



MAGISTRATES COURT *of* TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

Coroners Act 1995
Coroners Rules 2006
Rule 11

I, Simon Cooper, Coroner, having investigated the suspected death of John Thomas Norrish

Find, pursuant to Section 28(1) of the *Coroners Act 1995*, that

- a) The identity of the deceased is John Thomas Norrish;
- b) While satisfied Mr Norrish is dead I am unable to determine the circumstances of his death;
- c) I am unable to determine the cause of Mr Norrish's death; and
- d) Mr Norrish died, aged 52 years, on or after 26 November 2018, probably near St Helens in Tasmania at a location I am unable to determine.

Jurisdiction

- 1. The investigation of deaths in Tasmania is governed by the *Coroners Act 1995*. Section 21(1) of the Act provides that "[a] coroner has jurisdiction to investigate a death if it appears to the coroner that the death is or may be a reportable death."
- 2. 'Death' is defined in section three of the Act as including a suspected death.
- 3. 'Reportable death' is defined in the same section as meaning, *inter alia*, a death which occurred in Tasmania and was unexpected or the cause of which is unknown.
- 4. Thus if a coroner suspects (on reasonable grounds) that a person has died and the death meets the definition of a reportable death, then that coroner has jurisdiction to investigate.
- 5. For reasons which will become apparent in this finding I am satisfied that I have jurisdiction to investigate the disappearance of John Thomas Norrish.

Background

6. Mr Norrish was born in Hobart on 22 May 1966. Both his parents predeceased him. He had a number of brothers and sisters and, possibly, a son.
7. He led a peripatetic life as a younger man residing in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Victoria and Tasmania. He had an extensive criminal history in the past but had not offended for some years.
8. The evidence indicates that Mr Norrish suffered an acquired brain injury in Victoria some time during the 1990s. The consequence of the injury for Mr Norrish included cognitive impairment and paralysis affecting both his left arm and left leg. He walked with a pronounced limp.
9. Mr Norrish's cognitive impairment caused difficulties with memory and disorientation. He was known to frequently become lost.
10. At the time of his disappearance and presumed death he was unemployed and in receipt of a disability support pension. He lived in a small Housing Tasmania unit in St Helens on Tasmania's East Coast with Mr Shane Rawlinson. Mr Rawlinson and Mr Norrish spent most of their time together with another man Mr Darren Gray. Mr Gray lived nearby in emergency accommodation in a caravan at the local Anglican Church.
11. He was a well-known character around St Helens and seen by many using his bicycle to move around the town, at the local tip shop, fishing from the St Helens wharf and at the Bayside Inn gambling on poker machines. A distinctive figure, Mr Norrish always wore a leather Akubra style hat and was well known for his habit of attempting to ride his bicycle whilst carrying a fishing rod.
12. There is evidence from both Mr Rawlinson and Mr Gray that suggests that in the lead up to his disappearance Mr Norrish may have been particularly unwell (in addition to the effects of his acquired brain injury). Both men told investigators that he regularly passed bloodied stools. Both men said they attempted to persuade him to seek medical treatment but he refused; Mr Norrish apparently being of the belief that if he went to a doctor he would die. Certainly no record exists of Mr Norrish ever attending a medical practitioner for any sort of treatment when living at St Helens.

13. His belief in the likely fatal consequences of attending a medical practitioner was not his only unusual one. He refused to drink water reasoning, apparently that “frogs fuck in it”. Instead, he consumed large amounts of instant coffee.
14. Mr Norrish was a lifetime heavy smoker. It is reasonable to conclude, in my view, that at the time of his disappearance his physical health was poor.

