

### **Thomas Kingsbury, the chimney-sweep of Tiger Yard**

Thomas Kingsbury was baptised in St Giles' Church on 6 July 1828. His father was a chimney sweep, and so too were some of his brothers and, later on, a couple of his sons. He lived at various addresses in Camberwell, at first working for his father, but the Post Office Directory for 1865 shows that he was now trading on his own account from Tiger Yard, and he went on to live there for most of the rest of his life.

His first wife died in 1862, and in 1878 he married again. He described the circumstances of his second marriage at the Old Bailey where, on 12 January 1880, he was a witness in the trial of Mary Ann Rayner for bigamy:

I live at Camberwell, and I am a chimney-sweep – I became acquainted with the defendant in the middle of April, 1878 – she came to visit my daughter, and then I met her at Gospel Hall, New Cut, and we kept company for a fortnight, and were then married at the Registry Office, Camberwell, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May – she represented herself to be a widow, and gave me a letter and a memorial card – this is the letter (*Read:* “Madam, I take the liberty of informing you that Mr Thomas Rayner, your husband, is dead, and was interred at Wakefield Cemetery. I obtained your address from a letter which was found upon him. Yours sincerely, J.W.E.” (*The memorial card represented that Rayner died in October 1876*) – I was satisfied with that letter – about a month after the marriage I became aware of Rayner being alive, and I said to the defendant, “You had better leave me, Mary, and go and get a place as soon as possible,” because I didn’t want to have my character disgraced – she said she would as soon as possible – I have since seen Rayner.

He added:

I continued to live with the defendant till December last, begging her day by day to go away and get a place – I gave her into custody; I could not get rid of her – she broke my windows, and broke my door down, and smashed my place up – I am not aware of a summons being out against my son and myself for detaining her goods – she would say anything – I delivered up her money to her, £140 – she says I owe her £12.

Mary Ann Rayner was arrested in Tiger Yard on 10 December 1879. She was found guilty and sentenced to three months' imprisonment, which she served in Newgate prison.

Evidently this experience didn't put Thomas off matrimony, because on 19 August 1880 he was married in St Peter's Walworth to a widow who was some twenty years his junior. Possibly the marriage wasn't a success; when the census was taken in 1881 she was living with him and with one of his sons by his first marriage, but in the censuses of 1891 and 1901 she was absent, though Thomas was described as a married man and not a widower.

Tiger Yard was tucked away behind The Tiger Tavern, and was larger than the space we see there today. The census returns give us a snapshot of what life there was like. The 1901 census taken on 31 March lists eighteen dwellings, each with two rooms, in which lived a total of ninety-seven adults and children. A typical household consisted of a man occupied as a labourer, a wife who was usually not described as having an occupation, and up to five children of whom the eldest were likely to be working as labourers, domestic servants or laundry maids. However there were exceptions: five households were headed by a man or woman described as married but whose spouse was not present (Thomas Kingsbury was one of these), and another contained a married daughter whose husband was absent. One household consisted of a man, his wife, four children of school age and his widowed mother; another couple lived not only with three young children but also a boarder; one of the households with an absent father had seven children, the three eldest of whom were working. No 8 must have been comparatively tranquil – it was occupied by a bricklayer's labourer living alone with his wife.

An exception to the general pattern was that Nos. 1 and 2, which were closest to the entrance from Denmark Hill, were treated by the census as a single dwelling with four rooms. This dwelling contained two households, one of which consisted of Thomas Kingsbury living alone and the other of an apparently unrelated married couple and with four children, one of them an adult. There is no indication of how the living space was divided, but possibly Thomas lived in one room and the other family in three.

I expect we all watched the BBC2 programme about Camberwell Grove, in the series "The Secret History of our Streets". The series took as its starting point Charles Booth's *Inquiry into Life and Labour in London (1806-1903)*. The first stage of the Inquiry was a Poverty Map drawn up in 1889 and based on information supplied by School Board visitors. Streets were colour-coded to show seven degrees between the upper classes and "the lowest

class". Ten years later the map was reviewed by a team of investigators who accompanied policemen on their beats and considered whether the original classification still held good.

For the most part Camberwell Grove was coloured yellow or red on the map: that is, "Upper-middle and Upper classes. Wealthy" and "Middle class. Well-to-do". This is much as we would expect, given the houses that we see today. But of course there was another Camberwell, and Tiger Yard was one of a cluster of streets round the foot of Denmark Hill which in 1889 had been coloured dark blue. This designated the second category from the bottom: "Very poor. Casual. Chronic Want." These streets were visited on 3 October 1899 by "E.A." and Police Constable Young. This is what E.A reported:

Tiger Yard still exists, and, with the exception of the house at the west end, is dark blue as map. This house is occupied by a chimney sweep, an old man who 'has enough to live on' and is the plutocrat of the yard. His house-front is strangely and wonderfully decorated with oyster and other shells, and before the house, encroaching, I imagine on the public land, he has made little grottoes. It is all very barbarous and very effective, and the house might with propriety be honoured with a touch of pink. The old man is very proud of his handiwork.

This chimney sweep was of course Thomas Kingsbury.



Thomas died in Tiger Yard on 1 July 1904, leaving effects valued at £158 7s 4d. And he left another legacy. Unfortunately it hasn't survived until the present day but we can see it in photographs of Tiger Yard which were taken in 1934, and which

are now in the collection of the Local History Library. One of them, reproduced here, looks down the Yard from the Denmark Hill entrance. On

the wall to the left of the entrance the shells with which Thomas Kingsbury decorated his home can still be seen.