

Lawrence Leech

Isle of Wight County Press – 26 June 1937

CAMP HILL OFFICER'S DEATH

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BORSTAL BOY CHARGED WITH MURDER.

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INQUEST EVIDENCE OF SEVERE INJURIES.

The coroner's inquiry into the tragic circumstances of the death of Lawrence Leech, 35, a married officer on the staff of the Borstal Institution at Camp Hill, who died at the County Hospital on Thursday, was held at Ryde on Saturday. The Deputy Coroner (Francis A. Joyce, Esq.) had the assistance of a jury, of whom Mr. J. J. Dimmer was the foreman. Among those present were Capt. C. D. Robertson (Chief Constable), Mr. C. A. Joyce (Governor of the Borstal Institution), and Inspector Willmott. John Rowlands, a 17-year-old inmate of the institution, who is in custody on a charge of murdering the dead officer, was not present, nor was he legally represented.

The Coroner said in that case there was a little alteration from the usual routine, because, since the death of the unfortunate man was reported to him, the Magistrates' Clerk at Newport had intimated that a charge of murder had been made against a Borstal boy. Under those circumstances their duty was very much curtailed, and he only proposed to take evidence that something took place at the Borstal Institution, by which the deceased received injuries, and to call medical evidence as to the post mortem. He should probably adjourn the inquiry until the proceedings against the lad were terminated, which he supposed would be at the Assizes. He did not intend to bind the jury over, because he thought it was a serious thing for business men to be bound over for a long time. He would therefore, discharge them, and then, if he thought fit he could summon a fresh jury, although in all probability that would not be required. As the solicitor representing the lad was not present he would not permit anything of a controversial element to enter into the evidence in perfect justice for the lad. If any member of the jury wished to ask a question he requested him to put the question to him first of all.

George Harvey Soloman, hospital officer at H.M. Borstal Institution, deposed that at about 2.50 p.m. on May 31st he was walking across the parade, returning from dinner, when he was called to the kitchen to attend Officer Leech. On entering he saw inmate Rowlands in an agitated condition. He was being held under restraint by two other inmates, and Officer Leech, who was being supported by two inmates, was bleeding profusely from a wound in his left thigh. He also had a wound on his left upper arm. Witness immediately applied digital pressure to the left thigh and laid the officer on a table. He then sent to the hospital for a tourniquet and sent to the medical officer and chief officer for assistance. Deceased was conveyed to the institution hospital on a stretcher under witness's supervision. He placed him in a room and commenced to remove necessary clothing for the medical officer. On the following day deceased was removed to the County Hospital. – A juror commenced to put several questions to the witness, whereupon the Coroner intervened, and said he could not allow such questions. They were not called upon to find out anything in connection with the matter. His duty as Coroner was to receive evidence of the injuries sustained. No doubt the questions would be answered in another place. That was why at the start he said he could not allow anything of a controversial nature to arise as in the absence of the lad it would not be equitable or just.

Joseph McGurk, a Government clerk, of Shepherd's Bush, London, gave evidence of identification, saying deceased was his step-son. On June 17th he saw him in a private ward at the

County Hospital and was at his bedside when he passed away. Deceased spoke to him five minutes before the end, but made no mention of what had taken place.

Dr. Phoebe Napier-Harvey, senior house surgeon at the County Hospital, said deceased was admitted at about 2 p.m. on June 1st, suffering greatly from shock and loss of blood from two stab wounds on the left thigh and left upper arm. His general condition improved slightly up to the 13th inst., when he complained of pains in the left side of his chest. He then became weaker, and died on June 17th. On Friday, in conjunction with Dr. Firman-Edwards, and in the presence of Dr. Walker, medical officer of the institution, she made a post mortem. The wound on the left upper arm, which had healed, was 2½in. long, and that on the thigh was V-shaped and about 6in. long, and showed marked signs of infection. In her opinion the wounds were the primary cause of death, being very severe in character, particularly that on the thigh. Death was due to septicaemia of the left lung, due to acute infection in the upper side of the thigh. That wound had produced very severe hemorrhage before the patient reached the hospital.

