



IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: COR 2020 1530

FINDING INTO DEATH FOLLOWING INQUEST

Form 37 Rule 63(1)

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Inquest into the death of Ruth Ridley

Delivered on:	22 September 2021
Delivered at:	Coroners Court of Victoria, 65 Kavanagh Street, Southbank
Hearing dates:	22 September 2021
Findings of:	Judge John Cain, State Coroner
Counsel assisting the Coroner:	Nicholas Ngai, Family Violence Senior Solicitor
Catchwords:	Suspected homicide, no one charged with an indictable offence in respect of a reportable death, mandatory inquest.

HIS HONOUR:

BACKGROUND

1. Ruth Ridley (**Mrs Ridley**) was a 58-year-old woman who normally resided in Port Macquarie, New South Wales with her husband, Mr Gary Ridley (**Mr Ridley**). Mr and Mrs Ridley are survived by their three adult children.
2. Mrs Ridley married Mr Ridley in March 1980 and the couple spent most of their time in Gympie and Maleny in Queensland. The couple bought a holiday home at 11 Reservoir Lane, Tumbarumba (New South Wales) in 2003.
3. Mr and Mrs Ridley eventually settled in Port Macquarie around 2010. Mrs Ridley's mother, Wendy Roberts resided with the couple in Port Macquarie due to mental and physical health concerns.

THE PURPOSE OF A CORONIAL INVESTIGATION

4. Mrs Ridley's death constitutes a '*reportable death*' under the *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) (**the Act**), as the death occurred in Victoria¹ and the death appears to have been unexpected and violent.²
5. Pursuant to section 52(2) of the Act, it is mandatory for a coroner to hold an inquest if the death occurred in Victoria and a coroner suspects the death was as a result of homicide and no person or persons have been charged with an indictable offence in respect of the death.
6. The jurisdiction of the Coroners Court of Victoria is inquisitorial.³ The Act provides for a system whereby reportable deaths are independently investigated to ascertain, if possible, the identity of the deceased person, the cause of death and the circumstances in which death occurred.⁴
7. It is not the role of the coroner to lay or apportion blame, but to establish the facts.⁵ It is not the coroner's role to determine criminal or civil liability arising from the death under investigation,⁶ or to determine disciplinary matters.

¹ Section 4(1)(b) *Coroners Act 2008*

² Section 4(2)(a) *Coroners Act 2008*

³ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) s 89(4),

⁴ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) preamble and s 67.

⁵ *Keown v Khan* (1999) 1 VR 69.

⁶ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) s 69 (1).

8. The expression “*cause of death*” refers to the medical cause of death, incorporating where possible, the mode or mechanism of death.
9. For coronial purposes, the phrase “*circumstances in which death occurred,*”⁷ refers to the context or background and surrounding circumstances of the death. Rather than being a consideration of all circumstances which might form part of a narrative culminating in the death, it is confined to those circumstances which are sufficiently proximate and causally relevant to the death.
10. The broader purpose of coronial investigations is to contribute to a reduction in the number of preventable deaths, both through the observations made in the investigation findings and by the making of recommendations by coroners. This is generally referred to as the Court’s “*prevention*” role.
11. Coroners are also empowered:
 - (a) to report to the Attorney-General on a death;⁸
 - (b) to comment on any matter connected with the death they have investigated, including matters of public health or safety and the administration of justice;⁹ and
 - (c) to make recommendations to any Minister or public statutory authority on any matter connected with the death, including public health or safety or the administration of justice.¹⁰ These powers are the vehicles by which the prevention role may be advanced.
12. All coronial findings must be made based on proof of relevant facts on the balance of probabilities.¹¹ In determining these matters, I am guided by the principles enunciated in *Briginshaw v Briginshaw*.¹² The effect of this and similar authorities is that coroners should not make adverse findings against, or comments about individuals, unless the evidence provides a comfortable level of satisfaction that they caused or contributed to the death.

⁷ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) s 67(1)(c).

⁸ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) s 72(1).

⁹ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) s 67(3).

¹⁰ *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) s 72(2).

¹¹ *Re State Coroner; ex parte Minister for Health* (2009) 261 ALR 152.

¹² (1938) 60 CLR 336.

13. This finding is based on the totality of the material the product of the coronial investigation of Ms Ridley's suspected death. That is, the investigation and brief of evidence compiled by Detective Leading Senior Constable Andrew Leonard of Victoria Police Homicide Squad.
14. The brief will remain on the coronial file, together with the inquest transcript. In writing this finding, I do not purport to summarise all the material and evidence, but will refer to it only in such detail as is warranted by its forensic significance and in the interests of narrative clarity.

