

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

P.O. BOX 284 ORBOST VIC 3888



President:	Heather Terrell
Vice President:	Marilyn Morgan
Secretary:	May Leatch
Treasurer:	Barry Miller
Museum Committee:	Marina Johnson, Lindsay and Noreen Thomson, Geoff Stevenson, John Phillips
Collection Management:	Marilyn Morgan, Marlene Robb, May Leatch, Margaret Smith, Barry Miller
Research Secretary:	Lois Crisp, John Phillips
Newsletter Editor:	May Leatch

NEWSLETTER

No. 94 FEBRUARY 2013

HENRY JAMES, his life and unusual death

- by May Leatch

“The throb of Orbost’s heart missed a beat when the news was disseminated that Mr Harry James, senior partner of the firm of James & Bird, auctioneers and estate agents of Orbost, had been found dead by Mr J W Bird and Mr C Dreverman at 7.15 on Thursday morning last, in a room contiguous to the office” was how the Snowy River Mail of May 18th 1932 captured the drama surrounding the unusual death of Henry (called Harry) James on May 11th 1932.

Mr James, aged 72 years, had been a prominent citizen, businessman and entrepreneur in the Orbost district since the mid to late 1880s. That such a vigorous and successful man could have died by self-asphyxiation with the deadly fumigant **Cyanogas** in a room in his business premises in Nicholson Street was almost beyond belief.

Was his death suicide or accidental? This

question was dealt with in the Magisterial Inquiry which examined the evidence surrounding Mr James’ death.

So ended the life of one of Orbost’s most prominent citizens. The Snowy River Mail reported that the funeral cortege of 62 motor vehicles left from the James house (presently 65 Stanley Street), the funeral being the largest yet held in Orbost. Henry James was buried in the Anglican Section of Orbost Cemetery.

A self-made man

Born in Melbourne in 1860, Henry James attended Melbourne Grammar School before being orphaned at an early age. From then on, he lived by his own resources with a fierce determination to “Make good!” After working on farms at Maffra and Boisdale, he moved to Bairnsdale and then to the Snowy River, probably arriving here in the mid to late 1880s. On his arrival, he worked for early



ABOVE: The James & Bird building, cnr. Nicholson and Tarra Streets in on the left in this photo. It was in a room in or behind this building that Henry James’ body was found.



ABOVE: The James and Bird building, 2012. Note that the verandah awnings have been removed.

settler, John Cameron and was then appointed as Secretary of the Snowy River Shipping Company (formed 1884).

Thus began Harry James' career as a Shipping Agent. Later, he was to become a ship owner, main shareholder and founder of the Orbost Shipping Company (founded 1906), owner of the river tugs PS Curlip and PS Cheviot and SS Snowy and numerous other barges and shipping infrastructure.

He was a shipping and land agent, auctioneer and valuer, sold farm machinery, owned land, was an art collector and amateur photographer, supported the Library, served two terms as Orbost Shire President, was a foundation member of the Orbost Butter Factory, a Justice of the Peace, was appointed Deputy Coroner for the Orbost District in 1926, and is largely credited with establishing the seed bean industry on the Orbost district.

Following the devastation of the 1893 floods, Henry James helped co-ordinate the Flood Appeal. His name is also closely associated with St James Anglican Church where he is credited as being one of the men with the name "James" who were founding members of the Church in 1892.

In 1888, he married **Mary Ann Bird** of Bairnsdale whose father was a saw mill owner. In January 1890, Mrs James gave birth to a son in Bairnsdale ([Bairnsdale Advertiser](#), Jan. 30th 1890) but there are no later reports of children, so it is assumed that this baby died in infancy.

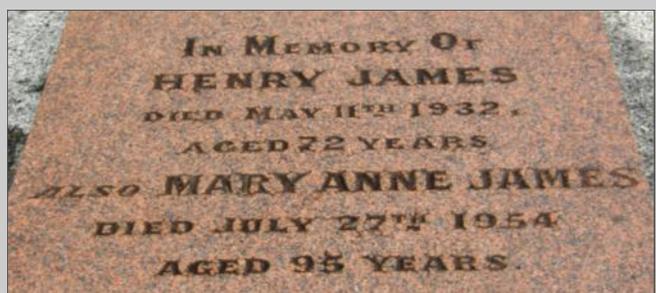
The Bird family were well known in Bairnsdale and later in Orbost, where Mary's brother **John Whitney Bird** came to Orbost as a young man in c.1900 and lived initially with his sister and brother-in-law. Later, he became Henry

James' business partner in 1921, forming the company known as **James and Bird** whose premises were on the corner of Nicholson and Tarra Streets. It was in a room attached to these premises that Harry James died in 1932.

