



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

Inquest:	Inquest into the death of Elizabeth BRITTON
Hearing dates:	23-26 September 2024
Date of findings:	7 November 2024
Place of Inquest	State Coroner's Court sitting at Lismore Local Court and Byron Bay Local Court
Place of findings:	NSW State Coroner's Court, Lidcombe
Findings of:	Deputy State Coroner Carmel Forbes
File number:	2020/00324025
Catchwords	CORONIAL LAW –cause of death non accidental blunt force head injury- suspicious circumstances-open finding on manner of death-recommendation that NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Unit further investigate the death
Representation:	Mr P Hogan, Counsel Assisting, instructed by Ms K Zielinski and Mr L Sampson NSW Crown Solicitor's Office Mr J Pender, Aboriginal Legal Service, representing Mr Anthony Siganto Ms G Jewison, instructed by Ms G Campagna, Campagna Legal, representing AB Ms L Geary, Mills Oakley Law Firm, representing the Britton family
Non-publication order	Non-publication orders have been made pursuant to section

	74 of the Coroners Act 2009 (NSW). A copy of these orders is on the Registry file.
Findings:	Elizabeth Britton died on 24 October 2020. The place of her death was Gold Coast University Hospital NSW. The cause of her death was non accidental blunt force head injury. The available evidence does not enable me to make a finding as to who inflicted the injury.
Recommendation:	<p>To the New South Wales Commissioner of Police:</p> <p>I recommend that the death of Elizabeth Britton be referred to the NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Unit for further investigation in accordance with the protocols and procedures of that Unit.</p>

Introduction

- 1 This is an inquest into the death of Ms Elizabeth Britton. Ms Britton died at the Gold Coast University Hospital on 24 October 2020 from blunt force head injury. She sustained the injury in her home sometime on Saturday 10 October 2020.
- 2 Section 81 of the *Coroners Act 2009 NSW* requires a Coroner to make findings as to:
 - a. The identity of the deceased person.
 - b. The date and place of the person's death; and
 - c. The manner and cause of the person's death.
- 3 The identity, date, place, and cause of Ms Britton's death are not in issue.
- 4 The issue in this inquest is the manner of Ms Britton's death – in particular, the circumstances surrounding her sustaining the head injury.

Ms Elizabeth Britton

5. Elizabeth Britton was 44 years of age at the time of her death. She is survived by her parents, Colin, and Valerie, and three sisters, Kate, Rose, and Jessica. She has a 20-year-old son, AB.
6. Ms Britton was born in Lismore. She was a sensitive and creative child who sought a broader world and moved to Sydney, with a friend at the tender age of 16. Towards the end of the '90s she moved to Brisbane, before eventually settling on the Tweed Coast, where she enjoyed living close to the beach.

7. Ms Britton's family describe her as warm and open hearted. She had a broad smile and kind and generous nature. She loved her friends and family with gusto. She was also a fun and devoted auntie. She had a genuine interest in people and made friends quickly and easily. Her family said "leave Liz alone for 5 minutes and you'd find her chatting away enthusiastically with someone she had just met". She always enjoyed a good chat and she saw the best in people.
8. Ms Britton loved music, especially live music. She also loved being in nature, a good storm and going on adventures. One of her defining and most appreciated features was a cheeky and mischievous sense of humour.
9. The end of Ms Britton's life wasn't easy. It was complicated by periods of mental health and a tendency to self-medicate; she drank too much and battled with addictions. No doubt this made things difficult for her and was a cause of concern by many who loved her. Ms Britton didn't do things by halves. She was strong willed and lived by her own rules.
10. Her loss is felt deeply by the many people she was close to. They miss her bold heart.

Background

11. In 2003 Ms Britton started a relationship with Christopher Kendrick and a year later, they had a son together, AB. That year, the relationship ended. Mr Kendrick and AB lived around the corner from Ms Britton. AB was sixteen years old at the time of her death and was a regular visitor to her home. He had lived with her for a period of time however had moved out due to problems with his behaviour in the home.