FOCUS OF THE CORONIAL INVESTIGATION AND INQUEST

15. The coronial investigation of a suspected death differs significantly from most other coronial investigations which commence with the discovery of a deceased person's body or remains. The focus in those cases is on identification of the body or remains, a forensic pathologist's examination and advice to the coroner about the medical cause of death and the circumstances in which the death occurred.
16. Absent a body or remains, the coronial investigation focuses on the last sighting of the deceased; any subsequent contact with family or the authorities; and evidence of proof of life since. In such cases, the coronial investigation is essentially an exercise in proof of death through the absence of evidence that a person has been alive or active via searches and a series of checks of records held by various authorities including law enforcement and databases.

FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS CONDUCTED BY THE VICTORIAN SYSTEMIC REVIEW OF FAMILY VIOLENCE DEATHS

17. For the purposes of the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*, the relationship between Mr and Mrs Ridley was one that fell within the definition of 'spouse'¹³ under that Act.
18. In light of Mrs Ridley's death occurring under circumstances of recent reported family violence, I requested that the Coroners' Prevention Unit (CPU)¹⁴ examine the circumstances of Mrs Ridley's death as part of the Victorian Systemic Review of Family Violence Deaths (VSRFVD).¹⁵

¹³ Family Violence Protection Act 2008, section 9

¹⁴ The Coroners Prevention Unit is a specialist service for Coroners established to strengthen their prevention role and provide them with professional assistance on issues pertaining to public health and safety

¹⁵ The VSRFVD provides assistance to Victorian Coroners to examine the circumstances in which family violence deaths occur. In addition the VSRFVD collects and analyses information on family violence-related deaths. Together

History of family violence between Mr and Mrs Ridley

19. The available evidence suggests that there was an extensive history of family violence between Mr and Mrs Ridley.
20. On 8 August 2019 Mrs Ridley reported to her General Practitioner (**GP**), that she was afraid of Mr Ridley and that he had assaulted her and threatened to kill her and her mother. Mrs Ridley had disclosed ongoing family violence to her GP over the preceding three years, and he noted that Mr and Mrs Ridley's relationship had deteriorated during this time. Mrs Ridley's GP was concerned for Mrs Ridley's safety, and contacted New South Wales Police the same day to report his concerns.¹⁶
21. Police attended Mr and Mrs Ridley's home later that evening and spoke with Mrs Ridley. Mrs Ridley disclosed that Mr Ridley had perpetrated emotional and psychological abuse against her and had previously assaulted her by pushing her and putting her in restraints but indicated she was unwilling to make a statement at the time. The attending officers advised Mrs Ridley to contact them if she required any further assistance and applied for an Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (**ADVO**) on her behalf.¹⁷
22. After the police left, Mr Ridley purportedly assaulted Mrs Ridley by grabbing her shoulders, holding her down on the bed and repeatedly threatening her, saying things such as he was going to '*slit [her mother's throat], and [Mrs Ridley] open and pull all of her intestines out.*'¹⁸ Mr Ridley also allegedly told Mrs Ridley that he would kill her slowly and make her death appear as though she had suicided.¹⁹
23. The following morning on 9 August 2019, Mrs Ridley attended the Port Macquarie police station and reported the incident that had occurred the previous night.²⁰ The police applied for a new ADVO and Mrs Ridley and her mother moved into emergency accommodation temporarily until Mr Ridley was removed from the home.
24. Mr and Mrs Ridley remained separated from this time. Mrs Ridley returned to live in the family property at Port Macquarie and Mr Ridley moved to a property the couple owned in

this information assists with the identification of systemic prevention-focused recommendations aimed at reducing the incidence of family violence in the Victorian Community

¹⁶ *Coronial Brief*, statement of C Meena, 144.

¹⁷ *Coronial Brief*, statement of A West, 177-180; statement of J Wood, 182-185.

¹⁸ *Coronial Brief*, statement of M Roach, 181; Application for apprehended domestic violence order, 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Coronial Brief*, statement of M Roach, 181-181.

