
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, ACTING STATE CORONER
HEARD : 9 JANUARY 2025
DELIVERED : 23 JANUARY 2025
FILE NO/S : CORC 1892 of 2024
DECEASED : BEVERIDGE, AARON JAMES

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Acting State Coroner.

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

*I, Sarah Helen Linton, Acting State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Aaron James BEVERIDGE** with an inquest held at Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 85, 501 Hay Street, Perth, on 9 January 2025, find that the death of **Aaron James BEVERIDGE** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Aaron James BEVERIDGE** and that death occurred on 7 June 2024 in the waters off Surfers Point, Prevelly, as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Aaron Beveridge was 47 years old and lived in Forest Grove, in the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, at the time of his disappearance on 7 June 2024. He was the father of three children, two daughters and a son, from two previous relationships. Aaron was a former chef and then worked as a maintenance worker. In his spare time he loved to surf.
2. On 7 June 2024, Aaron went surfing at Surfers Point, Prevelly, which is a very popular and challenging surfing location in the Margaret River area. There is an iconic reef break, known as Main Break, at this spot and it is famous for its big waves and solid swells. On bigger days, it is said to be suitable for advanced and experienced surfers only.¹ Aaron was an experienced surfer and he surfed at this spot often. Many of the local surfers in the area knew Aaron and he saw a few of them in the water that afternoon. It was the middle of winter and the sea was said to be very rough that day. However, Aaron was known to be able to surf in all conditions, so this day was nothing out of the ordinary for him.
3. Aaron was sitting on his board, near another surfer, when a large set wave approached them. The wave hit them and they both went under water. When they both surfaced, they had become separated and Aaron was about 10 feet closer to the shore than the other surfer. They then got dumped by another, larger wave. Aaron was pushed by the second wave onto the reef. Aaron's board was seen to be 'tombstoning' (stuck in a vertical position on the reef) by other surfers. This was because his leg rope had become stuck on a rock ledge. Aaron was trapped by the rope and being pulled underneath the surging water. Other surfers went over to try to help, but the conditions were too rough. Eventually, Aaron's leg rope snapped and his surfboard broke free and washed in to shore, but there was no sign of Aaron.
4. A search of the water and beach was coordinated by local police officers, including utilising two jet skis to search the area where Aaron was last seen, but there was limited visibility in the water and the search was eventually called off at 6.00 pm due to the poor conditions. Searches of land and sea continued for several days more, but no sign of Aaron was ever found. A police investigation obtained CCTV footage from a 'Surf Cam' in the area, which clearly showed Aaron's last moments as he struggled to separate himself from his leg strap, before he disappeared under water. The WA Police provided a report to the State Coroner indicating that they believe he is deceased and that he met his death by way of accidental drowning in the waters off Surfers Point, Prevelly, on 7 June 2024.²
5. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police in relation to Aaron Beveridge's disappearance, the State Coroner determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Aaron Beveridge had died and his death was a reportable death. The State Coroner therefore made a direction that a coroner hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.³

¹ <https://www.margaretriverfindthefun.com.au/listing/margaret-river-main-break>.

² T 4.

³ Section 23 *Coroners Act* Direction of Deputy State Coroner.

6. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 9 January 2025. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled during the police investigation conducted into the disappearance, as well as hearing evidence from Constable Bob Stenson who is attached to the Margaret River Police Station. Constable Stenson was involved in the initial search for Aaron and prepared the report for the State Coroner in relation to Aaron's disappearance and suspected death.
7. At the conclusion of the inquest, I indicated I was satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Aaron is deceased. I set out my findings below in relation to the circumstances of his death.⁴

