The Accident

The accident occurred at lunchtime on Tuesday 26th November 1946 but writing about it is taking place 73 years later in 2020. I was just eleven years old when I witnessed at close hand the messy death of a fellow primary school pupil whilst he and I were walking back to our school after taking lunch with about a score of other pupils from our school.

I do not recall any discussion about the accident at the time but my memory of it — including some very fine detail — has never left me. Until today I have not seriously thought about the accident or considered its effect on my later life. But just over a year ago (late 2018) and as a result of much prompting by my daughters I began to write my memoirs of what they considered to be an interesting and fulfilled life. Needing to start somewhere I began writing up my early life experiences in rural Lincolnshire. When I came to the accident I found I had doubts as to whether or not what I remembered could actually have taken place.

Whilst recognizing that there is often a difference between past events as remembered and as actually experienced, I knew that something catastrophic must have happened just as I turned 11 years of age because I suffered a mental illness of some kind which kept me away from school for over a year. Whilst this was probably known in my family I do not recall that the cause or nature of my illness was ever discussed with me. There is a significant caveat to this in that I had — and have — no memory of what happened immediately after the accident apart from disjointed, brief recollections, more like flashes of memory, which were not directly related to the accident itself but to events during my later 'recovery'. This led me, 72 years later in 2018, to begin an attempt to discover whether-or-not what I remember so vividly actually occurred.

Having been a police officer in my adult life I was aware that a record of the accident and death would be held somewhere if, in fact, the accident had taken place. Using internet resources I looked up all the death dates in Sleaford between 1940 and 1960. These referred only to those buried in the Sleaford cemetery. Between 1940 and 1960 there was just one entry for a 10 year old boy. This boy had died as a result of an accident while walking home from the same school I attended. He is recorded as

falling and breaking his leg but dying several weeks later in Lincoln Hospital.

On obtaining this news I believed I had found evidence that my dreamlike memory of a more violent death did not happen and that I must have suffered an hallucination of some kind. However, when I obtained a copy of Alan Musson's death certificate and a photograph of his gravestone in the Sleaford cemetery I found that the date of his death did not appear to fit with my own life experience. Alan died a year earlier than when I became ill. I would have been 10 years old when he had his accident. too young to be the school head-boy I became the following year. I know I was head-boy when 'my' accident occurred because it was that which led to my being present at the scene. The school would, surely, not have had a pupil from a junior year acting as the head-boy: the role of headboy and head-girl would have been restricted to final year pupils. Again, I know my family moved from Sleaford to London during the summer of 1947 when I was still unwell and that I did not return to my primary school from the day of the alleged accident. This meant I did not take the 11+ school examination I should have taken in the 1946/47 school year.

I began to feel that chasing Alan Musson's death details, after six months of hunting, was taking me in the wrong direction. But I could find no evidence of a later or more relevant death from these Sleaford records.

Early in 2019 I discussed this problem with an Exeter neighbour who also had police investigation experience. Moira assisted me in seeking what at first seemed like a needle in a haystack. Rather than searching through official channels as I had been doing Moira followed a more direct route. She contacted the William Alvey School and the local Sleaford Library both of which provided important information. At first, enquiries were directed at the death of Alan Musson in 1945 but were soon extended to any death of a young person in Sleaford between 1945 and 1947.

The school was the first to provide important news. It had been the habit of the head-teacher to keep a school log book in which was recorded any event considered important in the administration of the school. This hand-written log book was passed on from head-teacher to head-teacher. Fortunately, the head-teacher (Stephen Tapley) in post when Moira's first enquiry in 2019 was made had a strong interest in the history of the school and was intrigued by our enquiry. He found a school log entry written by the then head-teacher, Miss Beavis, dated 8th February,

1945 which, after recording a heavy period of falling snow and frozen toilets, wrote: 'Yesterday (February 7) Alan Musson of George street, a scholar, died in Lincoln Hospital, his death being caused by a fall on his way home from school on December 18 (1944)'. (Page 129). According to his gravestone in the Sleaford cemetery Alan was 10 years old at the time of his death; 17 days short of his 11th birthday. If this was the boy I was looking for, my memories seemed faulty and my mental illness was based on a remembered self-created delusion.

With this information, the current head-teacher sent a copy of the published history of the William Alvey School written by yet another head-teacher, Peter Thornton, in 1998. Peter Thornton had found the head-teachers log book whilst cleaning out a cupboard prior to his retirement and it was this find that persuaded him to write the history of the school. In this history, reference to the log entry relating to Alan Musson was followed by reference to another accident which took place about a year later in November 1946. Information about this second accident was relayed to Mr Tapley who was asked to see if there was a log book entry describing this later accident. Indeed, there was!

