

Emily Woodford

Isle of Wight Country Press – 2 February 1907

ACCIDENTAL DEATH AT THE COUNTY ASYLUM.

EPILEPTIC PATIENT'S FATAL FALL.

On Tuesday afternoon the Deputy Coroner for the Island, (F. A. Joyce, Esq.,) held an inquest at the County Asylum on the body of Emily Woodford, aged 43, a native of Ryde, who died at that institution on the previous Friday, under circumstances detailed below. Ald. J. Dore (chairman of the Asylum Visiting Committee) and Dr. Harold Shaw (medical superintendent of the Asylum) were present, with Dr. Piggot (assistant medical officer), Mr. J. H. Green (clerk), and Mr. T. Leadbeater (head attendant), and Inspector Cass with P.C. Bungey, representing the police. Deceased's brother was also present. Mr. R. Morris was chosen foreman of the jury.

The Coroner said he believed the holding of that inquiry was merely a formal matter, but as he understood that deceased fell in a fit, injuring her head, and that she probably died from concussion of the brain, an inquest was necessary.

Nurse Hettie Read gave evidence of identification, saying deceased had been partly under witness's charge during the last 12 months. She enjoyed very good health, except when she was suffering from epileptic fits, from which she had suffered off and on since witness had known her. She had the fits sometimes at intervals of about three months and sometimes much more frequently. Deceased had fallen before, but not to hurt herself. On the previous Friday morning, just before 11.45, deceased was sitting on a seat in the day-room of the ward, about 7 or 8 yards from witness, apparently all right, when she was suddenly seized with a fit and fell forward on her face on the floor. Witness at once went to deceased and saw a wound on her forehead. She sent for the doctor and matron immediately, but deceased breathed once and then died instantaneously. Nurse Lance and Nurse Phillips were in the ward, where there were 41 patients. No one was close to deceased when she fell. Deceased struck her forehead on the floor; there was nothing on the floor for her head to strike against. She simply fell flat on the plain floor. She struck against nothing before reaching the floor; there was nothing for her to strike against. She fell very heavily. - Q. You are quite sure she was not struck or pushed by an inmate or anyone else? - Not by anyone. - Q. You are positive of that? - I am quite sure. Dr. Piggot arrived shortly after and pronounced life extinct.

Dr. Piggot, assistant medical officer, said about 11.45 on the day named he was sent for to go to the ward in question, where, on going at once, he saw deceased lying on the floor on her back, with the nurse supporting her head. She appeared to be dead and on examination he found life was extinct. Deceased had a cut about three quarters of an inch long over the left eye, and there was bruising of the upper eyelid. The nurse explained to him that deceased had fallen in a fit, which was consistent with the injury. - Q. Was there any obstacle, a table or a chair, against which she would have been likely to strike her head to cause an injury like that? - Not near enough to where she was sitting. - Q. The explanation given by the nurse is that she fell forward face downward on the floor. Would you expect to find an injury of that description from a fall of that kind on to the floor? - I should think it quite possible, undoubtedly.

Dr. Harold Shaw, medical superintendent of the County Asylum, said deceased was an epileptic idiot, of whom he had had personal knowledge for 17 years, formerly at Fareham and latterly at Whitecroft. During the whole of that time she had been subject to intermittent attacks of epilepsy of a most severe character. It was most extraordinary that she had not had more injuries than she had had through falling. He corroborated the evidence of Dr. Piggot as to the inquiry. - Q. Do you agree with Dr. Piggot that a patient falling on the plain floor in the manner described, an injury like the one in this case might be occasioned? - Yes sir, in such fits as she had; they were of a particularly severe nature. - Q. The injury appears to be a rather sharp one. - That is not at all an uncommon thing. The patient falls heavily. It is the way the skin gives away, it just gives away in a line. It does not follow she fell on anything sharp. - Q. That injury would be consistent with a fall in an epileptic fit from a chair? - Yes, quite consistent with a fall on to the floor. If the patient had not been in a fit she could have made some effort to save herself, but as it was she could not. In

conjunction with Dr. Piggot he made a post-mortem examination on Saturday morning and found the wound and bruising, but there was no fracture of the skull, and he came to the conclusion that death was due to concussion of the brain. There was no other injury about deceased and no other cause for death. It would be rather unusual for a person to die from concussion instantly – it was the combination of the epilepsy and concussion which accounted for that. A person in a fit did not breathe for a very long time afterwards, and if anything interfered with them when in such a condition it tended to accelerate death very markedly. Q. You think the primary cause of death was concussion of the brain? – Oh, yes, concussion of the brain was the immediate cause of death.

The Coroner briefly summed up, saying that from the evidence, which was quite satisfactory, it was plain that deceased fell in a fit and injured herself in a rather unexpected way, causing instant death. There was no doubt that death was the result of a fall.

The Jury agreed and at once returned a verdict that deceased died from concussion of the brain, caused by an accidental fall during an epileptic fit.

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