



**STATE CORONER'S COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest: Inquest into the death of Gaida Coote (second inquest)

Hearing dates: 12 February 2020

Date of findings: 12 February 2020

Place of findings: NSW State Coroner's Court, Lidcombe NSW

Findings of: Magistrate Harriet Grahame, Deputy State Coroner

Catchwords: CORONIAL LAW – search for missing person,
subsequent discovery of remains

File numbers: 2019/85386
(First Inquest 2015/167231, Findings delivered 28
October 2016)

Representation: Ms Amanda Chytra (Sergeant) Advocate Assisting

Findings:

The findings I make under section 81(1) of the *Coroners Act 2009* (NSW) are:

Identity

The person who died was Gaida Coote

Date of death

She died on or in the days shortly after 3 December 2014

Place of death

She died in the Ku-ring-gai Wild Flower Garden at St Ives, NSW

Cause of death

I remain unable to determine the exact cause of her death

Manner of death

Ms Coote died in bushland, having attended a volunteer bush care group.

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Introduction

1. The remains of Ms Gaida Coote were located on 11 March 2019 in the Ku-ring-gai Wild Flower Garden in St Ives, Sydney.
2. Ms Coote last spoke to a family member on 2 December 2014. On 3 December 2014 she attended a bush care group at the Ku-ring-gai Wild Flower Garden. She did not return home and was subsequently reported missing by family members.

The history of these proceedings

3. An inquest was held into the disappearance and suspected death of Ms Coote on 14 October 2016. Those proceedings canvassed the circumstances of her disappearance and the extensive search that followed. On 28 October 2016 I found that Ms Coote had died on or in the days shortly after 3 December 2014. I further found that she died in or close to the Ku-ring-gai Wild Flower Garden at St Ives NSW. I was unable to determine the manner or cause of her death.¹
4. Pursuant to section 83 (3) Of the *Coroners Act* 2009 (NSW) it is now appropriate to hold a fresh inquest so that further information may be placed on the public record. I do not intend to restate those matters set out in my original findings.

The evidence

5. The Court took brief oral evidence from the officer in charge of the investigation, Detective Senior Constable Gregory Carroll. Further documentary evidence was also tendered including statements, photographs and reports.

Location of skeletal remains

6. On the evening of 11 March 2019, two members of a local bush walking group located skeletal remains whilst taking a short cut through dense bushland in the Ku-ring-gai Wild Flower Garden. They were forced to leave the location due to fading daylight. In the days following they returned to the area and attempted to retrace their steps in an effort to locate the remains again.²
7. On Saturday 16 March 2019 the bushwalkers were successful in their search and notified NSW Police at Gordon Police Station of the location. All remains were left in place. Numerous police attended the location and found the remains by following fabric markers tied to trees left by the bush walkers.

¹ Findings in the *Inquest into the Disappearance and suspected death of Gaida Coote*, 28 October 2016.

² See statement of Paul Pilkington, Exhibit 1, Tab 6 [4-15]

Police Investigation

8. Detective Senior Constable Gregory Carroll assumed control of the investigation. He attended the location on 16 March 2019 and arranged for a Crime Scene Guard to be maintained until weather conditions were safer.
9. On 17 March 2019 officers from the Forensic Services Group attended. They were assisted by specialist officers from the Rescue and Bomb Disposal Unit and Public Order and Riot Squad. An extensive search of the area was conducted over 17 and 18 March 2019.
10. Several bones were located including a partial left scapula, a mandible with sixteen teeth with evidence of dental work, a cranium, left and right pelvic bones, sacrum, left and right femora, left and right tibiae and left and right fibulae. These bones were transported to the Mortuary at the Lidcombe Forensic Medicine Complex.
11. Clothing and other items were also located in the search including clothing, a backpack containing a thermos, lunch box, two keys, one of which was a Nissan brand car key, a watch with a brown coloured band and a garden tool bag containing gardening tools. These items were consistent with items Ms Coote would have been in possession of on 3 December 2014.
12. On 17 March 2019 police obtained a statement from Ms Coote's daughter, Karen Aspden, and showed her photographs of the property that had been located in the search including the watch with a brown band. Ms Aspden told police that her mother had purchased a Padget brand watch with a brown band during a recent trip to China.³
13. On 27 March 2019 the skeletal remains were examined by Dr Bernard l'Ons. The cause of death was unable to be unascertained from the examination⁴. An anthropology report was completed by forensic anthropologist Denise Donlon. She concluded that the bones examined were from one individual, a caucasian female over the age of 40.

Dental Identification

14. In establishing the identity of the remains, the court was assisted by the examination undertaken by forensic odontologists from the NSW Forensic Dental Unit. On 21 March 2019 Professor Chris Griffiths examined the skeletal remains and recorded post mortem dental charting. Dental radiographs were also taken. These records were compared to dental records obtained from Ms Coote's dentist. After matching ante mortem and post mortem radiographs, Professor Griffiths and Doctor Pamela Gower agreed that the skeletal remains were those of Gaida Coote.⁵

³ Statement of Karen Aspden, Exhibit 1 Tab 10 [5]

⁴ Examination Report for the Coroner, Exhibit 1, Tab 4

⁵ Report of Forensic Odontologist, P Gower, Exhibit 1, Tab 3

How does the information add to what was known at the earlier inquest?

15. Taking into account the dental records, the place of discovery and the property which was found in close proximity, I am satisfied that the bones are the remains of Ms Coote. At the earlier inquest I could not be satisfied that Ms Coote had perished in the Wild Flower Garden as in the absence of her body, it appeared possible that she could have walked beyond the park into surrounding adjacent bushland. I am now satisfied, on the balance of probabilities, that she died in the Garden on or in the days shortly after 3 December 2014. I remain unable to establish a medical cause of death. However, as previously stated, there is no evidence of suicide or foul play. Ms Coote died in bushland, having attended a volunteer bush care group.

Findings

16. The revised findings I make under section 81(1) of the *Coroners Act 2009* (NSW) are:

Identity

The person who died was Gaida Coote.

Date of death

She died on or in the days shortly after 3 December 2014.

Place of death

She died in the Ku-ring-gai Wild Flower Garden at St Ives, NSW.

Cause of death

I remain unable to determine the cause of her death.

Manner of death

Ms Coote died in bushland, having attended a volunteer bush care group.

Conclusion

17. Finally, I once again express my sincere condolences to Ms Coote's family.
18. I thank those involved in this investigation and in the preparation of the inquest.
19. I close this inquest.

Magistrate Harriet Grahame
Deputy State Coroner,
NSW State Coroner's Court
12 February 2020