

A CORONER'S NOTEBOOK

On February 10th, 1790, William Joyner of Berkeley was "elected Coroner for the County of Gloucestershire". The part of the county with which he was concerned was the southern half, being bounded in the north by a line passing roughly through Tetbury, Nailsworth, Bisley, Rodborough, Stonehouse (but not Stroud?), Arlingham, across the Severn and westward to the River Wye, at least as far north as Brockwear. It included the northern parishes of Bristol.

Joyner kept an account book⁽¹⁾, in which he recorded three sorts of activity. Most of these related to his coroner's duties, others to tax sessions and some more personal domestic and private business transactions.

So far as Joyner the coroner is concerned, the entries are a record of his inquests which he had to keep to substantiate quarterly repayment of his expenses by the Chairman of the Quarter Sessions. The accounts cover the period from his election in 1790 until the end of January 1823.

The record is embellished by some marginal notes, mostly noting the deodands which he levied and the results of the Assize Court trial where an inquest had committed a person to stand trial for murder or manslaughter. There are also some press cuttings and manuscript extracts of professional interest or because Joyner was personally involved (Appendix A, B, C).

Originally the book belonged to an earlier member of the family; both back and front covers are inscribed "Reuben Joyner - His summing book, August 13, 1769," but there are no entries prior to William Joyner taking over the book and inscribing - "William Joyner, Memorandum Book, 1781". The earliest pages contain a record of Land and other taxes. assessed at Newport Sessions.

The details of each inquest are necessarily brief, although in all but a few instances, Joyner (or his clerk sometimes?) recorded the following information:- date of inquest, place where it was held, name age and status of deceased, day and time of death, cause of death, verdict of the jury, distance travelled to the inquest, the fee claimed. Despite the lack of rapid communications at the time the inquests were always held very soon after the death; quite frequently on the day following the death. But there were some deaths which escaped the coroner's eye altogether, sufficient for a public warning to be issued. In recording the place of the inquest, he normally named the building - very frequently a public house - as well as the parish and village.

In 1790, Joyner held 37 inquests. The number increased steadily year by year, with a few pauses and recessions, to 92 in 1822, the last full year recorded. They reached a peak in 1820, when there were 119. The increase in the number of deaths no doubt reflects the growth of the

population; there is no evidence of any significant change in the proportion of deaths from any one cause.

The year 1820 was an exception to the general rule: there was a considerable heat wave in late June and early July. There were eight inquests in this period, in which the cause of death or the recorded verdict stated explicitly or implicitly, unusually hot weather. The deaths all occurred out of doors - several in hay fields - and were caused "by excessive heat of the weather", or by drowning whilst bathing in millponds or rivers.

Apart from the unusual summer weather, the deaths in 1820, despite their greater number, were in very much the same pattern (of cause, age, sex) as in the 'lean' years at the start of Joyner's office. That is, about four times as many men as women (no women died of excessive heat incidentally!).

Throughout the years, there were many accidents in which the deceased was run over by a horse-drawn waggon. This suggests that it was not uncommon for the driver to fall asleep and fall off in the track of the wheels. This is supported by Jacob(2) who in defining Deodand says "...There are several Examples of Forfeitures in Cases of Deodands, as if a Man in driving a cart, falls so as the Cartwheel runs over him, and presseth him to Death, the Cartwheel, Cart and Horses are forfeited to the Lord of Liberty: for Omnia quae movent ad mortem sunt Deodanda".

There were comparatively few suicides - three to five a year, throat-cutting, drowning or hanging being the most popular methods. Almost without exception, a suicide attracted a verdict of Lunacy. This verdict was a charitable interpretation of the circumstances by the jury. The implication of insanity preserved the deceased's property for the benefit of his or her dependents. Otherwise, a verdict of *felo de se* led to forfeiture of personal property to the Crown (Appendix C)

Accidents of all sorts - in industry, in the home or elsewhere, were numerically the greatest cause of death. Though not particularly numerous, fatal accidents to children frequently happened "in the absence of parents" and were caused by clothes catching fire or by scalding with a pan of boiling water. Apart from accidents, the great majority of deaths were due to unexplained "sudden death" or being "found dead". Probably only the presence of a witness made a significant difference between the two. But frequently, and especially in the case of sudden death in the presence of witnesses, it is recorded that the deceased literally dropped dead without warning and "without previous illness". Perhaps the modern equivalent would be coronary thrombosis. But there was one case of an infant who was "found dead on his mother's lap". Wherever a person died suddenly or was found dead without evidence of disease or violence, the jury invariably returned a verdict of "death by visitation of God" (Appendix E).

Though the details of inquests are brief and by their brevity somewhat stylized in phraseology, aided by marginal notes and other insertions, there are some clear pointers to the character of William Joyner, and more

by inference, the attitudes of the public of the day. Joyner was a deeply humane man endowed with a warmth of feeling towards less fortunate persons with whom he had to deal (Appendices A & B).

