





FATAL **FIRE** AT TOIRO.

FOUR CHILDREN BURNED TO DEATH

It is not too much to say that when the news spread of the fatal **fire** at Keithmore, Toiro, near Balclutha, on Sunday, 4 March 1900 the sensibilities of the community received such a shock as has not previously been experienced in this district. The story is told in the inquest, so we need not recapitulate and add to the harrowing tale. The catastrophe cast an unprecedented gloom over the whole district. Universal sympathy is felt for the bereaved parents. Reference was made to the sad event in several of the pulpits in the district on Sunday. The following is the evidence taken at the inquest held at Toiro yesterday before Mr J. S. Fleming J.P. acting coroner, and a jury consisting of Messrs John Wilson (foreman), Robert Kerr, Josiah Keys, James Sheddan, William John Keys, John Walker.

James **Christie** had seen the bodies on view viz., Alison James, aged 8 years, Douglas McAdam, 6 years, Stewart Fowler, 5 years, and Helen Baxter, 3 years. He identified the latter as his youngest child. The other three bodies were too much burned to recognise, but he had no doubt they were the bodies of the others named. He last saw them alive about 7.30 on Saturday evening, the two younger in the house, and the two elder coming in from the harvest field with the ploughman. He then left to go to a meeting and did not return that night. He recently purchased an adjoining farm and his wife and he slept there that night, the children being left at Keithmore in charge of the servant.

About 5.30 on Sunday morning he was awakened by someone. He jumped up and saw the **fire**, ran to the spot and found the whole house in flames, It was about an hour afterwards that they were able to recover the remains of the children. Three bodies were found in one bed, the other on the floor alongside. They seemed not to have moved in bed. Saturday night

was the first time he and his wife had slept away from Keithmore leaving the children there. The **fire** seemed to have originated in the kitchen, that part being most consumed.

Lonie Walker, servant girl, said Mrs **Christie** left about an hour after her husband. She was engaged ironing till about 9.30, the children having gone to bed shortly after their mother left. Three slept in one bed and one in another. Before going to bed she banked the **fire, and** thought she shut the door of the range, but was not certain. A sheet of iron, covered by a rag, was in front of the range. She was awakened at daylight by hearing a sound as of **fire**. She jumped up and found the house on **fire**. Unable to get in at the door of the children's room, she went round and raised the sash of the window and got inside, and went to the cot for the baby. She got hold of her, but she jumped out of her arms. Being almost suffocated she was obliged to go out of the window. The side of the room next to the kitchen was then on fire. She ran to the hut and wakened Hugh Ross.

Witness slept in a room across a passage from the children. When she got to the window she heard the eldest boy speak. Asked him where he was, and he replied he had got out of bed to see where his father (who used to sleep in the same room) was. The **fire** was strongest near the kitchen. The children's room was full of smoke and quite dark. Made another attempt to get in at the window, but the room was full of **fire**.

Hugh Ross went to bed in the men's hut about 10. 30., the house being then all in darkness. Was awakened about five o'clock on Sunday morning by Louie Walker. Rushed to the house which was in flames. Pulled off some of the weather boards, but could not get in for the **fire**.

The Jury returned a verdict of accidental death, and that no blame is attachable to anyone.

The four children were buried in the Balclutha Cemetery. When the parents moved to Dunedin some three years later they had the bodies of the four children moved to the Northern Cemetery in Dunedin and a beautiful memorial was erected to them.

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