

of Bath. An Inquisition Indented taken at the  
 in and for the said City of Bath the first \_\_\_\_\_ day of May  
 in the year of our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy  
 Before Henry Wright \_\_\_\_\_ Esquire Mayor of the said City and  
 Coroner of our Sovereign Lord the King in and for the same City upon  
 of the Body of Elizabeth Read Spinster then and there lying dead near  
 River Avon in the Parish of Saint Michael within the said City upon  
 of Elias Sumption John Reeves Thomas Rogers William Hill James Do  
 Charles Jones Henry Mullins Thomas Lewis John Pore John Arnold  
 Jones Jonathan Whatley Thomas Rodbone good and lawful men of  
 City who being sworn and charged to inquire on the part of our Lord  
 when where how and in what manner the said Elizabeth Read came to  
 Do say that the said Elizabeth Read on the thirtieth day of April in the  
 aforesaid at the Parish and in the City aforesaid about the Hour of six  
 in the Evening of that day accidentally casually and by misfortune fell  
 River Avon in the parish and City aforesaid and was then and there  
 and drowned of which said Suffocation and Drowning she the said  
 Read then ~~instantly~~ died and so the Jurors aforesaid do say that  
 Elizabeth Read in the manner and by the means aforesaid accident  
 and by misfortune came to her Death and not otherwise In Witness  
 will the aforesaid Coroner as the Jurors aforesaid have to this In  
 set their hands and Seals the day and year and at the place afo

Henry Wright Mayor  
 Coroner

Elias Sumption  
 John Reeves  
 Tho. Rogers  
 William Hill

Henry Mullins  
 Thomas Lewis  
 John Pore  
 John Arnold  
 The mark  
 of Thomas Jones

# The Accidental Death of Children in Bath, 1777-1835.

*Jan Chivers*

It is not easy to access the daily lives of the children of 'ordinary' families in the eighteenth century. Through records of their deaths detailed in the Coroners' Records [fig. 1], however, it is possible to learn something of the lives of children in this period: where they played, how much freedom they had to roam the city, gender differences revealed in the nature of their deaths and the working practices of parents, particularly single mothers.<sup>1</sup> This study does not include the deaths of infants, many of whom were possibly victims of infanticide, as this has been dealt with elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

From the 1750s, medical opinion argued that maternal breastfeeding rather than sending babies to a wet nurse not only had physical benefits but also led to what today we would call 'mother/child bonding'.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that attitudes to children were changing from the idea that children were essentially sinful and, therefore, in need of correction and punishment to a softer approach to child rearing.

G.J. Barker-Benfield has identified the growth in the eighteenth century of what he called 'the culture of sensibility', which, he has suggested, developed into a 'culture of reform' and encouraged humanitarianism.<sup>4</sup> Humanitarian reformers sought to address a number of issues in response to what was seen as commercial capitalism's exploitation of vulnerable sections of society including the mistreatment of children.<sup>5</sup> Notable among reformers involving themselves with children were Thomas Coram who founded the London Foundling Hospital in the 1740s and Jonas Hanway who founded the Marine Society in 1756. Both of these organisations aimed to raise children in benevolent conditions in order to produce a healthy workforce.<sup>6</sup>

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several acts of parliament were passed that indicate a concern for the working conditions of children. The Chimney Sweepers Act of 1788 prohibited the apprenticeship of boys before the age of eight and addressed the conditions in which they lived and worked. The Factories Act of 1802 concerned the age and condition of children working in textile mills as did the Cotton Mills and Factories Act of 1819. Reformers concerned themselves with the age at which children joined the labour force, usually set at the age of eight or nine, and the conditions and hours of child labour.