On page 150 of the school log book Mr Dougan, who had succeeded Miss Beavis as head-teacher wrote in 1946: 22nd November (sic): I much regret to record the death of Brian Fowler — aged 11 years (sic) — a pupil in this school, who was killed by falling masonry when on his way back to school from dinner today. A full report of the accident has been sent to the Director. The headteacher was out of school most of the afternoon session visiting Cranwell with Canon Waudby to break the news to Mr. and Mrs. Fowler.'

This statement is repeated in the 1998 history but the author included extra information. 'The masonry was part of the door casing of one of the cottages along Eastgate, number 45 (sic)'.

Subsequent investigation, including the findings contained in the coroner's report and in Brian Fowler's death certificate revealed a number of errors in the log entry and, consequently, in the published school history. The date of the accident was Tuesday 26th November and not 22nd November (the previous Friday); Brian Fowler was 10 years old at the time of his death and not 11 and the number of the house where the accident occurred was 43 and not 45 Eastgate. In his history, the author also incorrectly calls Brian Fowler, 'John'. Despite a careful search it has not been possible to find the 'full report sent to the Director'

nor is it known where the author obtained the additional information he included in his history in 1998, 52 years after the accident. Mr Dougan was very new to the post of head-teacher having taken up this post in July 1946 in preparation for the coming school year starting in September. A study of the log entries in his first year and immediately preceding the recording of Brian's death suggest that these entries may have been written together possibly several days after the accident. This might explain the date error. Mr Dougan consistently referred to himself in the third person in his log entries.

The Sleaford Library success came soon after the discovery of the school log entries and of the school history. On request, the library staff undertook a search of the Sleaford newspapers published between 1945 and 1947. What was being sought was any reference to a serious accident in Sleaford involving a young boy. After two weeks of searching one of the library staff excitedly emailed Moira that she had found something that might be of interest. On an inside page of the *Sleaford Gazette* dated November 29th 1946 had been a reported an inquest into the death of a boy named Brian Fowler. This inquest had taken place the previous Wednesday, 27th November.

Before examining the inquest evidence which will either support or refute my memory of this event I feel it may be helpful to introduce what I actually remember before its assessment according to the evidence. But first, some scene setting is required in order to make sense of it all.

First, while I try to be as factual and honest as I can it has to be recognised time and subsequent events inevitably distort the narrative. Second, I had been made a school prefect — or head-boy — at the start of my final year at the William Alvey School in September 1946. I thought I was called the head-boy but I have a 'prefects' badge which I believe came from the school. There were two of us, the other a head-girl for whom I recall I had 'warm' feelings as a child but cannot now remember her name. Third, the school did not provide lunchtime meals for its pupils but had arranged for these to be provided at the Sleaford Secondary School about 800 yards away close to St Denys Church. Fourth, a number of pupils (about 20), including myself and my younger sister, did not bring sandwiches to school and needed a cooked lunchtime meal. This meant there was a file of children walking forth and back between the Alvey School and the Secondary School alongside the Sleaford/Cranwell Road (now the B1517) before and after lunch. This

was not a busy road at the time, cars were still relatively scarce after the War. Today, in 2020, the road lies in a different place as it approaches and passes the Alvey School. What is now Ashfield Street and the car park in front of the school were then part of this road, which was much closer to the buildings on the left side of the road while approaching the school from the town centre. Fifth, it was one of the duties of the school prefects to lead the file of pupils to and from the Secondary School at lunch-time. A 'duty' teacher followed the file of pupils to ensure that pupils took care as they walked alongside the road. I had been undertaking this shared duty with the head-girl since September following my appointment as one of the two school prefects. The walk, which took about 15 minutes either way, was normally a bit of noisy fun - unless it was raining.

On the day of the accident I was leading the pupils on the way back to the Alvey School after lunch at the Secondary School. I was in the front with the file of lunch-taken pupils following quite closely behind. For some reason the duty teacher, Mr Pearson, was ahead of me rather than at the rear and was standing on the pavement about 50 yards closer to the school with me and the file of pupils behind me slowly approaching him. We had reached a gradual left-hand bend on the left side of the road leading to our school when one of the pupils (later to be identified as Brian Fowler) came running past me followed by one or two other pupils. They appeared to be engaged in a game of what I knew as 'Tiggy off the Ground'. Pupils were instructed to keep behind the prefect leading the file and Brian was clearly in breach of this as he dashed past me. Then, immediately in front of me and to my left Brian jumped onto what appeared to be an angled ledge on the stone surround of the door of a street-fronting house on our left. This was the nearest upright jamb of stone. There was another stone jamb to the right of the door and a lintel across the top which sat on top of the two upright jambs. As Brian jumped onto the angled ledge about 18" (half metre) from the ground he raised his arms to take hold of the stone jamb higher up. The stone jamb immediately came away from the wall followed by the lintel and the right hand jamb. I think it was the lintel across the top that hit Brian's head. The three pieces of stone and Brian immediately crashed to the ground. This happened right in front of me and lasted just a few seconds but I could see that Brian's head was crushed and it looked, to me, as if it had been smashed off. There was blood and other stuff all over the pavement. It was all so sudden.

