



Coroner's Court of Western Australia

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

Ref: 56/19

*I, Evelyn Felicia VICKER, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Clarence Benningfield BATEMAN** with an inquest held at the **Coroner's Court, Court 83, Central Law Courts, 501 Hay Street, Perth, on 6 September 2019**, find the death of **Clarence Benningfield BATEMAN** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt, and the identity of the deceased person was **Clarence Benningfield BATEMAN** and that death occurred on **25 September 1977** in the vicinity of **11 Hatch Street, Lancelin**, in the following circumstances:*

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable Craig Robertson assisting the Coroner.

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INTRODUCTION

Clarence Benningfield Bateman (Mr Bateman) was last seen alive on the evening of 24 September 1977 at his home address of 11 Hatch Street, Lancelin, where he was put to bed in an intoxicated state. In the early hours of 25 September 1977 a house fire completely destroyed the home and Mr Bateman was not located in the house or vicinity or ever seen or heard from again.

The inquest into this matter was held in Perth as the only available witnesses were in the Perth area. The documentary evidence comprised of the brief of evidence, Exhibit 1 Tabs 1-30, and the public notice of inquest dated 16 August 2019 as Exhibit 2.

Oral evidence was heard from Senior Constable Smith who compiled a report for the purposes of the investigation from the original missing person's report (MRP).¹ During the course of the inquest, a son and daughter of Mr Bateman, who were present for the inquest, provided information to the court by the way of background and observations from the police photographs taken at the time of the house fire.²

Telephone evidence was also received from Stephen Scott Baker (Mr Baker), manager of the Endeavour Tavern in Lancelin in September 1977. He was provided with a copy of his statement, however did not have a clear recall of the events disclosed therein, although he agreed the facts sounded like the sorts of things he would have noted and said at the time.³

Long Term Missing Person's Project (LTMP)

In 2017 it was established there were a number of files relating to the long term disappearance of people who had been in Western Australia at the time of their reported disappearance. Some of the disappearances occurred at a time when a coroner had limited or no jurisdiction to examine the circumstances of a suspected death.

¹ Exhibit 1, tab 4 and 5

² Exhibit 1, tab 30

³ t.10.9.19, p.22

Section 23(1) of the *Coroners Act 1996* WA (the Act) allows the State Coroner to direct an investigation into a suspected death in certain circumstances without a body, for the purposes of allowing a coroner, under section 23(2), to establish beyond all reasonable doubt that death has occurred. The investigation must be done by way of inquest and will attempt to clarify how the death occurred and the cause of the death. This effectively brings the suspected death into the ambit of s 25 of the Act and allows registration of the death under the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1998*.

The reported number of LTMP made it unrealistic for the Office of the State Coroner (OSC) to absorb those matters into the already long outstanding inquest list in a timely manner. A plan was proposed for a project to clear the backlog of LTMP files once it had been determined the matters fitted the circumstances set out in section 23(1) of the Act. That is, the State Coroner or delegate had reasonable cause to suspect the person had died and the death was a reportable death (section 3 of the Act).

In 2018 funds were approved for a coroner to work exclusively on the LTMP cases, on a part-time basis for twelve months, as a separate listing from the OSC general inquest list. This followed a pilot project of four inquests conducted in 2018.

In 2019 a coroner was appointed for that project with the support of an in-house Coronial Investigation Squad (CIS) police officer as Counsel Assisting (CA).

The anticipated outcome of the LTMP project was that by June 2020 the majority of reported LTMP matters would be resolved and that future missing persons files would be dealt with in the normal course of OSC business.

THE DECEASED

Mr Bateman was born on 3 December 1904 in Fremantle. We have little information about Mr Bateman's early life other than the fact that at the time of his death he had a brother, Leslie John Bateman living in Kelmscott.⁴ No

⁴ Exhibit 1 Tab 5

information was obtained from Leslie Bateman which may have shed light on Mr Bateman's earlier life.⁵

We do know he had a first wife by whom he had two sons, Ian Bateman and David Bateman. Mr David Bateman is resident in Victoria and Mr Ian Bateman resides in Albany.⁶

Mr Ian Bateman advised CA that Mr Bateman had left their family home when Ian and David were very young in the very late 1930s, and that his first wife died in 1980.