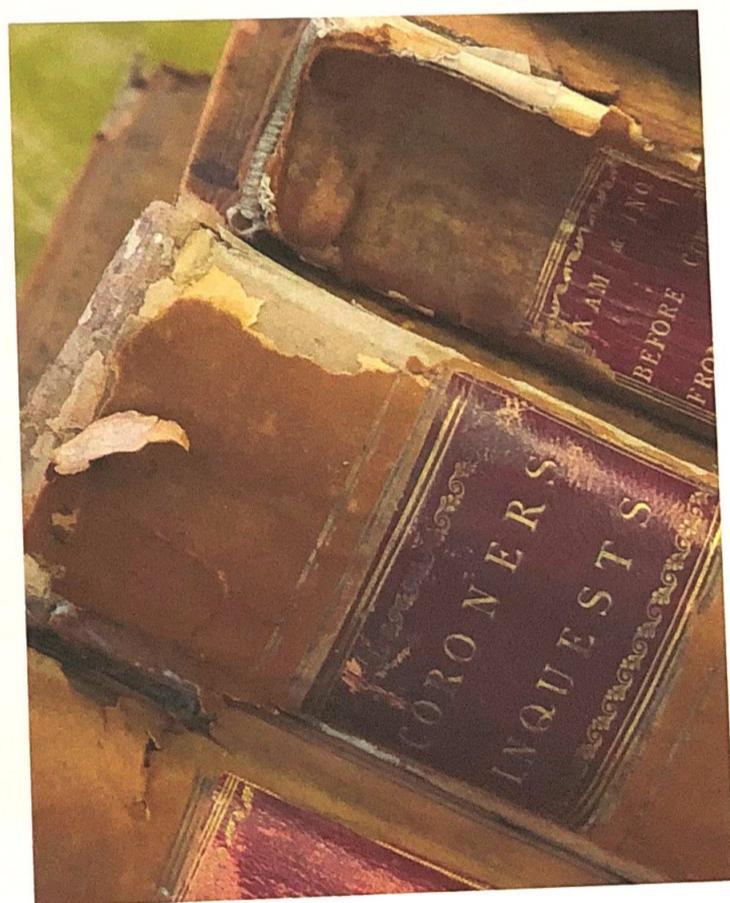


fig 1: City of Bath Coroners' Examinations and Inquisitions, 1776-1835  
*Photograph by Dan Brown*

Labouring families often needed to put children to work at a young age in order to contribute to the family income. The fact that some of the children featured in the Bath Coroners' Records were at play might suggest that they did not come from the poorest families and that there was a growing understanding of the nature of childhood. On the other hand, it might mean that children were turned out of the house during the day to fend for themselves.

The Bath Coroners' Records rarely record the age of the deceased but cases involving the deaths of children were an exception. Childhood is a cultural designation that changes over time. Some of those classed as children by the writer of this article were around twelve years old and might not have been considered children by contemporaries. Two of these older children were working as apprentices and their deaths were the consequence of their working conditions.<sup>7</sup> They have been included in this study.

In eighteenth-century Bath, the Mayor was also the Coroner and it would appear that he held all inquests promptly and efficiently [fig. 2]. Inquests into the deaths of children were

accorded the same weight as those concerning adults with juries varying in number between twelve and seventeen, the usual number being thirteen. In the years covered by the Coroners' Records, 1777-1835, the Coroner conducted 491 inquests of which forty-four (9%) involved the death of a child. Of these, thirty-two concerned boys and twelve concerned girls.

Although the number of children's deaths that resulted in an inquest remained steady over the period of the records at one or two a year, some years had no record of a child's death at all. As one would expect given the rise in the population of Bath, the total number of inquests increased over the period. Child deaths increased slightly in the 1820's but not as much as one might have expected. Table 1 shows an increase for 1821. We do not know why child inquests did not increase in line with adult inquests. It may be that there is an issue of the under-reporting of child deaths, or that there were particular, unknown, reasons why some deaths resulted in the involvement of the Coroner.