As might be expected inquests on men exceeded those on women by about four to one. Deaths by accident predominated, - they accounted for about half the total - and of these, coal mining and transport either on land or water, accounted for about half in more or less equal numbers (one coal miner was twelve years old).

The social problem of illegitimacy was as evident in Joyner's Gloucestershire as it is today. There are many instances of inquests on newly-born infants - some never identified, others where the mother was named. Verdicts varied according to circumstances which are not recorded, but in many cases it seems that the jury (possibly under direction of the Coroner?) gave the benefit of the doubt to the mother, by returning a verdict of "natural causes" or "still-born". Some mothers who were committed for trial, were found not guilty of murder at the assizes or guilty of a lesser charge, attracting a modest penalty (Appendix F). Despite the charitable attitudes to the mothers mentioned above, it is clear that illegitimate children were not looked upon in the same way. Usually, the deceased child is described as for instance, "the body of a male bastard child born of the body of, singlewoman". Where the mother was known, she was invariably a woman of the lower and usually servant class. More well-to-do infants did not die in circumstances which required an inquest. There were also some unsuccessful attempts to procure abortions by the use of poisons administered to the mother (Appendix G).

In July 1790, a twenty year old forgerman of 'Lidney' "was drowned in attempting to save the life of a hunted Deer belonging to Thos. Bathurst Esq." A founder anti-blood sport society member?

For a number of years in the early 19th century, there were French prisoners-of-war held in Stapleton jail in Bristol - presumably from the Napoleonic wars. They had their quarrels in jail and, apparently, access to weapons of sorts which they used in skirmishes amongst themselves. On 6th March, 1808, two inquests were held, one on Joseph Cailleau who was killed in a duel by Francois Pierre; the other on Charles Dijeon who was killed by Francois Delore. Verdicts of manslaughter were recorded and both men committed for trial at Gloucester Assizes. On March 16th (only 10 days later!) they were "acquitted on grounds of self defence". But on December 30th, 1800, another prisoner was shot dead by a sentry "for throwing stones at him and other provocations and for trying to escape". The verdict was Justifiable Homicide.

There were also some foolhardy people in Joyner's time, as ever. For example, Mr. Parry Richards "late of Chepstow", who was drowned on 23rd January, 1791, whilst trying to cross the River Severn at low tide at six o'clock in the evening "although persuaded by many on shore not to make the attempt as being impracticable". So it was.

Other local researches covering the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century have shown a considerable incidence of vagrancy in Gloucestershire. However, few vagrants figured in the Coroner's record - less than 1%; or, if one assumes that all the unidentified bodies were vagrants, the figure would be about 6%. At the same time it was not uncommon for people to die of exposure "through the inclemency of the weather".

All in all, a record which was originally written for little more reason than to account privately for the transactions of a public official, now manages to reveal something of the life and attitudes of the times.

G. KEMP.

Sources

Glos. Records Office, D620.

G. Jacob, New Law Dictionary (5th edition, 1754).

Appendix A

May 25th, 1790 Taking an inquest near Traytors Bridge in the Parish of St. James, Bristol, on the body of Elizabeth Fitkin, spinster aged 20 years who was found drowned in Froome River on the 23rd Inst. Verdict - Lunacy.

A manuscript copy of an advertisement in the Bristol, Bath and Gloucester paper refers to the same event in the following terms:-
"The necessity of a Magdalen Hospital in Bristol was never more apparent than on the inquest taken last week before Mr. Wm. Joyner of Berkeley, one of the Coroners of the County of Gloucester on the body of a young woman found in the River near Earls Meads the preceding Sunday. The unfortunate Female had for some time lived a loose, disorderly life and has been the miserable pupil of a school of Infamy in Silver Street, becoming Pregnant, and by the horrid effects of a certain malignant disease, in a most deplorable state of health, she was driven from that wretched receptacle without money or scarcely any raiment. In this Abiss of misery she applied to her friends, her Father and Mother in law who refused to Admit the returning penitent under their roof, shut their ears against her promises of reform, and would hardly look upon a daughter bathed in tears, and in the most excruciating pain both of body and of mind. Some kinder woman however, permitted her to sleep two nights in her apartments on the Cold Stones. The next day, by the extremity of hunger and the accumulated horrors of her situation, she was driven to despair, and plunging into the fatal stream, she finished her life and wretchedness together. You cannot bestow eulogism better than on the worthy Coroner, who, in his charge to the Jurors, so pathetically described the circumstances attending this daughter of destruction, as to draw tears from all who heard him; and who at the same time strongly recommended the Institution of the above charity in terms which not only reflect honour on his feelings as a man, but also on the choice of the County in such an officer."

