

ACCIDENTAL DEATH IN NINETEENTH CENTURY NORWICH

Introduction

Coroners investigate cases of death that are referred to them in order to determine whether the death is due to natural causes, accident, suicide or homicide. Coroners' inquests can give an insight into different times and places by showing the sort of risks that people confronted in their everyday lives, and by providing information about employment and childrearing practices. This article considers surviving records of Norwich coroners' inquests 1800-1835,¹ focusing on the causes of accidental death.

Today, the main causes of accidental death in England and Wales are transport accidents, falls and poisoning. In early nineteenth century Norwich, transport accidents were also one of the main causes of accidental death, but the other major causes were clothes catching fire, drowning and work accidents.

Clothing catching fire was the most common cause of accidental death for toddlers and young children, and occurred mainly in this age group. The following case is typical. In 1816, Martha Draper, aged 3, was alone by the fire in her parent's kitchen and the linen apron and petticoat she was wearing caught fire. Boys also died in this way. In 1801, Thomas Stangroom, aged 4 and a half, was left alone in his mother's house in St Paul, while she went to the baker's for bread, and he set fire to the linen slop he was wearing.

Drowning was a common cause of accidental death for children and teenagers but also affected adults, young and old. Most involved falling into the river from the bank, while some involved falling from a boat, or a boat capsizing. One of the eldest to accidentally drown was Isaac Bird in 1816, aged 82. He was with friends in The Ship pub, St Etheldred, and lost his way to the toilet in the yard, ending up in the river.

Horse and cart accidents usually involved the driver falling from the cart and then being run over, and mostly affected adults or teenagers, but some involved pedestrians being run over, who could be of any age. There were also cases of people dying after falling from a horse. Some horse and cart accidents and people drowning after falling from boats, happened while people were at work.

Work accidents mainly affected adults or teenagers, but there were also cases of children being killed while at work. In 1802, Jonathan Virlee/Virlo, aged 8, died when his clothes became entangled in the cogs of a horse mill wheel, belonging to Messrs Seaman and Bleakley in St Mary. Another child, James Ward, aged 8, was killed in 1807 in a cotton mill, when he climbed on a beam to drive the horse and his head was crushed by the cogs. There were other cases of people dying at work after becoming entangled in machinery of different kinds. In 1824, Robert Haward was killed in George Robertson's mill in Hethersett, when he was screwing up the going geers of the mill and was dragged between the spur wheel and the stone nut. Similarly, in 1835, the clothing of Joseph Leggett, aged 25, became entangled in machinery, while he was adjusting the going geers in the mill of his master, William Pitts of Hingham. Also in 1835, Leonard Martin's hand

and arm became entangled in machinery at the Norwich Yarn Factory in St Edmund and he succumbed to lockjaw.

Another kind of work accident was being crushed or suffocated by falling material. There were several accidental deaths of men working in marl pits who were crushed or suffocated when a jamb of marl fell on them. Two of them were Charles Chamberlin and Thomas Bacon who died in 1831 in a marl pit on a farm in Earlham, occupied by John Girling. Death by falling material of other kinds also occurred. In 1801, John Phinnick, aged 17, had a jamb of chalk fall on him as he worked in a chalk kiln, occupied by Martin Fountain. Two people were killed by cave-ins of earth while working at Samuel Blogg's brick earth pit in Heigham – Joseph Bensley, aged 13, in 1802, and Robert Ive, aged 63, in 1811. In 1823, Robert Barker, aged 22, was suffocated by a cave-in of earth or gravel, while he was working in a gravel pit in Mousehold Heath. In 1826, Charles Francis, aged 55, was killed when a jamb of earth fell on him while he worked in a sand pit in Blofield.

Another type of work accident was falls of various kinds. In 1801, John Trayner, aged 33, a vatmaker from London, fell through the trap door of a vat, while repairing vats on the premises of Timothy Tompson, brewer. In 1811, John Harvey, aged 64, a bricklayer, fell off his ladder while he was repairing a chimney. In 1823, Nicholas Morse, aged 51, was working with others on a new building on Castle Hill, and fell to his death when the shaft of a crane broke. In 1835, William Taylor, a journeyman painter, fell off a ladder while in the employment of John Candler in St Peter Parmentergate. There were also some accidental deaths from falls which occurred outside work, such as falling down the stairs.

Poisoning was a much less frequent cause of accidental death than any of the above. When it did occur, it mostly involved infants. In 1810, Valentine Pennyman, aged 5 weeks, died after being given laudanum by his mother to quieten him. In 1824, William Smith, aged 12 weeks, died after his mother, who usually gave him Godfrey's Cordial (diluted laudanum), gave him laudanum by mistake. Infants Elizabeth Cartwright in 1831, and William Washington Sweatman in 1835, were both poisoned by the "incautious administration" of laudanum by their mothers. All these deaths were judged by the coroner to be accidental. There were also cases referred to the coroner where laudanum poisoning was suspected, but which were judged to be death by natural causes ("visitation of God") such as William Mansfield, an illegitimate child, and Eliza Nethercote, an infant, from Lakenham, both in 1831. No cases of laudanum poisoning were ruled to be homicide in Norwich during this period.

A tougher approach was taken elsewhere a little later. The Coroner for the Lynn District of Norfolk wrote to Sir George Grey, MP, in 1865: "For several years I found that many children died in Emneth from the indiscriminate use of 'Godfrey's Cordial,' and inquests were very frequent. But fortunately, I put a stop to its use by recommending verdicts of manslaughter in two or three instances."²

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¹ *Coroner's Inquests, 1800-1835, City of Norwich Records.* Norfolk Record Office.

² *Letter from T.M. Wilkin to Sir George Grey, MP, dated 25th March 1865.* House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online.