

Porters, watchmen, and the crime of William Sayers: the non-scientific staff of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, in Victorian times

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Abstract

A careful study of the detailed archives of the Victorian Royal Observatory makes it possible to build up a picture of the employment and working conditions not only of the astronomical staff who worked at Greenwich, but also of the labourers, watchmen, and gate porters. Indeed, the archives open up a window on to how the Observatory was run on a daily basis: how its non-scientific staff were recruited and paid, and what were their terms of employment. They also say a great deal about how Sir George Biddell Airy¹ directed and controlled every aspect of the Observatory's life. Yet while Airy was a strict employer, he emerges as a man who was undoubtedly fair-minded and sometimes even generous to his non-scientific work force. A study of the Observatory staff files also reveals the relationship between the Observatory labouring staff and the Airy family's domestic servants. And of especial interest is the robbery committed by William Sayers, the Airy family footman in 1868, bringing to light as it does Sir George and Lady Richarda Airy's views on crime and its social causes and consequences, the prison rehabilitation service in 1868, and their opinions on the reform of offenders. Though this paper is not about astronomy as such, it illuminates a fascinating interface where the world of astronomical science met and worked alongside the world of ordinary Victorian people within the walls of one of the nineteenth century's most illustrious astronomical institutions.

Keywords: *Airy, Greenwich Observatory, labourers, watchmen, porters, Sayers.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The Victorian archives of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, are a mine of primary historical information in so many ways. Of course, there is the straightforward astronomy, but because Sir George Biddell Airy, who was Astronomer Royal between 1835 and 1881, kept a gelatine imprint copy of every scrap of paper which the Observatory generated, there is in addition a vast archive of social history. I have been working on a biography of Sir George for many years, and feel that I have not only come to know the Astronomer Royal very well, but have also been able to follow the appointments, careers, retirements and deaths of several dozen other people who worked for the Royal Observatory over forty-six years. These people, moreover, included not just members of the astronomical and scientific personnel, but of the ancillary and service staff as well.

And especially invaluable in these researches has been the generous loan from the present-day Airy family of well over a thousand individual private documents, which have made it possible for me to come to know Sir George and his wife Lady Richarda Airy 'at home', as it were, along with their children, wider family, and friends. And especially interesting has been the emergence of a whole 'below stairs' or servants' world at the Royal Observatory. Indeed, the people who lived in this world, and who, in Victorian terms, occupied places a good few rungs lower down the social ladder than even the lowliest scientific Assistants (after all, the Assistants themselves had their own domestic servants), emerge as real figures in their own right from the vast archive of documents that pertain to the daily running of the Royal Observatory – documents which would, in almost all other institutions, have been used as fire-kindling one hundred years ago.

2 G B AIRY AND HIS 'LABOURERS'

In addition to its astronomical Assistants, the Royal Observatory employed a small staff of men – usually three or four at any one time – who seem to have been given the generic title of 'Labourers'. These would include lodge porters, handymen, night-watchmen, and such: individuals who, in addition to maintaining the basic physical security of a walled and gated Government establishment, were also required to carry coal and candles to keep the offices in which the astronomers worked warm and illuminated, remove rubbish, sweep the floors, and do simple maintenance.

And as well as this official Observatory staff, there were those who were employed by the Airy family as their own servants, but whose comings and goings, because they were private as opposed to Government servants, were less well recorded, yet who still left an historical trace. These would no doubt have included a cook, various maids, and at least one manservant, a footman, which office, as we shall discover presently, was held in 1868 by one William Sayers. At any time, therefore, there were probably about six or eight official and domestic 'Servants' and 'Labourers' working within the walls of the Royal Observatory.

But no Admiralty labourers actually *lived* within the Observatory grounds, and while the Airy family might (there is no solid record) have had some 'live-in' servants within their private residence in Flamsteed House, we know that Sayers the footman lived in digs in Prior Street, Greenwich (Airy, 1868b). Living in one's own digs, even if half a mile away, was usually preferred by a servant to living in the attic of their employer's house, for being in digs meant that a servant had a life of his or her own, once the long working day ended. One could then go for a walk, visit a pub, or keep a tryst with a sweetheart in

a way that was impossible when the beady eyes of the master and mistress were always on one.

Yet while Airy was a high-principled and in some ways a strict employer, he was no martinet. Indeed, the abundant Observatory documents relating both to the scientific and to the labouring staffs make it clear that if an employee was honest, loyal, and thorough, then the Astronomer Royal would be a firm friend in time of need. Sick pay would be negotiated if the man fell ill, or pensions or gratuities extracted out of the Admiralty for men who were deemed in need of retirement.

