

New Londoners in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

by Philip Carter

In the footballing calendar, May is all about Cup Final day, and since 1923 (but for a brief interlude) Cup Final day has meant Wembley. The first Wembley final—the so-called White Horse final—is one of the best-known games in English football history, though it owes its celebrity less to the players of Bolton and West Ham, than to a policeman, George Scorey (1882-1965) and his horse, Billy. Organizers of the 1923 final had expected an attendance similar to those in previous years, but the new Wembley stadium—capable of holding 126,000—drew an enormous crowd. By 2pm an estimated 115,000 people had entered the ground and the turnstiles were locked. Even so, a further 50,000 to 100,000 spectators gained access by scaling the gates. Keeping order inside were just 596 policemen and a few stewards. Thousands of fans spilled onto the pitch, prompting a call for reserve officers to be brought in. One was PC Scorey who, with nine other mounted policemen, successfully cleared the playing surface by edging back the crowds. Remarkably, the game began just an hour after the planned kick-off and, two minutes later, Bolton's David Jack scored the first Wembley goal.

As well as a Chelsea/Liverpool Cup Final, May 2012 also sees the publication of the latest update of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (www.oxforddnb.com/), and with it a special selection of historical Londoners who shaped the capital between the thirteenth and late-twentieth century. Originally published in print and online in 2004, the *Oxford DNB* has since been extended in its coverage with three annual updates published every January, May and September. From May 2012 the *ODNB* will tell the stories of 58,202 men and women, of whom approximately 7500 were native Londoners, with many more one-time residents. With an eye to the summer, the May 2012 update seemed a good opportunity to look again at this coverage and to add a selection of 50 new biographies of individuals who left their mark on London's past.

It's in this capacity that George Scorey will now be added to the *ODNB*. In post-match press reports it was PC Scorey, not the goal scorer David Jack, who became the day's hero—partly for his actions and partly because, in photographs and newsreel footage, Scorey's grey mount, Billy, stood out as white. These images are familiar worldwide, but until recently little was known about Scorey before and after his Wembley appearance. May's *ODNB* update will publish what we believe is the first full account of his life, researched and written by the police historian, Chris Forester. Born in Bristol in 1882, Scorey joined the Royal Scots Greys aged fifteen, later serving as a trumpeter in the South African War, in the British Expeditionary Force, and at the subsequent battles of Ypres and Arras in 1915. Scorey left the army in 1919 and joined the mounted branch of the Metropolitan Police. In the following June he was issued with 'Billy', the 7-year old grey with whom he made his Wembley appearance. Scorey and Billy stayed together until the horse's death in 1930 and, despite numerous requests for public appearances, both returned to routine policing. Scorey retired from the Met in 1939 and



Famous image of PC Scorey at the so-called White Horse Final.

lived, with his second wife, in Chislehurst until his death in April 1965. Scorey, who rarely spoke of the 'White Horse' final, remained modest about his role, praising Billy's intelligence and the crowd's good humour. Not a football fan himself, he declined the offer of tickets to every Cup Final from 1924.

George Scorey is a good example of the new lives added in May 2012 in that his biography has had to be pieced together almost 'from scratch', rather than re-told from existing secondary sources. It's a popular misconception that the *ODNB* is simply a roll-call of the 'great and good'. Of course, there are numerous examples of such people, along with the notorious and infamous. But it's always been the Dictionary's intention (beginning with Leslie Stephen's original Victorian edition) also to provide accounts of those once notable but now forgotten, of people with close associations to well-known historical events or actions, and of individuals of interest to historians now and possibly in the future. This work of recreating lives has grown considerably in recent updates to the *ODNB*, thanks to the growing number of online genealogical resources without which, even five years ago, such first-time biographies would have been difficult if not impossible.

Another London figure of this kind is Henry Croft (1862-1930), the 'original pearly king' and founder of the pearly tradition. Here is a good example of the gap between popular anecdote—about both Croft and the wider pearly movement—and the hitherto availability of firm research. It's hoped that publication of Croft's *ODNB* biography in May 2012 will begin to redress the balance, though there's still more work to be done to provide a full story, both of the development of the pearly networks and of their founder.

Croft's origin as the first pearly king, and the early development of pearly customs remains somewhat speculative. Born in the St

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Pancras workhouse, he spent his working life as a Somers Town street cleaner, employed first by the St Pancras and then for St Pancras metropolitan borough council. In the mid- to late 1870s, Croft began decorating his clothing with mother-of-pearl buttons, then a fashionable form of dress produced in factories in London's East End. Popular accounts state that he took the idea from the relatively modest decorations worn by Somers Town costermongers, though the extent to which pearl buttons were then features of costers' working attire is debatable. Given that Croft's pearly suits were distinguished by their abundance of buttons (in contrast to the simpler decoration of costermongers' trousers and waistcoats), a more likely inspiration may have been London coster-singers, among them Hiram Travers who performed as the 'Pearly King' dressed in 'the handsomest and most costly suit of clothes ever seen' (*The Era*, 20 January 1883). The motive for developing the pearly suit appears to have been philanthropic. Dressing in this way would have allowed Croft to draw attention to himself when taking part in charitable pageants and carnivals. These had become an increasingly important means of hospital fund-raising in working-class areas of London from the 1870s, and Croft's first appeal in pearly costume is thought to have been for the London Temperance Hospital in the following decade.