The next thing I remember is Mr Pearson running towards me. As he arrived, he was taking off his brown coloured overcoat. It was made of cloth material and not one of the heavier winter overcoats. I remember Mr Pearson putting his coat over the head and upper body of Brian. To do this he kneeled on the pavement and his trousers were stained with blood and other liquid material. After he had covered Brian he then looked up at me from his kneeling position as I stood very close to him, the stones and Brian. He then pulled back his overcoat revealing Brian's crushed head and chest and said to me 'Who is this?'

As soon as this was said a blackness descended upon me and I have no recall of what happened next. To this day I remember what happened immediately before Mr Pearson spoke but nothing afterwards.

I suspect I was well on the way to being traumatised before Mr Pearson spoke. He must have been under tremendous stress at the time. As for me. I never returned to the William Alvey School from the moment the accident occurred. I did not take the scheduled 11+ examination and I moved with my family from Sleaford to London about six months later still suffering from the immediate post-accident blackout which has stayed with me ever since. Apart from the lead-up to the accident I have no recollection of that day or the days that followed except for occasional memory flashes such as my older sister walking with me in a field in bright sunshine; my brother taking me for a walk in a wheel chair (!); my bed placed behind the sofa in the sitting room of our house. My older sister tells me 'you were quite out of your mind and needed watching at all times'; so much so that she had to take time out from school herself to watch over me when my father and mother were unavoidably away from the house. I cannot recall any discussion or treatment which must have taken place at the time. Neither I nor Mr. Pearson attended Brian's inquest as witnesses.

It is obvious a significant amount of activity must have taken place at the scene that Tuesday lunch-time but I have no recollection of it. Apart from the contact described, my memories of Mr Pearson pre-date the accident and I have no memories of him since. The school records show that he retired from teaching just over a year later (June 1948) and that he specifically requested that the school did not publicly recognise his departure. The 1998 author of the school history mentions Mr Pearson's retirement and his request for anonymity by adding 'I wonder why?'

Before the accident and along with other Alvey pupils I did not feel affection for Mr Pearson. We were afraid of him because he occasionally bullied us. It should be remembered that the threat of corporal punishment was usual in primary schools at that time. However, I feel very sorry for him. He must have endured memories of what happened and his role in it all his life. If I was able to talk to him I would want to reassure him that as far as I was concerned at least, life eventually turned out well. But what he must have remembered of this accident defies imagination.

I have not been able to access the Coroner's report relating to the inquest into Brian's death but it was the report in the Gazette, found by Sleaford library staff that provided the evidence required. A copy of the newspaper report is provided as an appendix but it is worth repeating here in full.

Entry in the Sleaford Gazette dated Friday 29th November

1946

KILLED ON WAY TO SCHOOL

'Accident' verdict on Cranwell boy

Remarking that though it was not part of his duty to seek to apportion blame, nobody could suggest there was anything at all that would give rise to the question of criminal negligence in that case, the Sleaford Coroner (Mr E. C. Deal) recorded a verdict of 'accidental death' at the inquest on Wednesday on 10 years old Brian Malcolm Fowler of Delhi Square, Cranwell, who was killed outright by a piece of stone which fell on his head while he was on his way to Alvey School on the previous day.

Evidence of identification was given by the father W/O H. Fowler and Dr. J.W. Scholey stated that the boy's death was due to a compound fracture of the skull and cerebral injuries.

Terrance Minter (10) of Cranwell told the Coroner Brian jumped onto a ledge at the side of Mrs Maxey's house, No. 43

East Road (sic) and touched a stone slab to save himself from falling.

'The next thing I knew he was on the ground with the slab on top of him' he added.

P. Sergeant Wray estimated the weight of the stone, three pieces of which were found by the body, at 12 stone and said it was not part of the structure of the house but a superimposed architectural ornamentation.

