

**JURISDICTION** : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
**ACT** : CORONERS ACT 1996  
**CORONER** : BRENDYN DEAN NELSON, CORONER  
**HEARD** : 24 FEBRUARY 2026  
**DELIVERED** : 22 APRIL 2026  
**FILE NO/S** : CORC 3655 of 2025  
**DECEASED** : MURPHY, PAUL DAVID

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*Catchwords:*

Nil

*Legislation:*

Nil

**Counsel Appearing:**

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Coroner

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

Nil

Coroners Act 1996  
(Section 26(1))

## **RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH**

*I, Brendyn Dean Nelson, Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Paul David MURPHY** with an inquest held at Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 85, 501 Hay Street, PERTH, on 24 February 2026, find that the death of **Paul David MURPHY** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Paul David MURPHY** and that death occurred on a date unknown between 24 July 1986 and 30 September 1986 at an unknown location near Toolinna Rockhole within the Nuytsland Nature Reserve, from an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

### **Introduction**

- 1 Paul David Murphy was last seen by his father, Dennis, in January 1986, at Paul's rental property in Wembley. He was 24 years of age at the time.
- 2 Dennis tried to contact Paul by telephone in February or March of that year, but the line was disconnected. His subsequent letters to Paul were returned, unopened.
- 3 Dennis's concerns were temporarily allayed when he was informed that Paul's drivers licence had been renewed in June 1986. However, after receiving no further contact and having exhausted other attempts to locate Paul, on 3 February 1989, Dennis formally reported Paul as missing to the Western Australian Police Force (**WAPF**).
- 4 On 26 March 1990, members of the public discovered personal property near the Toolinna Rockhole, situated within the Nuytsland Nature Reserve on the Nullarbor Plain, approximately 870 kms east of Perth.
- 5 The area is approximately 65 km east-southeast of the Eyre Highway, and a remote, arid part of otherwise water-scarce landscape. Access to the Rockhole is via unsealed, rough tracks from the Highway.
- 6 The property included a silver pen engraved 'P. D. Murphy'. Dennis subsequently identified the pen as having belonged to Paul.
- 7 Searches of the site where the property was located and its surrounds, and ongoing missing persons investigations by WAPF, have not identified

Paul's whereabouts, or the cause of his disappearance. There have been numerous State-wide and national appeals for information in relation to Paul's disappearance, including in various news publications.

- 8 Proof of life checks have been conducted by WAPF on many occasions and, to date, no records demonstrating any activity by Paul since July 1986 have been identified.
- 9 In that regard, Paul is recorded as having purchased a 1968 Austin 1800 sedan, bearing registration plates UCM740 on 23 July 1986.
- 10 In March 1990, after the recovery of the property near Toolinna Rockhole believed to belong to Paul, police identified an earlier report from a member of the public who, during a fishing trip near Balladonia in September 1986, came across an abandoned Austin 1800 sedan.
- 11 The vehicle was found in a depression near the Toolinna Rockhole, approximately 50 metres away from where Paul's property would be located some four years later.
- 12 The member of the public who found the vehicle reported it to officers at Boulder Police Station upon his return from his trip and, about two weeks later, he was granted permission by police to salvage the vehicle. The vehicle was not identified as being relevant to Paul's disappearance until after the location of his personal property in 1990.
- 13 Subsequent investigations by WAPF revealed that the vehicle was ultimately disposed of at the Boulder rubbish tip. Police were unable to locate the vehicle to conduct further investigations.
- 14 No family members have had any contact with Paul since January 1986, including his parents, siblings and extended family (including relatives in New South Wales).
- 15 Based on the information provided by WAPF in relation to Paul's disappearance, the Acting State Coroner:
  - (a) determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Paul had died and that his death was a reportable death; and

(b) directed that a coroner investigate by holding an inquest into the circumstances of Stephen's suspected death.<sup>1</sup>

16 I held an inquest on 24 February 2026.

17 In addition to the documentary evidence contained in the coronial brief, I received oral evidence from First Class Constable Jevan Hayward of the WAPF's Missing Person Team.

