

Witnessing the familial

insights from inquest depositions and minding the gaps

'Witnessing the familial: insights from inquest depositions and minding the gaps',

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Abstract

Drawing on the common thread of Elizabeth Morgan's appearance as a deponent in her father's and daughter's inquests (1861 and 1870), this article examines how inquest depositions can be mined for evidence of familial relationships and circumstances. It considers what other records and research strategies can support the interpretation (and absence) of inquest records, and what insights can be gained from minding the gaps in the narratives offered.

This reflection functions as a companion piece to the article 'Untimely ends' published elsewhere in this issue of *Provenance*. I examine (or, in one case, do not examine) inquest records on the deaths of Gabriel Blewett, Emma Morgan, John Morgan and a woman named Morgan that are relevant to my Morgan forebears, in particular, my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Morgan, born Blewett. These examples illustrate how inquest depositions can be useful to family historians, helping to identify family members and shedding light on relationships and living conditions; they also suggest that researching the deponents may be necessary to understand their testimony. Understanding how inquests were conducted and how inquest records were created further aids in interpreting the evidence.

My father knew nothing of his Morgan ancestors beyond the fact of his grandfather Gabriel Morgan's middle name being Blewett. My first foray into rectifying this lack of knowledge revealed the connection: Blewett was Gabriel Morgan's mother Elizabeth's maiden name.[1] From knowing nothing, after years of research I now know a great deal, because across three generations the family's lives were circumscribed by courts, prison cells, asylums and hospitals—all great generators of records that have providentially been kept. Yet I hesitate to say I am lucky to have these records, as so many of them bear witness to trauma. I have omitted the real trauma behind them

because it would feel like exploitation to share everything I have learnt about my family.

Gabriel Blewett died in the Melbourne Hospital after a leg amputation on 14 May 1870, aged 70.[2] From my perspective, the most important evidence this inquest record contained was certain proof that Elizabeth Morgan and Gabriel Blewett were related. The question and answer nature of deponent's testimonies before inquest juries and the requirements for identifying oneself proved this without a doubt. Elizabeth identified herself as a dress-maker and also gave her first married name (she had been known by other names since). Aside from further details about how Gabriel Blewett's injury was exacerbated at home, most importantly Elizabeth stated: 'The deceased was my father. His name was Gabriel Blewett. His age was 70 years. He has left a wife and three children'. The statement that he left three children suggested something—namely, that Elizabeth was still in touch with her remaining two siblings back in England. She had not seen them for between six and 10 years, yet she knew they were both still alive. Inquest testimony was taken down by a government employee and then given to the deponent to read, swear to and sign before the coroner. It can come across as somewhat neutral in its accounting, but still be revealing.

