



MAGISTRATES COURT *of* TASMANIA

CORONIAL DIVISION

Record of Investigation into Death (Without Inquest)

*Coroners Act 1995
Coroners Rules 2006
Rule 11*

I, Madeleine Wilson, Coroner, having investigated the death of Graham Ronald Pettman

Find, pursuant to Section 28(1) of the *Coroners Act 1995*, that:

- a) The identity of the deceased is Graham Ronald Pettman, whose date of birth is 11 May 1942.
- b) Mr Pettman died in the circumstances set out below.
- c) Mr Pettman died by drowning.
- d) Mr Pettman died on 19 December 1959.

In making the above findings I have had regard to the evidence gained in the investigation into Mr Pettman's death which includes:

- Police Report of Death for the Coroner, received 20 December 2020;
- Affidavit Sergeant John Delpero;
- Missing Person Report dated 19 January 1960;
- File note of telephone call from Constable Kirkhope reporting the suspected drowning of Graham Dettman (sic) to Superintendent of Police (New Norfolk);
- File note of Sergeant Langford to Superintendent of Police (New Norfolk) dated 22 December 1959;
- Affidavit of Constable A Kirkhope, Port Arthur Police Station dated 4 January 1960;
- Report of Government Pathologist, Dr Campbell Duncan dated 4 January 1960; and
- Inquest finding of H. R Dobbie Esq dated 4 January 1960.

Background

Graham Ronald Pettman "Graham" was aged 17, single and worked as a fisherman. He lived at Blow Hole Road, Eaglehawk Neck.

On 19 December 1959, Graham and his older brother Neville, 19 went fishing in an 18-foot dinghy fitted with a marine engine in an area near Yellow Bluff, south of Eaglehawk Neck. The brothers were close to shore, attempting to pull in a cray pot which was stuck in kelp when the dinghy was flooded with water, causing it to sink. Both Neville and Graham entered the water. Neither were wearing life jackets. Neville was rescued by a fisherman but Graham, who was a weak swimmer, did not resurface.

The matter was reported to Constable Kirkhope of Port Arthur police station, who requested the assistance of a dive team and grappling irons from Hobart.

Sergeant Langford had been a member of the party who had searched for the body of Graham Pettman on 20 and 21 December 1959. Sergeant Langford reported that the dinghy involved in the accident had been located on the seabed and retrieved from the area where Graham had gone missing, about three miles¹ south of Eaglehawk Neck on the seacoast, an area that is exposed to open seas. He stated that the depth of the water in the area varied between 20 and 35 feet², in a radius of about 50 yards³. Two police divers had searched the area where the accident occurred but found no trace of the body. Visual searches of nearby beaches using binoculars also found no sign of the body. Sergeant Langford reported that the team had been unable to do any dragging of the area due to the rough nature of the sea floor.

At approximately 5.30pm on 30 December 1960, a civilian holidaying at Eaglehawk Neck reported the sighting of a body floating in the bay off Pulpit Rocks⁴. Upon attendance, police observed the body to be in heavy seas near dangerous rocks and a retrieval effort was postponed until the morning. At 6am on 31 December 1960 a body was located and retrieved. The body was badly decomposed but appeared to Constable Kirkhope to be that of a young man, whose size and shape appeared to conform with that of Graham Pettman. Professional fishermen informed Constable Kirkhope that the current runs from Yellow Bluff up the coast to Pulpit Rocks, which could account for the location of the body. They also advised that professional

¹ Approximately 4.8 kilometres

² Approximately 6- 10.6 metres

³ Approximately 46 metres

⁴ Pulpit Rocks is located approximately 9 kilometres north of Yellow Bluff.

fishermen had not been fishing over Christmas and were not due to restart until 4 January 1960, which may have accounted for the delay in locating the body.

Graham's father, Mr Colin Pettman, was asked to identify the body but due to the level of decomposition, he was unable to.

The body was transported to the Mortuary at the Royal Hobart Hospital where it was examined by Dr Campbell Duncan, a Government Pathologist. He identified the remains as those of a young man of medium build, approximately 5 feet 8 inches in height⁵. He reported that as decomposition was very advanced, no cause of death could be given, but noted that the appearance generally was consistent with death from drowning and with death having occurred about two weeks previously. He reported that there were no special marks or injuries that could assist with identifying the body.

Coroner H. R. Dobbie Esq handed down his findings into the death of an unknown young male person on 4 January 1960. His finding, recorded in full, stated:

“That on the 31st December 1959, the body of a young male person was floating in the sea of (sic) Pulpit Rocks near Eagle Hawk Neck in the said State, whose Name, and Surname are to me unknown. The appearance of the body generally was consistent with death from drowning about two weeks previously.

AND THAT the said unknown male person came by his death probably from drowning between 1st and 31st day of December 1959, but I am unable to say what was the exact cause of death.”

As a consequence of the inability to identify the human remains, a Missing Person Report was submitted on 19 January 1960 for Graham Ronald Pettman by Constable A Kirkhope. Graham was described as 5 foot 8 inches in height, medium build with brown hair and brown eyes and fair complexion. A description of his clothing was also given. The report stated that Graham was last seen at Yellow Bluff on the East Coast of Tasman Peninsula whilst fishing on 19 December 1959. Constable Kirkhope recorded that the body he had recovered from the sea on 31 December 1959 was consistent with the missing person's build and was the body of a young man. Graham

⁵ Approximately 1.72 metres

Pettman was the only known person missing for a fortnight in the area. The reason given for the missing person report was that “body found has not been identified”.

In October 2020, Sergeant Delpero of the Missing Persons Unit, State Intelligence conducted a review of the Missing Person’s Report related to Graham Pettman. As part of the review, evidence of life checks for were conducted, which produced no evidence that Graham Pettman is alive.

An interrogation of the Tasmania Police Missing Persons database⁶ did not identify any other persons reported missing in Tasmania at the time of the deceased’s disappearance, who remain unlocated.

As part of the review, contact was made with Benson Pettman, Graham’s surviving brother. In an affidavit sworn in 2020, Benson Pettman stated that neither he, nor his family ever had any contact with Graham after 19 December 1959. He and his family always believed that the body recovered from Pulpit Rocks on 31 December 1959 was Graham. They had been told that the body had been buried at Cornelian Bay Cemetery as an unknown male.

Enquiries conducted with Cornelian Bay Cemetery management have been unable to locate burial records for the unidentified body or Graham Pettman.

Mr Benson Pettman requested the Coroner consider changing the findings of Coroner H.R. Dobbie Esq.

On 20 October 2020 the disappearance of Graham Pettman was formally reported to the Coroner.

Pursuant to Section 58(1)(b) and (d) of the *Coroners Act 1995*, Chief Coroner McTaggart, acting upon her delegation from the Chief Magistrate, ordered the investigation be reopened and that the findings of Coroner H.R. Dobbie Esq be re-examined.

Having considered the available material, I find that the body recovered from Pulpit Rocks on 31 December 1959 is that of Graham Ronald Pettman and that he died on 19 December 1959 by drowning, in the circumstances set out above.

⁶ The database contains records dating from 1955.

Comments and recommendations

The circumstances of Mr Pettman's death are not such as to require me to make any comments or recommendations pursuant to Section 28 of the *Coroners Act* 1995.

I convey my sincere condolences to the family and loved ones of Mr Pettman

Dated: 22 May 2026 at Hobart, in the State of Tasmania.

Madeleine Wilson

Coroner