Airy himself (Figure 1) was an immensely scrupulous and hard-working scientific servant of Her Majesty's Government, but he was no workaholic. He fiercely guarded his own personal space and, as numerous records make clear, he regarded the time which he spent in the domestic parts of the Astronomer Royal's residence with his family as utterly sacrosanct. And so were family holidays away from Greenwich, spent either at the Airy family cottage at Playford, Suffolk, travelling on the Continent, or at a rented house in the Airys' beloved Lake District. Airy and his family were always away from Greenwich for at least six or eight weeks a year. He regarded it as essential to get off the premises to really relax, and he also allowed the Astronomical Assistants between two and six weeks' annual holidays, although I have found no references to servants' holidays beyond single day treats (Airy, 1875). Sir George, indeed, was a family man to his fingertips, whose love-affair with his wife Richarda (Figure 2) lasted a lifetime, and whose relationship with his children was remarkably warm, affectionate, and humorous. In Airy's view, relaxation was a crucial counterpoise to work, and his approach to astronomy was rigorously professional. For unlike many of the wealthy Victorian Grand Amateurs, for whom astronomy was a driving passion (see Chapman, 1998), Airy regarded it as a *job*: a fascinating and a high-status job, but not what he wanted to do in the evenings or while on holiday.

These attitudes cast a lot of light on Airy's own relationship with both his scientific and labouring staffs. Although he respected a man's right to his off-duty time, and while imposing strict and meticulous working practices upon all aspects of the Observatory's life, he nonetheless realized that when an astronomical shift was over, or forty years' service had been duly clocked up, a man had a right to do his own thing unhindered by thoughts of work.

Many, though not all, of the men who became porters, watchmen, or labourers at the Observatory were ex-ratings from the Royal Navy, who had been recommended to Airy by the supervizing Lieutenant at the Royal Naval Hospital down the hill who managed the activities of those able-bodied ex-sailors who were young and fit enough to work. On one occasion, however, a man who had been a former domestic servant with the Airy family strove to better himself by seeking Admiralty employment, clearly as a result of Airy's original support. James Payne, who may have been an ex-sailor when coming to work for the Airy family, had left Airy's domestic employ about 1861 to become an Admiralty Storehouseman. In 1872 March, however, Payne was seeking promotion to Storehouseman, First Class, and wrote to Airy for his support. As usual, Airy was willing to pull out all the stops when

it came to helping a thoroughly reliable man to better himself, and the Astronomer Royal sent a letter of recommendation to G J Shaw Lefevre, M.P. (Airy, 1872b). And while it seems, from the letter which Airy later sent to Payne, that a more Senior Storehouseman had in fact received the promotion (the Navy at this period always promoted on seniority), Airy (1872c) made it plain to his old servant that this was in no way an adverse reflection on Payne's capabilities. One wonders whether Payne ever did receive a subsequent promotion in his shore-based job.



Figure 1. George Biddell Airy in 1853. (After the Enid Airy Collection with thanks to the Airy Family.)

Yet while a good number of the labouring and portering staff at the Victorian Observatory were ex-navy men, one must remember that the Greenwich pensioners were by no means all old men, for when Britain had the biggest navy in the world, even in peacetime, the ravages of tropical disease, damaged joints, hernias, and occasional battle injuries² meant that there was an endless stream of relatively young men retiring from the Service who in one way or another could become recipients of pensions from Greenwich Hospital. And a good many of them became sufficiently recovered to pick fights in local pubs, consort with Greenwich's small army of prostitutes, and cause various kinds of trouble in the town. And some of the more reliable ended up working for Airy.

It was the rule, however, that a Naval Hospital Pensioner had to sleep at least one night per week in the Hospital, usually Saturday, though at the very beginning of his tenure as Astronomer Royal in 1838

July, Airy asked Lieutenant Rivers if John Williams, the Gate Porter, could be excused this duty (Airy, 1838). Williams was allowed this residential absence from the Hospital on condition, so Lieutenant Rivers specified, that "... he shows his legs to his Boatswain once a week ...", and thereby maintains his official presence on the pensioners' muster (Rivers, 1838).

Working as a Labourer at the Royal Observatory was quite well paid for unskilled work, and while the sums of money paid to individuals for a day's, a week's, or a year's wages, as recorded in the Observatory accounts, seemed to vary considerably, one must remember that some of these men could well have been in receipt of some kind of Navy pensions as well. And when the word got around that a Gate Porter's or a Labourer's job was going up at the Observatory, a cluster of written applications would often be sent to the Astronomer Royal, and these clusters of documents are still preserved in the Observatory archives.

