



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 Edward Harold Tait

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

- a) The identity of the deceased is Edward Harold Tait, date of birth 11 January 1971.
- b) I am unable to determine how Mr Tait died.
- c) I am unable to determine Mr Tait's cause of death.
- d) Mr Tait died between 30 November 1999 and 6 July 2023 at Clifton Beach, Tasmania.

In making the above findings, I have had regard to the evidence gained in the investigation into Mr Tait's death. The evidence includes:

- The Police Report of Death for the Coroner;
- Forensic reports confirming identity;
- Report of forensic pathologist Dr Andrew Reid;
- Report of forensic anthropologist Associate Professor Ann-Marie Williams;
- Affidavit of Sergeant Lee Taylor;
- Affidavit of Sergeant Scott Kregor;
- Affidavit of Constable Tania Curtis;
- Affidavit of Constable Nicholas Monk;
- Affidavit of Constable Ian Bellette;
- Affidavit of Senior Constable Scott Williams;
- Affidavit of Senior Constable Lucy Brown;
- Affidavit of Helen Tait;
- Affidavit of Gregory Hunter;
- Affidavit of Kevin Michael John Weston;
- Affidavit of Kevin Alexander Watson;
- Affidavit of Michael Bourrell;

- Housing Tasmania records; and
- Centrelink records.

Discovery of unidentified human remains

On 5 July 2023 Gregory Hunter was working on his property at Clifton Beach Road, Clifton Beach clearing weeds in a gully when he kicked what he thought was a rock. As it moved, it began to roll down the hill towards a quarry on the property. At this time, Mr Hunter realised that the “rock” appeared to be a human skull. Mr Hunter reported the find to police.

Police attended the scene. The skull was located in the saddle of a steep gully, approximately 270 metres inland from the coastline, within medium to dense bushland. The skull was missing its mandible, free of biological debris and did not appear to show the effects of physical trauma or violence. A small campsite was located approximately 75 meters up from the slope where the skull was found on the neighbouring property. A rusted corrugated iron sheet was covering a shallow dug out that was bordered by sticks and rocks. The space was large enough for a person to lay flat. The camp site appeared quite old and had not been used for some time. Forensic Officers examined the site and located two men’s brown shoes (the right shoe contained several store bought orthotics in the heel), a short sleeved top, set of keys, zippo lighter and a plastic bag containing two business cards. A nearby dam was searched by divers, but nothing was located.

Police commenced an investigation into the death. Police observed that pedestrian access to the site of the discovery was possible from the carpark at Goats Beach, a distance of approximately 4 kilometres to the south, with several walking and stock trails leading to the site. To the north, Clifton Beach Road was approximately 2.25 kilometres from the site of the skull across private farmland.

The right footed men’s lace up shoe, short sleeve top and zippo lighter were submitted to Forensic Science Services Tasmania (FSST) for DNA extraction and comparison against state and national databases however the testing yielded no matches.

The two business cards were badly disintegrated, however they were cleaned and enhanced. One was identified as a fridge magnet for a restaurant located at 241 Swanston Street, Melbourne.

Identity

Forensic Anthropology

The remains, consisting of a complete skull minus the mandible, underwent examination by Forensic Anthropologist , Associate Professor Anne-Marie Williams on 10 July 2023. She noted that the skull was in excellent condition with no damage evident. She observed that the skull appeared to have lain with the right side and front of the skull in contact with the soil for some time, resulting in the area being stained dark brown. The skull was observed to have some areas of minor cracking consistent with exposure to the environment for some years. No signs of animal scavenging were observed to the skull.

She concluded that the skull showed features consistent with a male Caucasian.

Forensic Odontology

The dental remains were examined by forensic odontologist Tamas Pacza on 17 July 2023. The examination revealed that there were five intact teeth, numbered 17, 18, 26, 27 and 28.¹ Root fragments were found in position 12 and 23. It was observed that tooth 16 was missing. Other features included restorations at teeth 17, 26 and 27.

The ante-mortem dental records of thirty-five missing persons on the Tasmanian Missing Persons database were subjected to comparison with the features of the recovered skull. Twenty-two persons were excluded, while there was insufficient evidence for comparison purposes for the remaining thirteen missing persons (two of whom were female). DNA comparisons were then conducted for the remaining eleven male candidates but no matches were found with the skull.

Forensic Pathology

The skull was examined by a Forensic Pathologist, Dr Andrew Reid on 10 July 2023. He observed that there were no upper facial bone, skull base or skull vault fractures to suggest that head injuries were the primary cause of death. No other skeletal remains were recovered. As such the forensic Pathologist was unable to determine the cause of the individual's death.

¹ Individual teeth are numbered according to which quadrant (section of the mouth) and tooth position they occupy.

Forensic DNA

The skull was forwarded to the Australian Federal Police (AFP) for forensic testing. A section of the left petrous bone was taken from the skull and submitted for DNA testing. A partial male profile was obtained from the sample and uploaded to the National Criminal Investigation DNA Database (NCIDD) and compared against samples collected by Australian Police from crime scenes, convicted offenders, suspects, volunteers and items belonging to missing persons and unknown human remains which yielded no results.

The sample then underwent biogeographical ancestry (BGA) testing.² The results suggested that the donor of the skull was likely to have a majority of recent genetic ancestors from Europe. The eye colour of the individual could not be determined but it was thought to be more likely that the individual had blond, brown or black hair colour than red hair.

The DNA profile was also uploaded to NCIDD Integrated Forensic Analysis (NIFA) database for kinship matching, familial searching and advanced direct comparison. On 14 December 2023, Tasmania Police were advised that no direct match nor kinship match was made and the male DNA profile remained unidentified. AFP conducted facial reconstruction imaging based on the recovered skull (less the mandible). These images were circulated by Tasmania Police, prompting a number of calls from the public, however further investigation did not result in identifying the skull.