At some stage Mr Bateman married again to Margaret Bateman (Mrs Bateman) with whom he had another three children, two daughters who at the time of his death were living in the Perth area, and a son, Robert, who had lived at Hatch Street, but moved out and was living at another address in Lancelin.⁷ Mr Bateman was usually referred to as Clarrie in Lancelin.

Mrs Bateman is now deceased, however a statement obtained from her in 1977 indicated that Mr Bateman was a retired professional fisherman and that she and Mr Bateman had moved to Lancelin in 1953, where they started to build the house located at 11 Hatch Street, Lancelin. Mrs Bateman stated that over the years the house was extended until its completion when it consisted of three bedrooms, kitchen, lounge, passage, bathroom, spare room and a back verandah. The house was constructed of a wooden frame, asbestos inner and outer walls, with an iron roof. The lounge room floor was concrete and all other floors were of timber. As far as she was aware the house was appropriately wired for electricity and had been checked by the SEC in 1967. There was never any difficulty with the electricity supply to the house and everything was working well.

She also stated there was a solid fuel water heater on the back verandah in good condition and a gas stove in the kitchen supplied by a Kleenheat gas bottle. That had been installed at Christmas 1976 and was working well.⁸

⁵ Exhibit 1 Tab 20

⁶ Exhibit 1 Tab 14 and Exhibit 2

⁷ Exhibit 1 Tab 14

⁸ Exhibit 1 Tab 23

All family members indicated that in late 1975 Mr Bateman was involved in a serious traffic accident which resulted in a head injury which affected his personality to some extent. Mrs Bateman believed that following the accident his mental condition deteriorated slowly and it was his son, Mr Robert Bateman's evidence that following the accident his father was a changed man. As a young male he found it difficult to relate to his father's changed state and there were conflicts between them. It was one of the reasons he had left the family home.⁹

Prior to the accident Mr Bateman had always been busy with his work with boats and had slip yards in Lancelin and from which he bought and sold boats.¹⁰ Mr Robert Bateman described his father as working in his shed on boats and being a normal, friendly, happy person.

Mr Robert Bateman was clearly distressed his father had died prior to him fully understanding his father was mentally affected by his accident and he had not had the opportunity to make peace with his father before he disappeared.

All family members are clear that while Mr Bateman's personality changed in that he became occasionally unfocused and more short-tempered, he was never a violent person, he had never done anything which would suggest he would harm himself or another person.

In November 1976 the family sold the home at 11 Hatch Street to James Lloyd Jones (Mr Jones), but the family stayed at the house on a rental basis. Mr Jones had been a long term friend of the Batemans and as far as he was aware there were no difficulties with the house's wiring, construction or other indications as to what may have caused a fire.¹¹

Family members and Mr Jones all described Mr Bateman as being a heavy smoker and extremely untidy. Following his motor vehicle accident he became more reclusive and stayed in his home in his room a great deal.

⁹ t. 6.9.2019, p 28-30

¹⁰ t.6.9.2019, p.32

¹¹ Exhibit 1, tab 22

Mrs Bateman described that following the accident Mr Bateman would remain in his room reading and smoking heavily. He smoked 3 packets of cigarettes a day and didn't use an ashtray. Mrs Bateman placed a large biscuit tin on the floor for his butts and he would throw his butts into the tin. She noted he didn't care whether his butts landed in the tin or not and his habit was not to stub cigarettes out before he threw them into the tin or onto the floor. She recounted him as often sleeping throughout the day and spending a lot of the night awake smoking and reading. She had been concerned he may set fire to his room with the butts.¹² Mr Jones also commented on the number of butts on the house floor.