3 EMPLOYMENT, PAYMENT, AND RETIREMENT

On 1853 February 26 Joseph Gale, the 71-year-old Observatory Night Watchman (who does not seem to have been pensioned off) died in office. Though he was only paid 12/6 a week (so Airy informed J Briggs, the Accountant General of the Royal Navy – see Airy, 1853a), his relatives or friends still saw it as fitting to have a batch of embossed, black-edged, and finely-printed funeral cards produced to record his passing, one of which still survives in the Observatory archives (Gale, 1853). Then the job applications started to come in. One came from an ex-policeman who had served in 'R' Division of what was probably the Greenwich Constabulary (Common, 1853), and who promised fine character-references, while another was from Michael Sheeky or Sheehy, the Observatory Gate Porter, on behalf of his brother, whom he describes as a "... proper Steady man 45 Years of age Five feet nine and Strong." (Sheeky, 1853). But the job went to Thomas Smallwood, who, in his application sent from his home in Upper George Street, Greenwich, described himself as a 'Shoemaker' (Smallwood, 1853). Like many 'respectable' working people whose letters are preserved in the Greenwich archives, Smallwood had been taught to write a fine copperplate hand, but his penmanship was better than his spelling and his grammar. For their 12/6 a week, Gale and Smallwood were only on duty from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. each day, with overtime pay if they were needed to work longer. They had to make their rounds once an hour, clock on, and do odd jobs during the night (Airy, 1853b). Whether Smallwood came to work at Greenwich via a prior service as a naval rating before taking up shoemaking is not clear, but as he does not seem to have had any explicit connection with the Naval Hospital, it is quite possible that he was a civilian. Self-employed shoe-repairing could, after all, be an unpredictable occupation, and it is not unlikely that Smallwood continued to do some shoe-mending by day, while working six hours a night as an Observatory Watchman for some reliable money.

Thomas Smallwood had been 51 years of age when appointed in 1853 March, and twenty years

later, in 1873 August, he wrote to the Astronomer Royal, "Sir, I regret to say that my strength does not improve and i fear that i shall never to do my duty again ...", and must retire (Smallwood, 1873). Since he had been a good and loyal servant, Airy immediately swung into action in an attempt to secure a pension for Smallwood, and wrote to the Secretary of the Admiralty on the subject. Unfortunately, however, Smallwood did not hold an established post covered by the Navy Estimates, but was a long-term casual servant, paid out of the Observatory's petty cash fund, and did not, therefore, qualify for an official pension. But Airy fought back for Smallwood, arguing that he had been entrusted with various 'confidential duties' over the years and had always behaved impeccably: indeed, said Airy, his long service "... seems to have a moral claim somewhat analogous to that of a Warrant Officer." (Airy, 1873b). In fact, Airy went on to fight his elderly Gate Porter's pension claim up through the bureaucratic echelons of the Admiralty, until in 1873 September a compromise was reached. For while bureaucratic precedent would not allow pensions to be paid to casual employees, the Admiralty relented under the force of Airy's bombardment, and agreed to pay a lump-sum gratuity of £20, or 6 months' wages, to Smallwood (Accountant ..., 1873).



Figure 2. Lady Richarda Airy. (After the Enid Airy Collection with thanks to the Airy Family.)

Then a week later, on September 19, poor Thomas Smallwood suddenly died. Airy now became determined that the gratuity should go to Rebecca Anne Smallwood, his widow, and the documentary saga of Smallwood's financial recompense was brought to a successful conclusion when Thomas Smallwood junior wrote to the Astronomer Royal on 1873 October 25, to record the eventual arrival of the gratuity to his mother, and to thank Airy (Figure 3) for the trouble he had taken on his father's behalf.

The success Airy had had in getting a gratuity for Smallwood was probably due, in part, to the previous approaches he had made to the Lords Commissioner of Admiralty to obtain pensions and gratuities for Greenwich porters and labourers, not all of which had been fruitful. Ten years earlier, however, another valued old retainer, Michael Sheeky, had felt the shades of infirmity and age closing about him. For in 1863 September, Sheeky had written to Airy in a good clear hand:

Master to my Grief i present this note to you i find myself since Midsummer in constant pains and i am afraid to Remain any longer you assisted me last winter but my helth [?] [or help] was wanting i dread the wet and cold And i know i could not do what i have done ser i have been faithfull to my Employment and your directions i Kept Strictly in your absence the Same as when you were at the at [*sic*] home you were just to me and may the lord Reward you and your family M^c. Sheeky.

The preserved documents pertaining to Sheeky's career at the Observatory prove that he really was as good as his word in terms of loyalty and reliability. Sheeky was also an old sailor, for 12 years before, in 1851, Airy had written to the redoubtable Lieutenant Rivers to get Sheeky excused the necessary muster rolls at the Hospital.