12. Ms Britton lived on her own. She did occasional part-time work for a telemarketing company.
13. Ms Britton had a tragic history of abusive relationships. At the time of her death, she was in what has been characterised as a violent and controlling relationship with Mr Anthony Siganto. This relationship commenced about two years before to her death.¹ Mr Siganto lived nearby in a public housing complex at Bogangar, around 8km from her home in Pottsville.
14. Although far from clear, Ms Britton and Mr Siganto may have ended their relationship on 1 October 2020. On that day, Mr Siganto had been involved in a violent altercation with Ms Britton's neighbour, after Mr Siganto saw Ms Britton at his house. Mr Siganto apparently became enraged, assaulted the neighbour, and damaged his property. Mr Siganto has told police that he had not spoken to Ms Britton since that time.² Ms Britton told another neighbour and friend, Ms Toni Saltzer, on 9 October 2020 that Mr Siganto had "blocked" her.³

8 October 2020

15. On 8 October 2020, Ms Britton called her agent to pay her rent, which was in arrears. During the course of the conversation Ms Britton told her "He is not my boyfriend anymore."⁴
16. At 6:42pm Ms Britton made another call to Mr Siganto. This call was very brief and may not have been answered.

¹Ex 1 Tab 13.

² Ex 1 Tab 68

³ Ex 1 Tab 11

⁴ Ex 1 Tab 82

9 October 2020

17. On Friday 9 October 2020, Ms Britton visited her neighbour, Mr Puntigam, at around 1:30pm. During this time, Ms Britton told him that she thought “some shit [was] gonna happen.”⁵ He was not clear what she was referring to.

18. Ms Britton then went to see her general practitioner for a chest infection. She saw Dr Robert Kearney. The consultation notes from that date state as follows:

Cough persists. Was seen here 3 weeks ago for same and commenced on Keflex with some benefit.

Has become worse. Was particularly bad a few days ago but has improved since then. Sputum production dark green.

Chest x-ray in June did not show any lung pathology.

Sleep disturbance acute on chronic. Has tried over-the-counter antihistamines with minimal benefit. Discussed melatonin and she will consider trialing (sic) this.

Imovane in the meantime⁶

19. After going to the doctor, Ms Britton was met by her mother, at the bus stop. CCTV footage shows that she was picked up at 2:48pm.⁷

20. Ms Britton then went to the Ramsey Pharmacy in Pottsville to obtain her medication, which was dispensed at 3:12pm.⁸ Ms Britton was dependent on oxycontin and would

⁵ Ex 1 Tab 19

⁷Ex 1 Tab 13b.

⁸ Ex 1 Tab 25

pick up a small dose of it from the pharmacy each day.⁹ Her patient history shows that on this date she collected:

- 30 x Zopiclone tablets 7.5mg with a note to 'Take ONE tablet before bed when required for sleep'
- 10 x Amoxicillin & Clav Acid tablets 875mg/125mg (Curam duo forte 875/125) with a note to 'take ONE tablet TWICE a day with food until all finished'¹⁰

21. Ms Britton returned to her apartment at 3:30 pm.¹¹ At 4pm, she called her employer and told her that she felt great and would come into work on Monday 12 October 2020. She went on to tell her "I'm not seeing him [Tony]...I'm thinking about getting an ADVO as I am scared of him. He can get in the house anyway he doesn't need keys; he knows how to get in."¹²

22. At 4:48pm, Ms Britton made a 5 second call to Mr Siganto. Her phone records then show that she made a six-second call to Mr Siganto's phone at 7.11pm. It is uncertain whether the call went to voicemail or was answered.¹³

23. At 7:52pm, Ms Britton's neighbour, Ms Toni Saltzer and Ms Britton had the following text message exchange:

Toni: U awake

Ms Britton: Yes. What you Up to

Toni: I'm fuckin sad

Ms Britton: Would like visit. Ama anyway. Xxx

Toni: Are U home or at tony

⁹ Ex 1 Tab 25, p. 3.

¹⁰Ex 1 Tab 88C.

¹¹ Ex 1 Tab 13

¹² Ex 1 Tab 29

¹³ Ex 1 Tab 7

24. Ms Britton then went over to Ms Saltzer's house for a couple of drinks on the front lawn of Ms Saltzer's's house, at around 9:30 to 10:00 pm. Ms Britton returned home alone.¹⁴ Ms Saltzer recalls that when Ms Britton left, she was a little drunk, but was fine.

10 October 2020

25. At 3:10 am on Saturday 10 October 2020, Ms Britton sent a text message about a music band to a friend.¹⁵ This is the last known communication by Ms Britton to anyone.

