

Richard Christie

Rushworth Chronicle

9 May, 1890

SHOCKING BURNING FATALITY AT RUSHWORTH. A MAN ROASTED ALIVE.

About midnight on Monday last Messrs Taylor Bros, saw that an old cottage belonging to Mr J. H. Roberts, in High Street, and occupied by a tinsmith named Richard Christie, was on fire. Hurrying to the spot they heard moans proceeding from the place, and looking in saw the occupant with a bag or blanket round his head trying to beat off the flames.

Mr T. Taylor tore off some boards fastened to a window, and as Christie was coming towards him he got through it (though almost surrounded by the fiery element) and attempted to catch hold of the tinsmith, calling out loudly to him to come that way.

Christie, however, must have exhausted his strength, as he fell back into the flames on his bed. Mr Taylor was driven back, and at once rushed to the rear of the building. Aided by his two brothers, slabs were wrenched away, but the would-be rescuers saw to their horror that Christie had rolled off the bed and was roasting alive on the floor. They did all that was possible to save him without jeopardising their own lives, but had Mr T. Taylor been about five seconds sooner on the spot he is sure he could have rescued the unfortunate man through the window.

The building, composed of weatherboards and slabs, had been up fully 30 years, and burned like matchwood, only a few minutes being occupied in its total destruction. Very shortly after Messrs Taylor Bros. pulled the slabs out the roof collapsed. At this moment the local Fire Brigade arrived on the spot, and promptly had a full pressure of water on the adjoining shop of Mr Medhurst, the roof of which had ignited. All hope of being able to do Christie any good having vanished the efforts of a large crowd present were directed towards saving Mr Medhurst's shop.

Thanks to the strenuous exertions of the Brigade principally this was accomplished. The Brigade are deserving of the highest eulogiums for the energetic manner in which it worked. So satisfied was Dr Heily with the way the members did their duty that he promised a guinea towards its funds on the spot. It would be impossible to particularise all who rendered assistance; suffice it to say that the timely help given perhaps averted the destruction of the other building.

When Christie's body was recovered the sight was sickening, the poor fellow being charred beyond recognition. Amongst the debris was found a tin box, in which were letters showing that deceased, who was aged between 35 and 40, had a wife and two children in Cellardyke, Fyfehire, Scotland.

The Waranga Shire Council deemed it a humane and charitable act to apprise Mrs Christie of her husband's sad termination, and ordered the transmission of a cable message accordingly. The deceased had resided on Rushworth about six weeks. He is said to have come here from New Zealand. It is not known whether he had relatives in the colony or not.

The scene of the catastrophe has since been visited by scores of people. Christie was supposed to have accidentally set the place on fire whilst in an intoxicated condition. It originated at the head of the bed. Further particulars are appended.

MAGISTERIAL INQUIRY.

A magisterial inquiry was held at Mr Roberts' in the afternoon by Mr Wolton Wigg, J.P., when the following depositions were taken:—

William Taylor deposed: I am a farmer, residing at Moora. I was in Rushworth last night from 7-30 to 2 o'clock. I have seen the body of deceased, Richard Christie, but could not identify it. About 12 o'clock last night I observed a house on fire. I went there and found it to be the house occupied by deceased. Pulled off some boards at the back, alongside the door, and heard cries from the inside. Did not see anyone in the house. I could not get in, as the flames were too strong. My brother arrived at the house with me. The premises were completely burned down, and the deceased was also burned. I was present when the remains of deceased were taken from the debris. The deceased was almost a stranger to me. When I first went to the fire I did not see anyone leave.

Timothy Taylor deposed: I am a grain-buyer, residing at Rushworth. I have seen the body of deceased, but cannot recognise it. Have known him about three weeks. Last night about 12 o'clock my attention was attracted by cries of "Fire." I was then about 150 yards from the scene of the fire. I ran to the spot, and looked into the front window of the house occupied by deceased, as I heard a moaning noise there. Saw a man through the flames with a blanket or bag over his head, as if he were shielding himself from the flames. Broke open the window, which was comprised of boards nailed across where the glass had been. Saw the man coming towards the window. Got half-way through and endeavoured to reach him. Not being able to see me he turned and went from me. The flames coming into my face were so strong that I had to retire. As I left the window I saw the man fall over on to the foot of the bed. Then ran round to the part of the house nearest to where I saw him fall, and pulled off four slabs, with the assistance of my brother, from the side of the house, thinking to be able to pull him out. Then discovered that he had fallen off the bed on to the floor. He must then have been dead, as he was roasting, and I thought it was useless to try further to rescue him. I then, in company with the fire brigade and others, assisted to save the next house from the flames. Was present when he was taken from the debris. I would not suspect that anyone set fire to the place. From the appearance of the fire I believe it started at the head of the bed.

Geo. Gregory Brice, senr., deposed: I am a licensed victualler, residing at Rushworth. Have seen the body of deceased, but could not recognise it. Knew a tinsmith for about three weeks who resided at the house which was burned down last night. He was at my hotel last night about 9 o'clock. He had one drink there, and remained about half-an-hour. He was not drunk, but appeared as if he had been drinking. By his conversation I thought he came from Scotland. He had a few shillings in his hand when at my place.

Andrew Spence deposed: I am a laborer, residing at Rushworth. Knew the deceased, Richard Christie. Have only known him since he came to Rushworth, but knew his family in Scotland. He told me he left home about three years ago, and also that he was married and had a family of two. His age would be between 35 and 40 years. Saw him last night between 8 and 10 o'clock at Dooley's Hotel. He was then the worse for liquor. Did not see him after that.

John Henderson Roberts deposed: I am a storekeeper, residing at Rushworth. Have seen the body of deceased, who was a tinsmith, and occupied a house belonging to me for about six weeks. Knew him to be a Scotchman. Think he told me he was from Fyfe. Think I last saw him alive on Saturday last. Last night, about 12.30, I heard cries of fire. Looked out and saw it was the house occupied by deceased, and owned by me. Got up and went out, and was informed that deceased was in the house. Several attempts were made to get deceased

out, but without success. The Fire Brigade were on the scene, and rendered every assistance they could.

Thomas Bennett deposed: I am a senior-constable, stationed at Rushworth. Last night I was going down the street at about 12 p.m., when I heard the cry of "Fire," and then the fire bell. Saw flames, as I thought, coming from Mr Roberts' store. In company with others I ran down. There were a few people standing in front of the house which deceased occupied, and which was in flames. I inquired if there was anyone inside, and was informed that the tinsmith was there. We could not get near the building for the flames. A few minutes after the fire brigade arrived, and they soon got the flames under, and then returned to the end where the body was lying on the ground. With the assistance of others I pulled it out. There were no clothes on it, and the body was burned to a cinder. I had it removed to Mr Roberts' store next door. This morning at daylight I searched where the body was found and got nineteen shillings and two pence, and a silver watch chain burned and destroyed. I also found some letters, apparently from his wife and daughters, addressed from 22 West Forth Street, Cellardyke, Fyfeshire, Scotland. There were also three photos (partly burned) of a female. I have known deceased for the last month, and during that time I never saw him drunk. I cannot say whether he has any property in the colony or not. I reported the matter to Mr Wigg, J .P., who decided to hold an inquiry. The deceased alone occupied the house, and my opinion is that he set the place on fire accidentally.

The finding as to the cause of death was to the effect that Christie died from being burned in a house which was accidentally set on fire.

Footnote: Rushworth cemetery records list Richard Christie, buried in the Catholic section.