There were also other Orbost connections associated with the Bird family. One of Mary's sisters married **Carl Drevermann** of Orbost and another sister married Frank Drevermann of Camberwell.

In later life, Henry James was the image of a very successful businessman, living in one of the finest houses in Orbost (now 65 Stanley Street). On his death, his estate which was left entirely to his wife, was valued at £16,262 in real estate, and £19,340 in personal property.

Following Henry James death, Mrs James is assumed to have lived mainly in Orbost until her death on July 27th 1954 aged 94 years. She and her husband are buried together in the Anglican section of Orbost Cemetery (grave No. 68).



ABOVE: The grave of Henry James (1932) and Mary Anne James (1954) in Orbost Cemetery. Photo 2012.

BELOW: The James house in Stanley Street. Photo 2012.



THE INQUEST

(Note: This article is a précis of the extensive report in The Snowy River Mail, May 18th 1932).

The hearing was conducted before Deputy Coroner, Mr R P Cameron, on May 17th 1932.

Mr James missing. Miss Tomlinson's evidence.

Mrs James was away visiting her sister, Mrs Ikin, in Benalla. On Thursday morning, Miss Lucy Tomlinson, the James' housekeeper, noted that Mr James had not returned home the previous night and contacted Mr C Drevermann who was a neighbour. Miss Tomlinson said that she had last seen Mr James at 7.30 the previous night when he said, "I'm going down to the office. Keep the fires burning." He appeared to be in good health and had eaten a good meal. She said that Mr James had not been too well for 12 months or more. [Refer also to evidence on Mr James' health given by Dr Nettleton and Mr Mosley].

Body found. Mr Drevermann's evidence.

Mr Drevermann drove his car to Mr James' business premises. Mr Bird was also there. While Mr Drevermann explored the yard, Mr Bird looked inside the building adjoining the premises, the front portion of which was occupied by Mr Rupert Mosley. In the middle of this building was a small room about 12ft x 8ft and another room used for the storage of machinery. In the smaller room, Mr Bird discovered his dead partner, Mr James lying face down with his feet near the open door. He called Mr Drevermann and they notified Senior Constable Bartholomew and Dr. Nettleton. Mrs James was then notified of her husband's death and she began the long journey home from Benalla, arriving that night.

Body examined and removed, Dr Nettleton's evidence.

Dr Nettleton noted the presence of cyanide fumes and initially had to withdraw from the room for his own safety. He later examined the body and reported that Mr James had been dead for 8 to 10 hours.

He had to turn on the electric light in the room (the switch was in the middle of the room). There was an electric torch next to Mr James' body. He and Snr. Constable Bartholomew removed two hessian bags from the floor on which a crystalline substance [the Cyanogas] had been spread. He also opened the window which had been blocked by hessian. He removed a tin of Cyanogas which had no lid on it and was about a quarter full. The lid was on a shelf outside.

The body was lying face downwards, legs fully extended, right arm outstretched. There was a frothing liquid discharge at the mouth. The body's twisted face, arms and legs showed the result of spasms.

The body was taken to Mr James' house where Dr

DEADLY POISON

The chemical compound $\text{Ca}(\text{CN})_2$ is a deadly poison. First manufactured by the American Cyanamid Company in 1924, it came in the form of crystals or flakes and is sometimes called "black cyanide".

When water is added, a cloud of hydrogen cyanide forms, killing all air-breathing organisms in a room within three minutes.

It was used for killing rabbits and gophers (in the US), rats, and for all forms of pest fumigation.

Henry James, being in the agricultural business, most likely marketed this product. Grains and beans needed to be stored, and rabbits and rats killed.

The recommended procedure for fumigating enclosed spaces (rooms) was to spread the Cyanogas flakes onto newspapers on the floor at a rate of one pound per 1 cubic feet of air space. It should never be placed on wet papers since this causes instantaneous release of the gas (and also damage to wallpapers).