Ms Margaret Castle, one of Mr Bateman's daughters attended the inquest and advised that although her father stayed the majority of the time in his room he would, especially if no-one else was there, come out and make himself a cup of tea. She did not think it would be unusual for him to be in the kitchen in the early hours if there was no-one else present.¹³

Since Mr Bateman's motor vehicle accident he frequently had lapses of memory where he lived in the past.¹⁴ The local police were frequently confronted with Mr Bateman approaching the police station and advising that property was missing which had been disposed of quite legitimately, but which he no longer recalled.¹⁵

Sometime before Mr Bateman's disappearance, Mr Robert Bateman had moved out of the family home at Hatch Street although he still visited and in his view both the electrics and the gas connections for the stove were in good condition. He did not believe the hot water heater would be lit unless his mother was there.¹⁶

At some point prior to his death both Mr Bateman and Mr Robert Bateman were in possession of very similar watches. Mr Robert Bateman kept his watch in the kitchen cupboard.¹⁷

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 23

¹³ t. 6.9.19, p.41

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 23

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 7

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 24

¹⁷ t. 6.9.19, p.47-8

On the 22nd September 1977 Mrs Bateman travelled to Perth with Mr Robert Bateman to visit her daughters and Mr Bateman was left at home on his own. When Mrs Bateman was away she believed Mr Bateman would remain at home other than go into town occasionally for a few drinks. She recalled him as mostly drinking sweet sherry, but he was not a heavy drinker.

Mr Steven Baker gave evidence by way of telephone, however, had no independent recollection of the events outlined in the statement he had given to the police in 1977.¹⁸ He knew of Mr Bateman through Mr Robert Bateman, but did not often see him at the Endeavour Tavern. His recollection of Mr Bateman was more to do with visiting a shed with Mr Robert Bateman where Mr Bateman was working on a boat.¹⁹

He did not recall seeing him at the tavern frequently.

DISAPPEARANCE

Mr Robert Bateman advised the inquest he had returned from Perth at about midday on Saturday 24th September 1977 and made arrangements to go out fishing with another person on a vessel called “Wild Goose II”. He recalled leaving the moorings at approximately 12.45 pm on that Saturday.

Prior to leaving to go fishing Mr Robert Bateman had visited the house in Hatch Street and seen his father. He hadn’t spoken to his father, but saw him there alive and well. He noted no electrical appliances were being used and that the solid fuel heater for the water system hadn’t been lit for a number of days, he did not believe it was likely that his father would ever light it. The radiator was off at the time he left the house, and all other appliances seemed to be in good working order.²⁰

Mr Robert Bateman never saw his father again.

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 25

¹⁹ t. 6.9.19, p.22

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 24

The next reported sighting of Mr Bateman was later that day at approximately 3.30pm when he went to the Lancelin Police Station to report the theft of some property. He was noted to be visibly affected by liquor and remained there for approximately half an hour before leaving. This was not an unusual occurrence since his motor vehicle accident and the police were used to him reporting property as missing or stolen. The police viewed Mr Bateman as a moderate drinker, although Mr Baker did not recall him frequenting the Endeavour Tavern, and his drink of preference was known by the police to be sweet sherry.

Within an hour of leaving the police station Mr Bateman returned and again complained about the property being missing. He had no recollection of having made a complaint earlier that afternoon.

In Grace Moss' (Ms Moss) statement to the police in 1977 she advised she was a State registered nurse in Lancelin in 1977, in charge of the Silver Chain nursing centre. She stated she had first seen Mr Bateman that day at about 5.30 pm when he came into the nursing centre in an intoxicated condition requesting sleeping pills. This would appear to be following his second visit to the Police Station.

