

Double Drowning in Dorset

YFH reader **Karen Shortland** shares how she first became interested in genealogy after hearing that two of her father's great aunts had died in a tragic accident

My sister and I began tracing our family tree 18 months ago after our father Graham told us the tragic story of his grandmother's sisters, who drowned in the River Stour in Dorset in 1908. He recalled being told as a young boy that the girls, Elsie and Sybil Green, had lost their way in thick fog coming home from church and had fallen in the water. They were just 22 and 16 years old respectively.

Both girls worked as assistant teachers in a school run by their mother, Julia. We had no idea where the schoolhouse was but my father thought the family had lived in West Parley, Dorset. We had some photographs to go with this story, including a picture of the girls with their family outside their home and another of the girls' headstone. The latter photo was taken at the stonemason's, so it didn't help us identify the site of their grave.

After a long internet search, I found the tragedy featured on a website for All Saints Church, West Parley. A photo on the site

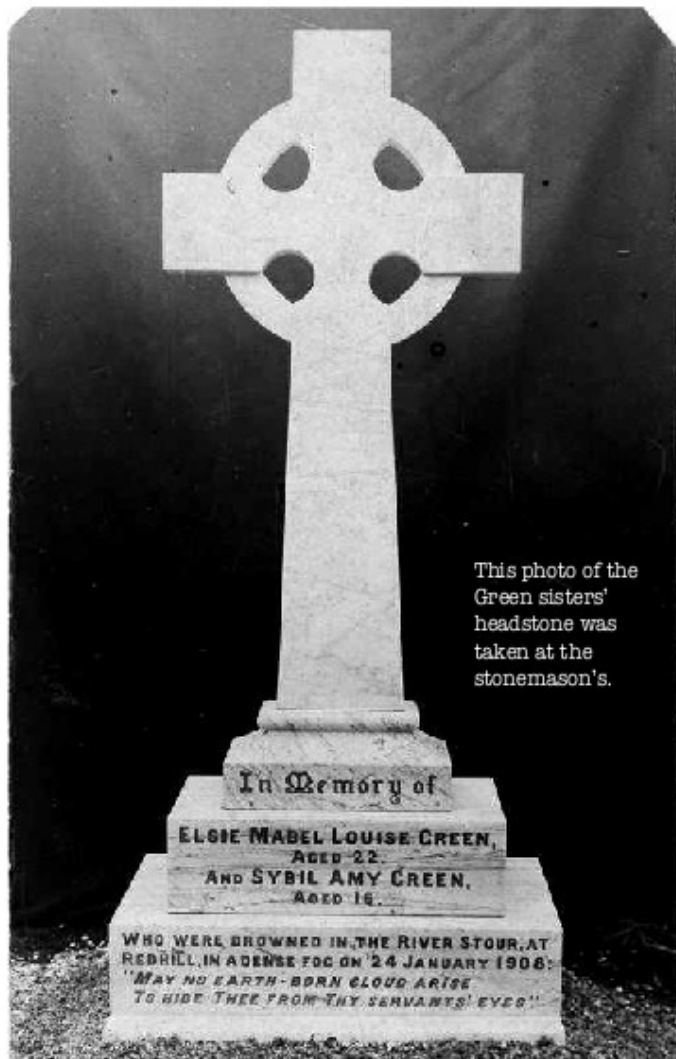
matched the one we had of the girls' headstone so I sent an e-mail explaining our interest and heard back from Roy, the website administrator. The grave was located just inside the entrance to the churchyard and he offered to take a photo 'in situ' for us.

He knew of a retired verger who had recalled hearing playground gossip when he was about eight years old that the girls had gone to the cinema one evening and, despite being warned about the foggy weather, they were walking home and headed towards a light. Unfortunately, this resulted in them losing their way and tragically falling into the fast-flowing river. This was a second-hand account, as the verger had sadly passed away.

Armed with our accumulated material, we decided to travel to Dorset. When we visited All Saints Church, we immediately saw Elsie and Sybil's grave just inside the entrance. After

Redhill Ferry, owned by Pascoe Marshall, where the Green sisters were last seen on the night of the incident.





This photo of the Green sisters' headstone was taken at the stonemason's.

In Memory of
ELSIE MABEL LOUISE GREEN,
 AGED 22
AND SYBIL AMY GREEN,
 AGED 18
 WHO WERE DROWNED IN THE RIVER STOUR, AT
 REDHILL, IN A DENSE FOG ON 24 JANUARY 1908:
 "MAY NO EARTH-BORN CLOUD ARISE
 TO HIDE THEM FROM THY SERVANTS' EYES"

searching the perimeter of the churchyard we discovered their mother Julia's grave hidden amongst a line of trees and overgrown vegetation and William, her husband, was buried alongside her.

Members of staff at Bournemouth Central Library were very helpful. They suggested titles of old local newspapers for us to check, on microfilm, for press coverage and articles from 1908. I have also been able to locate copies of two local history publications on an internet auction site – *The Ferries of the River Stour* by Richard Hutley and *My Story: Memories of Bournemouth and District* by Pascoe Marshall – both of which mention the sisters drowning.

