

# BOYS DEATH IMPROVES LIFE FOR OTHERS

## *Valentine Gray 1813-1822 and the Ramoneur Company*

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In 1822 a nine year old boy, Valentine Gray, who was one of the many chimney-climbing boys was found dead in the filthy outhouse where he was forced to sleep. It was at the back of a house, perhaps better described as a hovel, situated in one of the numerous slum alleys radiating off Pyle Street in Newport. Medical examination showed that his body was covered with bruises and the inquest learnt that his death was due to a severe blow or blows to the head. Following the inquest Valentine Gray's employer and his wife were charged and imprisoned for manslaughter. Both the local and national press reports of the inquest and the subsequent trial were extensive. They aroused much public anger not only in the Island but also across the whole country that children of his age and even younger could be treated so badly. It stimulated the already growing drive for new and effective legislation to protect youngsters in factories and elsewhere. It also led others to embark on philanthropic ventures such as that of the Ramoneur Company recorded below.

Here on the Island compassion, or was it perhaps more a sense of guilt and shame, led to the erection of a memorial put up by public subscription. It still stands nearly two hundred years later in Church Litten where it remains a pertinent memorial to him. Another reminder today of Valentine Gray's short and wretched life is a small shopping complex recently built between Scarrots Lane and Pyle Street, close to where he lived for the last miserable years of his life, for it is called Gray's Walk and has a suitable plaque to perpetuate his name and the suffering of climbing-boys.



*To the memory of Valentine Gray  
the little sweep  
Interred January the 5<sup>th</sup> A.D. 1822 in the  
10<sup>th</sup> year of his age  
In testimony of the general feeling  
for suffering innocence  
this monument is erected by  
public subscription*

Church Litten (now often called Litten Park) was the burial ground for the town of Newport. The parish church of St Thomas had no space around it for a burial ground.



The trial in 1822 of the Davis the Newport chimney sweep provoked national fury and was the catalyst needed to raise public awareness that was to change the attitude towards the ill-treatment of children like Valentine. Above is shown the plaque on the walk in the little courtyard at the centre of Gray's Walk, reminding passers by that that his short life\* of misery was certainly not in vain and the part the Island played in changing the law.

(\*Valentine was in his tenth year)

Like so many others in the same situation he came from a pauper family and taken from care of the poorhouse by the sweep Davies to work for him. He had been born in the nearby Hampshire village across the Solent of Alverstone. For the authorities it was one less name on their list, a saving of money and for employer a source of cheap labour. It appears that scant regard was taken for the future welfare of him or those like him.

Campaigns by such eminent politicians as the then Lord Shaftsbury, pamphlets and books such as the '*Water Babies*' by Charles Kingsley resulted in laws that ended climbing-boys being forced to sweep the chimneys of wealthy householder both here on the Island as well as on the mainland. Locally things started to move and by 1828 the *Hampshire Telegraph* was able to print:

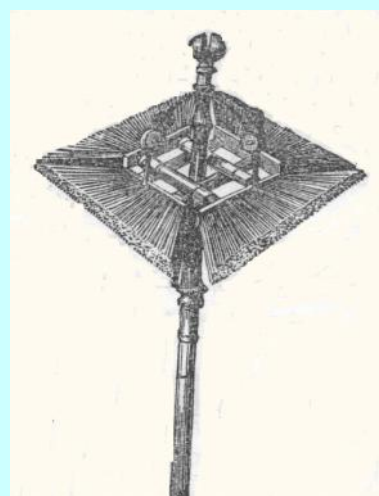
*"Newport July 26 – The Rev P. Geary, the mayor of Newport, with the kind attention which he has shown to the needs of the Inhabitants since his appointment to the important office of Chief Magistrate, has, in complying with the requisition most numerous and respectably signed, appointed a Public Meeting to be held at the Guildhall, on Tuesday the 29<sup>th</sup> inst to take into consideration the proper measures to be adopted for superseding the necessity of Climbing Boys, and substituting the use of Machines in Sweeping Chimneys. A large assemblage of the principal inhabitants of the town and neighbourhood, both of ladies and gentlemen, is expected"*

Many will be able to recall Charles Kingsley's '*Water Babies*' and no doubt the reforming work of Lord Shaftsbury, but it is expected that few will have any knowledge of the *Ramoneur Company* and its achievements. It was going strong, using its 1842 Patent no 9284, long before the legislation of 1864 "*Act for the Regulation of Chimney Sweepers*" and its penalty of £10 for offenders.

