

**KEBLE'S MARGATE AND RAMSGATE GAZETTE:
JANUARY 3RD 1895**

SUICIDE OF LICENSED VICTUALLER AT BIRCHINGTON

An inquest was held at the Powell Arms Hotel, Birchington on Friday afternoon, before Mr R. Payne, Coroner for the Liberties of Dover and a jury of which Mr Watson was chosen as Foreman, touching the death of Thomas Swan, landlord of the hotel, was found dead in a well at the rear of the house on Christmas morning.

The jury having viewed the body, the following evidence was taken:- Sarah Swan deposed that she was the widow of the deceased Thomas Swan, who was a licensed victualler living at that house, the Powell Arms. He was 54 years of age. She last saw him alive at 12.20pm on Christmas Day; he was then in the kitchen. He spoke to her about a boat which had been brought up into the Square and he said she had had it brought up there to annoy him. She replied that she knew nothing about it, neither did she. Those were the last words he spoke to her. He then left the kitchen and she did not see him alive again. She thought he went into the bar, but a few minutes after, her daughter Rosa came and said she heard a crash in the backyard and asked witness to go and see what it was. She went to the back door and saw that a stone had been moved away from an old well, which was now used as a cesspool.

She then thought something had happened. The stone was simply turned over close to the mouth of the well. The stone was sometimes moved for the purpose of putting refuse down. When she saw the stone moved she gave an alarm. Her husband had never threatened to go down the well, but she thought he was queer that morning. She had not had a quarrel with her husband on that day. They had a few words the Monday week before, but no blows were struck. The unpleasantness was made up on the following Thursday and they were friends again and nothing else transpired until he charged her with having the boat brought into the Square. The deceased had never threatened to drown himself.

The witness was pressed on this point by the Coroner and eventually she said that shortly after breakfast on Christmas Morning, he told her that he would make a hole in the water. She had had no quarrel with him. On the previous evening he told her that he had something on his mind. She asked him what it was and he replied that it did not concern her, as it was something that had happened thirty years ago, before he knew her. She asked him if he had ever committed a murder and he said he had not, but he did not care whether he lived or died and he would make a hole in the water. She told him that if he had done wrong in the past, he ought to try and do better and forget what he had done. That was all that was said then and on Christmas morning he did not refer to the matter. Deceased had no business worries, as she looked after the business and he only did the cellar work. They had been in the house since February, when they had moved from Sarre.

Thomas Pemble deposed that he was a dealer and resided in Birchington. On Christmas morning he went to the Powell Arms to assist in the bar, as he was friendly with the deceased. He got to the house about 20

minutes past 12. He went into the side parlour and while sitting there, the deceased came in. He said, "Good morning Tom." Witness answered him and the deceased asked what the boat was doing in the street. Witness replied, "Oh, some of the lads have been having a lark." It was then half past 12 and witness went into the bar to serve customers. The deceased followed him out of the room. Witness thought he was going to assist in the bar, but instead, he walked straight through the back door. That was the last he saw of him alive. About a minute or two afterwards, Mrs Swan came back from the back door screaming. She called out, "Oh, the stone's moved." Witness rushed into the back yard and found the stone covering moved from the top of an old well.

Witness got some help. Mr Pointer got a life-line from the fire station and Mr Pemble, witness's cousin, went down the well. He could not find the deceased the first time, but he brought up a hat, which witness recognised as deceased's. Mr Pemble then went down again and found the body, which was drawn to the surface. Deceased was then dead. He thought the well was 50 feet deep and there was a quantity of sewage in the bottom. He was often in the house, but he had not heard any quarrelling. There was a little squabbling sometimes, but on the whole, the deceased and his wife lived on fairly good terms. He did not see the deceased with a black eye, nor had he heard him threaten to take his life. He was a very quiet man and for 4 or 5 days before his death he seemed worried, as if something troubled him. On the Saturday evening, he was out at about a quarter past 10, a very unusual thing. Witness went to see if he could find him and met him coming from the direction of the garden. He had been fairly well, but had been very strange. There had not been any unpleasantness at home. The well was usually kept closed.

In reply to a juryman, the witness said he thought from the deceased's strangeness that he might be led to do something and that was the reason he went to look for him on the Saturday evening.

Rosa Swan said the deceased was her father. At about half past 12 on Christmas morning, she left her father in the parlour talking to the previous witness. Afterwards, when she was in the kitchen, she saw the deceased go through the bar towards the back yard and that was the last she saw of him. About two minutes afterwards, she was going to the back door to call her father to help in the bar when she heard a crash in the yard. She called her father, but he did not answer and thinking something had happened, she returned to the house and called her mother, who went out and noticed the stone was moved. There had been no quarrelling on that morning between her mother and the deceased. It was not usual for there to be differences between her father and mother. She had never before seen the stone off the well. She had never heard her father threaten to make away with himself.

Mr (Dr) H.E. Worthington, surgeon, said he was called to this case a little before one o'clock on Christmas Day. On getting to the house, he found Mr Pemble grappling for the body in the well and he waited until it was brought up, which was about 10 minutes afterwards. Death had then taken place, but the body was warm. The deceased was then taken into a shed. There was a fine graze on the forehead just over the left eye and the left eye appeared discoloured, as if the deceased had had a black eye for two or three

days before his death. He believed that death was due to suffocation from drowning.

William Thomas Pemble, Waterworks Inspector at Broadstairs, said he was staying at Birchington for a few days and on Christmas morning he was out for a walk, when someone ran out from that house and said help was wanted. Witness, thinking that there was a fire, walked into the house, but seeing nothing, went into the yard and saw several people standing round an open well. He looked down and seeing something move in the water, he offered to go down. A lifeline was procured and he was let down the well, which was about 60 feet to the water. He removed some dead dogs and cats from the top of the water and a hat then floated up. Finding that it was impossible for the deceased to be alive, he brought up the hat, which was identified as belonging to the deceased. A well kerb was obtained and witness went down again, but as there was about 15 or 16 feet of liquid in the well, he had to get a grapple and he succeeded in getting the body, which was brought up to the top. The deceased was a stranger to him.

In reply to a jurymen, witness said he did not try the well with a candle before descending.

P.C. Dryland said about 20 minutes past one on Christmas Day, he was called to a stable in the rear of the Powell Arms. He found the deceased there and he was dead. He searched the body and found a silver watch which had stopped at 27 minutes past 12, a chain, 7d. in money and a bunch of keys. He knew the deceased, but had very little conversation with him. He did not know anything about what had been going on in the house.

The Coroner having summed up, the jury returned a verdict, "That deceased committed suicide while temporarily insane."

The Foreman said the jury wished to express their recognition of Pemble's courageous conduct in going down the well.

The Coroner said he thoroughly agreed with that. He had only power to grant a reward of 5s. for recovering the body from the water, but perhaps the Royal Humane Society might take the matter up and grant Pemble a medal for his conduct.



The Powell Arms c. 1890