On 1 July 2024 the forensic laboratory, Forensic Science Service Tasmania (FSST) submitted a request to the AFP National DNA Program for Unidentified and Missing Persons Unit to initiate Forensic Investigative Genetic Genealogy (FIGG) testing to aid in the identification of the skull. This testing identified a third degree male relative. Intelligence was derived from the forensic data, genealogical research and other relevant sources which identified Edward Harold Tait as the most likely source of the unidentified human remains. In turn, it was determined that Helen Tait was a close relative of his.

A reference sample was obtained from Helen Tait, the biological sister of Edward Tait and compared to the DNA profile obtained from the skull. The DNA profile from the skull is 89 times more likely to have originated from the brother of Helen Tait, than from another randomly chosen person within the population. This provides moderate support for the deceased being Edward Harold Tait.

² BGA is the component of ancestry determined by DNA.

Ms Tait provided police with background information about her biological brother Edward.

Background of Edward Harold Tait

Edward Harold Tait (Edward) was born to Bertie and Willamina Tait, Scottish immigrants who moved to Warrnambool and then Warburton in Victoria. He had an older sister, Helen and younger brother, Peter. Edward was born with a congenital condition, where one of his legs was shorter than the other which caused him significant hip pain in later life.

When Edward was about 7 years old, his parents separated and his mother returned to the Shetland Islands in Scotland with Edward and Peter. His mother re-partnered and had another son, Kevin. As a result of their mother's substance abuse, Edward and his brothers were placed into a foster home. Helen and their father remained in Australia. Their father made several attempts to be reunited with the boys in Australia.

When Edward was about 16 years, arrangements were made for him to travel to Australia, however their father committed suicide before this could occur and Edward remained in care until he turned 18. At about this time, Helen travelled to Scotland to see her brothers. Edward was living in a self-contained flat at a foster facility, had a girlfriend and was working as a carpet layer.

In approximately 1988, Edward moved to Victoria, Australia and obtained work in the railway industry for 18 months, before he returned to Scotland and travelled. He returned to live in Australia, via India in 1993 and maintained contact with his sister Helen. At this time he told Helen he had been assaulted because he owed people money for drugs. He again travelled to India and returned some weeks later, telling his sister he had imported hash, which he had swallowed, saying "it's like pallets, I've swallowed a stomach full". Sometime after this Edward and his sister became estranged.

Between 1995 and 1996 South Australia Police recorded two interactions with Edward Harold Tait. The first, in December 1995 related to a stolen bike and him carrying an axe, and the second in January 1996, related to him being found unlawfully on premises. He told police he was homeless and only went to the premises to sleep.

In 1996 he was charged with stealing by Queensland police.

Edward was also recorded on Victoria Police systems between late 1995 and mid-1998 with complaints related to begging and stealing food, drinks and cigarettes. On each

occasion he was alone, had no known associates recorded and was living in homeless shelters or industrial areas.

Helen Tait last saw Edward in January 1998 in Bourke Street, Melbourne during a chance meeting. Edward appeared to be under the influence of drugs and spoke to her “in riddles”.

In January 2025, Helen Tait was notified that the remains of a person believed to be Edward Tait had been located in Tasmania. She assisted by providing a sample of her DNA for comparison. Helen Tait was unaware that Edward had been in Tasmania and did not know of any connection between him and the State.

Tait in Tasmania

Senior Constable Lucy Brown, of the Missing Persons Unit conducted enquiries into the Edward Harold Tait. Her investigations revealed that Mr Tait had led an extremely reclusive and transient lifestyle. Mr Tait had never been reported missing.

Investigations revealed that Mr Tait had resided at hotels and men’s shelters in the Greater Hobart area during August and September 1999. Housing Tasmania records showed that Mr Tait’s application to rent a unit at 36 Stainforth Court, New Town was approved on 17 September 1999, but the rental agreement was terminated on 19 March 2000, as the unit had been “abandoned”.

Records indicated that Mr Tait had last contacted Centrelink in person on 30 November 1999, to report his earnings in relation to his Newstart allowance. This allowance was cancelled on 10 February 2000, due to his failure to meet reporting obligations.

Senior Constable Brown conducted numerous other investigations, none of which produced any proof of life after 30 November 1999.

Findings

Based on the investigations carried out in this matter, I am satisfied on the balance of probabilities, that the skull located at Clifton Beach on 5 July 2023 is that of a male Caucasian. Further, based on DNA testing conducted by the Australian Federal Police, I find that the identity of that person is Edward Harold Tait. I am fortified in this belief by the fact that Mr Tait’s parents were Scottish and the additional fact that Mr Tait was born

with a congenital defect in which one of his legs was shorter than the other, and that one of two matching shoes located at a shelter a short distance from the discovery of the human remains, contained store bought orthotics.

I find that Mr Tait was living in Tasmania in 1999 and that there have been no reported sightings of him since 30 November 1999. I note that the investigations revealed that Mr Tait lived a reclusive and itinerant lifestyle, which is not inconsistent with the location of his remains, notwithstanding his acquisition of a rental property in September 1999.

I am unable to ascertain the circumstances surrounding Mr Tait's death, nor the cause of death, but find that at some time after 30 November 1999, Mr Tait stayed in a makeshift shelter on property at Clifton Beach Road, Clifton Beach, and that he died at or near the makeshift shelter on an unknown date.

Comments and Recommendations

I extend my appreciation to the investigating officer Sergeant Lee Taylor for his investigation and report.

The circumstances of 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 Tait.

Dated: 10 August 2026 at Hobart, in the State of Tasmania.

Madeleine Wilson
Coroner