When Sheeky had become too ill to continue his gate porter duties, however, Airy secured the services of another Greenwich pensioner, Edward Wellman, as his stand-in (Airy, 1863c), and entered into correspondence with Edward Hilditch, the Medical Inspector of the Royal Naval Hospital. Sheeky, so Hilditch informed Airy, had a nephritic (kidney) condition, and while the general prognosis was good, the elderly gate porter was best retired from further service (Airy, 1864a).

Once the Naval Hospital medical authorities had confirmed that Sheeky could no longer return to work, Airy set about obtaining financial support from the Admiralty. What is truly amazing, however, is the amount of sheer dogged energy that the Astronomer Royal – who in 1864 was himself 63 years old – was willing to devote to securing economic assistance for loyal yet humble labourers earning a few shillings a week. For whenever Airy waded in to obtain a pension or a gratuity for an old servant, it was on the top administrative brass of the Admiralty or War Office that he always set his sights. Airy did not trouble to present a case for a broken old retainer by working his way through labyrinths of middle-management red tape, through senior clerks and managers who dealt in shillings and half-sovereigns: no, he always went for the top. Letters demanding weekly shillings for Sheeky ended up on the desks of Lord Clarence Paget, Mr Whiffen (Accountant General of the Navy), Mr Romaine, and other nautical and armed forces administrative luminaries (Airy, 1864b, 1864c, 1864d).

Airy was not just concerned, moreover, with obtaining some sort of economic security for loyal servants who had become too old or too ill to work. He was also anxious about the working demands which could be placed upon those still in harness. Portering at the Royal Observatory, indeed, could be a gruelling job in winter, and as Airy reminded Mr

Lethbridge, of the Royal Naval Hospital, in 1841, it was the Observatory Porter's job to go to the Hospital gate to meet the Admiralty Messenger, which duty sometimes required the man to stand waiting for a whole hour, in all weathers, " ... and this, I think, would be sufficient to kill even a young man." (Airy, 1841). Airy requested the Admiralty to erect a shelter in which porters could wait, out of the weather. And elsewhere in Airy's correspondence with the Admiralty, he chivvies the Commissioners and their officials to supply good overcoats, sturdy boots, and similar protective garments to Observatory labouring staff whose duties often exposed them to the full fury of the elements. In 1863, for instance, Airy complained to Admiral Sir Stephen Lushington that the Gate Porter (probably Michael Sheeky) was worried about what seems to have been some new regulation likely to deprive him of the gold-laced coat and hat of his rank, and "The old man feels deeply the denial of the costume which he has borne many years." And what is more, Airy felt that a less ornate dress for the Porter would also damage the dignity of the Observatory (Airy, 1863a).

It is also clear that the Observatory Gate Porter's job was not without its physical dangers from stone-throwing roughs, especially on Saturdays and Sundays when large crowds surged through Greenwich Park, and in the socially-troubled 1840s particularly, Airy exchanged several letters on the matter of Gate Porter and Park security with the Superintendent of Greenwich Police, in the light of the new powers implicit within the Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 (Airy, 1840–1843).



Figure 3. Sir George Airy in 1873. (After the Enid Airy Collection with thanks to the Airy Family.)

Although we now live in a very different social and economic world from that of the people of mid-Victorian Britain, and we take it for granted that public employers have a duty, and a state welfare system exists, to provide a safety-net for the old, the sick and vulnerable, it is hard to imagine modern-day persons of the standing of Airy and the Accountant to Her Majesty's Navy discussing the merits of the case of, let us say, a part-time cleaner or security man who had become too ill to work. And one wonders

how exasperated Mr Whiffen or Lord Clarence Paget felt when yet another demand for a two-shillings-a-week pension fell upon their desks. But what this body of correspondence obviously conveys to us is that Airy would do his best to see justice done to the 'little people' who had served him well. And over his five decades at Greenwich, there were quite a few of them.

On the other hand, it should not in any way be assumed that Airy believed servants had an automatic right to job security or pensions. He was too much of a member of the Victorian middle class to believe that the 'lower orders' had any rights to paid idleness or disobedience, and always insisted to the Admiralty that, as the Director of the Royal Observatory, all powers of patronage and promotion over the staff, both astronomical and labouring, should rest entirely in his hands. And when in 1863 March James Stride, the Observatory labourer and gardener, wrote to the Astronomer Royal for pecuniary assistance with his necessary retirement "... without being troublesome to the Parish as he has no other sorse [*sic*] for his subsistence ..." (Stride, 1863), Airy was measured in his ensuing letter to Lord Clarence Paget (Airy, 1863b).

