

Fatal Burning Accident Wife Injured While Frying at Gas Stove

Sad Inquest Story

The sad circumstances attending the death of Mrs Elizabeth Cornwell aged 34 of 17 Burleigh Street who passed away at Addenbrooke's Hospital on Friday night, following a burning accident at her home on Thursday, was inquired into by the Borough Coroner (Mr G A Wootten) at the hospital today (Saturday). The Chief Constable (Mr R J Pearson) watched the proceedings on behalf of the police. The body was identified by Percy Ernest Cornwell, the husband, who said he was a carpenter. At 6.50am on Thursday he left home to go to work and his wife was then in her usual good health. He was told of the accident on his way home to dinner. Alice Ethel Cook, wife of Ernest Cook, a platelayer, of 20 York Street said the deceased was her sister. She was invited to dinner on Thursday. About one o'clock witness was in the kitchen and her sister was in the scullery. Suddenly witness heard a bang and on turning round saw the scullery ablaze with flames forcing their way into the kitchen. Her sister had been standing by the gas stove attending some sausages she was frying. Inside the stove she had a milk pudding. Witness saw that the back door was open and she tried to get through but the flames and smoke prevented her. Witness saw her sister stand back from the stove and thought she was safe. A neighbour and a young man who had been cycling by came in and put the fire out. Witness found her sister in a neighbour's house and at first did not recognise her. The injured woman said "Don't cry Alice". In answer to questions by the coroner, witness said she did not smell any gas escaping. In her opinion the accident was caused by the draught from the back door blowing out the gas in the oven. This escaped evidently from the bottom and was ignited by the jets at the top of the stove. She had heard from several people who had had their gas go bang when they tried to light it. The Coroner: Have you heard any complaints as to the quality of the gas? – No. Frank Edward Rider, a fruiterer, of 59 Burleigh Street said that his shop was opposite No 17. On Thursday, just after one o'clock, Mrs Cook rushed out and called him and he went and found the place in flames. He tried to find the gas meter and a young unknown man came in to help and eventually did find it. The young man turned off the gas and the flames subsided a bit. They then managed to rush into the scullery and went through to the yard. He could see nothing of Mrs Cornwell and so they put the fire out with sacks and towels. He then found all the gas taps of the stove turned on and there was in the frying pan an unusual quantity of fat which was blazing. (sic) In his opinion the gas stove was in a dangerous position opposite the back door and it was obvious that the least draught would blow under the stove. Part of the gas pipe had been melted and gas was escaping from it into the room. Mrs Cornwell said that she did not want a doctor or want to go to hospital but eventually the Borough ambulance was called. Guy Montague Tanner, house surgeon at Addenbrookes Hospital stated that Mrs Cornwell was admitted to the hospital at 1.40pm on the 16th. She was suffering from superficial and extensive burns to the hands, arms, chest, back and face. She was also suffering badly from shock. In answer to the coroner witness said that in a case of severe burns the important thing was to ignore the burns and bring the person immediately to the hospital for treatment for shock. It was the shock which developed later that had caused death which took place at 8 o'clock on Friday night. For slight burns Carron oil* was quite a good dressing. The Coroner returned a verdict of "Accidental death" due to shock following burns. In this case the stove was close to the door which might have caused the lower flames to be blown out. People could not be too careful in using gas stoves. He expressed his sympathy with the husband and his thanks to Mr Rider and the unknown young man for the assistance they rendered in a very able manner. Mrs Cook said the family would like to know who the unknown young man was so that they could thank him for what he did.

*an ointment of limewater and linseed oil, formerly used to treat burns [named after Carron, Scotland, where it was used among the ironworkers]