Ms Moss provided Mr Bateman with two Mogadon tablets and took him home in her car due to his condition. She described his condition as "a combination of frailty and drink".²¹

Sergeant Payne reported that while on patrol around Lancelin at 6.30 pm he saw Mr Bateman walking on Gingin Road towards the tavern approximately 400 metres away.²² Shortly following Sergeant Payne's sighting of Mr Bateman, Mr Baker as proprietor of the Endeavour Tavern, was advised that at approximately 6.50 pm an elderly man had fallen on the steps of the tavern and as a result had been taken in to the kitchen by the staff.

²¹ Exhibit 1 Tab 26

²² Exhibit 1 Tab 7

Mr Baker went to the kitchen and recognised “Clarrie” Bateman with a cut over his right eye. Mr Baker took Mr Bateman to the Silver Chain sister, Ms Moss for treatment.²³

Ms Moss received a telephone call from the tavern at about 7.00 pm explaining Mr Bateman was being brought to the nursing centre as a result of injuries caused by falling on the steps of the tavern. Ms Moss stated Mr Baker brought Mr Bateman to her and she treated him for the laceration of his right eyebrow. He also had an abrasion on his arm. Following treating him Ms Moss and Mr Baker took Mr Bateman home and put him to bed.

Ms Moss noted that Mr Bateman’s bedroom was a mass of papers, books, empty cigarette packets and butts. She noted a large tin on the floor which was full of butts and empty cigarette packets. She described the floor as littered with cigarette butts. She cleaned the area around his bed of rubbish and papers, before dressing him in his pyjamas and putting him to bed, while Mr Baker returned to the tavern to bring Mr Bateman a bottle of sherry he requested.

It was at that point Ms Moss noted Mr Bateman take the two sleeping tablets she had given him earlier in the day. Ms Moss was hoping the combination of sleeping tablets and drink would allow Mr Bateman to sleep and so lessen the risk of fire. She was aware Mrs Bateman was concerned Mr Bateman would set fire to himself one day when she was absent – due to his sleeping all day and sitting up smoking and reading during the night.

Other than the untidiness and cigarette butts Ms Moss noticed nothing else untoward about the state of Mr Bateman’s room and as she left the house she switched off the light leaving the bottle of sherry next to his bed. There were no cigarettes within reach, although there were some in his room.

Ms Moss noted she left the house at about 7.30 pm and at that time it was in darkness, Mr Bateman was in bed and very nearly asleep.²⁴ Mr Baker left with Ms Moss and placed the time at approximately 8.45 pm. He also noted Mr Bateman

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 25

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 26

to be in bed, half asleep and mumbling about his problems and how good the nurse was. Mr Baker stated that when he left the home the only electrical appliance operating was the refrigerator, although he believed the kitchen light was on.²⁵

At about 4.45 am on Sunday 25th September 1977 Mark McSharer (Mr McSharer), a contract electrician residing in Lancelin, was driving north on Gingin Road, Lancelin, and drove past Hatch Street. He did not see anything out of the ordinary or unusual. Approximately two minutes later he was driving back past the same spot and this time he saw a house at the rear of the Beachcomber Restaurant on fire. He drove up the driveway and saw the lounge room area was “Well and truly alight” with flames sweeping into the kitchen. He went around the house to the rear and could see the fire hadn’t spread to the bedroom area or the northern and eastern walls.²⁶

The proprietor of the Beachcomber Restaurant, Neville Farleigh (Mr Farleigh), was there and he advised Mr McSharer he had tried to get into the house, but had been beaten back by the flames. He had been alerted to the fire by the sound of asbestos cracking and exploding at approximately 4.30-4.45 am that Sunday morning.²⁷ Mr Farleigh had gone onto the back verandah, but couldn’t get into the house due to the fire. He was concerned Mr Bateman may be inside although he could not see any sign of him from where he was standing. Both Mr Farleigh and Mr McSharer are certain the fire was centred in the lounge/kitchen area and at that stage had not swept to the bedroom area.

They noted the fire spread rapidly through the house due to the asbestos and timber. Mr McSharer called for emergency services.