For as the senior Observatory servant, with twenty-one years' service, Stride occupied an Established Post, and had a formal claim to a pension. And in all fairness, Airy fully backed Stride's claim, whose 'rheumatic gout' had rendered him unfit for further work. But Airy, one suspects, had never been fully happy with Stride, not because he was not a dutiful and loyal worker, but because he had been appointed over Airy's head, and seemingly without his approval, by the Admiralty. Indeed, at the time of Stride's appointment, 1842 August 22 (Herbert, 1842), Airy had complained most forcefully to the Hon. Sidney Herbert, Secretary for War, insisting that *no one*, not even a labourer, should be appointed to the Observatory staff without the Astronomer Royal's full permission. And one senses that poor Herbert was taken aback from the way in which he apologized profusely to Airy for the oversight, while assuring Airy that Stride was a good man. And as if further attempting to smooth the Astronomer Royal's ruffled feathers, even the eminent Sir John Barrow, Secretary to the Admiralty Board, wrote a letter to Airy backing up Herbert's statement and emphasizing that Stride was naturally expected to be "... in absolute submission to your directions ..." (Barrow, 1842). Airy was always forthright in reminding their Lordships who was boss whenever the Queen's Navy crossed the threshold of the Royal Observatory.

Due largely to Airy's backing, James Stride got a handsome pension of £16-9-8 a year, which in 1864 Stride requested to have paid to an address at Lower Woodford, near Salisbury, Wiltshire (Airy, 1863d). Had James Stride run away to sea when a young man, perhaps as a way of escaping the tedium and poverty of an agricultural labourer's life, and after leaving the navy and working at the Royal Observatory for twenty-one years, then returned to his Wiltshire roots, grey-haired and worn out? It would be interesting to know more about his life, and if there are any members of the Stride family still living at Lower Woodford today.

Yet the upshot of the Stride affair in 1863 was to remind Lord Clarence Paget that the post of

Labourer at the Observatory should no longer be an Established one, but a post held by a direct appointee of the Astronomer Royal, and paid by means of a weekly wage from an Observatory cash fund. In this way, the Astronomer Royal maintained total control over his staff, and reserved to himself the right to recommend a pension for a man on that individual's own merits and not by an established right.

And no doubt one reason why Airy was so concerned with holding all authority in his own hands in matters of staffing was that he knew what a roguish bunch old sailors could be. One also suspects that, as a civilian and an ex-Cambridge don of a distinctly high-minded cast when it came to social probity, he was less tolerant of the fiddles and dodges of former Navy ratings than would have been Sir John Barrow, Lieutenant Rivers, or the other ex-officers with whom he had dealings. Unlike Lord Nelson, George Biddell Airy was not conveniently blind in one eye, and his earnest, civilian full-sightedness probably made him much less willing to put up with those acts of drunkenness, swearing, or petty indiscipline that a retired battleship captain would have left studiously unnoticed.

When Henry Liffen replaced Stride as labourer and gardener in 1864 January, he had a referee, a Blackheath market gardener, who described him as "... Sober and Honnest and abel." (Sexton, 1863). Liffen seems to have been a competent horticulturist (there is no evidence that he was an ex-sailor), providing flowers, sweeping passageways, and even, in 1864 July, tending beehives in the Airy family's private garden. Yet when he was found to have been absent without leave on the afternoon of 1872 February 19, Airy hit the roof, instructing the Chief Assistant and future Astronomer Royal William Christie that "... I fine him 2/6^d. *Please remember this when you pay him his quarter's stipend and let this stand on the face of his receipt* as a deduction for absence without leave." (Airy, 1872a). Rather harsh, one feels, for the first recorded misdemeanour in eight years of service, for Liffen was being fined a whole day's wages for half a day's absence. Airy was also adamant in reminding Christie, in 1873 May, when the elderly Liffen was retiring, that the rules of employment for labourers had now changed and, unlike his predecessor Stride, Liffen would not be receiving a pension. I have not been able to discover whether or not he received a lump-sum gratuity (Airy, 1873a).

But if Liffen's absence was capable of arousing Airy's sense of righteous indignation, and costing the poor man a day's wages, it was nothing compared to some of the antics of which some Observatory servants had earlier been found guilty.

On 1867 December 23, for instance, the Gate Porter (probably Richard Tuddenham) had enquired whether, during his long night watches, his wife might be allowed to join him for company, over Christmas, for example (see Stone, 1867). Airy, and his current Chief Assistant, Edmund Stone, corresponded about the possibility, until Airy decided against it, for fear of creating a precedent whereby night workers at the Observatory felt that their wives or friends could regularly keep them company (Airy, 1867). Whatever transpired over the next few months is not clear, but in early 1868 August, Mrs Tuddenham turned up at the Observatory gates and created such a scene that she

had to be threatened with police intervention if she did not shut up and go away. Tuddenham himself was threatened with dismissal if he failed to control his wife's outbursts and keep her away from the Observatory, and on 1868 August 5, Stone, at Airy's behest, wrote to the lady in question threatening her husband with a week's notice or the sack if she came near the Observatory again (Stone, 1868a).

