



Mass murder is not your usual conversation at the local cafe. It is more the type of topic that fills the news for weeks and is talked about for decades. Such an instance has the ability to leave a black mark on a town long after the crime is committed.

Yet it appears Southland's biggest mass murder has simply been forgotten.

Te Ara - the encyclopaedia of New Zealand carries no reference to it despite having a section on mass murders.

The police files and property files are long gone.

Any remaining references to the "Invercargill Tragedy" disappear after a month or so of the murders. Like a bad dream, it is forgotten.

Invercargill's forgotten atrocity

SHARON REECE's morbid curiosities led her to standing at the property - not necessarily the house - where a forgotten mass murder commonly reported as "the Invercargill Tragedy" took place in 1908 and asking: How much do you really know about the history of your house? And more so, how much would you really want to know?

seed merchant and good friend and neighbour to the city missionary, Archibald McLean. Before 1908 Baxter was a prominent member of society and a man who loved his wife and five children.

After Wednesday, April 8, 1908, Baxter became known as the man who woke during the night to butcher his entire family.

Newspapers used the poetic licence of the times and graphic narrative to describe the grisly scene:

"A GHASTLY DOMESTIC TRAGEDY: Father and three children dead. Mother, daughter and baby unconscious. J Reid Baxter attacks his sleeping family and then blows his head off - A house of horror," wrote Hawke's Bay's *The Weekly Times*.

It seemed the family had gone to bed in the usual manner. Basil, 9,

and Roy, 4, were put into the double bed they shared. Phyllis, 11, shared a room with her 2-year-old brother Ronald. Baxter and his wife Elizabeth had laid their newborn, John, in his cot before going to bed.

On Wednesday morning McLean noticed a lack of movement next door. He peered through the window of the young boys. Lying in bed, their faces were undisturbed. It was the pillows caked in blood and the lifelessness of the children that caused McLean to call police.

"I accompanied Sergeant Mathieson into the house. We made a hurried examination of the two bodies in the front room and found life extinct. In the room behind it Roy was dead in bed and Phyllis was on the floor alive but unconscious. We next entered Mrs

Baxter's bedroom. She raised herself and said 'what is the matter'. She then sank back unconscious. The baby was also unconscious. The door into the scullery through which the bathroom was reached was locked. We went outside and looked through the bathroom window, seeing a body in the bath," McLean said during the coroner's inquest.

Baxter had used a 30 centimetre-stove scraper to kill his three sons and left his wife, daughter and newborn baby clinging to life. He then half-filled his bathtub and blew his head off with a shotgun, falling back into the filled bathtub to ensure his demise. Although the three survivors had been expected to pull through, each died within weeks.

Little information could be found about Baxter prior to his

committing the crime, other than he was a successful businessman who had emigrated from England to New Zealand.

Weeks before the murders he had suffered from British cholera. One of his employees said Baxter had been ill for about a month and seemed depressed.

The coroner found that Baxter killed himself and his family while in the grip of "impulsive insanity".

For a few weeks after the murders the "Invercargill Tragedy" was mentioned in papers throughout New Zealand and Australia.

Once Phyllis Baxter, the last surviving member of the family, died on April 22 the Baxter's lives and deaths seemed to have been erased from history.

Lloyd Esler is known for many

things in Southland - city councillor, teacher, historian and the author of books about Southland. Esler is working on a new book called *Dead and Buried in Southland*. It is a collection of unusual deaths, strange burials, lonely graves and missing people. Yet he and other local historians knew nothing of the Baxter tragedy.

Esler could list bank robberies, kidnappings, homicides and even petty crimes throughout the history of Invercargill. When questioned about Baxter he came up empty.

The research for this story went from Esler to one expert after another; librarians, archivists, museum curators and historians. Endless hours of dredging through online articles, books, coronial records, property files and library archives; speaking with anyone willing to weigh in on the subject, produced very little.

Many newspaper records, police files and medical records could not be found. It seemed as though any information surrounding the topic had vanished.

In an unmarked plot at the

Invercargill Eastern Cemetery lie the bodies of John, Basil, Roy, Ronald, Phyllis and Elizabeth Baxter. In the same plot is the man who raised them, cared for them and for reasons unknown, took their lives.

No record exists of whether their house was demolished or still stands, lived in by someone unaware of the horrors it held.

In recent times Invercargill residents have begun to embrace the city's history, celebrating its heritage in all different forms. If a city can forget one of its biggest tragedies, what else is hidden in the deepest corners of our archives?

Perhaps the *Weekly Times* gave the best explanation of all of Baxter's mass murder:

"Unheard, unsuspected, there happened in a quiet Crinan Street one of the completest and most ghastly tragedies that have ever occurred in New Zealand. No motive can be reasonably suggested, no explanation may be justly given. Men do these things sometimes and those who hear and see can only shudder and wonder and then try to forget..."





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