BACKGROUND

8. Aaron was born in Fielding, New Zealand. He had a younger brother and had recently discovered he also had an older sister. Aaron moved to Australia with his parents and brother in 2004 and they settled in Geraldton. In 2006, Aaron moved down south to Margaret River and settled permanently in the area.⁵
9. Soon after moving to Margaret River, Aaron began dating Sarah Astromsky and they moved in together the same year. They were together for over 10 years and had a son, Fenix, together. Aaron also had two older daughters, Chayne and Ava, who live overseas in New Zealand, but with whom he remained close.⁶
10. Aaron found work in hospitality as a chef and in various other roles at a number of different cafes, restaurants and resorts in the area. He then started working in maintenance and continued in that role thereafter, although he still enjoyed cooking at home. After their relationship ended, Aaron stayed in contact with his former partner, their son and his partner's other children. He had been living with his son and one of his partner's daughters prior to his death, but had recently moved into alternative accommodation.⁷
11. Work was the thing he did to make a living, but Aaron's main passion in life was surfing. His former partner told police Aaron had "dedicated his life to surfing" after first starting to surf in New Zealand at 14 years of age. "His priority before anything else was surfing"⁸ and he would alter his life to accommodate his surfing commitments. He always surfed Main Break and had disclosed to Sarah that he had experienced multiple 'close calls' when surfing in the past and had come close to being seriously hurt or even killed on occasion.⁹
12. Medical records show that Aaron had been seen in hospital on 30 January 2016 for a surfing injury where he had fractured his ribs and suffered a large pneumothorax

⁴ T 12.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 28.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 28.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 [10].

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 28.

(punctured lung). On 9 January 2018 he was again seen in hospital after being hit on the head by a surfboard and spending several minutes floating in the water unconscious. He was diagnosed with mild concussion. He returned to the ED on 3 March 2018 with another surfing injury, this time to his shoulder. He was diagnosed with a probably cervical nerve root injury. It seems these incidents had not diminished his passion for the sport and he continued to surf regularly.¹⁰

13. Aaron was described as a “happy, laid back and easy-going person”¹¹ who appears to have enjoyed every minute of living his life in the beautiful Margaret River region, where he could indulge in his passion for surfing every day. He was generally in good health and was not on any regular medications. As well as surfing, he enjoyed skateboarding, playing the guitar, decorating his surfboards and anything ‘ocean related’.¹²

LAST CONFIRMED SIGHTING

14. Aaron drove to Surfers Point sometime on Friday, 7 June 2024. He parked his car in the carpark, put on a black, long sleeved wetsuit and entered the surf with his custom surfboard to go surfing, like he had done so many times before.
15. Stefan Marsella arrived at the same surfing spot at 4.30 pm and he paddled out to Main Break around 4.45 pm. He observed the conditions were ‘lumpy’ and the waves were around six to eight feet at that time, with rough surf. When he reached the line-up, he saw Aaron already there. Aaron acknowledged his arrival with a head nod and they sat on their surfboards in the water about 10 feet apart. A large set wave approached them and they both went under the wave. Mr Marsella recalled the wave felt strong when he was under the water. When he surfaced, he looked back and saw Aaron had resurfaced about 10 feet closer to the shore than him. Another large wave then dumped them both. Mr Marsella recalls thinking Aaron was going to end up close to the reef but wasn’t overly concerned at that time. He didn’t see Aaron for about 15 minutes after that, and only realised something was wrong when he heard police sirens in the beach carpark.
16. Mr Marsella decided then to go in to shore. He caught a wave in and while he was on the wave, he saw Aaron’s board standing vertical in the water. He immediately knew something was wrong and realised that Aaron was snagged under a rock. He later told police he saw Aaron’s leg and his wetsuit come out of the water as he went by. Mr Marsella tried to paddle back out to get to Aaron for about five minutes, but his board was too small and he didn’t have the strength to get there in the conditions. He eventually gave up and returned to the beach, where he collected the rescue board and then paddled back out. By that time, he could no longer see Aaron’s surfboard or any sign of Aaron in the water. Along with four other surfers, Mr Marsella continued to search the water for about 20 minutes more, but saw no sign of Aaron. He then returned to shore again.¹³

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 4, Tab 26 and Tab 27.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 [18].