18 Constable Hayward prepared a report to the State Coroner outlining the full scope of WAPF's investigations and concluding that Paul had likely died sometime between July and September 1986 at or near Toolinna Rockhole, in unknown circumstances.

19 At the conclusion of the inquest, I indicated that I was satisfied on the evidence that Paul is deceased beyond reasonable doubt.

20 The delay in the publication of these findings after the inquest is the result of the Court waiting for the return of results of DNA comparison, the outcome of which is addressed below.

21 I set out below my findings concerning the circumstances of Paul's disappearance, and the course of the WAPF missing persons investigation, which underpin that conclusion.

22 I also explain why the cause of Paul's death must remain unascertained, and why I am also compelled to make an open finding as to the manner of his death.

## **Factual findings**

### **Background**

23 Paul was born in Liverpool, New South Wales to his parents Dennis and Beverley, who are now both deceased. He had four siblings.

24 Following his parents' separation in around 1979, Paul lived with Dennis in Karratha, and was employed as an electrical apprentice.

25 In 1984, Paul moved to Perth, where he was unemployed but derived some income from stock market investments, he made using his approximately \$40,000 in savings. However, Dennis advised investigators that in 1985,

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<sup>1</sup> Direction of A/State Coroner Linton dated 12 December 2025.

Paul had suffered a substantial loss of his savings due to a crash in the stock market.

- 26 According to a friend, Paul possibly also had a ‘betting system’, which had been somewhat successful. Paul would regularly place bets of \$1,000 on horse races. According to the friend, Paul had also expressed an interest in prospecting and gold mining.
- 27 Paul was single, and described as a quiet and reserved person who generally kept to himself, with one or two close friendships.
- 28 Dennis last spoke with Paul in January 1986, when was he living in a rented unit in Wembley. They would usually speak a few times a year by telephone, and in person when Dennis would visit Perth. Dennis attempted to contact Paul by telephone on several occasions in early 1986, but was unsuccessful. He also sent letters, which were returned. Police subsequently determined that Paul vacated the unit in Wembley on 28 June 1986, due to unpaid rent and other outstanding utilities charges.

#### **Purchase of the Austin 1800 sedan**

- 29 As identified above, Paul renewed his driver’s licence in June 1986.
- 30 On 23 July 1986, Paul purchased an Austin 1800 sedan, with the registration UCM740, from another person living within the same unit complex in Wembley. He paid \$200 for the vehicle. Paul’s friend described the vehicle as being old and ‘beat-up’.
- 31 Subsequent investigations by WAPF determined that the registration of the vehicle expired in September 1986, and was not renewed.

#### **Location of an abandoned Austin 1800 sedan**

- 32 In September 1986, during a fishing trip near Balladonia, a member of the public came across an abandoned Austin 1800 sedan in a depression approximately 70 to 80 metres off the road near the Toolinna Rockhole. As identified above, the area surrounding the Toolinna Rockhole is unpopulated and remote, and accessible by vehicles using dirt tracks. The photographic evidence contained in the brief establishes that in 1990 the area was relatively inhospitable, and I infer it would have been so in 1986.
- 33 In his statement to police in May 1990, the member of the public who found the abandoned vehicle described it as being ‘blue in colour’. In April 1990, he described the colour of the vehicle as ‘dusty blue’.