As a deadly poison, it was also a very effective tool for homicide. One author (Jean-Claude Pressac) has speculated that the Nazi SS used Cyanogas at one of its extermination camps during W W II, although the main gas used for this purpose appears to have been Zyklon-B.

Symptoms are headache, dizziness, vomiting, loss of consciousness, convulsions and death.



Nettleton continued his examination of the body in the presence of Constable Bartholomew.

Dr Nettleton said that he had seen Mr James on one or two occasions over the past 12 months and that Mr James had no evidence of heart disease which might have caused sudden heart failure. His opinion was that the Cyanogas had overpowered Mr James before he could get out of the room. He did not feel that suicide was the cause.

Mr Bird's evidence.

Mr Bird said that he had seen Mr James a little after 6pm at the paper shop the night before. He later went back to his office and said that he heard Mr James in his room at about 7.30pm. He said that Mr James had arranged to meet Mr Laycox at his office at 7.30pm. Mr Bird said that he had since found out that Mr Laycox had not turned up for this appointment.

When he and Mr Drevermann came to look for Mr James the next morning, they noted that Mr James' car

was at the rear of the office ready to go out the gate.

He then entered the office through the back door which was unlocked, then through Miss Boucher's room into Mr James' room and noted that his hat was on the table. He then went to the open passageway between Mr Mosley's office and his [Bird's] own office. He said that he and James had decided to fumigate the room which had previously been occupied by Mr Young. Mr James and Mr Stephenson had fumigated this room before and had intended to do it again.

Mr Bird looked into this room and saw the body of Mr James lying on the floor.

He said that Mr James was not worried mentally and was planning to continue working for the next 20 years. Only that afternoon, Mr James had ordered 20 tons of lime with which they were planning to experiment. Mr James had also arranged to go to Bemm River the next day.

Mr Arthur Patrick Mosley's evidence.

Mr Mosley, clerk, had been employed by Mr James for the past 25 years.

He saw Mr James at 5.30 the previous evening. Mr James told him that he was putting off the trip to Bemm River for a few days because he was not feeling as well as he would like. About a week before, when he and James had been talking, he said that Mr James had become dizzy and he was assisted to a chair where he quickly recovered.

Mr Mosley said that Mr James had no worries that would suggest him taking his own life. Mr James took a keen interest and pleasure in his business. He was making arrangements for next season's bean crops.

The previous fumigation. Mr Arthur Stephenson's evidence.

Mr Stephenson, labourer, had been employed by Mr James for the past 4 years.

Regarding the previous fumigation of Mr Young's room, he said, "On 23rd April, Mr James said that he wanted to get that room fumigated." Mr James asked Mr Stephenson to block the window of the room, along with the door leading to Mr Mosley's office, and get a bag put over the other door.

Mr Stephenson said that he did this, and also put two wet bags on the floor to put the Cyanogas on. Mr James said that he would put it on when everyone was away on account of the fumes. This fumigation was done at the end of April by Mr James.

Snr. Constable Bartholemew's evidence.

The Constable said that when he was called to the scene, he noted that the room had a hessian curtain over the door but that the door was open. The atmosphere was heavy with cyanide gas and the window was shut. He

noted a tin with the lid off and containing a quantity of Cyanogas on the floor in the room and alongside the body were two damp bags which were spread out.

The finding by the Deputy Coroner, Mr R P Cameron.
"this is a case of accidental death brought about by the use of Cyanogen whilst fumigating the room for the destruction of vermin."



ABOVE: Henry James, date unknown.

WAS HENRY JAMES' DEATH A SUICIDE?

This question has prompted my research. There are a number of key points of evidence to consider:

- **Mr James' mental and physical health**, the lack of a motive for suicide. He was a successful man with plans for the next day and for the future.
- **The second fumigation was planned**, though only done opportunistically after Mr Laycox did not turn up for his appointment that night. The door was left open (rather than closed as for a suicide) and his car was parked in preparation for his return home.
- **The use of wet bags** for the Cyanogen thereby hastened the release of highly toxic cyanide fumes. This procedure is very hazardous in confined spaces though Mr James appears to have used it successfully at least once before. He was not so fortunate this time.
- **The possibility that Mr James had a "dizzy" spell** and was quickly overwhelmed by the gas. Refer to evidence from Miss Tomlinson, Dr Nettleton and Mr Mosley. Mrs James might have been able to shed more light on this issue.

- May Leatch