Appendix B

April 26th, 1799 To ditto (inquest) at the parish of St. George (St. Don's Cross) on the Bodies of Four coalminers namely - John Fudge aged 19 yrs - George Biss aged 25 yrs. - William Powell aged 26 yrs. and John Milsom aged 35 yrs. - who were all drowned in a coalpit belonging to Dennis Butler Esq. & Co., called Pill Marsh in the parish aforesaid on the first of April Inst. in consequence of a large body of water bursting into the said coalpit whilst they were at work from out of an old coal work formerly belonging to Mr. Saml. Riddle - The bodies of the said men were not found till 25th. inst. owing to ye foul Air of the Pit and Quantity of water therein - Verdicts - Accidental Death.

Marginal note to the above - "The melancholy event which happened to these men who has left Wives and Twelve helpless children not of an age to afford their Mothers the least pecuniary assistance has drawn forth sympathy of Humanity and feelings of a Generous Publick and who has liberally contributed by subscription £50."

Appendix C

Press Copy.

An inquest taken on August 8th, 1800 on view of the Body of Thos. Flynn, the person who attempted to murder his wife and afterwards destroyed himself by cutting his Throat with a Razor and stabbing himself a little below the Heart. The fact was fully proved by several witnesses and the surgeon deposed the Deceased appeared collected and betrayed no Symptoms of derangement of Intellect. The Deceased had given his wife 3 or 4 very large wounds in her Head and her Skull was fractured. The Blows were given with an Iron Poker.

Coroner's Charge.

He observed, that this was a case in which the Jury would decide upon the same principle by which their Judgement would have been influenced, had they been trying the Deceased for murder of his Wife. He observed that there was no Evidence whatever inferring insanity, on the contrary, that it was manifest he came with the avowed intention of committing murder or of persuading her to live with him; the whole of the evidence proved he knew perfectly what he was about and had acted with design and meditation.

Verdict - That the deceased had Feloniously wickedly and of his malice aforethought Killed and murdered himself.

Body buried in the Publick Highway Parish of Westbury in Bristol. Aug. 8th, 1800.

Appendix D

Anonymous undated note:

"We cannot sufficiently lament the number of accidents that happen through excessive Drinking, particularly among the lower class; for notwithstanding the difficulty of procuring liquor in consequence of ye increased price, yet such a propensity is there in them, to this growing Evil, that they will dispense with more necessary Articles of Life, in order to satiate themselves with an imaginary pleasure, which never fails to plunge them in misery and ruin."

Report in the "Star". July 26th, 1814.

Thos. Callen died in consequence of Excessive drinking. The liquor had been forced upon the young man by some foolish companions. It was in consequence of this shameful abuse that the man died. The Coroner's Inquest after mature deliberation returned a General Verdict of - Died by Excessive drinking.

Appendix E

1808. July 31st. To taking an inquest at the White Hart Inn at Olveston, on the Body of William Reese Servant in Husbandry to Mr. John Adams, who on the morning of Friday the 29th Inst whilst at work grinding of the Malt for his said Master, fell down and Instantly Expired without uttering a single word afterwards. Verdict Sudden Death by Visitation of God.

Appendix F

March 26th, 1804. To ditto (taking an inquest) at Willsbridge near Bilton, on the Body of a new-born Male Child, found Dead in the Privy or Necessary House, belonging to Thos. Pearsall, Esq. at Willsbridge aforesaid, on 25th Instant - The Jury (after a full investigation of 6 hours) returned a Verdict, of Wilful Murder against Mary Marsh, Single Woman, aged about 23 years, Mother of the said Child, and Servant to the said Mr. Pearsall, and who stands Committed for Trial, for the said Murder, at the next Assizes at Gloucester.

Marginal Note:-

Mary Marsh was found Guilty of Secreting ye Birth of ye Child and sentenced to 12 months Imprisonment but acquitted of the Murder.

Appendix G

27th January, 1806. To ditto at the Sugar Loaf Inn at Tidenham on the Bodies of Harriot Hurcombe Singlewoman aged 17 year and her newborn Infant Female Child who died from Poisoned. After an Investigation of Two days the Jury returned their Verdict as follow, Wilful Murder against the said Harriott Hurcombe the Mother of the said Child by taking a Quantity of White Mercury Knowing the same to be a Deadly Poison in order to cause an abortion which caused the Death of the said Child, which lived Half an Hour after its Birth. And likewise Wilful Murder against William Collings servant to Mr. J^{no} James and William Davis, workman to the same Gentleman as accessories before the murder by Inciting, Moving, Instigating, Stirring up, counselling, advising and procurring the said Harriott Hurcombe to do and commit the said murder &c. It appeared the said Davis procured the Poison and gave directions how it was to be mixed up & taken and Collings took it to Hurcombe knowing it to be Poison and for what purpose it was to be taken; he was the reputed Father of the Child. The mother lived near a week after the Birth of her child and then Died in consequence of the Poison. She was ordered to be Buried in the Publick Highway in the parish of Tidenham - Collings was committed for Tryal and a Warrant was issued out against Davis who had fled his country for ye said offence.