- 34 I interpose that the trader who previously owned Paul's vehicle with registration UCM 740 independently advised police in April 1990 that that vehicle was 'white/sky blue' in colour.
- 35 The vehicle discovered near Toolinna Rockhole appeared to have been abandoned. The doors were closed but unlocked. The vehicle had two flat tyres, and did not contain any paperwork indicating to whom it was registered. When the member of the public who discovered it tried to hotwire the vehicle, it would not start.
- 36 The member of the public who found the vehicle reported it to officers at Boulder Police Station upon his return from his trip and, about two weeks later, he was granted permission by police to salvage the vehicle. Permission was granted where the existing registration was found to have expired, it had not been reported as being stolen, and there were otherwise no known reports upon it of interest to police. The number plates that were on the vehicle were, unfortunately, not recorded.
- 37 The vehicle was re-registered, and issue registration number KMC 8415. In order to re-register the vehicle, the member of the public physically checked the engine number, and recorded it as 18YTAH12547.
- 38 I interpose that the engine number for the vehicle owned by Paul is recorded on transfer paperwork as 18YTAH11021. The evidence contained on the brief includes the statement from the trader who previously owned the vehicle that he did not physically check the engine number prior to its transfer, and just copied the engine number contained in earlier paperwork concerning the vehicle. I infer that the two subsequent owners did the same, including the owner who sold the vehicle to Paul.
- 39 Prior to re-registering the vehicle, the member of the public found a pair of horn-rimmed glasses in the car, as well as 'some paper with the name Paddy Murphy on it'.
- 40 In an earlier conversation with a member of the WAPF Major Crime Squad, prior to making his statement, the member of the public only referred to a piece of paper with only the surname 'Murphy' written on it.

### **Dennis begins to search for Paul**

- 41 Although Dennis's initial concerns about being unable to contact Paul were assuaged by advice that he had renewed his driver's licence in June 1986, by early 1987, and having not received contact from Paul, Dennis began to make inquiries to try and identify his whereabouts.

- 42 It was ascertained that Paul's driver's licence expired in 1987, and has not been renewed since. It was also determined that Paul had not returned to collect property left with a friend in Swan View.
- 43 On 3 February 1989, Dennis formally reported to the Karratha Police Station that Paul was missing.
- 44 In October 1989, police spoke with the caretaker at Paul's previous residence, as well as his mother, neither of whom had heard from Paul. Police also confirmed that Paul had not had contact with extended family living in other states including New South Wales.

### **Location of personal property belonging to Paul**

- 45 On 26 March 1990, members of the public discovered property which appeared to have been secreted and left within a rock pile near the Toolinna Rockhole.
- 46 The men had been fossicking around the area about 90 miles south-east of Balladonia, looking for blowholes.
- 47 The men found what they described as a 'pile of gear', including parts of a metal detector, canned food, roadmaps, a car workshop manual for an Austin 1800, and some collectors' stamps.
- 48 One of the men also found a car radio amongst the property which, in addition to the way the gear was stacked, struck him as odd.
- 49 The property included a road directory which was in bad condition, but a name and address was discernible on the first page. The name was 'F J Saunders', and the address was a unit in the same complex at which Paul had previously been residing in Wembley.
- 50 I interpose that the Austin 1800 purchased by Paul in July 1986 had previously been owned by a Frederick John Saunders, before being sold to the person who sold the same vehicle to Paul.
- 51 The property located near the Toolinna Rockhole also included neatly folded clothing, and stationery, including a silver pen engraved 'P. D. Murphy', which Dennis subsequently identified as belonging to Paul.
- 52 The property was found with boxes, a tea-chest, a plastic garbage bin and a plastic clothes basket.

53 At the inquest, First Class Constable Hayward confirmed that the property was found at a spot which was approximately 50 metres from where the abandoned 1800 Austin was discovered in September 1986.

### **Search of the area near the Toolinna Rockhole**

54 On 29 March 1990, police officers undertook a thorough search of the area where the possessions believed to be Paul's were located. The search included excavation of the entrance to the rock pile to a depth of 5 feet.

55 The area was described by police at the time as being dotted with 'solution pipes', approximately 20 to 30 feet deep.

56 Solution pipes are vertical, cylindrical conduits in soluble rock formed by downward-moving water which, as they widen and deepen over time, collapse or subside creating what is known as a doline, or sinkhole.

57 The search occurred over two days, including from the air.

58 Police did not find Paul, nor did they identify any evidence of apparent or suspected criminality.

### **Subsequent investigations**

59 In April 1990, the person believed to be last in possession of the salvaged Austin 1800 accompanied police to the Boulder rubbish tip in an attempt to locate the vehicle. They were unsuccessful.