Ructions had also broken out at the Observatory in 1861 January, when Airy and his family had been absent at their cottage at Playford in Suffolk. It seems that a man called Shadbolt, accompanied by his two small children, had turned up at the Astronomer Royal's private residence in Flamsteed House, claiming to be Airy's old Cambridge servant. Innocently enough, a housemaid had admitted Shadbolt, no doubt to the Servants' Hall, but when challenged by Airy's current head manservant, Green, he became abusive. He appeared to be demanding some sort of place in the current domestic entourage of the Airy family. The police had to be summoned, as a result of which Shadbolt's behaviour was deemed sufficiently extreme to warrant an examination by the police doctor, who pronounced him "... out of his senses ...", and had him committed to the workhouse (Stone, 1861).

But as, according to his 'Journal', the Airy family did not return to the Observatory from their five-week Christmas and New Year holiday at Playford until 1868 January 30, Airy's personal involvement with the Shadbolt affair seems to have been entirely by correspondence with the Chief Assistant (Airy, 1868a). No authentic independent record survives regarding Shadbolt's claim to have been Airy's old Cambridge servant.



Figure 4. Cartoon of Sir G B Airy about to punish an unknown astronomer giving some indication of the way in which some people probably regarded him. The cartoon appears in one of the 1874 British transit of Venus notebooks. (Courtesy RAS Library.)

While the manservant named Green who dealt with the abusive Shadbolt in 1861 January could well have been the same Green whom Airy had spoken of as suffering from paralysis in 1859 August (Airy, 1859), he is unlikely to have been the Edward Green who suffered summary dismissal in 1850 January. For Edward Green the Gate Porter had been guilty of a most reprehensible crime in Airy's eyes: "Dismissed Edward Green who has been Gate Porter many years, as it appeared that he lodged two prostitutes in his house." (Airy, 1850). In Airy's eyes, such conduct by the once-trusted ex-sailor was a breach of that trust, and a clear indication that Green was willing to associate himself with bad characters. Perhaps one reason why Michael Sheeky turned out to be a veritable model Gate Porter and devoted servant to Airy is because in 1850 he succeeded to Green's job, from a less well-paid one, and fully understood the dire consequences of getting into the Astronomer Royal's bad books.

4 THE CRIME OF WILLIAM SAYERS

One incident which took place at the Royal Observatory during the summer of 1868 provides some valuable insights into the social assumptions and practices of Victorian England. This was a case of criminal misconduct by an Airy family servant. In 1868 July, Edwin Dunkin, the Second Astronomical Assistant and third in command after the Astronomer Royal, who was responsible for the custody of the Observatory petty cash account during the holiday absence of the First Assistant Edmund Stone, discovered the safe unlocked and £8 missing (Dunkin, 1868). Soon afterwards, Airy found that two £5 notes, his personal property, had disappeared from a private drawer in his own study (Airy, 1868c). An investigation was immediately set in motion which tells us much about how suspicions were formulated and the process of detection commenced.

Scrupulous in all things, the Astronomer Royal was soon able to provide the two detectives from Greenwich Police Station assigned to the case with the serial numbers of the missing bank notes. Such notes, after all, were valuable items of wealth in 1868, and Airy clearly wrote down their serial numbers as a routine matter of security. He then supplied the police with the names and addresses of three Observatory servants, Messrs Smallwood, Liffen, and Tuddenham, who were the institution's current porter, watchman and labourer, as possible suspects (Airy, 1868b). All three of these men possessed an intimate knowledge of the routine of the Observatory, while their coal-carrying, candle-lighting, and related duties also took them into the Astronomer Royal's residence in Flamsteed House, as well as the Observatory offices, where they would have had access to Airy's private study. It is interesting to note, however, that in none of the documents surrounding this theft did Airy express any suspicions regarding members of the scientific staff of the Observatory who, as gentlemen, he would have regarded as honourable.

It was also at this time, in early 1868 August, that Mrs Tuddenham caused that riotous disturbance at the Observatory gates which almost cost her husband his job, and one wonders if her fury had been triggered by a routine police visit to their house, in search of Airy's missing £5 notes. Quite likely,

the three Royal Observatory servants felt angry and embittered about having their names and addresses given to the police as obvious suspects (Stone, 1868b). It was, after all, the Victorian upper and middle classes who saw the 'Bobbies' as their protectors and friends, whereas the poor not infrequently regarded them as petty tyrants who used the authority of their uniform to reinforce a harsh pecking order within the working class.

