

Vera Wells, a Local Tragedy in Donnington, West Sussex in 1917

A Supplement to 'Eggs for the Wounded: A Study of Contributions
to The National Eggs Collection in West Sussex'

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Case Study: Vera Wells, A Local Tragedy in Donnington, West Sussex in 1917

Whilst tracking the records of 'Eggs for the Wounded' week-by-week in the Chichester Observer and West Sussex Recorder [please see 'Eggs for the Wounded: A Study of Contributions to The National Egg Collection In West Sussex'], an apparent anomaly caught my attention between the weekly publications of Wednesday 17th January 1917 [1] and Wednesday 24th January 1917 [2], with regard to collections for my local parish (village) of Donnington. The tally reported for the week 17th January 1917 was nil. The following week's total, 24th January 1917, was 72! I was intrigued by such a significant change for this 'little parish' (3). A report about a 'Donnington Tragedy' appeared on page 5 of the Chichester Observer 17th January 1917 [4], and the seemingly large egg collection for the following week coincided with the record of a burial in Donnington, linked to the tragic event previously noted [5].

Names have been noted here, because they were published in the Chichester Observer, which is freely available to read at the West Sussex Records Office.

The tragedy concerned the death of a seven year-old girl named Vera Wells, who was 'shot in the head' by her fifteen year-old uncle, Guy Homer [6]. The incident took place in the first room of the dwelling – still extant in Donnington – rented by Vera's grandfather, Frank Homer, a shepherd. Vera's father, a Charles Wells, had apparently lived in Canada for the previous four years and her mother was in service in Barnham. Vera was noted at the inquest into her death to have lived with her grandparents, and uncle, for five years [7]. The inquest was conducted in the cottage next door. The inquest report noted that Guy Homer had been accompanying his father, Frank, in using a gun to scare birds in the nearby fields. The evidence presented by Guy Homer indicated that he was not very familiar with the firearm, having used it twice before. He had, so it was reported, left the gun propped up by the door to the front room, when entering the cottage for lunch. Later, as confirmed by his mother, he picked up the gun and loaded a cartridge. Vera was playing with her doll in front of the fire place at the other side of the room. Guy claimed at the inquest not to have pulled the trigger, however, the gun was fired, and Vera was seen to slump forwards [8]. Guy was described as being 'excited and incoherent' for the rest of the afternoon, including upon arrival of the police [9]. By the time the police attended, the gun was located in an outhouse, but still contained an empty cartridge within its chamber [10]. The Coroner's Jury concluded the death was 'accidental and no-one was to blame' [11]. The Coroner also emphasised the 'stupidity of anyone loading a gun in a room' [12]. He also noted that the trigger

probably WAS pulled, but 'the boy did not remember in the excitement afterwards' [13].

No record has been found to indicate any further action was taken by the police against Guy Homer. Indeed, his later marriage is recorded as having taken place between July and September 1922, to a Miss E. R. [14], and he died at the age of about fifty-three years in Portsmouth, leaving £501 7s 7d to his widow [15].

Vera Wells' funeral took place in St. George's Church, Donnington, on 19th January 1917, at which 'many beautiful floral tributes were presented [16]. Guy Homer attended as a mourner [17]. Bearing in mind that Vera Wells was the granddaughter of a shepherd, and her mother was a servant, the little girl's life was commemorated with a fairly grand memorial, still clearly visible in the churchyard.

It is tempting to conclude that, although the death may have been accidental, not enough seems to have been done to ensure full justice was completed, not that I would wish to demean anyone involved in the review process. The evidence published in the Chichester Observer and West Sussex Recorder does impress that the death was, indeed, accidental. The generous donation of 72 eggs presented the following week towards the National Egg Collection [18] *perhaps* was a demonstration of collective concern and distress within Donnington parish regarding the unexpected and shocking nature of Vera's death. No record has been seen of a remembrance of the anniversary of her death though.

However, as stated earlier, my research into the topic of egg collections for the wounded started towards the end of World War 1. Reviewing information for the earlier years of that war showed that egg collections, particularly for Donnington, varied considerably upon several occasion from nil one week, to seventy-two the next. At times, no eggs were recorded as collected from Donnington for several months at a time! (Please refer to tables 2-5 in 'Eggs for the Wounded: A Study of Contributions to The National Egg Collection in West Sussex'). No clear explanations for the other changes were evident in the Chichester observer editions for those situations. Perhaps eggs, upon some occasions, were donated on a monthly basis, or just erratically...

On a reassuring note, there is a record of A Charles David Wells, of relevant age and background, a farmer – a restricted occupation in WW1 - [19], returned to Donnington, Chichester, England, from New Brunswick [20]. His return to Canada has not as yet been traced, however, a record has been found to note that a Mrs Caroline Wells, and her daughter Lena, Vera's younger sister, emigrated to D----, Manitoba, on 23rd March 1920, their tickets paid for by Charles Wells [21]. Hopefully, life vastly improved.

References:

- 1) Editorial, Chichester Observer and West Sussex Recorder, 17 January 1917, p8 col e.
- 2) Ibid, Editorial, 24 January 1917, p5 col e.
- 3) Chichester Observer and West Sussex Recorder, 24 January 1917, p5 col c.
- 4) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col f.
- 5) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col f.
- 6) Ibid, 17 January 1917, p5 col e.
- 7) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p2 col a.
- 8) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col a.
- 9) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col a.
- 10) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col a.
- 11) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col a.
- 12) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col a.
- 13) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col a.
- 14) WSRO/Westhampnett, 2b 941.
- 15) Wills and Probate, Winchester, 1955.
- 16) Chichester Observer and West Sussex Recorder, 24 January 1917, p5 col f.
- 17) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col f.
- 18) Ibid, 24 January 1917, p5 col e.
- 19) 1911 Census for England and Wales, www.ancestry.com
- 20) UK Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960, <http://interactive.ancestrylibrary.com>
- 21) Ibid.