

JOHN THOMAS MATTHEWSON

(c.1822 – 1887)



John was baptised at St Mary's, Battle on 26th April 1824 the 'base-born' son of Maria GRACE (or GRAVES) (baptised 28th March 1808, daughter of Samuel and Martha). John's father was Alexander MATTHEWSON.

John married Emily Ellen Farmer (daughter of Horation Nelson FARMER and Caroline EAST) on 11 Nov 1850 in St Mary Magdelene, Bermondsey, and the 1851 census records:

| ADDRESS | NAME | AGE | OCCUPATION | PLACE OF BIRTH |
|--------------------------|-------|-----|------------|----------------|
| 3 Swan Lane, Rotherhithe | John | 29 | Cooper | b Battle |
| | Emily | 29 | | b Bermondsey |

By the time of the 1861 census they had already established a considerable family and the places of birth of their children indicate frequent moves. We also see that John's mother was now living with them (no doubt providing assistance following the birth of Samuel):

| ADDRESS | NAME | AGE | OCCUPATION | PLACE OF BIRTH |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------|------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 Anne Place, Rotherhithe | John T | 38 | Cooper | b Battle |
| | Emily E | 38 | | b Bermondsey |
| | Emily M | 9 | | b Surrey [otherwise illegible] |
| | Martha | 7 | | b Fulham |
| | Alice | 5 | | b Bermondsey |
| | Samuel E | 1month | | b Rotherhithe |
| | Maria Grace | 57 | | b Battle |

Maria died shortly after, at Islington during the second quarter of 1861. Emily died on 3 July 1863 and John later Harriet HINTON. The Census of 1881 records John living with his new wife and stepson:

| ADDRESS | NAME | AGE | OCCUPATION | PLACE OF BIRTH | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| 353 Kensington Road, Hackney | John Matthewson | 59 | Journeyman Cooper | Battle, Sx | |
| | Harriet | -ditto- | 55 | | London City |
| | Henry Hinton | 30 | Warehouseman | Stepney | |

John died at West Ham during the last quarter of 1887.

But these mundane facts belie a fascinating and colourful life.

Matthewson had taken the Queen's shilling, initially enlisting in the Royal Artillery, transferring in April/May 1846 into the elite 7th Queen's Own Hussars, an event which led indirectly to his place in history. By July 1846 he was to be found in hospital at the regiment's barracks on Hounslow Heath. Private 995 John Thomas Matthewson had received 100 lashes on 22nd June 1846 and was 'not expected to live.' His crime was to have acknowledged a sergeant by saying "Halloa" and his punishment had

caused great stir in the regiment because in those progressive times his comrades had until that point considered that flogging could only be sentenced if 'disrespect' was compounded by the offence of 'insubordination'.

But that event was not his claim to fame, rather its happenstance; for in the adjacent bed was Private Frederick John White. White had dressed Matthewson's back after the flogging and was himself in the hospital having, on 15th June, received 150 lashes with the cat o' nine tails. After apparently starting to recover White observed to Matthewson on 30th June that his heart was beating so violently it was visible through his shirt; White died on 11th July. A post-mortem undertaken at the barracks recorded White had died of inflammation of the heart, pleura and left lung. Exceptionally, at the commanding officer's insistence, a certificate was made out stating 'the cause of death was in no wise connected with the corporal punishment he received on the 15th June last.' Much to the annoyance of the regiment's officers an Inquest was nevertheless convened and commenced sitting at the George IV inn, Houndslow Heath on 15th July. It was in his evidence, commenced on 20th July 1846 (the second sitting of the Inquest), that Matthewson was launched to national fame.

Matthewson gave evidence of his own offence and court-marshal. Whilst working in the stables he heard a voice calling him from outside. He answered "Halloa" at which a sergeant entered. The sergeant demanded what he meant by answering in that manner to which Matthewson rejoined, "Do you want me to go on my knees to you?" His evidence continued to explain he was then taken before the commanding officer, Colonel Whyte, who gave him seven days' solitary confinement for insolence to a N.C.O. Unfortunately Matthewson, not knowing when to give in, asked how he was supposed to answer. The Colonel then immediately ordered a court-martial for insolence, at which he was sentenced to receive 100 lashes. In the House of Commons debate that followed it was stated by Colonel Peel M.P., a friend of Col. Whyte, that matters were not as Matthewson had purported; that he (Peel) had reported Matthewson for being grossly disrespectful to him but that being a young soldier Col. Whyte had let off Matthewson with a warning "admonishing him in the kindest manner" and tore up the charge sheet; but that Matthewson had taken none of his Colonel's fatherly advice and four days later answered the sergeant "in a surly manner". Col. Peel related that the commanding officer initially gave Matthewson seven days confinement. Matthewson then "in a most insolent manner" demanded of Col Whyte "How would you have me answer a sergeant?" to which the Colonel had answered that he should do so in a respectful manner. However the M.P. related that when being taken to the guard room Matthewson muttered "most insolently and used language such as cannot be repeated in this House", and that all had agreed Matthewson's conduct had been much the most insolent they had ever witnessed. But the press and the nation took notice that Matthewson had received 100 lashes with a cat o' nine tails for a crime that could not be absolutely defined, and took a close interest in following his evidence to the Inquest. As a witness to the flogging of his comrade Private White, Matthewson stated the commanding officer stood motionless, only offering comment "Strike lower!":

Coroner: "Why did Whyte [i.e. Col. Whyte] cry "Strike lower!?"

Matthewson: "Because the lashes were taking effect on his neck. I noticed the skin puff up immediately after the blow had struck him. The lash cut him to the roots of his back hair, and as low as the bottom of his ribs."

Coroner: "Did the deceased make any observation to you about the cause of his illness?"

