

An Inquest involving the Chunk Stove in 1839

The popularity of the Chunk Stove does not appear to have been harmed by its association with the death of Mary Cronin, a housemaid to the Clerk of the Works at The Royal Hospital, Chelsea. The following is a full transcript of the report of the inquest in the West Kent Guardian dated 14th December 1839. It is an interesting insight into the conduct of inquests in the first half of the 19th century. The text in bold, highlights those parts which have particular reference to Chunk Stoves.

*" Distressing Occurrence - An inquest was held on Wednesday evening last, at the "Admiral Hardy," on view of the body of Mary Cronan, the housemaid of Mr. Lee, the clerk of the works at the Royal Hospital, who was found dead in her bed the same morning, **being suffocated from the effluvia arising from a coke fire contained in one of the new patent Chunk stoves. The case excited great interest, it having been believed that the Chunk stove was perfectly free from all danger, and might with safety be burnt in the bed-room of an invalid. The patent was more modern than Harper and Joyce's, or Dr.Arnott's, and has been highly spoken of by all scientific persons. A number of most respectable gentlemen were present, and also the patentees, Messrs. Rippon and Burton, of Wells Street, Oxford Street.***

A most respectable jury, amongst whom were Messrs. George Vernez, Henry Richardson, Knowlden, George Reeve, Inwood, Bond, Dunford, Sulman, Garlick, Symons, Jeans, and Munyard, having been sworn, proceeded to view the body, which lay on the bed in a small room, lighted by a skylight and without a chimney, the Chunk stove being fixed in one corner near the door, which opened into the garden. On their return the following evidence was given:-

Ellen Cronan, a nurse in the hospital, cousin of the deceased, identified the body as that of Mary Cronan, a spinster, aged 24 years. Witness knew nothing of the cause of her death except by hearsay. She laid the body out; there were no marks of violence on it, neither was it swollen. Deceased was always fine hearty young woman.

James Domville, of the Royal Infirmary, surgeon, being sworn, said: I was called about eight o'clock this morning to attend the deceased. I went to her immediately at Mr. Lee's house. Mr. Sturton and one of our assistants were there; she was quite dead, and my impression is that

she had been dead for some hours; she was warm ; she was not swollen about the body; **I believe she died from suffocation caused by the noxious effluvia escaping from the coke fire in a patent Chunk stove which was in a corner of the room;** I found a part of the food which she had eaten on the pillow at the side of her head, which she had vomitted ; it was not all effected by the operation of digestion. (Witness here produced a piece the meat which he had brought away, and which was in the same state as when eaten by the deceased.) She must, therefore, have died very early in the night; apoplexy is within the bounds of possibility of the cause of her death, but decided opinion that she died from suffocation, and that that suffocation was produced by the effects of the noxious effluvia from the stove; I cannot positively state the cause of her death without making a post mortem examination of the head and body; when I entered the room this morning where deceased lay, and where the stove was, I could smell the effluvia distinctly; I have no objection to open the body if required.

Richard Brewer, of Greenwich, labourer, sworn, said—I work for Mr. Lee I went there soon after seven o'clock this morning as usual; I went to the door where I knew deceased slept to call her, as I have done before ; I knocked, but receiving no answer I got alarmed ; I tried to get in, but could not, I therefore supposed that something was wrong, and I took the short ladder which stood against the wall and placed it up to the sky-light; I did not break the window, but did the latch, and then lifted up the sky-light and got down into the room; I saw deceased lying on the bed, the clothes were not over her, but turned back and on one side. I sent a boy to call Mr. Lee; I did not smell anything particular as I entered through the sky-light. I then opened the door; **before I got to the door I observed the patent stove was out of its position - the outer case of the stove out of its proper position. After I opened the door I examined the stove, and found it was canted about three inches on one side, so that I could put finger under one side of it; it ought to be at all times perpendicular, and imbedded in sand, to render it air tight.** Mr. Lee came to my assistance. Medical men were sent for directly Mr. Sturton came first, then two assistants from the hospital, and then Mr. Domville. The deceased was quite warm, and did not know whether she was dead or alive; she appeared to me to have been struggling. I put the stove in order yesterday about two o'clock the afternoon; I saw it twice afterwards, it was alight, and in its proper position both times; nothing was done to it afterwards to my knowledge. I do not think the deceased understood anything about the stove or its management. I am sure that I fixed it properly yesterday; I am in the habit of doing it, and I understand it; I did not push the stove on one side this morning when I entered or as

