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**CHURCHYARD:** Levi-Harry Maxwell was found with an empty canister of butane gas beside him in the ruins of St Margaret's Church, Hopton-on-Sea.

HOPTON-ON-SEA

# Coroner's concern over solvent abuse

By DAVID FREEZER

Norfolk coroner William Armstrong has voiced his concerns about the widening problem of solvent abuse among teenagers – as he brought an inquest into a 15-year-old's death to a close.

Family and friends of Levi-Harry Maxwell, from Hopton-on-Sea, near Great Yarmouth, listened as the coroner delivered a verdict of accidental death at Norwich Coroner's Court yesterday.

Mr Armstrong said the youngster died accidentally due to the use of butane gas, while under a care order.

He died at the James Paget University Hospital in Gorleston on Tuesday, July 24 last year, after attempts by his brother, Lewis, and paramedics to resuscitate him proved unsuccessful.

Sergeant John Wilkins, from Gorleston police station, said a half-empty canister of butane gas had been found alongside the teenager's body, in the grounds of the ruins of St Margaret's Church in Hopton, along with another used can in a nearby bush.

In his closing speech Mr Armstrong said he had discussed his solvent abuse worries with Norfolk drug and alcohol charity The Matthew Project, saying: "I want to say that solvent abuse is clearly a significant problem, especially among teenagers.

"We all must realise the effects of solvent abuse and be aware of the signs that youngsters may be using dangerous solvents.

"I am unashamedly using this hearing to highlight the dangers and that help, guidance and support are available from The Matthew Project."

During the hearing it was said that Levi-Harry had been in care since he was six years old and had been living



**CONCERNS:** William Armstrong.

with his current foster parents, Ian and Keri Brunning, of Coast Road, Hopton, since February 2011.

Mr Armstrong said Levi-Harry was being "very well cared for" by his foster parents and had a generally happy home life, although at school he "certainly behaved very differently".

It was also explained that some time during the autumn of 2011 the youngster had stayed round a friend's house and been caught sniffing from a butane canister.

The friend's father informed Mr and Mrs Brunning of what had happened and they asked family support worker Richard Farrar to speak to him about the dangers of solvent abuse.

Lewis Maxwell, 19, told how his younger brother had taken his wallet and used his identification to purchase the cans and how he and their friends had thought Levi-Harry was just messing around when they first found him in the churchyard.

Mr Armstrong said post mortem examinations had also found traces of cannabis in his body saying: "The most likely cause of death was as a result of butane gas. This cannot be absolutely proved but there were no natural diseases and Levi was a naturally fit and healthy young man."

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## MATTHEW PROJECT ADVISES CORONER

The coroner's call for more people to be aware of the dangers of solvent abuse come after he spoke to Norfolk drug and alcohol charity The Matthew Project.

In his closing remarks at the inquest into the death of 15-year-old Levi-Harry Maxwell, Mr Armstrong took the opportunity to read a statement from Naomi Selim, The Matthew Project's under 18 service manager for Norfolk. Ms Selim said: "The under 18 service works with young people who are using a range of substances. In several cases they have been referred to us for their use of alcohol or cannabis and solvent use is only disclosed at a later stage once the young person has built up a relationship with a worker.

"It is very difficult to estimate the prevalence of solvent use among young people in Norfolk; however, during 2012 The Matthew Project Under 18 Service undertook a survey with over 1,000 young people, looking at their knowledge and experience of drugs and alcohol.

"Of the young people who responded, 5pc reported that they had tried nitrous oxide (common inhalant), with the average age of first use being 14 years old.

"In addition our universal workers have reported an increase over the last year in young people raising questions about solvents during drug education sessions."

National drugs charity Drugscope says the effects of solvent abuse can be severe and publishes information warning of the dangers. These include risking choking on vomit if sniffing to the point of

unconsciousness and accidental death if sniffing near a potentially unsafe hazard, such as near a river or train line.

They explain: "Inhaled solvent vapours are absorbed through the lungs and rapidly reach the brain. Breathing and heart rate slow down and repeated or deeper inhalation leads to feelings similar to being drunk with loss of co-ordination and disorientation.

"In some cases users momentarily lose consciousness but will normally come round quickly with no lasting damage. Users report visual distortions and peculiarities similar to hallucinations.

"The effects are short-lived and usually less than 45 minutes without a repeat dose. As the effects wear off users often feel tired and drowsy and may experience a hangover.

"Gases in aerosols and lighter fuel refills squirted directly into the mouth can freeze the airways and lead to death through suffocation."

Legally, the Consumer Protection Act bans retailers from selling cigarette lighter refill canisters containing butane to anyone under the age of 18.

While the Intoxicating Substances Supply Act makes it an offence for a person to supply or offer to supply to someone under the age of 18 a substance – other than a controlled drug – if "he knows or has reasonable cause to believe that the substance or its fumes are likely to be inhaled for the purpose of causing intoxication".

For more information or advice, go to [www.matthewproject.co.uk](http://www.matthewproject.co.uk) or [www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)

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