Matthewson: "I don't exactly remember."

Coroner: "Did he say, "I think I shall die" ?"

Matthewson: "I think he did."

Coroner: "Did he eat, or have much appetite latterly?"

Matthewson: "He ate his allowance on the Saturday before his death. On Sunday he ate a potato, and on Manday a small bit of toast. I told the doctor myself of White's lack of appetite, but no extras of nourishing food was provided that I know of."

Coroner: "Did the deceased say anything as to the state of his health at the time he was punished?"

Matthewson: "He did. He said he was not fit to be punished."

The coroner voiced his opinion that as Matthewson himself had received punishment his name should not be published by the press, however Matthewson declined this offer and continued his evidence,

"I was present when White described the pain over his heart to Dr Warren [the regiment's surgeon]. That was on the Wednesday before his death. Dr Warren said to the deceased, "How are you White?" The deceased made no answer. Dr Warren immediately said, "Come, cheer up, it was for no disgraceful crime you were punished." White then said, "This is through the lash – that has caused my illness." Dr Warren made answer, "I know it is, I know it is", several times."

Coroner: "Did he explain what he meant by this?"

Matthewson: "No. I understand he meant it was because of the severity of the punishment. When Dr Warren examined White he did not put his ear to his chest, or tap it. He came again the same evening and bled him, and in the morning he blistered him. But [Dr Warren] did not go near White to examine him. He only looked as he pulled of his shirt. On Thursday morning Dr Warren came about 10 o'clock, and told the deceased to cheer up, and he would be a good soldier yet. He looked at the deceased's chest and back, but did not go near him or use any instrument. He ordered him a blister if he felt worse....[then referring to himself] ...my back is not well now, properly speaking. I had boils on my back, and pains in my chest, side and back, same as White complained of. The day after the flogging I had difficulty in breathing. Three or four days after that the pain left the chest and came to the sides. It would sometimes leave for two or three hours, then come back again."

Coroner: "Were you given any medicine for this?"

Matthewson: "No – I still feel it in the evenings when I lie down and draw breath. It feels as though something was running into my sides."

Coroner: "Did you mention this to the surgeon?"

Matthewson: "No."

Coroner: "Did you notice anything in the punishment of White which you did not observe in the punishment of the other men?"

Matthewson: "I did not. I believe there is an order for the removal of the stock [an item of uniform which might otherwise have provided an element of protection] from the neck while under punishment....I was going to keep my stock on, but I took it off by the order of the Adjutant. Some of the lashes fell on my head and amongst my hair. The marks are there now. The same farriers flogged me as flogged White."

The press made hay with Matthewson's evidence, and readers wrote adding their experiences and thoughts. Matthewson gave further testimony at the third and fourth sittings, during which he alleged Col. Whyte tried to silence him, or at least get him to modify his testimony, by the offer of promotion to Corporal. By now he was being hailed by the reforming press as a whistle-blower and by the Tory press condemned for a soldier-lawyer from 'the same class as furnishes the Chartist Orators...and....Anti-Corn Law League lecturers' who were 'sufficient to corrupt the discipline of a regiment by their pettifogging insolence'. Eventually, on 3rd August 1846, the Inquest jury returned a verdict that White had died,

'from the mortal effects of a severe and cruel flogging....In returning this verdict, the jury cannot refrain from expressing their horror and disgust at the existence of any law amongst the statutes or regulations of this realm, which permits the revolting punishment of flogging to be inflicted upon British soldiers: and at the same time the jury implore every man in this kingdom to join hand and heart in forwarding petitions to the Legislature, praying in the most urgent terms for the abolition of every law, order and regulation which permits the disgraceful practice of flogging to remain one moment longer a slur upon the humanity and fair name of the people of this country!'

Inevitably debate followed in the House of Commons, rehearsing the arguments presented at the Inquest. Whether justified or not Matthewson was, within two months facing another court-marshal for insubordination and 'using insulting and disgustingly abusive language to Lance Sergeant O'Donnell, his superior officer, accompanied by threats of violence' (The Times, 30.9.1846). Convicted on the sole evidence of Sergeant O'Donnell, this time Matthewson was sentenced to six months' imprisonment, two of which were to be in solitary confinement. By March 1847 he was back with his regiment, now in Ireland, but Matthewson had become a *cause celebre* not just with the reforming press but the wider public, a committee having been formed to raise, by penny subscription, funds to purchase his discharge from the army; Matthewson's discharge at a cost of £30 was recorded in January 1848.

But flogging was to continue in the British army, albeit with further reduction of the permissible maximum number of lashes. Matthewson however was to have the final word. More than thirty years later an incident in 1879, during the Zulu War, brought the subject once more before the House of Commons. During the debate a letter was read to the House by F. Hugh O'Donnell M.P., Member for Dungarven:

Sir,

Seeing that members of the House of Commons doubt the statements made as to the effects of the punishment of the lash, I will give you my experience of it. Thirty-five [sic] years ago I belonged to the 7th (Queen's Own) Hussars, and at the time I bore a good character.

My crime was calling out 'hullo' to a sergeant who called my name. I was warned for court-marshal, tried, sentenced, punished, and in hospital in less than two hours.

My boots were filled with blood. The marks are still to be seen on my back and neck. My back is always breaking out where the knots of the cat cut, and I can get no rest, so that I have been punished for 33 years by a hot-tempered colonel, and that for no crime. I am now almost sixty years old, and I suppose I shall suffer to my death.

The navy suspended flogging that same year, 1879. The last flogging in the army occurred in 1880. Abolition was finally achieved in 1881.

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Sources:

Censuses for 1851, 1861 & 1881

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The Times, 30th September 1846

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