The Coroner: Do you think that if septicaemia had not developed he might have recovered? – Dr. Harvey: He might have recovered, although it is doubtful. He was greatly shocked and had lost a great deal of blood.

Dr. Harvey, in reply to the Coroner, said that when deceased arrived in hospital she was satisfied that everything possible had been done for him in the hospital at Borstal.

Dr. L. Firman-Edwards said deceased was a spare, muscular man. The wound on the thigh was 5in. by 3in. and was in a septic condition, and the wound on the left shoulder, which had healed, was 3in. long. Deceased's kidneys and liver were abnormal consequent upon the presence of septicaemia. In his opinion deceased died from general septicaemia and pulmonary embolism, following infection from the deep incised wound on the left thigh.

The Coroner: It was a very nasty wound, wasn't it? – Dr. Edwards: Yes, it was.

This completed the inquiry and the jury were discharged. No verdict was recorded.

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THE FUNERAL.

Officers and Boys Form Guard of Honour.

The funeral of Officer Lawrence Leech took place on Monday. The high esteem and regard in which the deceased officer was held was well evidenced by the large attendance, including the senior Prison Commissioner (Mr. Alexander Paterson, M.C.), who flew down from London, members of the visiting committee, heads of the prison departments, a large number of deceased's fellow officers, and officers from Parkhurst Prison.

The service was held in the Institution Chapel, and was conducted by the Rev. G. F. Turner (chaplain), who was assisted by the Rev. the Hon. W. E. Bowen, C.C., of Totland Bay (a member of the visiting committee). Mr. Paterson read the lesson and the Rev. the Hon. W. E. Bowen led the prayers. After the service the organist, Mr. W. G. James, played Chopin's Funeral March, as the coffin, which was carried by Principal Officer Lambden and Officers Johnson, Lamb, Tutt, Williams, and Timpson, passed through a guard of honour of 100 "blue" boys, who were lined up from the church entrance to the main entrance to the institution.

The family mourners were Mrs. Leech (widow), Mr. Alan Leech (son), Miss Marie Leech (daughter), Mr. and Mrs. McGurk (stepfather and mother), and Mr. and Mrs. W. Leech (brother and sister-in-law).

{only family mourners transcribed in full}

Two omnibuses conveyed the officers to Carisbrooke Cemetery, where the interment followed. They formed a guard of honour near the grave, and followed the cortege in procession to the graveside.

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(extract from report of committal of John Rowlands)

Counsel's Story of the Attack.

Mr. Claxton, in opening the case for the prosecution, said that on May 31st the accused was attached to a party of lads working in the kitchen at Camp Hill. He was given permission to leave for a few moments, but did not return. Officer Leech, who was in charge, sent another officer to look for him, and Rowlands was found hiding in a room near the officers' mess. When brought back to the kitchen Officer Leech told him that he would be reported for the breach of discipline. Rowlands then became extremely violent and abusive and Officer Leech sent for a principal officer. While that message was being delivered Rowlands picked up a knife and attacked Leech, inflicting two extremely bad wounds which caused his death. Two other inmates, who were near at the time of the attack, went to Officer Leech's assistance. They struggled with the prisoner, who made stabbing actions towards them with the knife, but they evaded the blows and managed to wrench the knife from his hand. They then held him until other officers arrived and the prisoner was taken away to the cells. All this time prisoner was swearing and threatening to kill the officers who were taking him away, and also Officer Leech. When he was received into E hall by Officer Smithson prisoner continued his threats and said "It would be better if I had a rope round my neck for the wicked temper I have" and "Something seemed to snap in my mind." He was placed in a body belt and then became quieter.

Isle of Wight County Press – 17 July 1937

Verdict from report of the trial of John Rowlands at Hampshire Assizes:

The jury retired in private consultation for 10 minutes, and on their return they returned a verdict of "Guilty of willful murder."

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