

The little chimney sweep of Deddington

by Julie Ann Godson



In December 1880, a small boy was seen crying in the street in Deddington, struggling along with a chimney brush far bigger than he was, his clothes black with filth. When asked why he was upset, little Alfred Edwin Yerbury, nine, told Inspector Wyatt that he did not like chimney work. Rival sweep Thomas Evans, 36, claimed that Yerbury's master, Charles Dixon, 54, of Castle Street was in breach of the law in employing a child under ten.

Children were widely used as human chimney sweeps in England for about two hundred years; they were required to crawl through chimneys which were only about eighteen inches wide. The ideal age for a chimney sweep to begin working was said to be six years old, but sometimes they started at age four.

The child would shimmy up the flue using his back, elbows, and knees. He would knock the soot overhead loose with a brush, and it would cascade down over him. Once the child had cleaned all the way to the top, he would slide back down and collect up the soot pile for his master, who would then sell it as fertiliser.

Children often became stunted in their growth and disfigured because of the unnatural position they were required to adopt before their bones had fully developed. Their knees and ankle joints were most often affected. Their lungs would become diseased, and their eyelids were often sore and inflamed to the point where some sufferers lost their sight altogether.

Then in February 1875, there was a national sensation when a twelve-year-old chimney sweep named George Brewster became stuck in Fulbourn hospital chimneys in Cambridgeshire. An entire wall was pulled down in an attempt to rescue the boy, but he died shortly afterwards. Brewster's master was found guilty of manslaughter, and a bill was pushed through parliament in September 1875 which put an end to the practice of using children as human chimney sweeps in England.

Edwin Yerbury was actually the grandson of Charles Dixon's wife by her first marriage. He was born in the Dixon household, at the Windmill south of the Hempton Road out of Deddington. The actual windmill was demolished around 1840, and a group of lowly cottages housing mainly paupers was crammed on to the site. Within weeks of Edwin's birth, his father John Yerbury, a painter and decorator, had cleared off back to his parents' home in Birmingham. He reunited with Edwin's mother Mary Ann long enough to have daughter,

Elizabeth, in 1873, but thereafter there are no more children, suggesting that he had departed the domestic scene for good.

Meanwhile, in Deddington in 1880, Charles Dixon claimed that the boy was merely conducting his assistant, George Gardner, 34, to properties requiring his services while he himself was indisposed. The magistrates fined Dixon one pound plus ten shillings costs.

But before we condemn Dixon too roundly, he was labouring under difficult circumstances. Edwin, as he was known in the family, was actually the grandson of Dixon's wife Elizabeth from her first marriage to another sweep, Henry Jarvis. Altogether, three of Mrs Dixon's grandchildren lived in the cottage in Castle Street.

Consequently Edwin's mother Mary Ann Jarvis Yerbury was obliged to go into service. At 67, Mrs Dixon probably found a nine year-old, a seven year-old and a three year-old hard work as well as costly to feed, so perhaps it is unsurprising that Edwin was expected to go out and earn his keep. Unfortunately, the only employment Charles Dixon could offer was that provided in his own line of chimney-sweeping. (His own son Charles had died at fifteen, though whether or not from life as a child sweep it is impossible to say. The younger Dixon son Henry worked as a child sweep too.)

As it turned out, little Edwin did take up chimney sweeping for his trade, and spent the rest of his life in Castle Street in Deddington. He married Cecily Jarvis, a cousin, and had three children. His younger son, also Alfred Edwin, died of his wounds aged nineteen on the Western Front in 1917. After a spell as cook at Farnborough School in Hampshire, Edwin's mother Mary Ann came home to work in Deddington and never remarried. She died in 1935. Edwin's father John Yerbury married again in Aston, Warwickshire in 1890, possibly bigamously, and died in 1905. Edwin himself died aged 74 and was buried in Deddington on Christmas Eve in 1945.

- This is an expanded extract from Julie Ann's book *On this day in Oxfordshire*. Her books on the history of Oxfordshire are available at [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk). You can read about Julie Ann's research at www.julieanngodson.com, and follow her on Facebook at [@julieanngodson](https://www.facebook.com/julieanngodson).

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