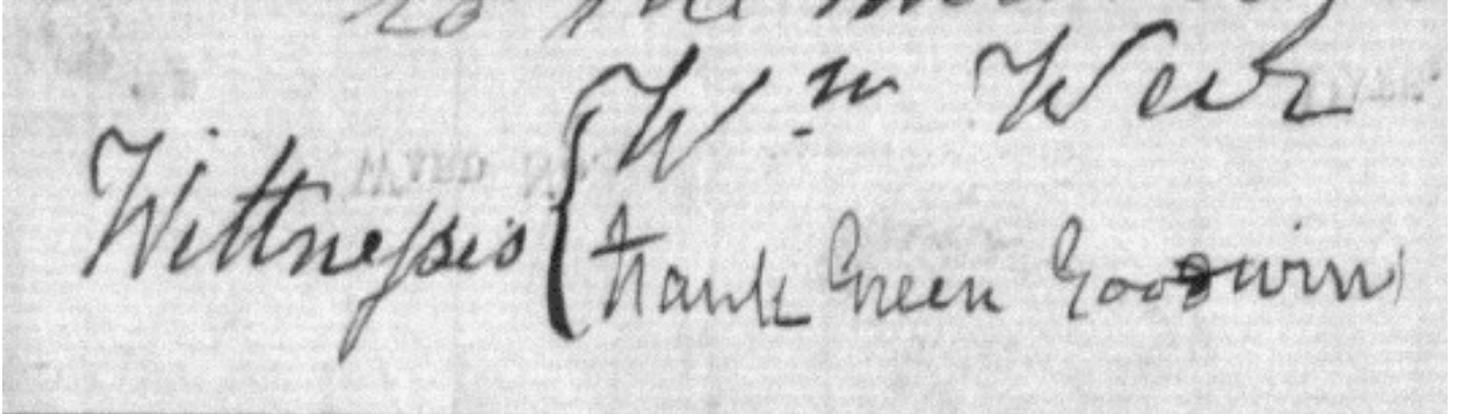


Figure 1: The signature of William Weir, foreman of the jury, from the inquest record of Gabriel Blewett, VPRS 24/P0, Unit 239, Item 1870/421 Gabriel Blewett; and the signature of William Weir, witness to the codicil of Gabriel Blewett's will, VPRS 7591/P1, Unit 38, Item 8/469 Gabriel Blewitt.

This was one of the first records I found about this family and it reassured me that I was on the right track, because the relationship between the parties was very clear. I went back to it a few years later and noticed something else—the name of the first juror, the foreman of the jury, William Weir. Gabriel Blewett was a stonemason and I had since discovered that one of the earliest buildings he worked on was the Christ Church School in Collingwood in 1855 with William Weir, another Collingwood-based builder.[3] I had also noticed on another record revisit that William Weir was the witness of a codicil to Gabriel Blewett's will in 1870, just before his accident. Were they the same William Weir? There were two things I had to work out: how many William Weirs were there in Melbourne at this time (and how do the signatures compare), and what was the usual conduct of an inquest—did they just grab any old 'good and lawful men' off the street? In country inquests in smaller towns, the chances are this would not be a coincidence, but in Melbourne, at the hospital, it could be. Checking Sands & McDougall's Melbourne directories suggested that my assumption was reasonable; however, as not everyone was listed in the directory, I searched Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria for deaths of William Weir. This revealed potentially eight candidates alive in Melbourne in 1870. Therefore, I remain uncertain about the signatures (Figure 1).

That William Weir witnessed Gabriel Morgan's will is proof enough that the men retained a friendship over a 15-year period (which is important to me). Him participating as a juror at Gabriel's inquest feels like the final act one might perform for a friend. Taking this as far as I could, I found Gabriel's record in the hospital ward book held at Public Record Office Victoria (PROV),[4] which notes that he slipped into a coma and died at midnight. Perhaps Ruth, his wife, and William, his old friend, came to see him the

next morning only to find he had died in the night, and William was roped into the inquest jury. The inquest was not held until two days after Gabriel died, so this scenario is not likely, but it is where my narrative bent wants to fill in the gaps.

Gabriel's inquest was not the first that his daughter Elizabeth Morgan had borne witness to. It was likely the third, in Australia at least, the first being her two-year-old daughter Emma's. Emma died in a tent at Clinker's Hill, Castlemaine, in 1861.[5] The verdict of the inquest was 'that Emma Morgan aged 2 years died at Castlemaine on the 22nd March in consequence of tubercle of the mesentery but we believe the mother has been guilty of great carelessness towards the child'. Aside from Elizabeth's testimony, there were six deponents, all men, three from neighbouring tents, the Castlemaine hospital surgeon, another medical man and the police constable who found Emma. Everyone except Elizabeth referred to Emma as 'the deceased', 'the child' and 'it'. Granted, probably nobody except Elizabeth knew her daughter's name and use of 'the deceased' is probably an artefact of how the testimony was taken down, but use of *it* for a child grates.

Some of the witnesses were very critical of Elizabeth. I researched what I could about all the witnesses in order to understand their testimony a little better. One was a very elderly man who appeared to tell it like it was. One was only about 17, which may explain the guarded nature of his testimony (he refused to be negative about Elizabeth). Neither of the medical men implicated Elizabeth. It was the police constable who did so on the word of the neighbours. The most negative and judgemental of those was George Greenhill. This man eventually became the mayor of Castlemaine. Three years after making this

deposition, Greenhill was assaulted by a fellow member of his friendly society in lodge rooms, which suggests something about his character that is borne out in newspaper reports of his local campaigning in Castlemaine. Greenhill, who effectively retired in disgrace from his council position, was described by one of his fellow councillors as a 'low, snarling, miserable cur' and a 'man entirely devoid of principles'.^[6] I bear this in mind when I consider his testimony.