I opened the door; that I swear; it was soon after seven o'clock, and was just getting light, so that I could see what I was about. I threw the clothes over the deceased directly I entered the room—the stove will burn 23 or 24 hours when properly fed—the last time I saw it was at four o'clock—it was burning and its proper position then—when I observed it this morning there was sufficient room for the vapour to escape from beneath—the coke was just alight, and no more—it was gradually burning away (a model of the stove was here produced, and the witness pointed out to the jury how he placed it yesterday, and how he found it in the morning.) I fed the stove with gas coke, and lighted it with some light coal—I do not know whether any person had any access to it between four o'clock yesterday afternoon and this morning—it was open over the smoke escape pipe behind—I stood upon the lead flat when I opened the sky-light, and put the ladder down immediately—I can smell pretty well generally; but I did not smell any effluvia from the stove this morning.

*The Coroner here suggested that it would be advisable to ascertain beyond doubt the true cause of death, and recommended an adjournment, that a post mortem examination might take place, which the jury coinciding in, Mr. Domville and Mr. Sturton were ordered to perform it. **The patentee of the stove applied for liberty to have their medical gentlemen present, which was acceded to, and the case was adjourned over to the following day. Thursday - The jury met again this evening, and were much surprised at finding one of the Chunk stoves had been fixed in the room for their inspection by the patentees, who also were present. The stove was lighted, and the heat resulting from it was very great. The room was again crowded by many respectable persons, among whom we noticed Mr. Hargrave, the magistrate, and several medical and scientific gentlemen.***

The following additional evidence was then adduced :

*James Domville recalled, said he was present today, and assisted in making **the post mortem examination of the body. Mr. Sturton, Mr. Keebie, Dr. Bunn, Mr. Gilchrist, Mr. Odling on the part of the patentees of the stove, and several other gentlemen were present also.** We proceeded first to examine the viscera and the chest; the lungs and intestines we found gorged with blood the general result of the examination is convincing to me that the deceased died from suffocation; the whole of the body, with the exception of the lungs, which were gorged with blood, was in a perfect state of health. We then examined the head, the brain was also perfectly healthy, except a slight engorgement of the membranes and blood-vessels, which also proves*

that the deceased died from suffocation, My opinion of the cause of death is not altered by the post mortem examination. When I entered the room yesterday morning, where the deceased lay, I discovered that the stove had been removed, I understood about hour before there was a smell in the room, but it was not by any means oppressive, though I could detect that some offensive combustion had been going on.

William Sturton, of Greenwich, surgeon, being sworn, said:- I was sent for about a quarter before eight o'clock yesterday morning to attend the deceased. I went to her immediately, and found her dead. As soon as I got into the room I experienced an unpleasant sensation from the effects of the effluvia, which was very strong and disagreeable the stove was then the room, but it was immediately removed, and I had the bed on which the deceased was lying brought forward, so as to be under the sky-light that the deceased might have the benefit of the air, and that I might see better. My attention was first drawn to her and not to the stove. The carotid artery was not pulsating. I did at first think slight pulsation of the breast was going on, but was afterwards convinced of the contrary. I opened two veins in the right arm but no blood flowed; I should have opened the carotid artery, but as there was no pulsation it would have been of no use. I remained until Dr. Domville came, he coincided with me that she was quite gone. I had previously administered a stimulant, and rubbed her externally with camphor and ammonia, but to no effect. My impression was then that she died from suffocation. I have proceeded to examine the body today, in company with Dr. Domville and other gentlemen, and I now perfectly agree with him in opinion to the cause death ; the body was in perfect state of health, except the congestion of the lungs. I opened the stomach, and found, I should say, about half to three-quarters of a pint partly digested food. When I was first called to her I observed she had been vomiting over the bed side. I took up a piece of the meat, which did not appear to have been operated upon at all by the digestive organs of the stomach. I could have done nothing to have restored animation I am sure; it is not as though she had died from want of air; if she had, something more might have been done to have restored animation such as inflation of the lungs ; but in this case the deceased died from breathing air strongly impregnated with deleterious matter. I did not take any particular notice of the stove, nor the fire in it, but I observed it was tilted a little on one side but I cannot say when that was done. I mentioned that circumstance to Dr. Domville afterwards. The deceased was lying with her head exceedingly low, and almost smothered with the food she had vomited up. I should say she had imbibed carbonic acid gas, or carbonic oxide or hydrogen, all of which are destructive to human life. The clothes were not very much turned down from the deceased; but I believe before I got there they had been

partly turned back again. I have examined other bodies that have been found dead; they all present different appearances, according to the cause of death. The deceased was in a perfectly easy posture when I first saw her; and I should say she died very quietly.