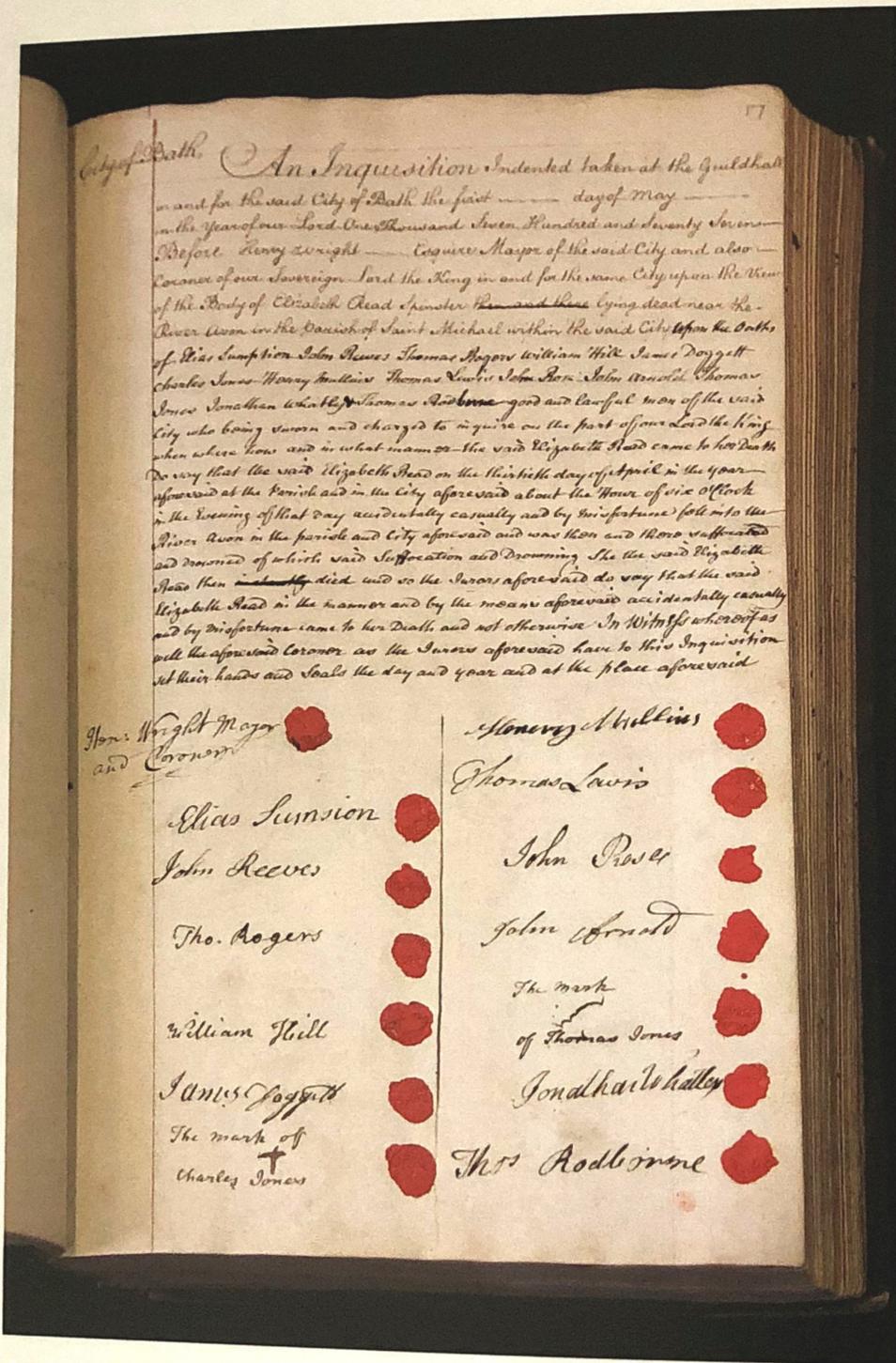


fig 2: City of Bath Coroners' Examinations and Inquisitions, 1776-1835  
Bath Record Office - Bath & North East Somerset Council

