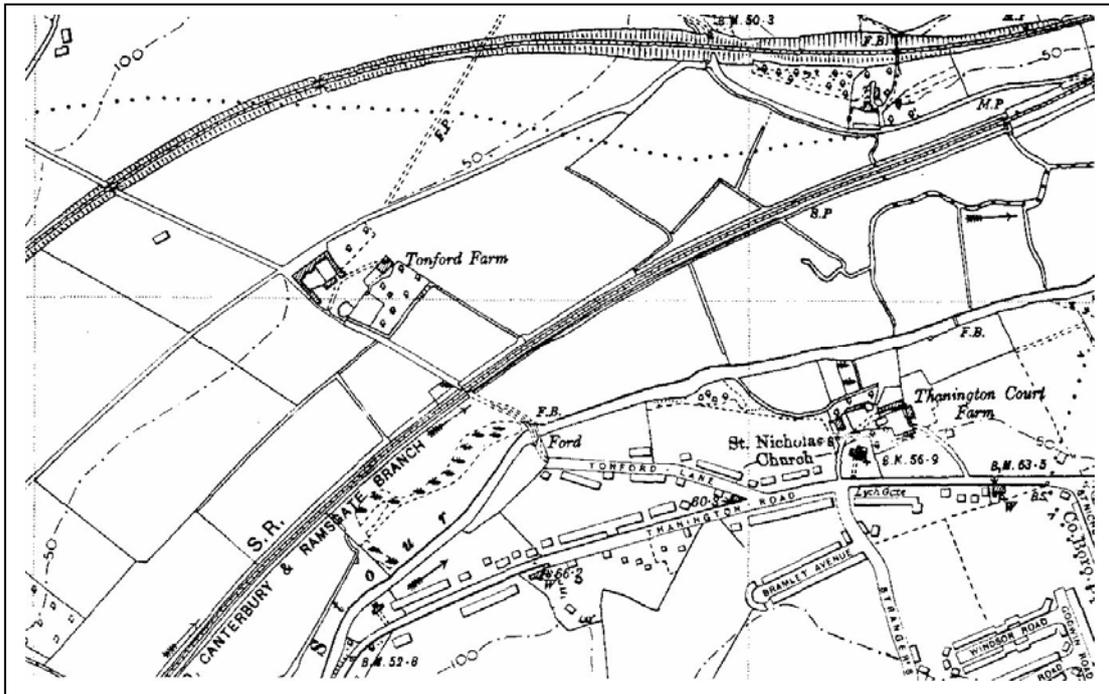


## The Thanington Poisoning Tragedy

By  
John Viner

In the early hours of Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> march 1929 Thanington, the outlying western district of Canterbury, was the scene of a sad incident which became known as the Thanington Poisoning Tragedy. At about 6 o'clock men working in the area saw a man behaving oddly, running around a field to the north of the Canterbury to Ashford road before collapsing in a heap. About 150 yards away, on the nearby allotments, a young woman was also seen, clearly in a very ill condition. The police were called and found the couple, both unconscious, the woman lying across a hedge. Near her were two cups and a bottle containing Lysol, an antiseptic disinfectant made from creosol (wood tar) and soft soap. Commandeering a truck from the Thanington based C. & G. Yeoman, the police conveyed the couple to the Kent and Canterbury Hospital where the woman was found to be dead on arrival. The man was unconscious and in a critical condition.

It seemed that the couple had entered some sort of suicide pact, for both had taken a quantity of Lysol, but who they were remained a mystery. If the man had not made a recovery it is doubtful if their identities would ever have been known. As it was, although unconscious for some time, he made a good recovery and named himself as Ralph Pattison, a 31-year-old miner from Easington Colliery, Durham, and the woman as Margaret Dawson, the 23-year-old daughter of a Sunderland painter and decorator.



*Map of Thanington at the time of the poisoning tragedy. The couple were found on land belonging to Thanington Court Farm. (Canterbury Library)*

It seems that Margaret and Ralph met while living in Tyneside and fell in love. The tragedy for them lay in the fact that Ralph was already married. Perhaps it was this that drove Margaret to leave Sunderland to seek comfort in the anonymity of London where she obtained work as a cook-general in a large house at Upper Norwood. She worked here for some months but kept in touch with Ralph, whose heart she still claimed as her own. In March Ralph left his home and travelled to London to be with Margaret. It is not known what brought them to Canterbury at the end of the month or what drove them to make their tragic death pact. It was difficult for a Durham minor to find alternative work anywhere at the fag-end of the 1920s and the impossibility of meeting his married responsibilities whilst caring for another was perhaps too much to bear. For Margaret's part perhaps it was the agony of loving a man she knew could never be hers. At all events, they sought to unite in death if they could not unite in life so, in Canterbury where neither was known, they purchased the bottle of Lysol and two

cups then, in the dawn of a cold spring morning, they entered the allotments at Thanington, intending never to leave.