26. During the day on Saturday 10 October 2020, her mother sent a number of texts to her (between 2.09pm and 5.27pm). She received no response. Ms Britton did not answer any of her mother's calls, which were made between 3.02pm and 6.47pm.¹⁶ The last text message from her mum at 5:27pm stated:

"Liz, I haven't been able to contact you all day and am now quite worried. If I don't hear from you soon, I will ask the police to do a welfare check. XX"

27. She sent this because in the past when she has said this to Ms Britton, she gets in contact with her.

28. There is otherwise no evidence of Ms Britton's activities or movements on 10 October 2020. Usually, she would pick up a double dose of oxycontin from the pharmacy on Saturdays, as the pharmacy was closed on Sunday.¹⁷ It is clear from the

¹⁴ Ex 1 Tab 11

¹⁵ Ex 1 Tab 7, p.7.

¹⁶ Ex 1 Tab 13, [7].

¹⁷ Ex 1 Tab 25, p. 3.

pharmacy records on the brief of evidence that she didn't attend the Pharmacy on that date.¹⁸ An analysis of Ms Britton's phone showed that she did not read or respond to any text messages from that morning, and did not answer any calls, nor did she make any calls or send any messages

29. By 6:05pm, Mrs Britton had become concerned for her daughter and called AB to ask him to check on her.¹⁹

30. At around 6.10 pm, AB went to Ms Britton's unit and let himself in. He told police that he found Ms. Britton seated on the third step from the top of the stairwell of the unit staring at the wall.²⁰

31. AB then went back to his father, Mr Chris Kendrick's residence.

32. AB contacted emergency 000 to request an ambulance at 6:29 pm.²¹

33. AB's girlfriend attended the unit.

34. Mr Chris Kendrick attended the unit.

35. Paramedics Mr Lincoln Taylor and Mr Jamie Cameron, along with a student paramedic, arrived at 6:52 pm.

¹⁸ Ex 1 Tab 88C.

¹⁹ Tab 13, [8].

²⁰ Tab 38, [12-15].

²¹ Tab 38, [21].

36. Ms Britton was able to walk but she was unsteady. She was assisted to the stretcher outside.

37. Upon leaving the unit, Mr Taylor could see three kitchen knives, laid out from large to small. They all had black handles and ranged from about 30cm down to 15cm. These were laid on a timber side table on the righthand side of the stairs. He remembers thinking this was odd as it was not near the kitchen.²²

38. The ambulance then drove Ms Britton to Tweed Heads Hospital, arriving at 7:44pm. Ms Britton was curled up in the foetal position and did not want to engage with the Ambulance officers on the way to the Hospital.

Tweed Heads Hospital

39. Upon arrival at the Tweed Hospital, the following note was made by Dr Wilson upon her examination of Ms Britton:

“Bruising over the R mandible, R lip & R side of face. Dried blood over her lips. Dried blood over the ears / No obvious teeth displaced / No blood over the tongue / Nose central. No tenderness. No maxillary or frontal bone tenderness. No obvious scalp bruising of tenderness. / No open wounds or lacerations / No midline neck tenderness / Thoracic spinal tenderness between the scapula. No obvious bruising, step or deformity.”²³

40. Dr Wilson’s assessment notes indicated a reduced level of consciousness with a GCS of 13 due to Ms Britton’s lack of ability to communicate with her. Dr Wilson also noted that she appeared sedated.²⁴

²² Ex 1 Tab 23

²³ Ex 1 Tab 80

²⁴Ex 1 Tab 80a, p.4 at 22.2.

41. Due to Ms Britton's traumatic brain injuries, and the requirement for neurosurgical intervention, she was transferred to the Gold Coast University Hospital.
42. Over the next two weeks, she received management of her severe traumatic brain injury. She remained intubated and sedated in the ICU. Sadly, she never regained consciousness.
43. After a CT of her brain, the medical consensus (from the ICU and the Neurosurgeon) was that Ms Britton had no chance of meaningful independent survival. A decision was made between the medical practitioners and her family to transition her to comfort care.²⁵ She died at 4:45pm on 24 October 2020 when life support measures were withdrawn.

Autopsy

44. An autopsy was performed on 27 October 2020 at the Gold Coast University Hospital by Associate Professor Alex Olumbe.²⁶
45. The significant findings of the autopsy included:
- linear skull fractures in the right temporal region extending medially into the middle cranial fossa of the skull floor (p. 5).
 - dark areas of haemorrhage in the peri-cranium tissue of the right parietal region straddling the midline (p.5).
 - haemorrhage in the right temporalis muscle (p.5).

