



# MAGISTRATES COURT *of* TASMANIA

## CORONIAL DIVISION

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### **Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)**

*Coroners Act 1995  
Coroners Rules 2006  
Rule 11*

I, Olivia McTaggart, Coroner, having investigated the death of Stella Joan Fraser

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Stella Joan Fraser.
  
- b) Ms Fraser was born in Portsmouth, United Kingdom on 30 March 1949. She immigrated to Tasmania with her family at the age of 13 years. In 1978 she married Tony Matepi and had two children: Melita Matepi and Keturah Parrelyn Matepi-Triffitt. In 1982 Ms Fraser separated from Mr Matepi and moved to Hobart to live with family members. She was a single parent for several years before returning to work as an enrolled nurse. In 2013 Ms Fraser had a stroke and her family subsequently noted a decline in her mental capacity and her mobility. After her stroke, Ms Fraser spent several years living with her daughter, Ms Matepi-Triffitt, and, for a short period, she was a resident of the Corumbene Nursing Home at New Norfolk. In 2017 she decided to move into a unit at Ouse out of a desire to live independently again.

On the evening of 4 June 2021 Ms Fraser used the pedestrian bridge below the Lyell Highway to cross the Ouse River and walk to the Lachlan Hotel. The pedestrian bridge was the only way for Ms Fraser to walk from her unit to the shops and other facilities in Ouse because she did not have a driver's licence. Ms Fraser regularly walked between the hotel (and other nearby facilities) and her home, sometimes on multiple occasions in a day. On this date, she arrived at the hotel at 5.54pm and purchased dinner and a non-alcoholic drink. She left the hotel at 6.21pm, as shown on the hotel CCTV footage. Ms Fraser was not seen alive by anyone after leaving the hotel. It is reasonable to assume that she intended to walk home using the pedestrian bridge, as was her usual practice. The evidence from family members indicates that she had been in good spirits on that day.

On 7 June 2021 Ms Fraser was reported missing by Ms Matepi-Triffitt as Ms Fraser did not answer her phone and was not at home. A missing person post was subsequently placed on the Tasmania Police Facebook page. Mr Brendon King, a resident of Ouse, saw the post. He was familiar with Ms Fraser and her regular habit of walking across the pedestrian bridge. He and his work colleague, Mr Simon Baxendale, drove to a location near both the vehicular and pedestrian bridges. After searching the area, they saw what they believed to be a body in the Ouse River. They called Tasmania Police and officers arrived at approximately 8.20am. The officers observed a female body who was obviously deceased and who was formally identified shortly afterwards by a close family member as Ms Fraser.

A thorough scene investigation took place involving numerous specialised police officers who were initially cautious to exclude the possibility of suspicious circumstances. However, upon full autopsy, the forensic pathologist, Dr Donald Ritchey, identified no significant traumatic injuries to account for death. He also saw no signs of hypothermia within Ms Fraser's body. He also noted the absence of alcohol and drugs in her system. He concluded that the cause of Ms Fraser's death was drowning. I accept his opinion. I am satisfied after a full investigation that there were no suspicious circumstances surrounding her death and that she did not die as a result of suicide.

I find that Ms Fraser died as a result of misadventure upon walking home from the hotel on 4 June. I cannot determine how she came to be in the river, but the most plausible scenario is that she (inadvertently or deliberately) left the walking path before entering onto the pedestrian bridge and fell into the reedy water at the edge of the river bank. She was found to have reeds entangled in her left hand, suggesting that she had attempted to try and stop herself falling or pull herself out of the water. Her dementia and limited mobility may have prevented her from being able to save herself. Ms Fraser's cause of death was drowning.

- c) Ms Fraser died on 4 June 2021 at Ouse, Tasmania.

In making the above findings, I have had regard to the evidence gained in the comprehensive investigation into Ms Stella Joan Fraser's death. The evidence includes:

- Tasmania Police subject report and report of death;

- Life extinct and identification affidavits;
- Opinion of the forensic pathologist regarding cause of death;
- Toxicology report from Forensic Science Service Tasmania;
- Tasmania Health Service and Central Highlands General Practice medical records for Ms Fraser;
- Corumbene Care records for Ms Fraser;
- Affidavits of Keturah Parrelyn Matepi-Triffitt, daughter of Ms Fraser;
- Affidavit of David John Triffitt, son-in-law of Ms Fraser;
- Affidavit of Brendon Roger King, who discovered Ms Fraser deceased;
- Affidavit of Lyndell June Roots, Licensee of Lachlan Hotel and the last person to see Ms Fraser;
- Lachlan Hotel CCTV;
- Affidavits and statements of three attending Tasmania Police officers and photographs;
- Tasmania Police ESCAD records and missing person report; and
- Records of proceedings in the Supreme Court pertaining to objection to autopsy by Keturah Matepi Triffitt.

### **Comments**

At the time of Ms Fraser returning from the hotel on the evening of 4 June, the most likely time of her death, it was very dark. There was no lighting on the pedestrian bridge and very little lighting in the area of the walkway. It is quite possible that the darkness played a role in Ms Fraser deviating from her path or falling into the water.

The Central Highlands Council has reported that it has responsibility for the walkways on either end of the pedestrian bridge, but the bridge itself is the responsibility of State Growth. The Central Highlands Council further reports that it has commenced investigating options for lighting the footpaths adjoining the pedestrian bridge and that costs associated with such lighting have been included in the 2022/23 budget.

### **Recommendations**

I recommend that the Central Highlands Council and the Department of State Growth investigate the requirement for lighting on and around the pedestrian bridge and, if appropriate, install sufficient lighting to allow safe crossing by pedestrians during hours of darkness.

I extend my appreciation to investigating officer, Constable Craig Keogh for his investigation and report.

I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Ms Fraser.

**Dated:** 22 July 2022 at Hobart Coroners Court in the State of Tasmania.

**Olivia McTaggart**  
**Coroner**