The post mortem on Margaret showed that she had drunk at least two fluid ounces of Lysol and that death was due to shock and collapse from corrosive poison, taken by mouth. Her father, George Dawson, travelled to Canterbury formally to identify the body and gave evidence at the inquest in April with much emotion. He had not seen his daughter since before Christmas; now she was dead.

The coroner, Mr C.A. Gardiner, adjourned the inquest until 2<sup>nd</sup> July because, until relatively recently, it was a crime to attempt suicide and Ralph had yet to face trial, not only for attempted suicide but for the murder of Margaret Dawson. The outcome of the inquest would depend on that of the court.

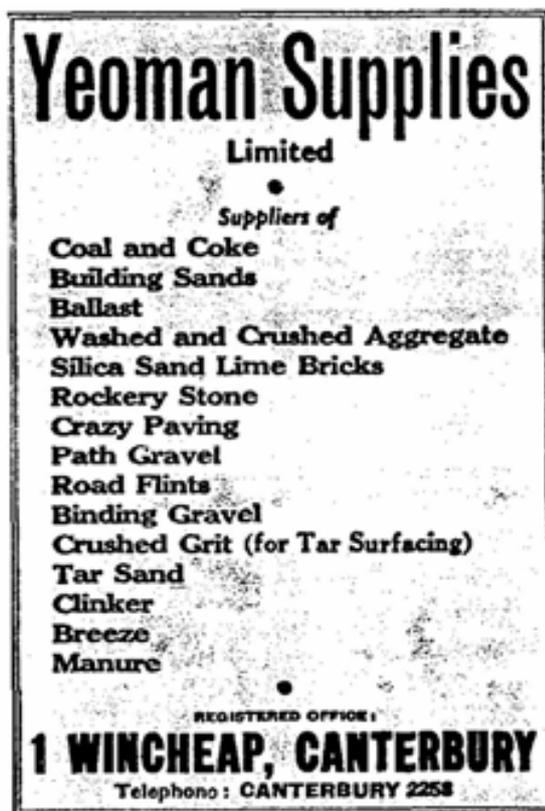
Ralph Pattison was arraigned before the Kent Summer Assizes, opened at Maidstone on 24<sup>th</sup> June before the Hon. Thomas Gardner Horridge Kt., charged with having agreed with the girl to commit suicide and to have himself survived. The crown's prosecutor, Clifford Middleton, recounted the story of the suicide pact, telling how Ralph was seen staggering about, eventually collapsing in the allotments and how Margaret was found to be dead on arrival at hospital. He made to read a letter written by Ralph to his wife but the judge ruled it out of order. The defence counsel, Mr B.H. Waddy, presented no evidence.

Mr Justice Horridge turned to the Grand Jury. 'You must take it from me.' He said, 'for two people to agree to commit suicide, and one of them survives, that person who survives is guilty of the crime of murder.' The jury retired but the evidence presented to them was so overwhelming that it took them but a few minutes to return the verdict of guilty.

The judge donned the black cap and assured the jury that there was only one verdict they could properly find in this case and they had found it. Rightly they had found the prisoner guilty of murder. 'It is my duty,' he continued to Ralph, 'to pass on you the only sentence which the law allows for the crime of murder.' Ralph listened to the death sentence unmoved and was led away by two warders. Mr Waddy asked if the condemned man's wife would be allowed to visit him and leave was granted.

It seems to the modern reader that there is a certain institutional injustice in the treatment of Ralph Pattison – whether or not attempted suicide was a criminal act, to find him guilty of Margaret's murder carries not only a sense of injustice but also of irony – when a suicide pact has failed it seems perverse to condemn the surviving partner to death.

Because there was the possibility that Ralph would appeal against his sentence the inquest, due to have taken place on 2<sup>nd</sup> July, was further adjourned until the 26<sup>th</sup> of the month. The appeal was heard that week and the death sentence passed on Ralph Pattison was commuted to Penal Servitude for Life. The inquest jury were not recalled and the Coroner finally formally recorded the verdict of suicide, not murder, on Margaret Dawson. Thus bringing to a conclusion the sad story of the Thanington Poisoning Tragedy, but one which left a young man in prison without the love either of his wife or the young lady in whose death he was almost a partner.



*Advertisement for Yeomans Ltd from Kelly's Directory 1930. A Yeomans lorry was commandeered by the police to transport the victims to hospital.*