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tabs 27 to 28.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 5.

17. Another local surfer, Jason Loof, had met Aaron in the water at around 4.00 pm. They sat on their boards and spoke to each other in the water, off and on, between catching waves for a while. The last time Mr Loof saw Aaron, he observed Aaron had been washed in by a large wave. Mr Loof caught a wave soon after and noticed Aaron's board tombstoning, pointing straight up in the air. He started to paddle towards the board and tried to line himself up to reach Aaron. The first time he attempted to grab the board, the waves pushed him past it and Mr Loof was washed in. He could then see others trying to do the same thing. Mr Loof paddled back over and after several more attempts he managed to jump onto Aaron's board and tried to use his weight to break the leg strap, but he was then knocked off by the waves.
18. Eventually Aaron's leg rope must have snapped and his surfboard washed in to shore. From that time, it was hard for the other surfers to pinpoint the exact location where Aaron had last been, although they tried to look closely in the general area to see any sign of Aaron. By that time, searchers on jet skis had arrived to help, and the surfers remained with them in the water for some time before it got too dark to search properly. They then returned to the shore.¹⁴

THE SEARCH

19. The first call to police was received at 4.37 pm from St John Ambulance. They advised they had received a call from a member of the public reporting a drowning male in the area of Surfers Point who appeared to be caught in a rip and was estimated to have been under the water for 20 minutes at that time. Police officers were sent to the area and the local Volunteer Marine Rescue Group were notified. At 4.39 pm it was noted that Aaron was believed to be stuck under the water because of the leg rope of his surfboard and an entry in the Incident Report records that at 5.04 pm local surfers were attempting to free Aaron from the leg cord.¹⁵
20. Local police officers had arrived at the beach at 4.55 pm and they spoke to a surfer, Michael Ogle, on the beach. Mr Ogle pointed out Aaron's surfboard and told the police officer that Aaron had been under water for about 15 minutes by that time and no one had sighted him on the surface. He explained that from the surfboard tombstoning earlier, they believed Aaron was trapped underwater because his leg rope had become struck on a rock ledge. While they were watching, the surfboard became detached from the leg rope and drifted to shore. One of the officers went and retrieved it and noted it had damaged fins and a visible fracture in the fibreglass where the leg rope had pulled away.¹⁶
21. Sea rescue jet skis were launched from nearby Gnarabup Beach boat ramp at 5.07 pm, staffed by volunteers from the marine rescue group, and they arrived at the scene at about 5.10 pm. They searched the area until the visibility became too poor.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 6.

¹⁵ T 5; Exhibit 1, Tab 14.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 19.

The search concluded at 6.00 pm with a plan to recommence first thing the next morning.¹⁷

22. Police were directed to Aaron's car in the carpark. The car was unlocked and the located Aaron's wallet and mobile phone in the car.¹⁸
23. A survivability expert, Dr Paul Luckin, was consulted by WA Police that night and he indicated there was no prospect that Aaron could have been found alive, given the water temperature and the accounts of witnesses and beach cam footage that indicated Aaron had been under the water surface for at least 30 minutes before the search began. In Dr Luckin's opinion, Aaron was most likely deceased before the first surfer went to try and assist him after realising Aaron was in trouble. From that time, any search was limited to a recovery, rather than a rescue, scenario.¹⁹
24. An aerial search with drones commenced on the morning of 8 June 2024, and four jet skis staffed by volunteers from the Marine Rescue Group and Surf Lifesaving WA also returned to the area. They successfully covered the designated search area for a number of hours. The police commended their highly professional efforts in very difficult conditions, but ultimately their search efforts were unsuccessful. Some divers also entered the water to search under the rock formations, but their efforts were hampered by rough swells and zero visibility. Extensive foot patrols were conducted in areas where it was thought that a body may have been washed up. Unfortunately, no sign of Aaron's body was found.²⁰
25. Searches of the area continued for several more days, with the assistance of members of the community who volunteered to help and provided their local expertise as to the most likely locations where something might wash up. After a stormy day on 9 June 2024, the weather calmed, making searching easier. However, despite the calmer conditions and local input, nothing relating to Aaron was located.²¹

