



## **CORONERS COURT OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest: Inquest into the death of Bruce John HITCHEN

Hearing dates: 31 July 2025, NSW Coroners Court Lidcombe

Date of findings: 31 July 2025

Place of findings: NSW Coroners Court - Lidcombe

Findings of: Magistrate Stuart Devine, Deputy State Coroner

Catchwords: CORONIAL LAW – whether missing person deceased – changes to missing person investigations - unascertained cause, manner, and place of death

File number: 2021/00361615

Findings: **Identity**  
The person who has died is Bruce John Hitchen

**Place of death**  
Unascertained

**Date of death**  
On or after 6 July 1987

**Cause of death**  
Unascertained

**Manner of death**

Unascertained

Recommendations: Nil

Non-publication Orders: Nil

## **FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

- 1 These are the findings of an inquest into the disappearance and suspected death of Bruce John Hitchen who was last seen alive on 6 July 1987.
- 2 Section 21 of the Coroners Act (“the Act”) gives jurisdiction to a Coroner to hold an inquest into the death, or suspected death of a person, if there is reasonable cause to suspect that the death, or suspected death, is a reportable one.
- 3 Reportable deaths are defined in section 6 of the Act. In this particular matter, the Court is dealing with a suspected sudden death, the cause of which is unknown and/or a suspected unnatural death, and so it falls within the Court’s jurisdiction.
- 4 The first role of a Coroner in cases such as this is firstly to determine whether the missing person is actually dead.
- 5 Given the seriousness of the finding and the common law presumption in favour of a continuance of life, it is well established that the Court should carefully examine the circumstances of the matter before making a finding of death and that the evidence of death must be clear, cogent, and exact. The standard of proof to be applied is that known as the Briginshaw standard.
- 6 If the death of the missing person is established then the Coroner has an obligation to make findings in order to answer questions about the identity of the person who died, when and where they died and what was the cause and the manner (or circumstances) of the person’s death.

- 7 If the Coroner is unable to answer these questions, then an inquest must be held because of s27 of the Act.
- 8 Section 81(1) of the Act requires that when an inquest is held, the coroner must record in writing their findings.
- 9 In addition, the coroner may make recommendations in relation to matters which have the capacity to improve public health and safety in the future, arising out of the death in question, pursuant to s82 of the Act.

### **The Inquest**

- 10 A coronial investigation precedes an inquest. During the investigation considerable evidence, in the form of witness statements, expert opinions, reports, banking records, custodial records, photographic evidence and more are obtained by, and provided to, the Coroner.
- 11 In the case of the investigation into Mr. Hitchen's suspected death, a 2-volume brief of evidence compiled by the Officer in Charge of the coronial investigation, Senior Constable Will Bott, was tendered to the Court and became Exhibit 1 at the inquest that was held at Lidcombe on 31 July 2025.
- 12 In addition to the brief prepared by Senior Constable Bott, I also heard family statements from Mr Hitchen's sisters, Jeannette and Anne.
- 13 Although I will touch on aspects of the evidence that I consider important, and not make mention of other aspects, I have had the opportunity to consider the entirety of this material during the coronial process.
- 14 It is important to stress that the length of this inquest and the number of witnesses being called, is in no way a reflection of the importance this court places on Mr. Hitchen's life. That is more accurately reflected in the preparation and lengthy investigations undertaken by police in an attempt to find out where he is, and what happened to him.

15 In relation to non-contentious factual matters and issues in these findings I have drawn from the opening submissions of the advocate assisting the inquest, Sgt O'Donnell. I am grateful for his considerable assistance in this regard.

## **Background**

16 Before going on to set out my findings and the reasons for them, it is important to say something briefly about Mr Hitchen because, whilst a great deal of evidence is gathered in a coronial investigation, that evidence rarely tells a Coroner much about the person who died and the way in which their death has impacted their family and friends.

