



'Captain Freak' of Dunbar: An East Lothian Visitor to Royalty

After her coronation in 1838, Queen Victoria was a frightened young woman. She was relentlessly pursued by a weird teenager, Edward, 'the Boy' Jones, who had an uncanny ability to sneak into Buckingham Palace without being detected. Dr Jan Bondeson tells us it would take until 1843 for an East Lothian man to try and emulate the Boy Jones.

Most of us today think of Queen Victoria as an elderly, corpulent matron, dignified but forbidding-looking. But in 1838, she was young and not unattractive; just crowned Queen of her country, and still virginal and unmarried. Throughout Britain, there was widespread sympathy for, and curiosity about, the young Queen. Her coronation was viewed by huge and enthusiastic crowds, who were looking forward to her spring-like reign. There was no such thing as royal security in those days. Queen Victoria's court at Buckingham Palace was run by well-nigh medieval standards by a number of inert functionaries, and no person was directly responsible for her security. Three groups of equally ineffective royal guardians operated independent of each other: the elderly and feeble royal porters, the pages who valued their night's sleep, and the military sentries who did not take their job very seriously. This very slack regime was exposed by Queen Victoria's determined young stalker, the extraordinary 'Boy Jones', who developed an obsession with the young Queen. Time after time, he sneaked into Buckingham Palace to spy on her, sit on the

throne, and rummage in her private apartments. "Supposing he had come into the Bedroom, how frightened I should have been!" the fearful young Queen wrote in her journal after the Boy Jones had been discovered lurking underneath a sofa in the room next to the one where she slept.

Edward 'The Boy' Jones was born in 1824, the son of a drunken old tailor, whose entire family lodged in a single room and slept on miserable rags. In December 1838, the Boy Jones was caught inside Buckingham Palace, where he had rummaged round in the empty bedrooms, including Queen Victoria's private apartments. Since he had stolen a quantity of the Queen's underwear, and some other palace mementoes as well, 'the Sweep in the Palace', as he was called for being so very dirty, was tried at the Westminster Sessions. Thanks to a clever barrister and a bonhomous judge, his palace intrusion was treated as a joke, however, and he was acquitted. In December 1840, the Boy Jones was back in Buckingham Palace. This time, he was caught lurking underneath a sofa in Queen Victoria's dressing-room. He had been there for

several hours, witnessing the Queen's private tête-à-tête with Prince Albert. It would have been perfectly possible for him to burst into the young Queen's bedroom, pull off her bedclothes and shout 'View hallo!' There was widespread outrage that such a filthy ragamuffin would be able to enter Buckingham Palace at will, and the incompetent royal guardians were rightly lambasted by the press. Due to the delicate question what the Boy had really seen in Queen Victoria's dressing-room, he was tried *in camera* by the Privy Council, and sentenced to three months in prison, as a rogue and a vagabond.

After he had been released from prison in March 1841, it did not take long for the Boy Jones to find his way back into Buckingham Palace; he was arrested in the Picture Gallery, eating some cold meat and potatoes he had stolen in the royal kitchen. Once more, the Boy Jones was brought before the Privy Council, and sentenced to three more months in jail. There was speculation how many times the Boy Jones had been inside Buckingham Palace but escaped undetected. His father said that Edward had often been away for days on end; when asked what he had been doing, he had refused to explain his absence. In the end, the Boy Jones was kidnapped by government agents and forced to serve in the Royal Navy for six years without charge or trial. He later became a burglar and was transported to Australia, where he was Town Crier of Perth for a while, before falling off a bridge in Bairnsdale when drunk and dying in 1893.

It would take until 25 March 1843 for any East Lothian man to try to emulate the Boy Jones. Just after midnight, a young man dressed as a mariner was observed by a police constable walking back and forth just outside the gates to Buckingham Palace. He asked one of the sentinels how long he had been on duty, and the palace watchman politely answered about an hour. When the suspicious policeman asked what the man in nautical attire was doing there, he blurted out that he had been robbed and demanded entry to the Buckingham Palace. Believing him to be drunk or insane, the constable took him into custody. His pockets turned out to contain a quantity of papers and a pocket-book, but no money at all. When brought before the magistrate Mr Hall at the Bow Street police office the following day, the would-be palace intruder identified himself as 'John Edward Freak', a Dunbar mariner. He gave evasive answers to the magistrate's questions: when asked if he was a common sailor or a sea captain, he said 'You may see that by my papers' and when asked if he was one of the proprietors of the vessel, he sullenly replied 'Possibly I am'. When asked whether he had any relations, 'Freak' pointed to his breast with a dramatic gesture, exclaiming 'All my relations are in myself, and you will learn by my papers that this is the truth!' Suspecting that 'Freak' was not right in the head, Mr Hall ordered two doctors to be fetched and directed the master of St Martin's Workhouse to take charge of the prisoner.

A little research shows that John Edward Freake [so spelt] was born at Dunbar in 1815, the illegitimate son of Dr John Edward Freake MD and his mistress Elizabeth Johnson. When Freake Sr died in 1822, he left Elizabeth Johnson and young John Edward a hundred pounds in his will. It would appear as if that money was eventually made use of to purchase a ship, since when taken into custody for his attempted palace intrusion, Freake was master of the Scotia, currently lying in Folkestone on the way from Dunbar to France. He stayed at Ward F in St Martin's Workhouse for a while, before being admitted to Hanwell Asylum, from which he was discharged as cured on September 27 1843. He never did anything newsworthy again.



OLD HARRY'S VISIT TO JONES, IN SEARCH OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE.
"Now, my lad, just inform me how you managed to get in, for that's the very thing I want to do!"
'Vy, yer see, my Lord, I can't very well do that, 'cos I means to go back again ven I gets out o' quod.'

Old Harry's visit to Jones, a caricature from the *Odd Fellow* of April 24, 1841, depicting the Boy giving some advice to politician 'Old Harry' Brougham. The Boy Jones may well have been drawn from life.



Buckingham Palace, from vol. 3 of Ackerman's *Microcosm of London*



The young Queen Victoria, from vol. 2 of the *Gallery of Engravings*

Jan Bondeson is author of *Queen Victoria's Stalker* (2012) and *Murder Houses of Edinburgh* (2020). There is a short film about the Boy Jones: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6_09yiQtfI