



# SOUTH WILTSHIRE CORONER'S INQUESTS



## Durrington

**PEARCEY / PERCY - Infant**

**14<sup>th</sup> September, 1878**

### Infant's death

On Monday an inquest was held at the Vicarage, Durrington, before the Deputy-County-Coroner, Mr R A Wilson, on the body of an illegitimate child of Thurza Percy, a cook in the employ of the Rev. C S Ruddle, which was found in the vault of a closet on Saturday morning.

The particulars of the case, which excited considerable interest in Durrington and neighbouring villages, will be found in the evidence that was adduced.

Jane Thomas was the first witness, and stated that she was a fellow-servant of Percy's, and had heard her on various occasions complain of being unwell. She had, however, kept to her work until last Friday, on which day witness told her, in consequence of her being particularly unwell, to go to her bedroom. During the day she visited her several times, and it was proposed to send for a doctor, but at Percy's request they abstained from putting this proposition into execution. Between five and six in the evening she had occasion to go to the closet, but found it locked and Percy inside. After waiting for about five minutes, the door was opened, but not before Ellen Collins had threatened to send for a policeman if she (Percy) did not do so. There were signs about the closet of a child having been born, but nothing was said to that effect at the time, nor did Percy make a statement. In her own mind she was quite satisfied that a child had been born. After getting Percy upstairs she sent for Mr R Smith, her master and mistress being away at the time.

Ellen Collins deposed that she was called by the last witness on Friday afternoon to see Percy, and on responding to her call found her (Percy) very ill. She stayed some time with her, and returned to her home at about five o'clock. On her going again to the Vicarage she found that Percy had left her room, and was in the closet where Thomas was attempting to get in. Witness, seeing that Thomas could not enter, threatened to send for a policeman if the door were not opened. This had the desired effect, for very shortly after the door was opened. She, however, was not present when Percy came out. She (witness) said nothing to her (Percy) about it.

PC Phillips said that on Friday, he received information from Mr Smith to the effect that the cook at Mr Ruddle's had been confined, and had done away with the child. It being late in the night he was unable to search for it at once, but on the following morning, in company with Sergeant Potto, he did so, and after digging away half of the bricks of the vault of the closet found the body embedded in the refuse.

Mr Style, surgeon, of Amesbury, was next examined, and stated that at Mr Smith's request he went down to Durrington Vicarage on Friday night. He asked Percy if she had been confined, and she replied in the affirmative, adding that the child was in the closet. The next day (Saturday) he was present when the body was removed from the vault, and he found it to be that of a fully-developed male child. He had that day made a

post mortem examination of the body, and from what he had seen he had come to the following conclusions : First – That the child was born alive; secondly, that marks round the mouth and nose showed that suffocation had been attempted; and thirdly, from the fracture of the occipital bone, that the child had been stunned, and probably before death was complete it might have been thrown down the vault.

In reply to the Coroner, witness stated that the marks round the mouth and nose might possibly have been caused inadvertently and without criminal intention. He did not think the fracture of the bone was caused by accident.

Mr Eddowes said that he assisted Mr Style in making the post mortem examination; and having heard his evidence as to the appearance of the body and the internal organs he might say that he acquiesced in it. He thought the child was born alive, as the lungs floated when placed in water.

Answering the Coroner, who asked if the lungs would have been inflated if the child had just breathed, he said that when he said the child had been born alive he meant that the child had breathed fully.

In answer to further questions, he said he thought the fracture of the occipital bone (which is that bone pertaining to that part of the skull which forms the hind part of the head) was caused before death, and that some violence was used, but it was possible that it might have been caused by accident.

The Coroner, in summing up, pointed out that they must have it proved beyond a doubt that the child had been born alive before they returned a verdict of murder.

The jury, after a brief consultation, returned a verdict, "That there was not sufficient evidence to show whether the child was born alive or whether it died before birth."

#### Magistrates Hearing 1878 October 5th

At the office to the clerk of the county magistrates, on Saturday, before Mr Hussey, Thurza Pearcey was charged with concealing the birth of her illegitimate child on the 6th of Sept.

All the evidence produced at the inquest showing there was a concealment, was repeated, and finally the prisoner was committed for trial at the Assizes.

*Extract published with kind permission from [Salisbury Inquests](#)*