60 On 11 December 1990, the investigation was filed pending receipt of any further information.

61 Proof of life checks have been conducted by the WAPF on multiple occasions during the course of the investigations, with no records indicating that Paul is still alive.

62 A buccal swab was obtained from Paul's mother as part of the investigation, and searches have been performed to ascertain if the DNA matches any unidentified remains. Those searches have not yielded any matches.

63 There have been numerous articles published in State-wide and national publications concerning Paul's disappearance, from 1989 to 2000.

64 Police have received multiple reports concerning potential sightings of Paul which have been capable of being excluded as actual sightings. There is one report that warrants further consideration.

- 65 In June 1990, a member of the public who lived in Norseman in the early months of 1987 and 1988 gave a statement to the police.
- 66 He initially advised police, when contacted in April 1990, that he had seen Paul ‘some time ago’.
- 67 In his subsequent statement, he said he thought that in about 1987 he was about 5 km out of Balladonia when he slowed down to assist the driver of a ‘light-coloured Austin 1800 sedan’.
- 68 The driver was a male ‘who looked the same a photo shown to [him] on tv (*sic*)’.
- 69 The driver asked the witness how he could get to Esperance. The witness said that the driver looked confused and disorientated.

**Has Paul’s death been established beyond all reasonable doubt?**

- 70 At the inquest, First Class Constable Hayward expressed his belief that Paul was deceased.
- 71 I am, of course, not bound by the view of the investigating police and must form my own opinion as to whether Paul’s death has been established to the requisite standard, being the highest known to law.
- 72 Based on the evidence, I am satisfied beyond all reasonable doubt that Paul is dead. Put another way, I do not consider that there is any reasonable hypothesis other than that Paul is deceased.
- 73 I reach that conclusion based on the following findings.
- 74 First, I find that the seemingly abandoned vehicle located in September 1986 near the Toolinna Rockhole was the 1800 Austin sedan purchased by Paul in July 1986.
- 75 I make that finding based on:
- (a) the similarity in the description of the vehicle found near the Toolinna Rockhole by the person who located it (including the estimated year, make, model and colour), and the descriptions contained in the contemporaneous documents recording the specifications of the 1800 Austin sedan purchased by Paul;

- (b) the fact that the abandoned vehicle was located within 50 metres of personal property subsequently identified and confirmed as having belonged to Paul;
- (c) the fact that the personal property included a road directory with the name and address of a person who previously owned the Austin 1800 purchased by Paul; and
- (d) the fact that the person who salvaged the vehicle found a piece of paper in the vehicle with the name 'Murphy' on it, as well as a pair of glasses, in circumstances where Paul was known to need prescription glasses and wore glasses.

76 As identified above, the engine number on the document transferring ownership of the Austin 1800 to Paul does not match the engine number on the papers re-registering the vehicle after it was salvaged.

77 I find that this difference is a consequence of:

- (a) the engine having been replaced at some time between the production of the vehicle in 1968 and the transfer of the vehicle in the 1980s; and
- (b) the transfers in the 1980s proceeding on the basis of the existing paperwork; and
- (c) the member of the public that salvaged the vehicle being the only person who would have had cause to physically examine and record the correct engine number.

78 Secondly, I find that the personal property located in the rockpile near Toolinna Rockhole in March 1990 belonged to Paul.

79 I make that finding based on the inscribed pen that was located amongst the property, as well as the road directory identified above.

80 Having reached those conclusions, I inferentially find, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary:

- (a) that after having purchased the Austin 1800 on 24 July 1986, Paul has driven the vehicle from the metropolitan area, and ultimately arrived at the area near the Toolinna Rockhole where the vehicle has seemingly been abandoned sometime before or during September 1986;

- (b) that Paul had various personal property in the vehicle, having recently moved out of his rental unit in Wembley; and
- (c) that after arriving at that location near Toolinna Rockhole, Paul has transferred personal property from his car and secreted it in the rockpile where it was subsequently found in 1990.

