



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 death of Alison Henderson Mason,

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Alison Henderson Mason;
- b) While satisfied that Mr Mason is dead I am unable to determine the particular circumstances of his death;
- c) I am unable to determine the cause of Mr Mason's death; and
- d) Mr Mason died on or about 8 October 1968 at or near Devonport, Tasmania.

Why Mr Mason's disappearance is being investigated

1. The *Coroners Act 1995* governs the investigation of deaths in Tasmania. 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 3 of the Act as including a 'suspected death'.
3. 'Reportable death' is defined in the same section as including 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 the power to investigate that person's disappearance.
5. For reasons which will become apparent in this finding I am satisfied that it is appropriate to investigate the disappearance of Alison Henderson Mason because I am satisfied, on reasonable grounds, that he is dead and the cause of his death is unknown.
6. The fact that Mr Mason's disappearance and suspected death is being considered by a coroner 51 years after he was last seen alive needs to be explained. His disappearance was reported to police in 1968, but not reported to the coroner until this year. I note that under the

previous Tasmanian Coroners Act, no power existed to investigate suspected deaths.¹ This changed with the advent of the current Act in 1997.

6. Until a death (including suspected death) is reported a coroner cannot of course investigate it.
7. It is not clear why Mr Mason's disappearance was not reported until 2019. However the delay in reporting his suspected death did not compromise the coronial investigation in this case.

Mr Mason's background

8. The evidence is that Mr Mason was born on 29 September 1902 at Barrington in Tasmania's North West Coast region, the son of Andrew William and Sarah Jane Mason. If he was still alive today he would be 117 years old.
9. His youngest (and only surviving) son, Peter, said in an affidavit that his father was educated to part way through first year high school. Reportedly, he left school because his brother was killed in the First World War, and Mr Mason needed to help on the family farm.²
10. Mr Mason married Elsie on 5 November 1930, and lived, and worked in the North West of Tasmania (primarily Sheffield) all his life. He appears to have retired in 1966. Mr and Mrs Mason were at the time of his disappearance living at 132 Oldaker Street Devonport.

Circumstances of his disappearance

11. Prior to his death, Mr Mason suffered heart, memory and mental health issues and was described as having similar symptoms of dementia. In 1967, he spent some time in a psychiatric clinic in Launceston and was described as basically housebound.
12. Mr Mason went to bed at 9.30pm on Wednesday 8 October 1968 and asked his wife to set the alarm for 11.30pm. He did not say why. He was not seen again. The circumstances in which he left the home indicate he was on foot. There is nothing to suggest the involvement of any other person in his disappearance.
13. His wife raised the alarm the next day and despite searches in and around the area of his home, no trace of Mr Mason was located. He appears to have left the house wearing pyjamas, a dressing gown and slippers. None of these items of clothing were ever located. Mr Mason did not take his hat with him, and this was the only unusual aspect to his disappearance.

¹ See *Coroners Act 1957*, section 7 which required an actual body to be located before a coroner could investigate.

² I note Commonwealth War Grave and National Archive records show that Private George Bernard Mason 2611, 40th Battalion AIF, son of Andrew William and Sarah Jane Mason of Rockfield, Barrington died of wounds received during the attack on Broodseinde Ridge and was buried at Ypres, Belgium on 6 October 1917.

14. There was a degree of media attention at the time of Mr Mason's disappearance. Information from available Tasmania Police historical records indicate that Mr Mason was depressed in the lead up to his disappearance. This in turn led to speculation, at the time, that he had drowned. I note that the Don and Mersey Rivers, as well as Bass Strait are all within a relatively easy walking distance of Oldaker Street. However, there is no evidence that would enable a conclusion to be reached that Mr Mason died as a consequence of drowning or immersion in water given that his body has never been recovered.
15. Mr Mason was formally listed as a missing person. Despite occasional enquiries from time to time after 1968, no new information or evidence was uncovered relating to his disappearance.

Why I am satisfied Mr Mason is dead

16. Although Mr Mason's body was never found there is ample evidence to conclude he is dead. First is the fact that, after his disappearance, Mr Mason was never seen or heard of again. I note that on 28 May 1981, Mr Mason was formally declared deceased by the Supreme Court of Tasmania and recorded as deceased by the District of Devonport.
17. In August 2011 Tasmania Police conducted enquiries with the Tasmania Prison Service; the Electoral Commission; the Department of Health and Human Services (both housing and mental health); various other government departments and instrumentalities including Aurora; the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages; as well as ten of the most commonly used financial institutions in Australia and all state and territory police jurisdiction information holdings, Centrelink and Medicare. No trace of Mr Mason being alive was found as a consequence of those enquiries.
18. In all the circumstances I am satisfied to the requisite legal standard Mr Mason is dead and has not been seen since on or about 8 October 1968. It seems logical to conclude that he died at a place at or near Devonport on the north-west coast of Tasmania.

Comments and Recommendations

19. As I have said I am satisfied that Mr Mason died on or about 8 October 1968. I am unable to make any further findings. In particular I am unable to reach a concluded view as to the cause or more specific circumstances of his death. I do note though that there is no evidence to suggest his disappearance, and subsequent death, was suspicious.

20. The circumstances of Mr Mason's death are not such as to require me to make any recommendations pursuant to Section 28 of the *Coroners Act 1995*.

21. I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Alison Henderson Mason.

Dated 15 November 2019 at Hobart in the State of Tasmania.

Simon Cooper
Coroner