Tumbarumba, where he lived with his son, Steven Ridley, Steven's partner, Amy Ridley, and their three children.²¹

25. After the separation, Mr Ridley repeatedly contacted Mrs Ridley via phone and email, trying to reconcile their relationship.²² During this time he also told Steven that he wanted to resume the marriage '*not for the relationship but for financial reasons.*'²³
26. On 19 October 2019, Mrs Ridley travelled to Tumbarumba to assist with caring for her grandchildren, to attend her grandson's birthday party, and to retrieve her personal belongings from the Tumbarumba property. During this time, she stayed at the Tumbarumba property.²⁴
27. On 24 October 2019, Mrs Ridley had an argument with Steven and Amy about her concerns regarding their care of their children. Following this argument, both Steven and Amy left the property. Amy and her children went to stay with her parents in Wauchope and Steven went camping.²⁵

Evidence of family violence risk factors in this case

28. The *Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM)*²⁶ details several '*evidence-based risk factors associated with greater likelihood and/or severity of family violence*'²⁷ and factors which '*may indicate an increased risk of the victim being killed or almost killed.*'²⁸ It is the current tool for family violence risk assessment across Victoria. MARAM was developed as a result of recommendations made in the final report of the Royal Commission into Family Violence in March 2016.
29. There are 27 family violence risk factors detailed in the MARAM which fall into two categories. Of these, 15 are classified as '*serious risk factors*'²⁹ which can indicate a risk of the victim being killed or almost killed. Evidence in the available material suggests that at least 21 of the 27 total risk factors were present in the relationship between Mr and Mrs Ridley. There were 11 serious risk factors which indicated that Mrs Ridley faced an increased risk of being killed or almost killed:

²¹ *Coronial Brief*, statement of S Ridley, 72.

²² *Ibid*; exhibit 48.

²³ *Coronial Brief*, statement of S Ridley, 72.

²⁴ *Ibid*; exhibit 48, 881.

²⁵ *Coronial Brief*, statement of S Ridley, 72-74.

²⁶ Family Safety Victoria, *Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework* (2018).

²⁷ *Ibid* 26.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

1. *Planning to leave or recent separation* – in this case, Mrs Ridley had recently separated from Mr Ridley and attended the Tumberumba home in the lead up to the fatal incident to retrieve her personal property to finalise their separation.
2. *Escalation in severity and/or frequency of violence* – in the lead up to the fatal incident, the actions and level of physical violence committed by Mr Ridley towards Mrs Ridley escalated following the report to NSW Police on 8 August 2019.
3. *Controlling behaviours* – The MARAM notes that the use of controlling behaviours is strongly linked to homicide.³⁰ Numerous friends and family members noted that Mr Ridley was very controlling of Mrs Ridley, with one stating ‘*she couldn’t really do anything without him knowing about it.*’³¹ Mr Ridley purportedly controlled her contact with others,³² isolated her from her church,³³ restricted her access to the car³⁴ monitored her mobile phone,³⁵ locked her in her room, and would not let her attend to daily tasks such as grocery shopping without his permission or company.³⁶
4. *Access to weapons* - A police risk assessment completed with Mrs Ridley on 14 August 2019 indicated that Mr Ridley had access to weapons,³⁷ however there is no other indication in the available police records as to the type of weapon that Mr Ridley purportedly had access to.
5. *Has tried to strangle or choke the victim* - The MARAM notes that ‘*strangulation or choking is a common method used by perpetrators to kill victims. It is also linked to a general increased lethality risk to a current or former partner.*’³⁸ Mr Ridley appears to have choked Mrs Ridley on more than one occasion throughout their relationship, including on one occasion where he allegedly choked her whilst she was asleep.³⁹
6. *Has ever threatened to kill victim* - Evidence shows that a perpetrator’s threat to kill a victim is often genuine and should be taken seriously, particularly where the perpetrator has been specific or detailed, or used other forms of violence in conjunction to the

³⁰ Ibid 28.

³¹ *Coronial Brief*, statement of N Ridley 86; statement of R Gillett, 112; statement of A Fraser 119; statement of F Mian 127; exhibit 39, 534.

³² *Coronial Brief*, statement of A Fraser, 119; statement of F Mian 127; exhibit 39, 534.

³³ *Coronial Brief*, statement of M Minturn, 192.

³⁴ *Coronial Brief*, statement of M Bremner, 123-124.

³⁵ *Coronial Brief*, statement of A West, 178.

³⁶ *Coronial Brief*, statement of G Hannaway, 188.

³⁷ *Coronial Brief*, exhibit 40, 555.

³⁸ Family Safety Victoria, Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (2018) 28.