Kenneth Eke (Mr Eke) was a professional fisherman residing in Lancelin and captain/secretary of the Volunteer Bushfire Brigade. He received a telephone call prior to 5 am on Sunday 25th September 1977 reporting a fire at the Bateman’s house. He drove to the scene of the fire and saw that it was well established and the centre of the blaze was in the vicinity of the kitchen/lounge room area. He had

²⁵ Exhibit 1 Tab 25

²⁶ Exhibit 1 Tab 28

²⁷ Exhibit 1 Tab 29

the fire unit on site at 5.00 am and was part of containing the fire. He agreed it was impossible to enter the house at any point due to the intensity of the flames. The fire moved in a north west direction through the house and the roof collapsed at about 6.00 am. The bushfire brigade had completely extinguished the blaze by 8.00 am. Mr Eke noted the bedrooms on the west side of the house were the last to be engulfed in flame. He was of the belief the fire started in the vicinity of the kitchen area, but wasn't able to find any cause for the fire on his inspection.²⁸

Sergeant Payne, when sifting through the debris following the fire on Sunday 25 September 1977, came across a piece of bone with meat still attached to it about 75 cm long and 10 cm across which looked like part of a spine. He located that in what he believed to be Mr Bateman's bedroom. He also came across a watch in that area. He believed the watch to be similar to the one worn by Mr Bateman and the one he had been wearing when Ms Moss and Mr Baker put him to bed the previous evening.²⁹

The police searched the area thoroughly looking for Mr Bateman, but without result. It was initially thought that Mr Bateman had perished in the fire or suffered injuries that caused him to run away from the house and that he may be lying in the bush injured or disorientated. A search of the surrounding areas failed to locate Mr Bateman.

INVESTIGATION

Following the fire and search of the surrounding area on Sunday 25th September 1977 the remains of the house were carefully sifted with the aid of volunteers. In addition the outbuildings within an area of 400 metres of the property were again systematically and thoroughly searched without finding any trace of Mr Bateman. The investigation continued to Tuesday 27 September 1977 when Sergeant Dorrington spoke with the family about the possibility Mr Bateman may not have been on the premises and permission was given to speak with the bank manager about accessing the family accounts.

²⁸ Exhibit 1 Tab 27

²⁹ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

A larger area surrounding the property was searched to a radius of 800 metres and the entire debris was again sifted and raked over without result. The search continued with civilian volunteers and police for a number of days and on Thursday 29th September 1977 the bay was searched by professional divers local to the area and with knowledge of the underwater conditions, tides and drifts.³⁰

Following no trace of Mr Bateman the search was extended to the foreshore of the bay 8 kilometres on either side of Lancelin by trail bikes, beach buggies and horse. Again there was no trace of Mr Bateman. Traffic known to be in the area overnight was contacted to ask if anyone had picked up anybody of Mr Bateman's description without result. Sergeant Payne also noted there was a long weekend in October when there was a large influx of visitors to the Lancelin area, all of whom were off-road vehicle enthusiasts. None of these people reported finding anything in the bush or dune areas around Lancelin.

Information provided by Mr Bateman's bank indicated he had not accessed his account since Friday 24 September 1977 and public appeals were made via media for assistance. Due to the disappearance of another man in another area there was some confusion, but it was clear that whilst the other man was located, no-one ever reported seeing Mr Bateman or finding any trace of him again.

The piece of spinal column located by Sergeant Payne was provided to Dr Pocock, Forensic Pathologist at the State Health Laboratory Services. While the attached organs were identified as not being human, a DNA test confirmed the species contributing to the column was kangaroo and not human. Further the mixed bone and fragments from the fire from the "bed" area, were in Dr Pocock's opinion, fleshless, old and partly burnt and none of the identifiable fragments were human. The report then indicated the samples had been destroyed.³¹

In court Mr Bateman's daughter, Ms Castle, and son Mr Robert Bateman asked if they could examine the photographs of the fire damage.³² It was difficult to relate the debris located to specific parts of the house due to the extent of the destruction.