The coroner expressed sympathy with W/O and Mrs. Fowler and Mr G. G. Jeudwine, who appeared for Mrs Maxey associated himself with the Coroner's remarks on her behalf.

It is of interest in that inquest account indicates errors in the head-teachers' school log entries of the incident. The log shows death takes place on 22nd November but this should have read 26th November and that the house number was given as 45 whereas it was 43. The log also states that Brian Fowler was 11 years old at the time of his death when, in fact, he was 10 years old. At first I thought these errors were the result of sloppy reporting by the newspaper reporter but later learned that the correct information was as reported in the *Sleaford Gazette*.

My recollection of the incident also differs in that the stone surround of the door was at the front of the house and not at the side as stated. When the stones fell, none ended up lying on the body of Brian Fowler but were on the pavement beside him. The police sergeant appears to have got it right and he adds an interesting comment concerning the status of these stones in that they were 'ornamental'. This, together with the presence of a solicitor attending the inquest on behalf of the house owner, Mrs Maxey, suggest that the question of culpability must have been considered. The fact that the heavy ornamental stone was insufficiently secured to prevent collapse would, undoubtedly, be an important issue if this incident were to be considered today. The intervention by the Coroner concerning this question of culpability is of interest and is possibly misjudged. But the strangest aspect of this inquest was that it was held less than 24 hours after the accident! My older sister, who was in her early teens at the time, claims that it was very difficult to get anyone to talk about the accident after it had occurred and that she felt the inquest was held in an unnatural rush.

When seeking and obtaining all this information about Brian's death in 2019, I became unexpectedly distressed. Any topic containing what could be called emotional content had an unsettling effect upon me. I even stopped watching television documentaries that followed the life of wild animals because the death of an animal caused me so much distress. The sight of a pack of wolves attacking and killing a young bison in the USA Yellowstone Park has kept me away from such viewing ever since. I simply cannot rationalise my way out of these feelings.

This recent reduction in emotional control lead to a close friend suggesting I should seek counselling help. This I did. At our first counselling meeting we soon got to the accident. I then spent the next hour weeping uncontrollably. The counsellor let me get on with it and said nothing. I apologised for my weakness but was reassured by his response: 'it would come out sometime and best now when you can do something about it'. I found — and still find — it remarkable that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be present 72 years after the defining event.

It was subsequently suggested I could consider returning to the scene of the accident and make a gesture of some kind which might support closure of the distress I was experiencing. At first I refused to even consider taking a 600 mile round trip to Sleaford but after a few weeks of reflection I came to believe that a visit to Brian's grave might help. The suggested gesture could be to leave an artefact of some kind accompanied by a moment of silence or prayer. It was even suggested I might blow on the stone I had selected for the purpose and while placing it close to his burial place, asking that he and I could now be at peace. The blowing was meant to symbolise the releasing of my own hidden distress. My immediate — but silent — reaction to this suggestion was to assuredly reject it. This was simply not my style! But I gradually accepted that a visit to Brian's grave might be helpful.

As a result of these new developments Moira and I began, independently, to seek the place where Brian was buried. This proved to be a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful task. We, and those who responded to our enquiries, consulted records held in Sleaford, Cranwell, Spalding and Lincoln to no avail. We learned more about Brian's family life; his parent's names — including the maiden name of his mother—when and where they were married; Brian's birth registration and, of course, the registration of his death in 1946 but no sign of where he was

buried. We considered that with his parents being married in 1931 and Brian being born in 1936 there was probably at least one other child born during the five year interval. This could mean that his brother or sister is likely to have married and had children during their later life. If so, those children would have been told the story of their tragically deceased uncle. These nephews and/or nieces might know where Brian was buried. Again, contact was made with the only known undertaker firm operating in Sleaford in 1946; however, the Co-operative Funeral Service was unable to help because their records did not go back that far. However, we did get confirmation that it would have been very unlikely for Brian to have been cremated.

After what was now months of ever more detailed enquiries I began to feel restive, experiencing feelings of uncertainty concerning my almost obsessive need to find Brian's grave. This was not doing me any good! When Moira said she wished to contact the RAF records office concerning the home address of Brian's father (we already had his service residential address in Cranwell) I decided to call a halt to our searches.

Again, it was the current head-teacher of the William Alvey School, Stephen Tapley, who came to the rescue. In one of our earlier email exchanges he had mentioned that at the end of the playing field at the back of the school a memorial garden had been in existence for some years. This was called the 'Tom and Maddie Memorial Garden' and had been created to commemorate the lives of two pupils who had tragically died in 2004 and 2007. Photographs showed this to be quite a well-maintained piece of ground surrounded by hedging and containing pathways and some seating. Memorial artefacts were present in what appeared to be a very restful environment. It was suggested I might place an additional artefact dedicated to Brian in this memorial garden.