The numbered notes were soon traced, however, to one William Sayers, who had for the last three years been employed not by the Observatory, but by the Airy family, as a footman and manservant. What is more, the twenty-one-year-old servant had recently contracted what the Astronomer Royal considered to be an unwise marriage to a flighty wife, and was living in a one-room bedsit in Prior Street, Greenwich. Sayers was caught in the act of passing one of the missing £5 notes, which led to his arrest and speedy confession. Being a footman, he had easy access to his master's private apartments, including his duplicate set of Observatory safe keys (*Standard*, 1868). One presumes that the person who was changing the banknote for Sayers became suspicious because in their private capacity young domestic servants would rarely ever have handled sums of money in such high denominations. There is no surviving record of Sayers's actual salary, though on 1868 July 31 and August 8 there are references to him having received £3-10-0 wages, but with no indication of the period covered by the sum (Airy, 1868d). A footman's wage could vary considerably depending on age and height, and whether he had an imposing appearance. A second footman of 5ft 6in stature could expect only £22 or so a year, but an experienced six-footer would receive between £32 and £40 per annum—not to mention tips (Dawes, 1989:127).

The Sayers robbery in itself would have been of little historical significance but for the incidents which followed the culprit's arrest at the end of 1868 July. These incidents cast some light on the relationships within the Airy household, as well as the Astronomer Royal's overall attitudes towards crime and its social remedies.

In late July, Mrs Sayers, the mother of the thief, sent a simple, undated letter to Lady Richarda Airy, in which she implored the Astronomer Royal's wife to assist her son and, if possible, help to reduce the pending prison sentence (Mrs Sayers, 1868). Though Richarda's reply does not survive – one presumes that she did not take gelatine copies of her correspondence – it is clear that she spoke up on her former servant's behalf, for when a report of the trial was published in the *Standard* newspaper on August 5, her mitigating statement was cited. Lady Airy's plea was sufficiently strong, indeed, to have Sayers's sentence reduced from six to four months' hard labour (*Standard*, 1868).

The imprisonment of Sayers did not conclude the involvement of both the Airys in the affair, and the correspondence which was to follow illuminates both Sir George's attitude towards criminals and also introduces us to an interesting aspect of the mid-Victorian prisoner rehabilitation service.

Towards the end of 1868 October, as Sayers was coming to the end of his four-month sentence, Airy received a letter from the Revd W Fraser, Chaplain of Maidstone gaol, where Sayers was

serving his sentence. The Revd Mr Fraser made two requests of Airy: firstly, that he might provide character references for Sayers to help him obtain work on his release; and secondly, that he would grant the ex-convict a sum of money to help him manage in the period between release and employment (Fraser, 1868).

Airy expressed his willingness to supply the ex-convict with a testimonial to help him obtain honest employment, but he was not willing to contribute money to his personal upkeep. On the other hand, the Astronomer Royal was glad to enclose a £5 cheque to put into the general prisoners' fund for the gaol (Airy, 1868g). While reluctant to give personal financial aid to the man who had robbed him, Airy did not object to helping prisoners in general. Indeed, this response was entirely in keeping with Airy's general character. For as we have seen, he was always happy to promote the interests of the honest and deserving labouring poor, while at the same time believing that the shiftless and the guilty should be punished. Even so, as a humane man, Airy saw it as his duty as a gentleman to help the unfortunate – even those who had been caught and were now paying their dues. Hence the £5 cheque.

The correspondence with the Revd Mr Fraser, moreover, along with that which he had exchanged with the Superintendent of the Greenwich Police Station, became a vehicle by which Airy came to outline his opinions on the criminal character, with particular reference to that of William Sayers.

Sayers represented a dangerous type, Airy argued, not because of any conspicuous wickedness in itself, but because he was "... weak and sharp, a most dangerous association." His sharpness and cunning were not mischievous in themselves, but because he was a weak character, he was an ideal "... tool of accomplished thieves ...", and would be manipulated by greater rogues (Airy, 1868e). Airy was of the opinion that such associations lay behind the robbery.

The Astronomer Royal then suggested a prognosis for the future career of Sayers, which was congruent with the prevailing nineteenth-century theories of criminal types. Unless placed under a proper reforming discipline and kept out of bad company he would degenerate, and meet one of two ends. Either he would be egged on by his accomplices to commit increasingly serious crimes, or he would become insane and die in a mad-house. Sayers's "... countenance ought to be well marked and registered ..." for future public reference, asserts Airy (Airy, 1868g), though one wonders how a man possessing such a conspicuously criminal physiognomy had ever been employed by the Airy family in the first place! Was Airy being wise after the event?

The shock of four months' hard labour, and possibly the kindly ministrations of the Revd Mr Fraser, certainly seem to have brought about a profound contrition in Sayers. Early in December, shortly after Sayers's release, Mrs Richarda Airy received a letter from one Revd Mr Scott of Greenwich, an Evangelical missionary who worked with discharged prisoners. He said that Sayers was a reformed man, with a "... Christian Character ...", who most dearly wished to meet Mrs Airy and beg her forgiveness (Scott, 1868). Scott asked if such a meeting could be arranged.

