

LOCAL NEWS

Probe under way after house blaze

■ **GOSPORT:** The cause of a fire that ripped through a home is not yet known.

Seventeen firefighters and one officer tackled the blaze at the house in Grange Crescent, Gosport, after a fire began in a cupboard under the stairs on Tuesday.

An investigation into the fire has begun.

However, it has been confirmed that the incident is not being treated as suspicious.

The flames destroyed most of the ground-floor area around the stairs and the whole house was severely damaged by the heat.

Fire crews from Gosport and Fareham were called at 12.21am after the homeowner was woken up by a



The fire-damaged house

smoke alarm.

He managed to safely get his parents out of the house before firefighters arrived on the scene.

The fire was put out shortly before 2am.

Train change

■ **PORTSMOUTH:** Southern trains will change its timetable from Monday.

The service from Portsmouth Harbour to Brighton will now depart at 5.33am instead of 5.34am.

Timetable information is also available at southern-railway.com, via nationalrail.co.uk or call National Rail Enquiries 08457 48 49 50.

Dog patrols

■ **PORTSMOUTH:** Early-morning patrols have been taking place to catch dog-owners who don't pick up after their pooches.

Council enforcement officers have been making the most of the lighter mornings to get out in parks and cemeteries and catch people leaving dog mess.

It comes as part of an ongoing crackdown on dog mess.

Let's meet the Tweenies!

■ **PORTSMOUTH:** Children can meet TV favourites the Tweenies at a special storytelling event next week.

Jake and Fizz from the Tweenies will be at Cascades Shopping Centre, Commercial Road, on Thursday in the New Mall opposite TK Maxx to read fun stories to their young fans.

Children can have their photos taken with the Tweenies at the storytelling sessions from 11am to midday.

There is also a chance to win a pair of tickets to the live Tweenies show at the Kings Theatre in Southsea, which runs from April 13 to 15.

To win the tickets, children have to enter the



The Tweenies

Cascades competition by colouring in a picture which can be downloaded from the Cascades website, cascades-shopping.co.uk

The completed pictures should be taken to one of next week's storytelling sessions.

Tower pride

■ **PORTSMOUTH:** The Spinnaker Tower has come fourth in a national contest to find the building people are most proud of.

The tower was one of 30 finalists in the competition, which was organised by DIY giant Wickes.

It finished behind Bletchley Park, in Milton Keynes, the Needles Old Battery, on the Isle of Wight and the Cavern Club, in Liverpool.

Flat flooded

■ **CHICHESTER:** Firefighters were called to flat which had been flooded.

Water started pouring into the flat in Augusta Court, Winterbourne Road, Chichester, in the early hours of Tuesday.

The electrics were checked over by the crew from Chichester and switched off at the mains.

It happened just after 1.30am when the flat above flooded.

THURSDAY'S AGENDA

The long haul



Ten years on, an inquest is finally under way into deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. **CHRIS OWEN** and **CLARE SEMKE** report from the first day



After years

More than a decade ago 10 elderly and sick people went into hospital. They never came out.

Yesterday their relatives finally got their day in court at the start of inquests which will attempt to find out exactly how they died.

For at least the next six weeks they will sit in Court One at Portsmouth Crown Court listening to hours of evidence about how their loved ones met their end at Gosport War Memorial Hospital between 1996-1999.

The families are determined to get to the bottom of the circumstances of these deaths and have been fighting for years to get this

far.

Yesterday morning there was almost a sense of release as the families greeted each other with handshakes and some hugs outside the court building in Winston Churchill Avenue.

Gillian Mackenzie, whose mother Gladys Richards died at the Bury Road hospital in August 1998, arrived wearing a purple skirt and jacket, pictured, - a colour which shouted the defiance she has proclaimed for more than 10 years. Ironically, her mother's death is not one of those being considered by



coroner Andrew Bradley and the jury of five women and four men.

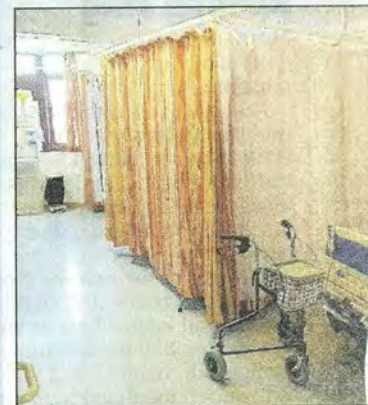
She has been promised a hearing without a jury at a date later this year.