I arranged for a Devon stone to be engraved with Brain's name and his year of birth and death (1936-1946) and took this with me when my eldest daughter and I visited Sleaford and the William Alvey School towards the end of July 2019, 72½ years since the last time I walked into the building. We met with Stephen Tapley and spent a morning touring the school buildings, watching a power-point history of the school, walking through the school grounds and visiting the Tom and Maddie Memorial Garden. Here, Brian's stone was laid to rest and a short, silent private prayer of my own was followed by a celebratory glass of wine. A

year of searching, with occasional exhilaration and disappointment, and accompanied by insights and experiences I did not know I was capable of having was over. The job was done.

Brian and I are now at peace.

Bob Buriden

Bob Snowden Exeter, Devon 2020

Life after Sleaford

After Bob left Sleaford and the William Alvey School he completed his school years in London. He was 'called up' when he was 17 years of age and joined his three brothers in the Coldstream Guards. He remained there for six years and took part in many Buckingham Palace ceremonies and other royal duties. From the guards regiment he became a policeman serving in London and then in South Australia for a total of five years. As a result of his police service he was invited to become more involved in helping people who had broken the law. The government sent him to Exeter University for training where he stayed for the rest of his working life soon to be awarded a psychology degree, a doctorate and eventually a professorship in family studies. During his university life he travelled widely, visiting over 40 countries when acting as a consultant to the World Health Organisation. He was invited to provide advice to both the English and American governments concerning the reproductive health of women. During this time he authored or co-authored seven books and over 200 technical papers with emphasis on the effect of new fertility regulating services and reproductive procedures (test tube babies etc.) on family relationships. He played a significant part in identifying the need to control the provision of infertility services resulting in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990.

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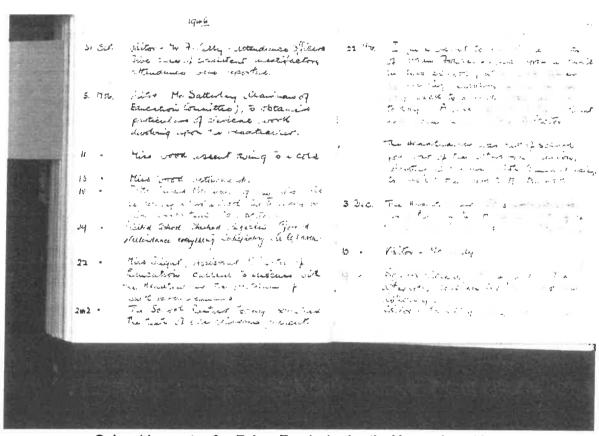
During these events he married and had three daughters one of whom is a teacher, the second a sign language interpreter and the third a learning difficulties nurse. Liz, his wife, was a nursing sister when they met and latterly a teacher and university research fellow. Away from his working life Bob became an efficient musician playing clarinet and then bassoon in university and city orchestras and was a founder member of the Exeter Wind Quintet. He also found time to rebuild 1930s cars. Currently, at 84 years, he is a widower who misses his wife, Liz, dearly and is cared for by his three daughters. He spends much of his time caring for birds, chickens and animals (including foxes) which visit his home in Exeter every day. He also remains quietly active in local politics, charity work and church life.

In June 2019, together with his eldest daughter, Julia, Bob visited Sleaford and the William Alvey School after an absence of 73 years to place a commemorative stone in the school's Tom and Maddie Memorial Garden in memory of Barry Fowler his fellow Alvey pupil who died so tragically in 1946.

* * * *



43 Eastgate is on the left. The B1517 road was closer to the house in 1946



School log entry for Brian Fowler's death. November 1946



SLEAFORD GAZETTE

FRIDAY 25" NOV

DDUCTIONS LTD.

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CORRESPONDENCE

PASSENGER'S OFFICE

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The Corner expressed sympaths with W.O and Mr. Powler and Mr. G. G. Jendwine who appeared for Mrs. Maxey, assuriated himself with the Corner's reports on her below

Thoughts And Reflections

BY "OBSERVER"

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Sleaford Gazette report of the Brain Fowler inquest on 27th November 1946

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH



GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number 10071242-69

	REGISTRATION DISTRICT SLEAFORD AND EAST KESTEVEN											
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CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the

26th

April

day of

2019

DYE 361530

See note overle

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AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE **CROWN COPYRIGHT

WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

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Copy of Brian Fowler's death certificate dated 26th November 1946