**Table 1: Adult and child inquests**

Date	Adult inquests	Child inquests
1790	9	1
1801	6	1
1811	4	0
1821	16	3
1831	17	1

Source: Bath Coroners' Records

Children were not only the subjects of inquests but also appeared as witnesses. The ages of witnesses varied between four years and nine years. Several were five years old. When in August 1808, an inquest was held following the death of Hannah Weeks, aged five years, the only witness called by the Coroner was her younger sister, aged four years. Hannah had been left in charge of her three younger siblings while their mother went down to the courtyard to fill her kettle. The mother spent some time chatting to her neighbour and when she returned, she found that Hannah, in attempting to revive the fire with a pair of bellow, had caught alight her muslin gown. Hannah's mother took her to the Casualty Hospital but the child died later of her burns. Hannah's sister was the youngest witness recorded. It is easy to imagine that attendance at the Coroner's Court to give evidence must have been a frightening event for a young child, especially as he or she had just witnessed a fatal accident often involving a family member. One can imagine court officials attempting to prise information from a scared and tearful child overawed by its surroundings and by the trappings of officialdom.

Water has always fascinated children and eighteenth century children were no different. The river, while providing a playground, was also the site of a number of drownings. Little girls picked flowers on the banks, washed their hands or peered into the water with fatal consequences. The first recorded inquest involving a child tells how Elizabeth Read, in May 1777, was on the riverbank with her seven year old sister [fig. 2]. When the younger girl fell in the water, Elizabeth jumped into the river in an attempt to save her little sister. Samuel Broad and Thomas Pearse, fishermen, tried to save both girls. They managed to save the younger girl but Elizabeth drowned.

Boys were more adventurous but with equally tragic results: they fished in the river, they fell off trees into the water, they played at building rafts and attempted to fish dead cats out of the water. Henry Selway, in September 1815, drowned after falling in the river while retrieving his hoop [fig. 3]. Two other boys died by drowning but not in the river. In May 1807, John Horwell who was nine months old fell from a box in which he was sleeping into a pan containing two quarts of water, and in January 1808, two year old John Smith fell into what was described as 'a fourteen inch garden well'.

The other major cause of childhood accidental death was fire, something that also fascinates most children. The death of Hannah Weeks, mentioned above, was not unusual. Harriet Carnell was only three and a half when, in February 1820, she was left alone for a while. She found some matches and caught her clothes alight. Despite being taken to hospital,

what manner the said Henry Selway came to his death Do say that the said Henry Selway on the Eighth day of September in the Year aforesaid at the Parish and in the City aforesaid being with other children in a certain Field called Kingsmead Field situate in the the said Parish and City adjoining the River Avon there beaten a hoop which then and there fell from the Bank of the said River Avon into the Waters thereof and the said Henry Selway endeavouring to reach the said Hoop from the said River Avon it so happened that the said Henry Selway accidentally casually and by Misfortune fell from the Bank of the said River Avon into the said River Avon and in the Waters thereof was then suffocated and drowned of which said Suffocation and drowning to the said Henry Selway then and there instantly died - And so the Jurors aforesaid upon their Oath aforesaid do say that the said Henry Selway in manner and by means aforesaid accidentally casually and by Misfortune came to his Death and not otherwise - In Witness whereof as well the said Coroner as the Jurors aforesaid have to this Inquisition set their hands and seals on the day and in the Year and at the place aforesaid -

fig 3: Extract from City of Bath Coroners' Examinations and Inquisitions, 1776-1835  
Bath Record Office - Bath & North East Somerset Council

she died of her injuries [fig. 4]. Girls at the time wore long dresses, petticoats and bibbed aprons tied with ribbons. The combination of long skirts and open fires was potentially lethal to small girls.