In this case, there is evidence of how Elizabeth felt about the inquest process, because a few weeks later, pregnant with my great-grandfather, she appeared before the Castlemaine Court to give testimony against her husband, who was charged with deserting his wife and family:

John Morgan was brought up on warrant, charged with deserting his wife and family. Elizabeth Morgan, defendant's wife, said that in March last he left her and went to Bendigo, and that since that time he had never given her any money to support her, with the exception of 5s [shillings]. During that time one of their children died, and she was not able to obtain the necessary medical aid. The consequence was that an inquest was held on it, and she was nearly committed for manslaughter, because she had not had means to obtain necessaries for it.^[7]

Elizabeth not only understood how she had been judged, but also the consequences of that judgement.

The next example concerns the death of Elizabeth's son, John Morgan, who drowned at Dromana in 1863. The cause of death was given as drowning on his death certificate, which states that a magisterial inquiry was held at Schnapper Point two days after six-year-old John drowned.^[8] No doubt the record of the magisterial inquiry, had it survived, would have illuminated the family's personal circumstances at the time, and described how John came to drown. However, unfortunately, this record is one of the 3–5 per cent of magisterial inquiries and inquest records in Victoria that PROV estimates have not survived.

This is where it is important to read PROV's series descriptions, which help both to understand the context of the records and to save time in research. The series description for Inquest Deposition Files (VPRS 24—see under 'Missing Files') suggests alternative record sources for information about inquests, including VPRS 937 Chief Commissioner of Police, Inward Registered Correspondence 1852–1893, which may contain reports by attending police officers. I have consulted records from the 1870s in this series and found the size of the files and, in many cases, the lack of indexing, to be quite daunting. (The 1863 files are on my to do list.)

In many cases like this, it is possible to find detailed descriptions of inquest depositions and findings in newspapers; however, to date, this one has defeated me. The lack of local newspapers for Mornington at this time and the distance from Melbourne meant that John's death may never have been reported as news. To build a picture of what might have happened, I extracted inquest data on drownings for 1863 from the PROV catalogue and looked at the inquest record for a young girl who drowned in the same location later that year.

My first thought was that John probably drowned in the ocean, as his death was recorded at Dromana; however, of the 278 drowning records for the year 1863, it can be inferred from location that people, and children particularly, commonly drowned in waterholes. From the 1860s through to the present day, 1863 recorded the highest number of deaths by drowning: 83 per cent of these were males. They fell into wells, waterholes, rivers, creeks, tanks and dams; they fell down mine shafts and off bridges; one man drowned escaping from the police while another man accidentally fell off a log. Children, then as now, drowned in the smallest depths of water, even a few inches at the bottom of a cellar. Seven months after John drowned at Dromana, a four-year-old girl called Phoebe Allison drowned at Schnapper Point in a waterhole on her father's premises in the middle of the afternoon. Several other children had drowned in waterholes at Schnapper Point in the preceding years. Their inquest records reveal commonalities: many children were playing without adult supervision when they drowned. What was John doing on the day he drowned? Where might his mother have been? Looking after my great-grandfather, the baby, while her eldest son, aged 12, looked after John, perhaps exploring together in the scrub? Without specific records relating to John's death, other inquest records can at least suggest something about the circumstances.

The final example relates to my search for a death certificate or proof of death for Elizabeth Morgan, daughter of Gabriel Blewett, and mother of John and Emma Morgan. Given what I knew about her personal circumstances, and a last conclusive sighting of her alive in 1889 in Collingwood where she had spent most of her 35 years in Victoria, I searched Trove using the phrase 'woman named Morgan' in connection with 'Collingwood' and 'death' from that date. I found something interesting under the heading 'Sudden death at Collingwood' in 1896

about a woman aged approximately 70, known only by her surname, Morgan.[9] I knew there would be an inquest record, and yet nothing came up in a search of PROV's catalogue for inquests for Morgan in 1896.