²⁵ Ex 1 Tab 81a, p.61.

²⁶ Ex 1 Tab 4

- areas of subdural haemorrhage marked in the left over the cerebral convexity (p.5).
- there was also a diffuse area of dark red haemorrhage extending from the subgaleal region of the right temporal muscle of the scalp downwards over the auditory meatus to the antero-lateral aspect of the sternocleidomastoid muscle (p. 6).
- red bruise on the helix and pinna of the right ear, the skin behind the right ear extending to the adjacent scalp, and also on the right forearm (p. 5).
- evidence of extensive and advanced coronary artery disease (p.7).

46. Ms Britton had bruises on her right hand and wrist, which Associate Professor Olumbe thought were consistent with defensive wounds. There were possible injection sites in both cubital fossae.

47. A toxicological analysis was undertaken of Ms Britton's blood which detected multiple prescription drugs at therapeutic levels, as well as an active ingredient of cannabis, all thought to be non-contributory to the cause of death.

48. Associate Professor Olumbe concluded that the immediate cause of death was head injury caused by at least two blunt force injuries including in the right temporal and right parietal regions straddling the midline extending into the occiput. The most likely primary impact of blunt force could have been to the right parietal region. He noted that the bruise on the right temporal muscle was associated with extensive bruising of the right ear and underlying skull fracture over the right temporal bone. It is noted that this would have been caused by blunt force trauma of moderate to severe force.

49. The subgaleal hematoma on the right parietal region extending to the occiput in the midline could have been consequent to a full or blunt trauma resulting in contrecoup injuries in the frontal and temporal regions including the left burst lobe.
50. He also thought that the severe coronary artery disease present in Ms Britton was associated with the extensive scarring of the heart muscle leading to ischaemic heart disease. He felt that ischaemic heart disease may have contributed to the death, although it is unclear in what way.
51. The cause of death was determined at autopsy as “head injury due to or as a consequence of blunt force, with ischaemic heart disease and coronary atherosclerosis as contributing factors.”
52. Professor Besser, consultant neurosurgeon, was retained to give his opinion as to the circumstances around Ms Britton’s cause of death. He is of the opinion that it is most unlikely that a simple fall alone could have produced Ms Britton's brain injuries, although it was certainly possible that Ms Britton may have *“had a fall as a result of the primary brain trauma, adding to her head injury sequelae.”*²⁷
53. He is of the opinion that Ms Britton’s death was due to traumatic brain injury caused by, most likely, two major blunt force injuries, consistent with the conclusions of Associate Professor Olumbe.²⁸ He thought that the injuries most likely occurred within 1-3 hours of when Ms Britton was found and that it was most likely that the blunt force injuries suffered by Ms Britton were due to an assault.²⁹

²⁷ Ex 1 Tab 94, p. 10.

²⁸ Ex 1 Tab 94, p. 11.

²⁹ Ex 1 Tab 94, p. 11.

Conclusion

54. I am satisfied on the balance of probabilities that the injuries Ms Britton sustained were caused by an assault and that she died in suspicious circumstances.
55. I have read the submissions by all the parties, and I am of the opinion that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further upon or analyse the evidence surrounding the suspicious circumstances of her death as there is an ongoing investigation.
56. At this point the available evidence only allows me to make findings in relation to identity, the date, the place, and the cause of her death. I am unable to make findings in relation to the manner or circumstances surrounding her death.
57. I extend my deepest sympathies to Ms Britton's family and friends.

Findings pursuant to s 81 (1) *Coroners Act 2009*

Ms Elizabeth Britton died on 24 October 2020. The place of her death was Gold Coast University Hospital NSW. The cause of her death was non accidental blunt force head injury. The available evidence does not enable me to make a finding as to who inflicted the injury.

Recommendation pursuant to s 82 *Coroners Act 2009*

To the New South Wales Commissioner of Police:

I recommend that the death of Elizabeth Britton be referred to the NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Unit for further investigation in accordance with the protocols and procedures of that Unit.

I close this inquest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C Forbes'.

Magistrate Carmel Forbes

Deputy State Coroner

7 November 2024

NSW State Coroner's Court Lidcombe