Lewis Doble, at four years old, was not much older than Harriet when his pinafore caught fire in the kitchen in June 1827. He was also taken to the Casualty Hospital but later died. It was usual for little boys to be dressed in pinafores, not unlike girl's clothing, until they were breeched at around four years. It was Henry Cole's shirt, however, that caught fire when he was in a dining room with an unguarded fire a few months later. His mother rushed him to the hospital but later his father took him home where he died. He was six years old.

These narratives and the other records of accidental deaths of children lead to some understanding of differences in the treatment of boys and girls. Table 2 shows that more boys had fatal accidents outside the home than inside whereas the reverse is true for girls. This suggests that boys were more at liberty to roam the city while girls were more likely to be confined to the home. Of the boys that died indoors, two were less than one year old, and two were still in pinafores. Sixteen of the boys who died outdoors drowned in the river. Anne Laurence in *Women in England* wrote 'Little boys, allowed to stray away from home, often drowned. ... The number of girls drowned was smaller ... suggesting that they stayed closer to home.'<sup>8</sup> The fact that boys were able to play at large in the city and gravitated towards water explains the fact that more boys than girls became the subject of inquests, although the home was far from safe for girls or boys.

Table 2: Place of death, 1777-1835.

Outdoors	Girls	5
	Boys	23
Indoors	Girls	7
	Boys	9

Source: Bath Coroners' Records.

What is, perhaps, surprising to the modern reader is the fact that there is no written record of any concern shown by the Coroner or his jury about the causes of these deaths. We are used to Coroners calling for whatever safety measure they may think desirable to stop children dying preventable deaths. As can be seen from the numerous adult deaths resulting from building work in the city at this time, this was an age long before health and safety issues came to be of any interest.

It is risky to extrapolate from the small number of children appearing in the Coroners' Records to assumptions about parenting and parental attitudes. Some historians have suggested that, because of the high mortality rate of children, parents were unwilling to invest emotionally in their off-spring, but that attitudes changed throughout the eighteenth century with parents becoming more affectionate towards their children.<sup>9</sup> Both Paul Langford and Roy Porter were writing about children of 'middling' and wealthy parents, citing the growth in portraiture of children and the growth in the market for books and playthings for children as evidence. It is probably safe to assume that the children who appeared in Bath Coroners' Records did not come from the wealthier section of Bath society.

The number of children apparently left unsupervised points to the necessity for both parents to work to provide enough money for the family to survive. A study of the Poor Law Records in Bath suggests that the arrival of children meant that the mother was unable to work

is within the said City it so happened that the said Harriet Carnell had <sup>some</sup> lighted ~~some~~ matches and the Cloathes which the said Harriet Carnell then and there had on her Body accidentally & usually and by Misfortune took fire and the Body and face and neck of the said Harriet Carnell was <sup>then & there considerably</sup> burnt. of which said Burning she the said Harriet Carnell. from the said Twenty third of February until the Twenty fourth day of the same Month in the same Year there and also at a certain Hospital situate in that part of the Parish of Mallet which is within the City aforesaid called the Casualty Hospital did languish and languishing did live on which said Twenty fourth day of February in the Year aforesaid in that Casualty Hospital aforesaid she the said Harriet Carnell of the mortal Burning aforesaid did die —

fig 4: Extract from City of Bath Coroners' Examinations and Inquisitions, 1776-1835

Bath Record Office - Bath & North East Somerset Council



fig 5: A Crying Boy at Bath by John Nixon, 1801. Watercolour sketch

Victoria Art Gallery 1994.23, Bath & North East Somerset Council

neighbour alerted Ann Davis's landlady, Mary Hallett, to the room where a child was 'crying murder'. It took some time to break down the door but when Mrs Hallett found her, Ann's clothes were alight. They undressed the child and rushed her to hospital and when her mother was found, she went straight to her bedside. It is worth quoting her evidence in full.