One presumes that Sayers was not granted the requested audience, however, although he took every opportunity of catching the Astronomer Royal's lady as she came and went. Sayers came to waiting at the Observatory gates, on the public park side, in the hope of seeing her, and generally "... lurking about in the neighbourhood.", as Airy complained to the Revd Mr Fraser (Airy, 1868h). Airy issued strict instructions to the Observatory gate porters not to admit Sayers under any circumstances, and to summon the Park Police if he became difficult.

Meeting with no success in securing a personal interview, the languishing Sayers decided to send a letter to Mrs Airy. Addressing her as 'Madham', and with many of the ungrammatical terms of servant-talk parodied in the *Punch* cartoons of the period, Sayers begged her forgiveness, beseeched her to prevail upon her husband to give him a chance of "... getting me on through this life ...", and even offered to pay back the stolen money.

Sayers's letter to Richarda Airy was undated, but was filed in a sequence dating from early 1869 (Sayers, n.d.). It cannot be denied, however, that Sayers set about the reform of his character and way of life with commendable earnestness, securing a job at the 'Crystal Palace', Deptford, on Airy's recommendation, and winning the warm approval of George Harrison, the Landlord (Harrison, 1868), six months later when he applied for an upper servant's place in the household of one Colonel Lowry Cole.

Airy sent a cautiously-worded letter to Colonel Cole at the end of 1869 October, mentioning Sayers's criminal record, but also emphasising his skills as a manservant. Of particular interest was the postscript which Airy added to this letter, which leads one to suspect that the Astronomer Royal had revised his theories about the inherent criminality of Sayers. His offence, Airy now argues, had been performed "... under the strong temptation of providing for an imprudent marriage, and ... he would be heartily glad to have an opportunity of recovering his character." As the file on William Sayers closes with this letter, one assumes that he got the job with Colonel Cole, and that the reformed man did indeed "... recover his character ..." instead of ending his days either on the gallows or in the predicted criminal mad-house.

The documents relating to Sayers are of significance, amongst other things, for the light they cast on the character of Mrs Airy, and for their indication that it was clearly known amongst servants, and even their parents, that she was capable of mitigating her husband's rigour. Nowhere in the documents, nor in the newspaper articles relating to the trial, is there any reference to Airy himself being appealed to as a potential fount of mercy. Quite apart from the obvious fact that he personally was £10, and the Observatory £8, worse off because of the incident, his naturally legalistic way of thinking inclined him to place justice above leniency when a trusted underling went astray. Richarda Airy, however, obviously possessed a reputation for kindness and generosity, so it was naturally through her that pleas for mercy were conveyed. And it is reassuring to know that under her influence the Astronomer Royal was capable of changing his mind.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whether Victorian prison chaplains and rescue

missionaries generally went to such lengths to aid discharged convicts as did the Revds Mr Fraser and Mr Scott, or whether Airy was approached because of his high social position, would be impossible to ascertain without a wider archival knowledge of the Victorian penal system. Yet, irrespective of precedents or motives, Airy's subsequent actions were of crucial importance in giving to William Sayers the fresh start which he so earnestly desired. The Royal Observatory staff archives open up a remarkable window into the way in which two great social groups, the working and the upper middle classes, viewed each other across that gulf of wealth and culture which was a fact of life in Victorian England. But perhaps most of all, they show that George Biddell Airy, while in no way a 'soft touch', was nonetheless a man of conscience with clear ideas of social justice, and that it was well known amongst the working people of Greenwich that Lady Richarda knew how to soften justice with mercy.

6 NOTE

1. George Biddell Airy and his wife Richarda are generally referred to by the titles 'Sir George' and 'Lady' Airy in this paper. Airy did not actually accept a knighthood until 1872 July (Order of the Bath), though he had been offered the rank of knight in 1835, 1847, and 1863, turning down the offer on these occasions on the grounds of the relative modesty of his financial circumstances.
2. Navarino, the last great naval battle fought under sail by British men-o'-war against the Turkish and Egyptian fleets, had been as recent as 1827.



THE LATE SIR GEORGE BIDDELL AIRY, ASTRONOMER ROYAL. (From a Photograph by John Watkins.)
(See page 15.)

Daily Graphic Jan 6 1892.

Figure 5. The late Sir George Bibbell Airy, Astronomer Royal. (From a Photograph by John Watkins.) Illustration accompanied an obituary in the *Daily Graphic* of 1892 January 6. (After the Enid Airy Collection with thanks to the Airy Family.)

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