

# A Murder at The Adelphi – William Terriss R.I.P.

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This note is about an unusual engraved coin, shown in Figure 1. Whilst many engraved coins serve as memento mori, it is often difficult to find further details of the person involved. As the title of this article suggests, this piece has a more interesting story to tell.



**Fig. 1.** Gothic Florin dated 1884, engraved across the obverse “*William Terriss Dec. 16 1897.*” in an italic script and “*R.I.P.*” in an italic block font. (Shown 200%).

A quick Google search reveals the extent of the story, with Wikipedia<sup>(1)</sup> and Encyclopaedia Britannica<sup>(2)</sup> entries and a whole book dedicated to William Terriss.<sup>(3)</sup> The following paragraphs provide a brief summary.

William Charles James Lewin, the third son of barrister, George Herbert Lewin, was born in St John’s Wood, London, 20 February 1847. He was educated at Christ’s Hospital and then Bruce Castle School, Tottenham, followed by Windermere College and finally Jesus College, Oxford.

Following a short time in the merchant navy he tried several careers abroad, but on returning to England, he decided to become an actor, adopting the stage name William Terriss. His first appearance on stage was at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Birmingham in 1868 (Figure 1.). Two years later he was in the London West End.

He married Amy Fellowes in 1870 with whom he had two sons and a daughter. One of his sons and daughter would also become significant characters in the entertainment industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Following another trip abroad (sheep farming in the Falklands!) he returned to the theatre in London in 1871. He performed many leading roles and in 1880 joined Sir Henry Irving, the great Victorian actor-manager, at the Lyceum Theatre. In 1883 he moved to the Adelphi Theatre, returning to Irving and the Lyceum a few years later. He was one of Britain’s most popular actors in the late Victorian era – his dashing looks, voice, demeanour and swashbuckling style gave him many heroic roles and leading parts and the nickname “Breezy Bill”.

The following figures show William Terriss in some of his theatrical roles.



**Fig. 2.** William Terriss in 1868.



**Fig. 3.** William Terriss in the lead in *Romeo and Juliet*, at Drury Lane in 1873.



**Fig. 4.** William Terriss as Squire Thornhill in *Olivia*, at the Adelphi in 1878.



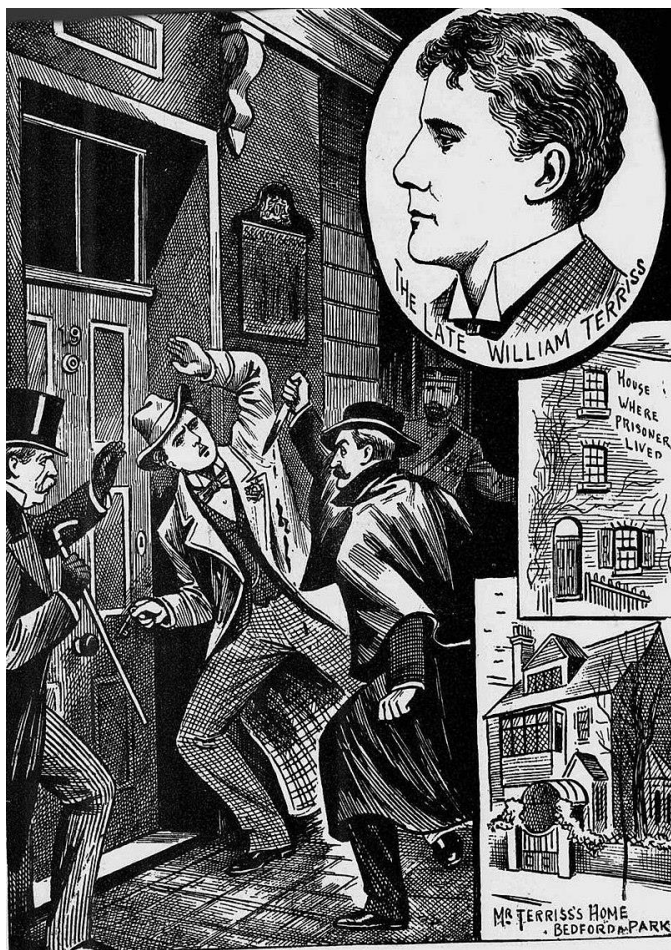
**Fig. 5.** William Terriss and Jesse Millward in *The Harbour Lights* in 1885. The play ran for 513 performances.