³⁹ *Coronial Brief*, statement of J Smith 117; statement of M Bremner, 123.

threat, indicating an increased risk of carrying out the threat, such as strangulation and physical violence.⁴⁰ Mr Ridley reportedly made multiple specific threats to kill Mrs Ridley prior to her disappearance.⁴¹

7. *Stalking of victim* - 'Stalking, when coupled with physical assault, is strongly connected to murder or attempted murder.'⁴² The available evidence suggests that Mr Ridley engaged in stalking of Mrs Ridley during their relationship.⁴³
8. *Sexual assault of victim* – Mrs Ridley's diary notes indicated that Mr Ridley had sexually assaulted her during their marriage and told her that there was no such thing as rape in marriage.⁴⁴
9. *Obsession/jealous behaviour toward victim* - Mr Ridley exhibited jealous behaviour towards Mrs Ridley and accused her of being in a relationship with a close female friend.⁴⁵
10. *Unemployed* - Mr Ridley was unemployed at the time of Mrs Ridley's disappearance. The MARAM notes that a '*perpetrator's unemployment is associated with an increased risk of lethal assault.*'⁴⁶
11. *Drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse* - Mrs Ridley alleged that Mr Ridley was an alcoholic.⁴⁷ It is unknown whether he was drinking at the time of her disappearance.

CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THE DEATH OCCURRED PURSUANT TO S.67(1)(c) OF THE ACT

30. Between 9 August 2019 when the ADVO was issued to protect Mrs Ridley and the 17 October 2019, there were emails from Mr Ridley to Mrs Ridley which indicate that he was keen to mend their relationship. Mr Ridley also complained to Mrs Ridley that Steven and Amy were allegedly having issues caring for their children and Mrs Ridley agreed to travel to Tumberumba to visit her grandchildren.

⁴⁰ Family Safety Victoria, Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (2018) 28.

⁴¹ *Coronial Brief*, statement of N Ridley, 80-81; statement of A Fraser, 119; statement of M Roach, 181; Application for apprehended domestic violence order, 161.

⁴² Family Safety Victoria, Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (2018) 28.

⁴³ *Coronial Brief*, exhibit 51.

⁴⁴ *Coronial Brief*, statement of A Simpson 86; exhibit 40, 550.

⁴⁵ *Coronial Brief*, statement of M Bremner, 123.

⁴⁶ Family Safety Victoria, Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (2018) 29.

⁴⁷ *Coronial Brief*, statement of K Hannaway, 188.

31. On 17 October 2019, Mrs Ridley travel to Tumbarumba from Port Macquarie and she arrived at about 2.00am on 18 October 2019.⁴⁸ Steven noted that in the following days there was tension between his parents after Mrs Ridley had arrived and that she stayed in the family's caravan whilst Mr Ridley stayed inside Steven's house.⁴⁹
32. Mr and Mrs Ridley left Tumbarumba on 24 October 2019 and arrived in Albury, New South Wales at approximately 1.38pm and visited the Commercial Club eatery in Albury.⁵⁰
33. On 25 October 2019 at 1.30pm, Steven spoke to Mr Ridley on the telephone who confirmed his and Mrs Ridley's camping plans for the upcoming weekend along the Murray River. Mr Ridley indicated that they would return to Tumbarumba on Sunday 27 October 2019 and then back to Port Macquarie on Monday 28 October 2019.⁵¹
34. Google tracking services records⁵² obtained by Victoria Police shows Mr and Mrs Ridley travelling from Tumbarumba on 26 October 2019 at 10:34am and arriving at Neil's Reserve, Murray River Road, Walwa, Victoria in the afternoon.
35. Video footage extracted from Mrs Ridley's mobile phone indicates that she captured video footage on 26 October 2019 at approximately 6.40pm.⁵³ The footage showed Mr Ridley catching a fish and Mrs Ridley's voice heard in the background. The area where the video footage was captured has been tracked by Victoria Police to a location within Neil's Reserve, Murray River Road, Walwa, Victoria.
36. On 27 October 2019 at 1:00pm, Steven returned to the Tumbarumba holiday home and found his father, Mr Ridley alone.⁵⁴ Mr Ridley told Steven that Mrs Ridley was visiting a friend. Steven returned to his camping site shortly after.
37. On 29 October 2019 at 4.20pm, Mr Ridley's body was found in the driver's seat of Mrs Ridley's 4WD.⁵⁵ The vehicle was parked facing Pikes Dam off Walwa-Shelley Road, Shelley, Victoria. Mr and Mrs Ridley's mobile phones were discovered in the vehicle and were wrapped in foil.