³⁰ Exhibit 1 Tab 7

³¹ Exhibit 1 Tab 21

³² Exhibit 1 Tab 20

It was clear the area most badly affected by fire was the kitchen/lounge area, not where the kangaroo remains were located, though the precise locations were difficult to determine. Ms Castle thought it quite probable Mr Bateman had been in the kitchen making himself a cup of tea when the fire erupted. Neither Ms Castle or Mr Robert Bateman believed there would be any reason for a kangaroo to either be in the house, under the house, or specifically in Mr Bateman's bedroom. This is a part of the evidence which is inexplicable.³³



This photo depicts the remains of the house at 11 Hatcher Street, Lancelin, viewed facing south-east

³³ t. 6.9.19, p.35, 54

There was also discussion in court as to the likelihood Mr Bateman had woken in the early hours of Sunday 25 September 1977, after the effect of the two sleeping pills and alcohol had worn off. Due to the fall of the previous evening, the alcohol and Mogadon it was likely he could have been a little confused and disorientated. Ms Castle thought it was entirely likely he would have been in the kitchen making himself a cup of tea when possibly something went wrong or a cigarette caused a fire. Whatever the reason both Mr Robert Bateman and Ms Castle believe it more likely Mr Bateman was in the kitchen, rather than the bedroom, at the time the fire was noted by Mr Eke and Mr McSharer. It is their belief he was consumed by the fire and he perished in the early hours of 25 September 1977, in the kitchen area of the house.³⁴

There was general discussion during the course of the inquest about the fierceness of the fire. It was pointed out the house was made of wood and asbestos and would have ignited very quickly and thoroughly and made it extremely unlikely someone with Mr Bateman's physical and mental capacity at that stage would have been able to escape the centre of fire rapidly had he been in the kitchen.³⁵

The police report of Sergeant Payne at the time of the fire referred to the lounge and bathroom floors as being concrete while the rest of the house was wooden flooring.³⁶ Ms Castle did not recall that as the case,³⁷ but I note Mrs Bateman's statement to the police in 1977 stated the lounge had a concrete floor at the time they built it in 1953.³⁸ Trying to relate the photographs of the house post the fire³⁹ to the sequence of events make it very hard to be clear as to what exactly occurred, but all the available evidence indicated the fire was fiercest in the kitchen/lounge area which would have been the route of escape from Mr Bateman's bedroom. This makes it more likely Mr Bateman was overcome by fumes and died in that area of the house following the start of the fire in that area, and was then fully consumed by the effects of the fire.⁴⁰

³⁴ t. 6.9.19, p.56

³⁵ T. 6.9.19, p.38-40

³⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 7, Tab 21

³⁷ t. 6.9.19, p.49

³⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 23

³⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 30

⁴⁰ t. 6.9.9, p.39-43

Certainly police enquiries since that time have failed to discover any trace of Mr Bateman, nor is there any indication he ever accessed any bank accounts, pension, or other services, or approached any authorities. His mental capacity at that time make it extremely likely he would have come to the attention of the authorities, and checks in later years with his family or other authorities revealed no indication Mr Bateman was still alive.⁴¹

HAS DEATH BEEN ESTABLISHED?

Mr Bateman was 73 in September 1977 and if still alive would now be aged 115. His state of health in September 1977 was not good as a result of a motor vehicle accident two years earlier and, in particular, overnight the 24 and 25 September 1977 we have reliable information he was intoxicated, had a fall, had taken mild sleeping tablets, and was in a generally confused state in the preceding hours. On that information alone I am satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt that Mr Bateman is certainly deceased now, and died some time on 25 September 1977.

I am of the opinion Mr Bateman would not have been in a position to voluntarily disappear and evade authorities in the condition in which he would have been in the early hours 25 September 1977.