The circumstances of Mr Norrish’s disappearance

15. Mr Rawlinson reported Mr Norrish missing at the St Helens Police Station on Monday 26 November 2018.
16. The evidence obtained in the investigation of Mr Norrish’s disappearance establishes that he was last verifiably alive on 25 November 2018. A number of independent credible sightings established his presence in and around the St Helens Township and at the St Helens Waste Transfer Station, Eagle Street, St Helens.
17. Several witnesses saw him heading west on Argonaut Road, away from St Helens and away from his unit.
18. Other sightings, less reliable, suggest he was still alive on 26 November 2018, and possibly in the company of Mr Gray at his caravan at the church and at or near the St Helens wharf. Mr Gray said that the last time he saw Mr Norrish was on Sunday, 25 November 2018 when Mr Norrish rode away from his caravan “either late morning or early lunch [sic] to ride to the tip”. That account is consistent with the evidence of several witnesses and accords with evidence from an employee at the Waste Transfer Station ‘Tip Shop’.
19. Extensive searches were carried out by Police and SES personnel on land, Marine Police and Volunteer Marine and Rescue and the Police Dive Squad, in and on the water, and from the air utilising a helicopter. No trace of Mr Norrish was located.
20. In the immediate aftermath of his reported disappearance, police attended and searched his unit. The unit was clean and tidy in the main living area. There were no signs of disturbance and no evidence of foul play or giving rise to any suspicion in relation to Mr Norrish’s disappearance. His bedroom contained his personal effects including a swag and newly purchased tent. The unit was searched again a few days later by officers from the Criminal Investigation Branch, and again nothing of any significance was discovered. A complete police forensic examination was also conducted, also with negative results.

21. Other comprehensive searches were carried out in relation to Mr Gray's caravan (one of the places where Mr Norrish was last verifiably alive). Nothing was located as a consequence of that search which aided in identifying the whereabouts of Mr Norrish.
22. Searches were also conducted at the St Helens Waste Transfer Station and the St Helens wharf (the latter by members of the Police Dive Squad). Both the Waste Transfer Station and the wharf were areas known to be frequented by Mr Norrish. Again, nothing was found as a result of those searches which assisted in locating Mr Norrish.
23. Various persons close to Mr Norrish including Mr Rawlinson and Mr Gray were also interviewed. None of the persons interviewed could cast any light on Mr Norrish's disappearance. The investigation did not identify any person with a motive to harm Mr Norrish.
24. Mr Norrish was noted to owe small amounts of money he had borrowed either to gamble on poker machines at a local hotel or to purchase cigarettes. The amounts of money involved – variously described as being \$20, \$50 or less than \$200 – would not, in my view, have provided a sufficient reason for someone to harm him.

Why I am satisfied Mr Norrish is dead

25. Inquiries were conducted with Centrelink and the Commonwealth Bank. Those enquiries showed that Mr Norrish last accessed his Commonwealth Bank account on 24 November 2018 when he withdrew two dollars from a supermarket in St Helens, leaving a balance of three cents. A subsequent check of that account carried out on 29 May 2019 showed the account had not been accessed in any way but that his Centrelink payments have continued with the account balance having accrued to nearly \$10,000.
26. Other inquiries were conducted with airlines and the TT line, the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, telephone carriage services and national police information holdings all proved fruitless.
27. Despite an extensive media campaign and detailed investigations no trace of Mr Norrish has ever been found since his disappearance.

Conclusion

28. Mr Norrish's disappearance has been extensively investigated by police in the aftermath of his disappearance and more recently by officers acting in accordance with my direction. Viewing the evidence as a whole, I think the most likely explanation for Mr Norrish's disappearance and presumed death is that he headed in the wrong direction along Argonaut Road after he left the Tip Shop around lunchtime on Sunday, 25 November 2018. What happened to him after that is impossible to determine. There is no evidence that points either way to homicide, suicide, misadventure or death as a result of natural causes.
29. In addition to normal lines of enquiry, the fact of Mr Norrish's disappearance has been the subject of publicity during National Missing Person Week, and through the usual procedures that are associated with long-term missing persons. Unfortunately, no trace of Mr Norrish has ever been able to be found.
30. No further investigation of Mr Norrish's disappearance and presumed death pursuant to the provisions of the *Coroners Act 1995* is in my view warranted. Specifically, I do not consider that there would be any benefit in the holding of a public inquest because I do not consider any further information is likely to be forthcoming as a result of that process.
31. There is nothing to suggest a particular cause of death in the case of Mr Norrish. That is unlikely to change unless and until his remains are located.

Comments and Recommendations

32. The circumstances of Mr Norrish's death are not such as to require me to make any comments or recommendations pursuant to Section 28 of the *Coroners Act 1995*.
33. I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Mr Norrish.

Dated: 14 December 2023 at Hobart, in the State of Tasmania.

Simon Cooper
Coroner