The patent of Sir Francis Desanges of Portman Square London and Anguish Durant of Long Castle, Shropshire was for

*"Improvements in apparatus for sweeping and cleaning chimneys or flues, and extinguishing fires therein, which we intend to call Ramonuer".*

The patent was created around the design of special brushes on rods which had several universal pivots that could get the brush into every nook and cranny thus eliminating the use of climbing boys – see the illustration showing the brush. Chimneys built in many of the larger houses of this period were often quite complex in design with many nooks and bends with some even having branches to several fireplaces. They founded a company of the same name, ‘Ramoneur’. The world can still be found in a large dictionary meaning a *chimney sweep*. (Today there is a modern national cleaning and service organisation which still uses the name of *Ramoneur*.)



A circular issued from Southampton read:

*“Established for the suppression of Climbing boys, and the more effectual Cleansing of Chimneys and Flues by the use of an efficient Patent Machine; and also to” provide the 'Agricultural Interest' with a pure and unadulterated article of Soot.”*

The Ramoneur Company received great support from many of the nobility, churchmen and gentry in the area. Although itself not an Island company or invention, the death of Valentine Gray contributed much to its founding. Their principal offices were in Southampton at number 5 Above Bar and they had agents at Portsmouth in Britain Street of St George’s Square in Portsea. There was an Isle of Wight section. They recruited men, not boys, who were paid a reasonable wage and wore a smart and distinctive uniform. The men were encouraged to improve their education whilst in employment and what is perhaps of more significance were provided with accommodation for which they paid rent. Some details of the Isle of Wight Association still exist. In the IW Record Office are preserved details of the local association up to around the year 1850. Part of those reported for the year 1848 are set out below:

**Accounts** *“Isle of Wight Patent Ramoneur”* for £215-5s-7d  
1848

Wages	£153-16s-0d
Cash at Ryde	£2-16s-9d
Rent paid by men at Newport	£2-6s-8d

*General Managers Returns for week ending March 24<sup>th</sup> 1849*

	<u>No of sweepings</u>	<u>Brought forward</u>
Newport	46	560
Ryde	10	148
Cowes	16	166
Ventnor	4	42
Yarmouth	--	--
Brading	--	--
<u>Totals</u>	76	916

Gross estimated value of work done £4-1s-2d and soot £1-10-6d

Income for the week £5-11s-8d

Joseph Starling General Manager  
Isle of Wight Ramoneur Office at Newport

No doubt the growing interest at the time in applying ever more fertilisers on farm and gardens helped the company achieve over a quarter of its income from the sale of soot in 1848. For soot had been promoted as a 'safe and natural' substance to use, a fallacy that was to last until the phasing out of coal fires in the decades following the Second World War.

In this day and age no longer do most of us need the services of a ramoneur for our chimneys so it is perhaps easy to forget the contribution the sacrifice of Valentine Gray made towards creating better lives for youngsters today and the inventions made by this company. (There is still a national company engaged in industrial cleaning of aircraft and the like with the Ramoneur name)



It is perhaps a pity that the brush on the sign above the Pyle Street entrance to Gray's Walk is not of the Ramoneur type, but it never the less provides a reminder that Newport and the Isle of Wight played a significant role in changing public attitudes which resulted in regulations for the protection and welfare of child workers – starting with the climbing-boys and spreading to other industries – Valentine Gray's death was not in vain.

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