POLICE INVESTIGATION

26. Police obtained footage from a surf camera that is located at Surfers Point. The footage showed Aaron in the water surfing. He could be seen trying to duck dive under the large swell and then ditching his surfboard to go under a large wave. He then got back on his board and continued to paddle in the whitewash before he became stuck on the reef and separated from his surfboard. The surfboard then began tombstoning in a vertical position and Aaron could be seen trying to separate himself from his leg rope, which was stuck on the reef, while holding his breath. His body could eventually be seen on the surface, with the surfboard still in the vertical position, before he disappeared as he went below the surface. About five minutes after Aaron was last seen on the surface, his surfboard became detached from the leg rope and could be seen on the footage as it floated to shore. At the same time,

¹⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 15.

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 7, Tab 9, Tab 12 and Tab 14.

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 9 and Tab 14.

Constable Stenson observed that Aaron can be seen being sucked out to sea in the current. That is the last sighting of Aaron.²²

27. Constable Stenson was informed by other surfers that there is a prominent rock on the northern side of the reef at Main Break, which locals call the ‘Surgeon’s Table’, and they believed this was where Aaron’s leg rope had become stuck. Mr Marsella, who was in the water with Aaron that day, had been stuck there previously, so he was able to recognise the spot and Constable Stenson was able to later identify it on the CCTV footage. Another witness explained to Constable Stenson that the experience of being stuck in that position is like “being attached to a jet ski by ... your leg rope - and being towed behind that jet ski at speed, and then having to sit up, reach forward, and then try and detach yourself from that leg rope.”²³ Working against that force makes it almost an impossible task, as it proved to be the case for Aaron on this particular day, although he could be seen trying hard to do so.²⁴
28. Based upon the eyewitness accounts and the CCTV footage, the investigating police eliminated any criminality or third party involvement in Aaron’s disappearance. The police investigation report concluded that Aaron became trapped on a reef while surfing and when his attempts to remove his leg rope were unsuccessful, he most likely drowned. The absence of a body was not considered suspicious, given the search efforts were hampered initially by the quickly fading light and bad weather conditions.²⁵
29. Constable Stenson advised that the community came together to help the official search, and there are still people in the local community to this day that will go out in their boats or walk the beaches and think of Aaron and look for any final sign of him. Aaron’s brother has provided the police with a DNA sample that can be used as a comparison in the event that any unidentified remains are found that may be related to Aaron in the future.²⁶

CONCLUSION

30. I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Aaron Beveridge died around on 4.45 pm on 7 June 2024 in the ocean at Surfers Point, Prevelly, after he became stuck on a reef while surfing. The death was likely due to drowning, but it is also possible he suffered injuries that contributed to his death. Accordingly, the cause of death must remain unascertained. However, even without a definitive cause of death, the known circumstances are sufficient for me to be satisfied that the manner of death was by way of accident.
31. Aaron knew the risks, but the joy of surfing outweighed those risks for him. He was described as “the tall bloke with long arms who would paddle the biggest waves.”²⁷ He was a passionate and experienced surfer, with advanced water skills, so going out

²² T 7 - 8; Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

²³ T 6.

²⁴ T 6 - 7

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

²⁶ T 9, 11.

²⁷ T 9.

in the toughest conditions was not reckless for him, but still he accepted there was always some risk. While they will continue to miss him, Aaron's family and friends have come to accept how and when he died, and take consolation in knowing Aaron died "doing what he loved most, in the place he loved most."²⁸ This inquest finding merely confirms, formally, what they already know in their hearts.

S H Linton
Acting State Coroner
23 January 2025

²⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 28.