Francis Odling, of 26, Oxford Street, Westminster, surgeon, being sworn, stated that he was present at the examination of the body of the deceased, by the desire of the patentees. That there was no doubt whatever as to the true cause death, which was suffocation, and that he was of the same opinion as the two former medical witnesses on every point, and that the deceased was certainly perfectly healthy prior to her death.

Charles Lee, of Greenwich Hospital, Clerk of the Works, being sworn, said:- The deceased was my servant; she came to me on Sunday last; she was in good health I saw her last alive on Tuesday evening, about eleven o'clock, just before she went to bed she slept alone, and in the room which the jury saw her; the stove was fixed in the room, and alight all Monday night, and she slept there then. The stove was put in the room by my order, because I knew it was a damp situation, and I thought the stove would make the room more comfortable, and saw it properly fixed. I have had the stove in use for about a month. The deceased knew nothing I believe, about its management, nor was she instructed to my knowledge; I have also two others in use, but neither of them in a bedroom. **I asked the deceased on Tuesday morning how she liked the stove, and she said it made the room very comfortable, and she appeared pleased with it;** it was lighted again at 2 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon. I saw it myself at four. I was with the smith when he fixed it, and he fixed it properly. I heard nothing of her during the night. I was first roused by man in the morning, who said that deceased was not up, and that he thought something was wrong. I immediately dressed myself and went to her. I then sent for medical assistance. Mr. Sturton arrived first, Dr. Domville arrived soon afterwards. The door was open when I got in, but I believe it had not been opened for more than five minutes. I could smell the effluvia from the stove, it was not very strong, because the skylight was open, and it had partly escaped. I observed the cylinder of the stove was out of its perpendicular; it was canted forwards about three inches. My opinion is that it could not have been canted by the man opening the door. **My own idea is that the deceased took the cylinder off for curiosity, and did not properly replace it again. I think it is possible she saw it lighted, but I do not think she knew how to put the fire out, or how to lessen the heat.** Every assistance was rendered to her immediately. The fire was burning yesterday morning, but the fuel

was nearly all consumed; it may sometimes burn hours, but it won't always, from the circumstance of the cylinder being out of its position. There must have been greater draught, and that would cause the consumption to be more rapid. No person went into the room between 4 o'clock on Tuesday and the time when the deceased was found except herself. The pipe from the stove goes through the external wall of the house and ascends. I have examined it and found it quite perfect, and not at all stopped, and I am of opinion it would go for many months without being stopped.

Richard Brewer, being recalled, repeated that he was quite sure that he did not run foul of the stove, nor upset the outer case; he said I saw it out of its position when I first got into the room; I thought the stove had produced some effect upon the deceased directly I got down. There was no possibility of my pushing the ladder against the stove as I got through the sky-light. I sent for Mr. Lee as I was in the act of getting down into the room. I was in such a fright that I did not smell the effluvia; I have had the care of the stove ever since it has been used in the hospital, and I perfectly understand the management of it; I am quite sure I put it right on Thursday afternoon. I removed the stove out of the room after Mr. Sturton arrived there was very little fire in it, so little that it could hardly be seen; I filled it as usual the previous day; the deceased did not say anything to me about it; I do not know whether she saw me light it or not; she made no observation concerning the stove or the lighting it, but she has said it was a very comfortable thing; she did not ask me to show her anything connected with it, nor did I tell her how to manage it.

The Coroner then asked Messrs. Rippon and Burton whether they were desirous of offering any evidence as to the general safety of the action of their stove, which they answered by stating that, as it had been clearly proved that the stove was out of the perpendicular, it was unnecessary for them to add word on the subject. If it had been properly used no accident could possibly occur; but, of course, if the directions for such were not attended to the patent would be valueless. Mr. Rippon added that he had burnt one in his own bedroom, at night, for two months previous to purchasing the patent, without the least ill effect.

The Coroner summed up, and, on a short consultation, the jury returned verdict, that the deceased was suffocated whilst sleeping in a room wherein there was burning a coke fire in a certain patent stove, called a Chunk stove, which was found to be displaced, but

how the said stove became so, there was no evidence to prove, although no one, except the deceased, had access to it.

After the termination of the case the jury signed a paper, stating that the circumstance would not have occurred if proper care had been taken placing the stove in a correct position."