**Fig. 6.** William Terriss as the title character in *Henry VIII*, at the Lyceum in 1892.

On 16 December 1897, as he was entering the Adelphi Theatre through the stage door in Maiden Lane to prepare for the evening's performance of *Secret Service*, Terriss was stabbed to death by a deranged and disgruntled actor, Richard Archer Prince

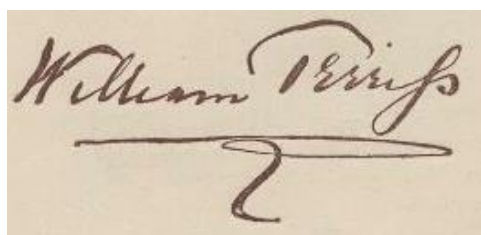
Terriss had known Prince for many years, helping him find early acting roles and even positions in his own plays. During the run of *The Harbour Lights*, in which Prince had a minor role, Terriss took offence to something that Prince said about him and had Prince dismissed. Terriss, however, sent small sums of money to Prince via the Actors' Benevolent Fund, and continued to try to find him acting work. By the end of 1897, Prince was destitute and desperate for work, but he had become unemployable due to his abuse of alcohol and mental instability (Absinthe?).



**Fig. 7.** The murder of William Terriss.

It has been claimed that Terriss's ghost haunts Covent Garden tube station and the Adelphi Theatre.<sup>(1)</sup>

The whole of Terriss's career, his murder and the trial of Richard Prince can be traced through national and international newspapers. There was quite an outcry when Prince was not given the death penalty for the murder.



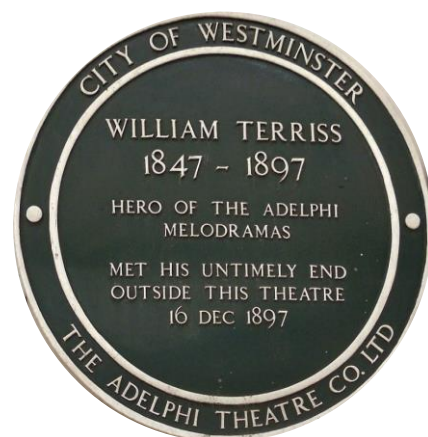
**Fig. 9.** Autograph of William Terriss.

On 13 December 1897 Prince was forcibly ejected from the foyer of the Vaudeville Theatre. The following evening Prince and Terriss were seen arguing in the Adelphi Theatre. On the day of the murder Prince asked for money at the Fund's office, but was refused. He then crossed the street and waited for Terriss, hiding in a doorway near the Adelphi's stage door. Terriss was killed by a stab through the heart.

The murder of such a well-known actor made sensational news. Figure 7 shows a sketch of the crime as depicted in *The Illustrated Police News* (1897).

At the trial, Prince was found guilty but insane and sent to Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, where he died in 1937.

Terriss was buried at Brompton Cemetery, London and a plaque commemorating his life can be found above the stage door of the Adelphi Theatre (figure 8).



**Fig. 8.** Plaque to William Terriss above the Adelphi Theatre stage door.

Figure 9. shows the autograph of one of the most famous actors of his time, cut down at the age of forty nine.

Returning to the engraved coin, the style of the engraving is interesting in that it includes both italic script and italic block letters. In the 1890s there was a change in fashion from engraving using a cursive font to a more “blocky” angular font. Combined with the wear of the coin it is very likely that the engraving was carried out shortly after the date of the murder.

The coin is also pierced, suggesting it was intended to be worn with a loop on a chain. However, close-ups of the piercing show that it has not been on a loop for any period of time, as the marks in the metal created when the hole was drilled are still visible (Figure 10.)



**Fig. 10.** Close-ups of the hole drilled for suspension

## References and Acknowledgements

- (1) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Terriss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Terriss)
- (2) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Terriss>
- (2) A.J. Smythe. *The Life of William Terriss, Actor*. 1898

Thanks to Nigel Lutt for bringing this intriguing coin to my attention and for first identifying William Terriss.

## Post Script – 24 January 2023

Thanks to Andrew Wager, another piece has been found with the same inscription. (Shown below 200%). This piece is engraved in exactly the same style, on the obverse of a much more worn Victorian Young Head shilling. It also has a piercing and the wear suggests it has been hanging from a loop for some years. The piercing has made the exact date unreadable, but as the head is a higher profile than later issues, the date is probably one of 1839, 1849 or 1859.

It is suspected that quite a few made by an enterprising engraver and sold to friends, mourners, close family, and fellow actors of Terriss. Pieces may have been sold to “fans”, if such a thing existed back then, but maybe not to the general public.