17 Bruce John Hitchen was born on 17 February 1947 in Gilgandra, NSW, to parents George and Frances. Mr Hitchen was the second eldest of seven children. His siblings are Jeannette, Marion, Robert, Maureen, Graham, and Anne.

18 In January 1969, Mr Hitchen married Sandra Bryant, and together they had one child, a daughter named Deanna, born in 1971. The marriage ended around 1972, and Mr Hitchen had minimal contact with Sandra and Deanna after this. Deanna stated that her last memory of her father was when she was about 7 or 8 years old and he took her on a short holiday. She has not seen or heard from him since.

19 Mr Hitchen sold his property in Brewarrina in 1984. After this, he moved around quite a lot and did not appear to stay in any one location for very long.

20 About Mr Hitchen's personal qualities, Anne told the Court Mr Hitchen was someone who worked hard, was generous, caring and helped others. She said he was widely respected and popular. She made specific mention of him running a successful sheep station when he was just 15 years old.

21 Jeannette also spoke of Mr Hitchen's generosity of spirit and readiness to lend a hand. She said he had his troubles but he had a reputation as a good bloke

and someone who tried his best. She remembered fondly their arguing over the best car and the best rock n roll band.

- 22 The picture painted by Anne and Jeannette is that Mr Hitchen is missed by those that knew him, loved and still very much a part of their lives.

### **Events leading up to Mr Hitchen's disappearance**

- 23 Piecing together an exact history for Mr Hitchen and his whereabouts leading up to his disappearance was difficult in this case.
- 24 Family and friends who have been spoken to say that he would often turn up and see them unexpectedly, stay for a period of time, and then leave without any formal goodbye. And it is often difficult for family and friends to remember exact dates for when they last saw him, given the amount of time that has past and the sporadic nature of his comings and goings.
- 25 A close friend, Ian Witter, described Mr Hitchen as suffering from a sort of 'manic depression' where he was either 'very high or very low.' He would often turn up and see Ian in Sydney or stay at various places and would often get in trouble with police. He would show up and then disappear sporadically. Ian was also Mr Hitchen's power of attorney and recalls having to bail him out of prison at Parramatta. Records indicate this was in 1984.
- 26 Mr Hitchen's sister Jeannette recalls that the last time she saw him he visited her at about 2am, clearly intoxicated and wanted to take her for a drive. He then fell asleep in his car. An exact date for this occasion is unknown.
- 27 Mr Hitchen's close friend, Greg McMullen, also provided a statement to police. He stated he had not seen or heard from Mr Hitchen since about 1985 when he visited his home in Myall Park. On that occasion, there was no discussion of him leaving the area or travelling anywhere.
- 28 Mr Hitchen's friends Margaret and William Gaff, who grew up with him, were also spoken to and said that they last saw Mr Hitchen when they were living at

Toongabbie. They thought this might have been in the 1990's, but this could have been earlier, with RMS records showing that Mr and Mrs Gaff moved to Wiseman's Ferry in 1990.

- 29 What can be confirmed from custody records is that in March 1987, Mr Hitchen was arrested for high-range drink driving and driving whilst disqualified and entered into custody. He was released from Cessnock Correctional Facility on 6 July 1987. This is the last confirmed record of Mr Hitchen alive.

### **Investigations following Mr Hitchen's disappearance**

- 30 Mr Hitchen was first reported missing to police in 1999 by his sister, Anne, who stated she had not seen him since 1985. The investigating officers at the time recorded that Mr Hitchen had been in custody in 1997, and the investigation was closed on that basis. This was later found to be an error and records confirmed it was in fact 1987 when he was last in custody.
- 31 It should be noted that since this time, the NSW Police Force has established the Missing Persons Registry which has changed the way missing persons reports are investigated and ensures far greater oversight so that errors of this nature and the premature closure of investigations will no longer occur.
- 32 The statement of Inspector Glen Browne (the Manager of the Missing Persons Unit when the statement was prepared) is contained in the brief of evidence and it explains the role and functions of the Missing Persons Registry and how missing persons investigations have changed. It is a lengthy document that runs to 45 pages and has been summarised in the context of other inquests.
- 33 In any event, in 2002 Mr Hitchen's sisters Jeanette and Anne placed notices in newspapers and conducted searches for Mr Hitchen, with no further confirmed sightings of him.
- 34 The last known will of Mr Hitchen was dated 15 August 1980 and in 2007, an application was made by his daughter, Deanna to have Mr Hitchen declared