81 Paul's reasons for driving to that area are not clear.

82 I infer from the presence of some equipment used for prospecting amongst the personal property that was located in 1990, and the comments he made to his friend, that Paul might have decided to travel to that place (and nearby areas) in order to conduct some prospecting.

83 The area is at the margins of the Goldfields region, and Paul may have decided to prospect, including in the dolines referred to above that are scattered in the area.

84 Paul's reasons for seemingly secreting his personal belongings in the rock pile are also unknown.

85 One possibility is that Paul's car broke down, and he decided to secrete his belongings while walking on foot to try and find help.

86 As identified above, the Toolinna Rockhole is situated in an area that is relatively remote, and accessed via dirt tracks. It is not an area that appears suitable to travel to in a sedan like the Austin 1800 that Paul was driving.

87 This theory is also supported by the fact that when the person located the abandoned Austin 1800, it had flat tyres and could not be started.

88 The fact that Paul was not found in the subsequent search does not exclude this possibility. As identified, the area is remote, and the physical search was conducted some four years after Paul's disappearance.

89 Another possibility is that Paul deliberately left his car and belongings behind while attempting to prospect.

90 Again, this theory is not excluded by the fact that Paul was not found in the subsequent search. There is a possibility that Paul may have fallen or slipped into a doline, including one that collapsed under foot. It is not apparent that police conducted the subsequent search had the means to thoroughly search all the dolines in the area.

- 91 In either event, I am satisfied from the manner in which the vehicle and belongings were found, that Paul did not return to his vehicle or his belongings after leaving the area on foot, and that he has died sometime prior to the location of his abandoned vehicle in September 1986.
- 92 I reach that conclusion on the basis of:
- (a) the above findings regarding the dates on which the car and property were located, and the state of both the car and property;
  - (b) the remoteness of the location, and the lack of means for Paul to be able to survive had he left the area on foot and not found help; and
  - (c) the proof of life checks having not resulted in any evidence that Paul survived beyond 24 July 1986.
- 93 I reach that conclusion notwithstanding the evidence of the member of the public who says that he saw Paul in 1987.
- 94 I am satisfied, given the time between the sighting and when the statement was given to police, that this sighting could well have occurred in mid-to-late 1986 and the witness was simply mistaken as to the exact timing.

**How did Paul's death occur?**

- 95 Having found beyond reasonable doubt that Paul has died, I am required to determine, if possible, the cause and manner of his death.
- 96 Where Paul's body has never been found, the cause of his death must remain unascertained.
- 97 As to the manner of Paul's death, Dennis believed that Paul's vehicle experienced mechanical problems, prompting him to unload his belongings for safekeeping and search for assistance on foot.
- 98 His belief was based on his reasoning that the belongings were found in a location about 50 metres away from where the Austin had been located.
- 99 Dennis's theory is cogent, and may well be accurate.
- 100 However, the absence of Paul's body and further evidence precludes any ability to reach a verdict of misadventure (on the basis of him having potentially undertaken a risky act of driving to a remote location in an

unfit vehicle, and broken down, before perishing) or accident (if, for example, he perished after falling into a doline) to the requisite standard.

- 101 I am also unable to exclude the possibility that Paul took some action to deliberately end his own life or at least recklessly endanger his health and safety. There is no evidence of Paul having been diagnosed with any mental health conditions, and the manner in which the personal property was left suggests that Paul may have been planning to return to it.
- 102 However, there is evidence that Paul's financial situation had deteriorated recently, and if the witness's identification and description is accurate, it appears that Paul decided to proceed to drive to an inhospitable area in a poorly suited vehicle, in a seemingly confused and disoriented state.
- 103 Further, although there was no evidence of suspicious circumstances or third-party involvement identified by investigators, where Paul's body has not been found, the involvement of a third party – albeit unlikely – cannot be entirely excluded.
- 104 The reality is that Paul's manner of death remains unknown.
- 105 As such I am compelled to make an open finding as to the manner of his death.

BD Nelson  
**Coroner**  
22 April 2026