she heard him coming she would get down beside the bed.—The Coroner: You were on good terms with your wife? —Witness (emotionally): Oh yes. He went down stairs and looked into the coal-house, the w. c., and the outhouse, and thinking she might have gone to neighbour's outhouse to hide, he went there. On his way he glanced towards the rainwater tank in the garden and saw her clothes against the cover of the tank —her cloak, hat, and shoes, and a candlestick, and also their coal hammer and a chopper with which he thought she had raised or prised up the manhole cover of the tank, part of the chopper being wet. He lifted the cover,

which was completely down when he saw it, but could not see anything, so he went for assistance, and several officers came, including Mr. Bracegirdle, Mr. Cooper, and Mr. Grist, — Q. You have not found any communication from your wife? — I thought she might have left to me a note, and I have hunted everywhere, but have not found one.

Officer Charles Francis Grist said he was on his way home to breakfast at about 7.30 when he saw a group of officers at the rainwater tank, and went to see if he could give assistance. He found that they had been pumping and bailing out water, and he then got down through the manhole with a pocket torch, found the body of deceased, and brought it up. He knew deceased very well, and that she had been in failing mental health for some time. His wife had been across to her to give assistance. When he found the body it was cold and apparently lifeless, but as they did not know how long she had been in the water artificial respiration was applied immediately after the recovery of the body by Officer White and others, under his superintendence for about an hour, but without result.

George D. Bracegirdle, engineer at Camp Hill Prison, said that on the previous morning Mr. Ellis came across, told him what had happened, and asked him to come at once to search the tank. He took a rake and other implements to drag the water in the tank, and as that was not successful he suggested pumping some of the water out. The tank was 19ft. 6in. long by 7ft. wide and 7ft deep, and it was nearly full of water, there being between 5000 and 6000 gallons in the tank. The only entrance into the tank was through the small manhole for inspection purposes, the manhole cover being 2ft long by 1ft. 6in. wide. He was there whilst the water was being pumped out and confirmed the evidence of the last witness as to the finding of the body and so on. After they lowered the water a bit it was possible to get inside to find the body, which had got right to the back end of the tank.

Dr. Craig, deputy medical officer of the Prison, said he was called at about 7.20 on the previous morning to see the body of the deceased, and found it had been got into the house. Deceased was quite dead and cold, and showed the usual characteristics of drowning. There were no marks on her at all, except a few bruises on her right hand, which were such injuries as could have been caused by the heavy cover of the tank catching her hand as she lowered the cover into position when she was going down into the water.

The Coroner said it would have been almost impossible for deceased to have lowered the cover without injuring her hand.

Dr. Craig said that was so. He had attended deceased for the last month or so. She was very nervous and neurotic. She appeared to have groundless fears that she was making a nuisance of herself to her husband and others. Those more definite symptoms had only come on lately. She was taking very little food, and endeavoured in every way to refuse all treatment. She had reached a critical stage of life, and since then her mental attitude had changed for the worse. He saw her on Tuesday morning, when she seemed brighter, and promised to get up and take some food. He had been seeing her fairly constantly. The last week in August he recommended that someone should be with her night and day as he began to suspect her mental attitude?—Q. Although she had not reached that stage when it would be deemed desirable to put her under restraint? — Hardly, no. — Q. But only under observation? — Yes. — Q. As far as your observation extended you found the husband and wife on very good terms? — Yes, very good terms indeed. Witness added that deceased had been dead for at least two hours, and probably longer, when he saw the body. She might have died from heart failure on immersion.

The Coroner expressed deepest sympathy with the deceased's husband in that most pathetic bereavement. He was quite satisfied that everything had been done for the deceased during her illness, and that the husband was in no sense blame in any way whatever in connection with that unfortunate event. It was quite clear that deceased was suffering from mental trouble, and had reached a stage when it was necessary that some amount of care should be exercised over her, but not when restraint should have been placed upon her. She seemed to belong to that large class of persons who were on the border line; hence the difficulty of dealing with them. He had no doubt she was mentally disturbed, was not accountable for her actions, and was liable to act on sudden impulse. No doubt she conceived the sudden idea of destroying herself, and she did it in a very determined way. As he had said no blame attached to the deceased's husband or to anyone, and the prison officers had rendered every help they could. He returned a verdict "That deceased committed suicide by drowning whilst temporarily of unsound mind."

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