Having said that I am unable to determine whether he actually died in the fire or had escaped the fire, but somehow died elsewhere. On the evidence of the search of the area I consider this to be highly unlikely, however, cannot determine realistically what happened in view of the inexplicable evidence about the kangaroo remains, which no-one can explain, and the fact no human remains were located, although somehow kangaroo remains were identifiable, though apparently in an area of the house not so thoroughly consumed by fire.

It is quite possible that in the chaos of the fire, however it started, Mr Bateman in a confused state was unable to escape the fumes and collapsed in the house and was entirely consumed by fire in the vicinity of the kitchen. It is also entirely

⁴¹ Exhibit 1 Tab 2

possible Mr Bateman collapsed as the result of a medical emergency, while in the kitchen with a cigarette, and that is how the fire started. His body was the consumed in the fire.

It is therefore my opinion the death of Mr Bateman has been established beyond all reasonable doubt, and I am satisfied he died sometime on the 25 September 1977 in the vicinity of 11 Hatch Street, Lancelin.

MANNER AND CAUSE

As stated, while I am satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt Mr Bateman died on 25 September 1977 at Lancelin I am unable to determine the exact sequence of events.

While it is highly likely he was in the house at 11 Hatch Street in the early hours of the 25 September 1977 I am unable to determine how exactly death occurred and as a result the manner of his death.

In all the circumstances I make an open finding as to the death of Mr Bateman.

CONCLUSION

I am satisfied Mr Bateman was a well-loved family member to his second family, however, the result of the serious motor vehicle accident affected his mental capacity and made him unpredictable, erratic, and sometimes confused and disorientated as to what was occurring around him. This caused problems for his family in trying to respect his dignity while allowing him some freedom of choice.

By September 1977 it is apparent Mr Bateman generally preferred his own company and did not interact easily with other people.

I am satisfied that in the absence of his wife on Saturday 24 September 1977 Mr Bateman became intoxicated and confused. He believed items had been stolen

from him which he reported to the police. He was confused enough to do this two times without recall of his prior visit. It would seem that on the Saturday Mr Bateman was not in a “normal” condition.

At approximately 7.00 pm he attended at the tavern, but was already affected by alcohol and stumbled on the steps cutting his head. It is highly likely this confused and agitated him further. His son, Mr Robert Bateman pointed out his father was quite a slight person and it would not have taken a lot of alcohol to affect him.⁴²

Mr Baker very kindly took Mr Bateman to the local nursing station and there Mr Baker and Ms Moss cared for Mr Bateman and then took him home to a familiar and safe environment. There he was put to bed in what was believed to be the safest circumstances for him to allow him to recover his composure. It is clear he was cared for as well as possible in the circumstances.

I believe it likely that by approximately 4.00 am on the Sunday morning Mr Bateman, who frequently was up and about during the night, awoke and was probably somewhat disorientated as a result of the events the previous evening. I am sure being in the familiar environment of his home was the most comforting place for him to be, however, suspect something occurred which caused a fire and Mr Bateman became disorientated, and while in a confused state became overcome by fumes and then incinerated in the fire.

As soon as the fire was noted by residents they attempted to enter the house and noted the fire to be burning most fiercely in the vicinity of the kitchen. It is likely that if Mr Bateman was in the house that is where he was. He would have been overcome by fumes initially and then if he remained in that area would have been consumed.

While I cannot say for certain that is what happened due to the obscure information relating to the kangaroo remains, I am certain that had Mr Bateman escaped the fire and remained alive for any period of time he would have been observed in the vicinity of Lancelin and assisted.

⁴² t. 6.9.19, p.28 and p.36

Consequently, I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt that Mr Bateman is deceased and was deceased in that timeframe.

I hope the evidence discussed at the inquest, while obviously painful for Robert Bateman and his sisters, has assisted towards their coming to terms with the death of their father, without confirmation, for many years.

E F Vicker
Coroner
14 November 2019