Pascoe Marshall owned the ferry and tearooms where the girls were last seen on the night of the incident. In his book he recalls, 'One foggy night I was at work here when Charles Corbin called in to say he was going down to the ferry to put two girls across. I told him to tell the girls to be careful of the fog. This he did and warned them not to follow the river but to strike off away from the river towards East Parley where they lived. They were

The grave was found at All Saints Church, West Parley in Dorset.



Pascoe Marshall owned the ferry where the girls were last seen on the night of the incident

two Misses Green, daughters of the schoolmistress. They never reached home. Apparently they were muffled up in scarves against the fog, tried to follow the river edge and slipped in; their footprints were clearly seen next day and their bodies recovered later.'

At Bournemouth Central Library, we found witness accounts and inquest reports to help us piece together the facts. Following the second inquest, held on 28 January, *The Bournemouth Daily Echo* reported that the girls' distressed father, William, told the coroner that at 1pm on Friday 24 January the girls had set out on a trip to Poole and that he had not seen them alive again.

Charles Corbin, of Marshall's Ferries, reported that at 6.30pm the girls asked him to take them over the river. Charles told the inquest that there was thick fog with visibility down to two yards. Even though their faces were muffled he said he knew the sisters 'as well as he knew his own brother'. On crossing the river the elder girl said to him 'I wish you could pull us all the way home like this' and he had replied, 'Yes, I should not lose sight of you.' The younger one, prophetically, said 'I should not like to fall into the water tonight. It is so dark!' He told the coroner that he had not seen them home after landing and had quickly lost sight of them in the fog, but they appeared to set off in the right direction.

He then said it was not a minute later when Mr Griffiths, a local keeper, came and told him the girls had gone into the river. They had apparently lost their bearings in the fog. Mr Griffiths had heard a female voice cry out and he initially thought his wife and her friends were in trouble so had rushed to their aid. He saw the girls in the water and waded in to rescue them but, after his lamp went out, he lost sight of them.

As soon as the alarm was raised, volunteers worked tirelessly along the river, in boats and on foot, to try to find the girls. Sadly, Sybil's body was recovered the next day and her inquest was held on 27 January in East Parley Schoolroom. Elsie, her older sister, was not recovered until 28 January on the opposite bank, in a place called Hayter's Hole, and her inquest was held that evening. The girls were laid out side by side in one of the schoolrooms where they had previously taught.

The coroner recorded verdicts of 'death by accidental drowning, through falling into the

CASEBOOK



The *Bournemouth Graphic* carried photos of Elsie Green (left) and her younger sister Sybil (right).

River Stour' and commended the efforts of everyone who tried to help the girls on the night of the accident, and those who joined the subsequent search for their bodies. The jury members at the inquests were reportedly so affected by the tragedy that they handed their fees to the girls' father, William Green, as a way of showing sympathy to the family for their loss.

A joint funeral took place on 30 January with a very poignant description of the scene appearing the same day in *The Bournemouth Daily Echo*. The hearse was half an hour late in leaving after the girls' distressed mother went to take a last look at her children. The flower-strewn coffins were eventually carried out through the small playground and the cortege set off for West Parley. It arrived to a churchyard overflowing with more than a thousand spectators, many of them local children. There was also a list of mourners and transcriptions taken from the many floral tributes, which helped expand our family tree.

After the success we'd had so far, the final part of our puzzle was to locate the house in our picture. Much of the area has changed in 100 years, partly due to the expansion of Bournemouth (previously Hurn) Airport. Local parish archivists did not recognize the house and suspected it might have been destroyed, but we pored over old maps trying to identify possible locations. After a disappointing search one afternoon, we decided to explore the perimeter of the airport at Chapel Lane, East Parley by car and were amazed to actually find the house hidden behind a row of trees.

Taking a few photographs and newspaper articles, with some apprehension, my father knocked on the door. We explained our family connection to the house and the owners invited us to look round the exterior. They also showed us photographs of the dilapidated house prior to their restoration work. The building still showed some of the original distinguishing tile

patterns. The foundation stone, although worn, was clearly engraved with the year the house was built for the Green family, 1901. The new owners were very helpful and keen to hear more about our research. Before leaving, my father, sister and I were given permission to pose for our own version of the original image.

Since our return from Dorset, my father has been in contact with the local residents' association in West Parley to tell them our findings. Their website at www.keepwestparleygreen.org.uk now displays a page, with photos, that tells Elsie and Sybil's tragic story. The association has an ongoing project to clear the graveyard at All Saints and our ancestors' graves are now basking in sunlight rather than being hidden in the shadow of overgrown trees. In 2008, on the 100th anniversary of the girls' death, there was a well-attended memorial service for them at the church and, had we started our research a year earlier, we could have attended ourselves.

We have found that, as with all detective work, it can be difficult to corroborate facts and our research turned up conflicting information, which caused some confusion. However, we think that the girls lived in East

Parley and taught at St Barnabas Church School next to the family home and they were returning from a shopping trip, not church or the cinema, when they died. We were really pleased to find out so much about our family history and continue to explore other branches of our growing family tree. It has been a fascinating experience so far and who knows what else we will discover!

My father, sister and I pose for our own version of the original family photo.



The final part of our puzzle was to locate the house in our picture, which shows Elsie, far right, and Sybil, second right.