Now 75, she has spearheaded the campaign to win these inquests and was met with some acclaim by many of the relatives on the court steps.

Outside the court she said: 'I can't believe that this day has finally come at last.'

'It's going to be a long haul before we get to the verdicts, but at least we stand a chance of getting our points across in public for the first time.'

'Whether we get anywhere in the long run though remains to be seen.'



Inside the War Memorial

PICTURE: IAN HARGREAVES (090923-6)

As she spoke there was a chorus of clicking as dozens of cameras went into action from the waiting crowd of photographers and cameramen from the nation's media.

At the heart of the 10 cases featuring six women and



'I can't believe'

finally gets started

of waiting, families hope they will get to the truth...



Hospital

THE re-opening of a mass inquest into 10 suspicious deaths at Gosport War Memorial Hospital is an unprecedented step.

It marks the culmination of an 11-year quest for the truth by relatives of the deceased.

But for dozens of bereaved families, the heartache is far from over.

It was Gillian Mackenzie who kickstarted complaints against the care and treatment of elderly patients at the hospital after her 91-year-old mother, Gladys Richards, died there in 1998.

Yet despite spending more than a decade in pursuit of the

truth, Mrs Mackenzie will now have to wait even longer for answers, as her mother's inquest has not yet been scheduled.

For at least six weeks, assistant deputy coroner for south-east Hampshire Andrew Bradley and a jury will hear evidence at Portsmouth Combined Court Centre in Winston Churchill Avenue before deciding on their verdicts.

The inquest is being held after the government rejected calls for a public inquiry, to the anger of the 92 families whose relatives died.

The deaths have been the

subject of three inquiries by Hampshire Constabulary and a probe by the Crown Prosecution Service.

But despite evidence gathered following the launch of Operation Rochester into 92 deaths at the hospital in November 2002, the Crown Prosecution Service decided in December 2006 not to take any of the cases to court.

And the Police Complaints Authority - now the Independent Police Commission - which launched its inquiry in November 1998, later launched an investigation into its own handling of the probe in February 2006.

Bereaved families raised concerns in June 2007 that inquests into their relatives' deaths would never be held as seven of the bodies were cremated.

However, last May Portsmouth and south-east Hampshire coroner David Horsley opened the inquest into deaths of Leslie Pittock, 82, Elsie Lavender, 83, Helena Service, 99, Ruby Lake, 84, Arthur Cunningham, 79, Robert Wilson, 74, Enid Spurgeon, 92, Geoffrey Packman, 66, Elsie Devine, 88, and Sheila Gregory, 91, after appealing to Jack Straw for permission.

Inside the court the hearing had been due to start at 10am, but so many lawyers, relatives and journalists needed to be seated that proceedings did not get under way until 10.15am.

At that point Mr Bradley

arrived and took his place on the raised platform at the head of the court.

It soon became clear that little of any substance was going to happen yesterday as lawyers for the family and the hospital started to raise legal and procedural

points with the coroner.

A lot of it hinged on which witnesses were to be called and at what point they would give their evidence in the coming weeks. But finally, at 11.10am, the jury was sworn in and Mr Bradley

greeted them with the words: 'You're here to hold an inquiry into the deaths of 10 people at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.'

'They are 10 separate inquests, 10 individuals. They are people who have died and they are entitled

to have their deaths examined.'

A few minutes later the legal arguments started again and at 12.10pm Mr Bradley sent the jury home for the day and told them the hearings would resume again today.

THE DOCTOR

DR Jane Barton was the only doctor investigated in relation to the deaths of elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

At least one relative called for doctors' regulatory body the General Medical Council to investigate her conduct in 2002.

Dr Barton - who is a partner at Forton Medical Centre in Whites Place, Gosport - was clinical assistant at Gosport War Memorial Hospital in 1998.

She was in charge of medical care on a day-to-day basis until her departure in July 2000.

Dr Barton is subject to certain restrictions placed on her by the GMC and proceedings are ongoing. A hearing date will be set when the inquests are over.

She attended the opening of the inquest yesterday, but is not scheduled to appear as a witness until April 14.



Dr Jane Barton



that this day has finally come at last.