⁴⁸ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of Steven Ridley dated 31 October 2019, 72

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 73

⁵⁰ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of DLSC Leonard dated 3 February 2021, 224

⁵¹ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of Steven Ridley dated 31 October 2019, 74

⁵² *Coronial Brief*, Exhibit 12 and 27, 455-466

⁵³ *Coronial Brief*, Exhibit 15

⁵⁴ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of Steven Ridley dated 31 October 2019, 76-77

⁵⁵ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of DLSC Leonard dated 3 February 2021, 218

38. On the same day, 29 October 2019, Mrs Ridley's mother and Steven's brother both reported to Steven that they were unable to locate Mr and Mrs Ridley.⁵⁶ Steven attended the Tumbarumba holiday home after work and found all his mother's possessions on the veranda, his parents medication still inside the house and his mother's laptop in the caravan.⁵⁷ Steven eventually attended Tumbarumba Police Station to report his parents missing.
39. An autopsy was performed by Forensic Pathologist, Dr Matthew Lynch, at the Victorian Forensic Institute of Medicine on 31 October 2019 and medical examiner's report dated 30 January 2020 indicated that the medical cause of death for Mr Ridley was 'I(a) Carbon Monoxide Poisoning'.⁵⁸
40. NSW and Victoria Police conducted joint operations to search for Mrs Ridley's body around the Pheasant Creek Reserve near Pikes Dam as well as Neil's Reserve. Divers from NSW Police canvassed the Murray River around Neil's Reserve and Victoria Police Search & Rescue teams canvassed Pikes Dam.⁵⁹ A further aerial search was conducted by helicopter of both areas to no avail. The services of a NSW Police cadaver dog were used to conduct a search of Neil's Reserve and a section of the pine forest immediately opposite where Mr Ridley's body had been located.⁶⁰ Despite extensive efforts by NSW and Victoria Police, Mrs Ridley's body was unable to be located.
41. Victoria Police investigators believe that it is likely that Mrs Ridley's body was disposed of in a shallow grave somewhere within the Jingelic Pine plantation, half of which has since been impacted by the 2019-2020 Walwa bushfire.⁶¹

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION:

42. Having held an inquest into the death of Mrs Ridley and having applied the appropriate civil standard of proof, I make the following findings, pursuant to section 67(1) of the Act:
 - a) The identity of the deceased was Ruth Ridley, born on 25 July 1961.

⁵⁶ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of Steven Ridley dated 31 October 2019, 77-78

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

⁵⁸ *Coronial Brief*, Medical Examiner's Report dated 30 January 2020, 308-315

⁵⁹ *Coronial Brief*, Statement of DLSC Leonard dated 3 February 2021, 287

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 288

- b) The weight of the evidence suggests that Mrs Ridley's death occurred sometime between 26 October 2019 and 27 October 2019 at Neil's Reserve, Murray River Road, Walwa, Victoria.
- c) Mr and Mrs Ridley had an extensive history of family violence in their relationship.
- d) Mr and Mrs Ridley were separated due to the conditions of an active ADVO at the time of the fatal incident.
- e) Google location services data obtained from the mobile phones belonging to Mr and Mrs Ridley indicate that the couple were travelling in and around a camping spot at Neil's Reserve on Murray River Road in Walwa, Victoria during the late morning hours of 26 October 2019.
- f) The last known documented evidence of Mrs Ridley being alive is video footage captured on 26 October 2019 at approximately 6.40pm. The footage showed Mr Ridley catching a fish and Mrs Ridley's voice heard in the background.
- g) Between 26 October 2019 and 28 October 2019, Mr Ridley took deliberate steps to deflect police investigation into Mrs Ridley's disappearance and lied to family members about Mrs Ridley's whereabouts prior to him taking his own life on 28 October 2019.
- h) Mrs Ridley has missed family events, prepaid holidays, has had no bank activity and has not accessed any medical services since October 2019. Her immigration status shows up as '*in country*'.
- i) The balance of the available evidence suggests that Mr Ridley was involved in Mrs Ridley's death and that her death was the result of a homicide of unknown causes.
- j) The available evidence does not enable me to determine the cause of Mrs Ridley's death or the location of her body other than in the proximity of Neil's Reserve, Murray River Road, Walwa, Victoria.

43. I convey my sincerest sympathy to Mrs Ridley's family.

44. Pursuant to section 73(1) of the Coroners Act 2008, I order that this finding be published on the internet.

45. I direct that a copy of this finding be provided to the following:

Mr Nathan Ridley, Senior Next of Kin

Detective Leading Senior Constable Andrew Leonard, Coroner's Investigator

Signature:



**JUDGE JOHN CAIN
STATE CORONER**

Date: 22 September 2021

NOTE: Under section 83 of the *Coroners Act 2008* ('the Act'), a person with sufficient interest in an investigation may appeal to the Trial Division of the Supreme Court against the findings of a coroner in respect of a death after an inquest. An appeal must be made within 6 months after the day on which the determination is made, unless the Supreme Court grants leave to appeal out of time under section 86 of the Act.
