

Dark Secrets at Broad Blunsdon

Sherlock Holmes once observed: ‘...the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.’¹ The visitor to the picturesque village of Broad Blunsdon just north of Swindon would certainly be surprised to know that anything worse than rabbit poaching or apple scrumping had taken place there. There is a memorial in the village churchyard to various members of the Plummer family who lived at Holdcroft House in the village. Thomas Plummer came from a wealthy landowning family, and had a fortune of £15,000. Underneath the names of Thomas and Caroline Plummer is written:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF MARY EUGENIE WASBROUGH,
DAUGHTER OF THE ABOVE, WHO DIED 21ST JANUARY
1937, MAY SHE REST IN PEACE

No one remembers the case of Mary Eugenia Plummer now, but for a while in the mid-nineteenth century, she was national news. In May 1860, when she was just twelve years old, Eugenia stood trial at the Old Bailey on a charge of perjury.

The Reverend Henry John Hatch had been chaplain at the new Wandsworth Prison. In 1859, he advertised in *The Times* for paying pupils to be educated along with his adopted daughter, Lucy. Thomas and Caroline Plummer brought their daughters, Mary Eugenia, eleven, and her seven-year-old sister Stephana Augusta, to Wandsworth to receive tuition. The arrangement did not last long. Their mother feared that a violent thunderstorm was an act of God against her for ‘abandoning her children with strangers’ and removed both children. Eugenia was only at Wandsworth for two weeks; Stephana for just one night.

Two months later, Henry received a letter from his bishop saying that the Plummers were accusing him of assaulting both of their daughters

while they were in his care. On 1 December 1859 he was tried at the Old Bailey, convicted, and sent to Newgate for four years with hard labour. Prosecution witnesses were Eugenia, Stephana and their mother, Caroline Plummer.

There was some disquiet in the press regarding the justice of the conviction given the nature of the accusations, 'too disgusting to print', and significant discrepancies in the prosecution testimony given. Neither Henry nor his wife had been allowed to give evidence, and his counsel did not call any material witnesses. Henry's only chance of liberty was to apply for the Royal Pardon.

Henry John Hatch's petition to The Queen contained his own evidence and that of members of his household, none of which had been heard in court. But his friends pulled off a most brilliant coup: they contacted the twelve members of the jury that had convicted Henry and showed them the petition. Eleven of the twelve then signed a declaration to the effect that had they seen Henry's evidence during the trial, they would never have convicted him. But the Home Secretary, Sir George Cornwall Lewis, remained unconvinced. He did say though, that if Eugenia could be convicted of perjury – of lying about what she claimed Henry had done to her – the petition would be reconsidered.

A campaigning journal, *The Detective*, advertised for anyone with knowledge of the case to contact them; several people did, and it then printed the following – Caroline Plummer had a conviction for assaulting one of her servants, and she once threatened the children with her husband's razor while drunk. Eugenia had been asked to leave at least one school because of her behaviour, and two other schools reported that she was untrustworthy. Henry's friends advertised for funds to bring an action against Eugenia. Around £700 was raised from the public. Finally, on 15 May 1860, Mary Eugenia Plummer, now aged twelve, was put on trial at the Old Bailey for wilful and corrupt perjury.

The five-day trial was a sensation. Caroline Plummer was intoxicated in the witness box; she offered the chief prosecuting barrister, Edwin James, QC, alcoholic refreshment if he should visit her at Holdcroft House. The Plummers' doctor, John Gay, gave evidence; Eugenia had told the Hatches that she intended to marry Mr Gay when she was seventeen and he called her his 'Little Wife.' In his evidence, Mr Gay said that he had observed 'slight marks of violence' when he examined Eugenia following the alleged incidents, and he claimed that he had reported this at the previous trial. There was no record in the court transcript of Mr Gay having given evidence previously. When he was being pressed on the point he fainted and had to be carried from court. Eugenia's sister Stephana, now aged eight, who had only spent one night at the Hatches', was called, and astounded the court when she claimed that Henry had assaulted her while his wife looked on.

After the Judge's summing up which took nearly eight hours, the jury retired in the early evening. Returning two hours later they found Eugenia guilty, while recommending her to the extreme mercy of the law. She was sentenced to three weeks in prison, followed by two years in a reform school.

The press had a field day. All the national newspapers had leaders on the case. The *Morning Star* reported 'Eugenia and her evidence were utterly depraved...' The *Morning Herald* noted '...the horrible case of the wretched child Mary Eugenia Plummer...' The *Daily Telegraph* reported '...we don't like Mrs Plummer, we don't like the children... it was not Eugenia but her ill regulated parent who should have stood in the dock...justice will not be satisfied until that wretched woman has been put on trial to answer for her own perjury...'² It seemed likely that Caroline Plummer had coached the children in their evidence, invented initially by Eugenia because she did not like the sober and disciplined life at the Hatches', and needed an excuse to be taken away. If there was a conspiracy, possibly assisted by John Gay, then it took place at Holdcroft House in Broad Blunsdon. Naturally such a circumstance

was impossible to prove, so in spite of the opinion of the *Daily Telegraph*, no action was ever brought against the Plummers.



Holdcroft House, Broad Blunsdon. Caroline Plummer denied having the bell in the tower, visible over the conservatory, rung when Henry John Hatch was convicted of her daughter's assault. Hatch was later given a Royal Pardon and Caroline's daughter convicted for perjury before she was also pardoned (By kind permission of Kirsten Gillett)

A week after the trial ended Henry John Hatch was released from Newgate, having spent 191 days in prison. Two weeks after that, Eugenia, too, was released under The Royal Pardon; she was to spend several years away from her family under the control of a strict governess, where it was intended that she should receive some religious and moral education. Henry embarked on a protracted series of court actions against his solicitors for bungling his defence case. He ended his days as a country vicar in Little Linford in Buckinghamshire. On his death, his liabilities exceeded his assets by £65.



The author contemplates the Plummer memorial at Broad Blunsdon

Thus does a relatively simple memorial in a quiet country churchyard offer no clue to the nation-wide opprobrium directed towards the Plummers for the scandal of their persecution (and prosecution) of the reverend Henry John Hatch, and the turmoil in the family following Eugenia's conviction. Financially at least Eugenia was secure. At the age of 38 she married her 71 year old GP Rice Wasbrough, who left her £10,000 when he died. When Eugenia died in 1937, she left over £30,000 making her a millionairess in modern money.³

Peter Maggs

¹ *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches*, by Arthur Conan-Doyle

² *The Morning Star*, *the Morning Herald*, *the Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 15 May, 1860

³ The full story of Henry John Hatch is related in *Henry's Trials*, by Peter Maggs, ISBN 978-0-9562870-0-7 Published by Mirli Books, 2009

Footnote: I came across the case of Henry John Hatch while researching my family history. My gt-gt-gt-grandmother, Ann Hatch, had five illegitimate children. The second of these was baptised by the local rector of Sutton in

Surrey, Henry Hatch. Finding out whether my Ann Hatch and Rector Henry Hatch were related (as far as I can tell, they were not related), I came across a record of the trial of his nephew, Henry John Hatch. The research that followed, which started in 1996, resulted in the publication of *Henry's Trials* in 2009.