'I gain my livelihood by selling meat about the town which keeps me from home the grater part of the day. On the 17<sup>th</sup> November between the hours of 10 and 11 in the morning I left my daughter, the deceased, in my room which is in the attick story and locked the door of my room. There was a little fire in the grate and I cautioned the deceased who was about 8 years of age not to play with the fire. About 6 in the evening I heard that the deceased was in the united hospital dreadfully burnt. I remained with her till she died which was about 11 o'clock at night on the 24<sup>th</sup> instant. The deceased was perfectly sensible till her death and told me that she was playing with her playthings near the fender and that her frock caught fire.'

and that the family fell into poverty at least until any children were old enough to add to the family income.<sup>10</sup> If there were no father, the situation became even more acute. Two of the most poignant inquests illustrate the problems faced by single mothers and the economic necessity that drove them to leave their children unattended.

On the evening of Christmas Eve 1830, the mother of William and Joseph Jones prepared to go to work leaving the two young boys on their own. There is no record of the nature of her work but, as a night worker, it is possible that she was a prostitute. The family lived in 'a hovel' at the back of the Westgate Inn. It was an exceptionally cold night and the boys attempted to block up the gaps in the walls with rags. They then begged a chafing dish of coals from a neighbour. The boys' mother had asked another neighbour to look in on them while she was out but when the neighbour checked at six in the morning she found both boys dead in bed. An inquest was held on Christmas Day when the jury concluded that because of insufficient ventilation they had suffocated due to smoke and sulphurous fumes from the coals in the chafing dish.

When Ann Davis went to work on the morning of November 17<sup>th</sup> 1835, she locked her eight-year-old daughter, also Ann, in their attic room with instructions not to play with the fire. At about five o'clock in the afternoon, a

Mary Hallett's evidence ends with 'The deceased's mother was always very kind to her.' There is some slight evidence here that ideas about affectionate parenting had spread to the labouring poor.

Poor parents, single mothers in particular, without the support of family, many of them having come into the city from the surrounding hinterland, must frequently have found themselves having to leave their children unsupervised while they earned an adequate wage to keep the family from the Poor Law authorities. Application for poor relief was likely to end up with removal and the possible splitting up of the family. [fig. 5]

The Coroners' Records give us a unique insight into the world of children and families in the late eighteenth century. Bath was struggling at this time to attract visitors to the city and to sustain a large resident labour force. Inquests were public, important affairs held in the Guildhall and frequently reported in the press. The authorities in the city may not have wanted to draw attention to the accidental death of children at a time of national concern for the welfare of the young.

The death of a child is always a tragic event. Children were vulnerable to death from disease from birth but the preventable accidental death of a child seems particularly tragic.

## Notes

1. City of Bath Coroners' Examinations and Inquisitions, 1776-1835, Bath Record Office, hereafter Coroners' Records.
2. Jan Chivers, 'Infanticide in Bath, 1776-1835, The Coroners' Records' in *Bath Exposed! Essays on the Social History of Bath, 1775-1945*, Ed. Graham Davis, Bath, 2007.
3. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, London, 1977, chap.4.
4. G.H. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago and London, 1992, chap.6.
5. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, pp. 224/5.
6. The letterhead for the Foundling Hospital, designed by William Hogarth, shows children holding variously a sickle, a rake, a trowel, a plumb line, a sweeping brush, a spinning wheel and a card for carding wool. Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth*, London, 1997, p.331.
7. Ann Allen was a pauper apprentice domestic servant. (March 26th 1782). James Head, 'a young boy' was working in Racey's Yard, Walcot Street, when a load of hay smothered him. (April 17th 1820).
8. Anne Laurence, *Women in England 1500 -1760 A Social History*, London, 1994, p.85.
9. Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People England 1727-1783*, Oxford, 1989, pp.501-3; Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1990, pp.266-8; Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bed, & Dangerous People? England 1783-1846*, Oxford, 2006, pp.179/180.
10. Jan Chivers, "'A Resonating Void": Strategies and Responses to Poverty, Bath, 1770-1835', unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the West of England, 2006.