But at least the inquest was reported in the newspapers. [10] The initial newspaper account of the death stated she was about 70; however, the newspaper report of the inquest findings stated she was 53, and the death certificate stated she was 63. Neither newspaper report indicated that the woman's first name was known, and her death certificate lists her only as 'woman named Morgan'. The ages 53 and 63 are very particular and I could not explain the change from an approximation of 70 to 63 without further details about the woman. But, if the people who knew her did not even know her first name, how could anyone have known her actual age? Could she perhaps have had some keepsake on her person that indicated her birth year? Knowing what information comes to light in inquest depositions, this is one missing record I regretted not having survived, because there may have been further clues that would have helped me.

I searched the newspapers in Trove for the names of other people who had inquests held on them in Melbourne in August 1896 and could not find them in the PROV catalogue either. Perhaps there was a whole swathe missing? Looking at the catalogue results around this date, I realised that the inquest records were there but that the name metadata was missing. I reported this to PROV and was informed that it would be rectified (a reminder of how valuable the work of volunteer transcribers of name metadata is). The files were there with only the file number and, by sampling in the file number range where I hoped my inquest would be, I finally found the one I was looking for.[11] I was hugely disappointed because it is unlikely the 'woman named Morgan' is my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth. It was the deponent Mrs Quinn, who found the body, who stated 'she said she was 53 years', which is too young to be my Elizabeth Morgan, who would have been 69. Who was right: Sarah Quinn reporting the words of the deceased woman; the police, who first reported her age as about 70; or the registrar of deaths?

Nevertheless, there is something very poignant about this record—this woman with a name nobody knew—and the humanity of those around her. Mrs Smith, whose house the woman named Morgan lived in, told the police that the woman, who was of the 'vagrant' class, came to her house about three months prior and, as she complained of being ill, Mrs Smith would not turn her out, from which I presumed that the woman named Morgan could not afford the rent and that Mrs Smith had let this slide.

My Elizabeth is probably the Elizabeth Morgan who died in November 1894 in the Melbourne Hospital of senile debility and exhaustion.[12] This Elizabeth was aged 70, according to her death certificate, which may have been an approximation, as no other particulars were known. She was buried on 3 November 1894 in an unmarked (pauper's) grave in the 'Other Denominations' section of the Melbourne General Cemetery. My Elizabeth was almost 68 in late 1894, so this could have been her. The gaps in this record may say it all.

Inquest deposition files as public records offer a very distinctive kind of access to personal information, drawing together the testimony of multiple witnesses (deponents), and often including family members of the deceased. When using these records for research, I have learnt that interpreting them requires empathy and fanning out the research to consider the circumstances of the deponents as well as the deceased. Minding the gaps in the records and the narrative they purport to tell through asking questions and seeking answers in alternative record sources can help to shed light on more than just the death of the individual.

Endnotes

- [1] I explored the beginnings of my research journey in two blog posts for the Find & Connect web resource, 'Encounters with the Immigrants Home', 24 and 29 August 2017, available at <<https://www.findandconnectwrblog.info/2017/08/encounters-with-the-immigrants-home-part-1/>>, accessed 10 November 2020.
- [2] VPRS 24/P0, Unit 239, Item 1870/421, Gabriel Blewett.
- [3] William Weir, born c. 1825, died in 1890. See 'The late William Weir', *Mercury and Weekly Courier*, 8 May 1890, p. 2.
- [4] VPRS 12477/P1, Unit 18, 15 February 1864 – 16 August 1872, Males, No. 2 & 3 Wards Gillbee GSV Book No: 144, pp.101, 104–105. My transcription is available at <<https://ancestry.helenmorgan.net/references/001-004-0002>>, accessed 10 November 2020.
- [5] VPRS 24/P0, Unit 106, Item 1861/181, Emma Morgan.
- [6] 'Disgraceful scene in the Castlemaine Borough Council', *Leader*, 12 January 1884, p. 32.
- [7] 'Castlemaine Police Court', *Mount Alexander Mail*, 5 April 1861, p. 5.
- [8] Victorian death registration number 2816/1863.
- [9] 'Sudden death at Collingwood', *Age*, 25 August 1896, p. 5.
- [10] 'To-day's inquests. Natural causes', *Herald*, 27 August 1896, p. 2.
- [11] VPRS 24/P0, Unit 662, Item 1896/1067 [no name].
- [12] Victorian death registration number 14031/1894. Beneath the hospital, as the place of death, is the notation 'Abbotsford', which fits with Elizabeth's last known residence in Collingwood.