

16 September 1893

A CANAL BOAT CAPSIZED NEAR NORTHWICH TWO CHILDREN DROWNED

INQUEST AND VERDICT On Monday afternoon at the Red Lion Inn, Barnton, Mr C Blunt, deputy coroner, held an inquest on the bodies of **Elizabeth Theobald**, aged four years and seven months, and **Lily Theobald**, aged nine months, daughters of **Thomas Theobald**, who met with their death in an extraordinary manner and under circumstances detailed below. The Rev S L Laidman, vicar of Barnton, was appointed foreman of the jury.

Thomas Theobald, Ducie Street, Piccadilly, Manchester, deposed that he was a boatman. On Saturday, in charge of two boats on the river Weaver. The boats were named *Ted* and *Willie*, and belonged to **Mr Thomas Hassalls** of Ducie Street, Manchester. He (witness) had been captain of the boats for about a year and seven months. They arrived at Barnton with them on Friday night, and went to Higgins' works at Anderton in order to obtain salt in bags. They put in about 12 tons of salt and a ton of empty jars, and about nine o'clock on Saturday morning, they left the salt works to go to Brunner Mond's. They intended to complete the cargo at the chemical works, and during the morning 11 tons 12 cwts of soda crystals in bags were placed on the boat *Willie*. When they finished at Brunner's, witness, **Thomas Ditchfield** (who worked under him), witness's wife and four children were on the boat *Willie*. The children were aged six years, four years and seven months, two years and seven months and nine months respectively. The boats lay by the embankment, *Ted*, which was empty, being next to the shore. The boat *Willie* was registered to carry (...) tons, and on the two boats they had carried as much as 75 tons. It was witness's intention to have the empty boat laden with crystal soda. *Willie* was laden by a quarter past eleven, and a few minutes afterwards the accident occurred. Just on the completion of the loading, the shipping clerk said to him, "Captain, we will get the boat clothed up for fear of rain". Ditchfield threw the stern plank on the boat ; but witness said, "Hold hard ; we will trim the boat first". Ditchfield was at the stern end, and he came to the bags to assist in moving one to the other side of the boat. This was necessary in order to trim the boat straight, and it was a job which often had to be done on narrow boats. They moved the bag which contained the soda, but even then the boat was not straight, and he said to Ditchfield, "The boat is not straight yet, and we will shift another one". They therefore moved another bag which also weighed 5 cwts, and then the boat began to "wharf?" over on the side nearest to the empty boat. His wife ran out of the cabin, and called out, "Oh dear, Tom, whatever are you doing?" Then she screamed and said, "The boat is going over". He believed the boat would recover herself ; but, as soon as he saw that she continued to go over towards the empty craft to which she was tied, he ran to the cabin to assist his wife and children. He called out to Mrs Theobald to get ashore. Two of the children were in the hatches. He picked up one of them and threw her on the other boat to a man who was working there. He then threw the other child, and Ditchfield caught her. His wife wanted to go into the cabin for the other children, and he had difficulty in preventing her from doing so. The water was in the cabin. He told his wife to jump on the empty boat, and the man on the *Ted* caught hold of her hand, but a sudden lurch made him leave go of her, and she was thrown into the water. She caught hold of the string which was hanging by the side of the boat, and she was rescued. As the boat was sinking, he (witness) entered the cabin to save the other two children. The water rose to his waist, and he had to turn back. A minute or so later the boat went down, turning completely over.

The Coroner : How do you know that the weights of the salt and soda on the boat which you have given us are correct? From what you say, there would be about 21 tons on the boat.

Witness said he had given the tickets of weights to his employer. He knew that the tickets from Higgins' works stated that there were 112 two cwt bags.

The Coroner observed that that made the figures eleven tons 4 cwt of salt, and the witness had stated that there were 12 tons 4 cwt.

Witness said the last were the correct figures. With reference to the soda, the man who checked told him that there were 11 tons 12 cwt.

The Coroner : Have you ever had a similar occurrence? - Witness : No, sir. Do you think your boat was too heavily weighted? - I cannot make out the cause of its going over. If the canal had had plenty of water, I should have put on a greater cargo. We ought to take 35 tons easily and without any danger. And you cannot account for the accident? - I cannot give any information at all. The boat has been got up and is empty? - Yes. Have you examined her since? - Not carefully, but she does not seem to be leaking at all. She is a boat that did not ordinarily ship a bucketful of water. I dare say she would be four feet deep and she drew about 14 inches.

The Foreman : You say that after you moved one bag, the boat listed to the same side? Witness : She still listed towards the open river. After we moved the second bag, she leaned over to the other side and went down. While you were moving the bags, did anyone interfere with the ropes by which the boat was tied to the empty craft? - I believe the rope slipped, and my wife was unloosening it so that she could tighten it again, but the boat went down. Do you think the unloosening made a difference? - Well, if it had been properly fast, it might have made a difference.

Witness, in answer to Mr Hazlehurst (a juror), said the bags were laid all the way down the boat. The boats were specially built for the trade in which they were being employed.

Thomas Ditchfield, living with Theobald, stated that he was in the *Willie* on Saturday when the accident occurred. When the last four bags had been put in place, the boat started lying slightly towards the open river. They decided to move some of the soda, and accordingly shifted one bag. This made no difference, and so they moved another two cwts. As soon as they had done this, the vessel began to sink. She was not long in turning over and going to the bottom. Two of the children were saved in the manner described. He could not account for the boat going over without a rope or something slipped. She was by no means heavily laden.

Frank Hickson of Anderton, labourer, deposed that on Saturday morning he was engaged in loading the *Ted*, which lay by the side of the boat which had capsized. He noticed Theobald and Ditchfield moving a bag and concluded that they were trimming the cargo. He next noticed that the boat was leaning over towards the boat in which he was working. He caught the two children thrown by the captain ; but the boat was soon full and at the bottom. He did not see the rope slip, but he thought that if it was loosened by the captain's wife, that would have something to do with the accident.

Patrick Wilson of Castle Northwich, labourer, spoke to diving into the boat's cabin when she lay under water, and recovering the bodies of the two children. The eldest was covered with utensils, and the stove and ashpan had also turned over upon her. The baby was fast in a chair.

The Coroner, in summing up, gave it as his opinion that the jury could do nothing but record a verdict of accidental death. The boat might not have been loaded properly ; but he would not like to say that that was the case.

The foreman agreed with the coroner that they could only return a verdict of accidentally drowned. It was quite possible that as long as the rope kept in position the boat was secure ; but he was not going to say that the captain was any way to blame in the matter.

The jury agreed to a verdict of "Accidentally drowned".