While there were theatrical 'pearly kings' from at least 1883, the earliest known printed reference to Croft in this guise is a letter and photograph in the *Strand Magazine* for February 1902, identifying 'Mr F. Croft' as the 'Pearlie King of Somers Town' and describing his suit of 4900 buttons. Over the next decade a London-wide network of pearly dynasties was established, so that by 1911 each of the capital's boroughs boasted a pearly king, queen and family. To what extent Croft was involved in these organizations still remains unclear. Subsequent newspaper references drew attention to his appearance at the sporting and social events with which Pearlies became associated. In June 1907, for example, 'the Pearly King' Croft took part in the Horse of the Year show, when he was presented to Edward VII. Elsewhere he is identified for his charity work. In June 1922 'Brother Croft'—'the pearly king of the world'—was one of several monarchs raising money for the ex-servicemen's charity St Dunstan's in Regent's Park. Croft's other organizations included the Sons of Phoenix temperance society and a fund set up following the Thames floods of 1928, for which he raised £72 and received a medal from the lord mayor. The giving of medals or ribbons in recognition of collections became commonplace; after 'lifelong work for charity', Croft was said to have received 2000 such awards and to have raised as much as £5000 before his death, also at the St Pancras workhouse, in January 1930. In death, too, Henry Croft was something special. Buried at St Pancras cemetery, East Finchley, his funeral procession comprised a horse-drawn hearse, Irish pipers, 400 pearly kings, queens, and family members, and representatives of his charities. The proceedings were captured by Pathé News and Pathé was again present when a full-size statue—dressed in pearly suit, top hat and cane—was unveiled in 1934 to 'the original Pearly King of the world'.



Statue of Henry Croft in the crypt of St Martin in the Fields.

May's update of the *Oxford DNB* sees similar acts of recovery and recreation for medieval and early modern Londoners. These include Geoffrey Chaucer's scribe, Adam Pinkhurst (fl. 1385-1410), and the mercer and hospital founder, William Elsyng (d.1349). It was Elsyng's exposure to the destitute blind that prompted him to establish his institution in the Cripplegate ward. Known as the hospital of St Mary's within Cripplegate or the Elsyngspital, this was a notably large undertaking for an ordinary citizen, and the first hospital founded in London since the mid-thirteenth century. By 1331 St Mary's was said to have 60 patients who were regularly remembered by London citizens in their wills. Today the remains of the tower of its church, which became the parish church of St Alfege, can still be seen on London Wall east of the Museum of London.

Benefaction and vagrancy are also evident in the life of Wandsworth's Henry 'Dog' Smith (1549-1628), researched and written by Tim Wales. Smith gave sizeable bequests, and much good advice, to several Surrey towns, including Wandsworth, where in St Mary's church his monumental effigy provides a full report of his philanthropic achievements. His nickname originated with

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the story that he too had been a beggar ‘and was commonly called Dog Smith, because he had a dog which always followed him’. Today his name lives on through the Henry Smith Charity, based in Leadenhall Street. Smith’s contemporary, the Southwark pauper Agnes Cowper (d. after 1619), is another recently recovered life made possible by her chance encounter with the conscientious record keepers of St Saviour’s parish, Southwark. Their efforts to discover whose responsibility she was has provided an unusually full account of a single working woman in early modern London. Cowper’s story follows the decline of her trade (cap-making), her move into domestic service, vagrancy, and her mistreatment at the hands of various parish officials—here pieced together by Laura Gowing of King’s College, London.

250 years later there were echoes of Cowper’s life, and especially its sense of decline, in another new addition to the *ODNB*. In her youth Jane Cakebread (1827/8-1898) worked as a servant in Stoke Newington. However, by the 1880s she had fallen victim to drink

and, over the next two decades, she became one of London’s most celebrated criminal figures and the subject of medical enquiry. Her 277 appearances before a police court are thought to be a record number, enlivened by her colourful, and popular, abuse of modern policing and the poor manners of young officers. Cakebread’s unusual fame brought her to the attention of the temperance activist Lady Isabella Somerset who tried, and failed, to curb her excesses. She spent her final year in the LCC’s pauper asylum at Claybury where she was observed for evidence of an alcoholic ‘personality’. Cakebread’s case also was used to promote more effective responses to destitute inebriates—notably magistrates’ ability to order treatment rather than prison, which became possible with the 1898 Inebriates Act. She died at Claybury in the December of that year. Despite Cakebread having been, as a newspaper put it, ‘one of the most famous figures in the metropolis’, her funeral was attended by just a single mourner. It’s a poignant example of noteworthiness followed by anonymity. Ideal for the *Oxford DNB*.

About Philip Carter

Philip Carter is Publication Editor at the Oxford DNB, University of Oxford. The ODNB online is available free—anywhere, at any time — via nearly all UK public libraries, including every London borough. Library members are able to log-on via www.oxforddnb.com/ using a personal membership number. The May 2012 update of the ODNB was published on Thursday 24 May.