

A Heathcote mystery – was it murder?

On 12 September 1892, Sarah Nagle, a 63-year-old widow disappeared without trace from her cottage across the road from Heathcote Railway Station. Searches in nearby bushland turned up nothing.

Mrs Nagle had been quite well off, and it was rumoured that she was murdered. Others believed she had got lost in the bush and perished from exposure. Her son-in-law put up a £50 reward for finding her, but withdrew it after 12 months of fruitless searching.

Five years later, two Sutherland bushmen, William Stanton and George Candy, were roo shooting when they came across a skeleton, still clothed and with two rings on a finger bone, in a cave near Kangaroo Creek, two kilometres east of Heathcote Railway Station. They immediately assumed it was the missing woman. This was confirmed when Sarah Nagle's daughter identified the two rings as her mother's.

The inquiry into Sarah Nagle's death held at Kitt's Royal Hotel (now Boyles Hotel) found no motivation for murder, although her sister claimed that the daughter and her husband – who stood to benefit from her death – had been pressing her for money. The daughter denied this, and the investigating doctor found no evidence of violence on her remains. He was strongly of the opinion that she had died of natural causes.

The jury returned an open verdict.

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Joseph and Sarah Nagle (nee Keep) owned a good slice of valuable land on the western side of the road across from Heathcote Railway Station. On it were two cottages facing the line, both within speaking distance of the railway line.

When Joseph died in 1891, Sarah Nagle went to live with her married daughter, Mary Ford, in Auburn, but she was in the habit of spending weekends at her cottage in Heathcote. On Friday, 10 September 1892, 63-year-old Sarah Nagle, arrived to spend the weekend at Heathcote. A friend was with her and on Sunday, she told the friend that she was going to visit Mrs Cooper on the other side of the line. Heathcote stationmaster, Mr Hogan spoke to her as she left the cottage at about noon, and Mr Cooper later verified that she had visited at about 12.30pm. She was not seen again.

When Sarah Nagle didn't return home that afternoon a search party went looking for her in the surrounding dense bushland, dotted with gullies and ridges. Although the day had been fine, the night was bitterly cold, and Sarah was wearing summer clothes. Police were notified the next day, Monday, and the search continued intensely for two or three days before being scaled down. A smaller party searched for her for another six weeks.

Sarah's daughter, Mary Ford said that 'her mother was remarkable for forgetting the location of any place in which she found herself.' She had got lost in the city before, and seldom went out alone. Mary's husband, Charles offered a reward of £50 to find her, and only withdrew the offer after a fruitless six months of searching.

Rumours abounded that Sarah Nagle had met with foul play. She was well off, with considerable property at Heathcote, Maitland and in Sydney. Detective Collider investigated her affairs and business dealings and could find nothing suspicious.

Sarah Nagle is found

Nearly five years later, in August 1897, two labourers, George Gaudy and William Stanton from Sutherland, were out roo shooting, when they came across a cave near Kangaroo Creek, two kilometres east of Heathcote Railway Station. In the cave was a skeleton, partially covered with bushes and with the remains of clothing on it. On one of the finger bones were two rings.

The men immediately assumed this was the skeleton of Sarah Nagle, whose disappearance had caused such a stir five years earlier. The rings and a watch found with the remains were positively identified as Sarah's by her sister and daughter. The body was moved to Sutherland.

The suspicion that Sarah had been murdered was raised again, with her sister, Mrs Middlemiss of Botany, testifying at the inquest that her daughter and son-in-law, the sole beneficiaries of Sarah's death, had been pressing her for more and more money. The Fords denied this, saying the only money they had received from, or asked of her, was 10 shillings per week for board and residence. Their relationship with her had been very good. Mary stated that her mother had suffered from heart disease.

At District Coroner W.H. Mackenzie's inquiry at Kitt's Royal Hotel, Sutherland, the medical testimony was that Sarah Nagle's remains were lying 'in a state of natural repose, such as would have been adopted by a person lying down and dropping off to sleep.' He firmly believed that death resulted from natural causes, though he could not be absolutely sure.

After just a few minutes to consider, the jury returned an open verdict.

References:

- *Evening News*, Sydney NSW, 30 August 1897, p.3, 'The Nagle mystery'
- *Daily Telegraph*, 28 August 1897, p.9, 'The Heathcote mystery: remains of Mrs Nagle found. Was it murder?'