deceased so his estate could be distributed. A judgment was handed down by the Supreme Court on 2 July 2007 determining that, for the purposes of s40A of the *Wills, Probate and Administration Act*, Mr Hitchen is 'presumed dead'. The material relied upon by the Supreme Court forms part of the coronial brief of evidence.

- 35 Police conducted numerous searches for signs that Mr Hitchen might still be alive.
- 36 No records were found that he had changed his name or that he was living interstate or overseas. RMS records were searched which showed the last registered vehicle to Mr Hitchen was cancelled in 1983, and the last known address was Euligal Station, Gongolgon, from 1987. No records exist after that time.
- 37 On the bank accounts able to be obtained, there are no records of Mr Hitchen accessing his accounts after he was released from custody. An enquiry of Centrelink came back negative for any sign of Mr Hitchen being alive.
- 38 No local medical records have been located, no treating doctor has been identified, and no diagnosed medical issues have been reported by his family. Mr Hitchen has not used Medicare since 16 March 1987.
- 39 Mr Hitchen's last known employer said the last time he saw him was in 1984 or 1985 and his friend and fellow inmate whilst in custody, Mervyn Orcher, told police they had not had contact since prison.
- 40 Police spoke with family and other friends of Mr Hitchen, none of whom could account for any confirmed sightings or visits since 1987.
- 41 Information was received from family members that Mr Hitchen may have attended a 30-year school reunion for St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill. This reunion was held in 1991. Contact was made with Richard Quinn, a former teacher, and the Director of Advancement at the time of the reunion. Richard

made enquiries with the ex-students who attended and assisted with organising the school reunion, but no one recalled seeing Mr Hitchen there and there was no evidence of his attendance.

- 42 Police also spoke with Mr Hitchen's daughter Deanne, who provided a DNA sample for the police database. This was compared to DNA samples of unidentified human remains on the database, with no matches established. DNA was also collected from the siblings of Mr Hitchen to further establish a DNA profile in case of further unidentified bodies being located.
- 43 Based on his investigation, Senior Constable Bott believes Mr Hitchen probably died from misadventure or untreated medical issues and his death went unreported sometime in the late 1980's to early 1990's. This was sometimes the case. He believes there is no realistic chance of Mr Hitchen being alive today.

#### **Formal Findings as to Death**

- 44 Whilst Mr Hitchen's body has never been recovered, based on all the evidence available to me, I am satisfied that he is deceased. There is no evidence at all to suggest he is still alive and no other plausible explanation for his disappearance in the circumstances outlined above.
- 45 As to the cause, manner, time and place of Mr Hitchen's death, there is no post mortem examination and insufficient other evidence to support any positive findings beyond the following:



**Identity of deceased:** Bruce John Hitchen

**Date of death:** On or after 6 July 1987

**Place of death:** Unascertained

**Manner of death:** Unascertained

**Cause of death:** Unascertained

### **Concluding remarks**

46 On behalf of the Coroner's Court of NSW I extend my sincere and respectful condolences to Mr Hitchen's family.

47 I thank Sgt O'Donnell for his support in the conduct of this inquest and the Officer in Charge, SC Bott for his work in conducting the investigation and compiling the brief of evidence.

I close this inquest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Devine'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'S' and 'D'.

**Magistrate S Devine**

Deputy State Coroner

Lidcombe

31 July 2025