

Edward George Edwards

From Birmingham Streets to Bookara Flats

The newspapers in Birmingham once called him “a sharp and practised hand”.

Edward George Edwards was born in Birmingham in 1835, in a city of smoke, metal, and crowded courts. He was the eldest son of Edward Edwards, a warehouseman and glass packer, and his wife Elizabeth, known as Eliza, whose own father made pearl buttons for a living.

Edward’s parents married in 1834 at St Bartholomew’s Church in Edgbaston, and the following year their first child was baptised. That baptism record matters. It anchors the family firmly to Birmingham and records Edward’s father’s trade, details that quietly ground a life later too often described only through crime and punishment.

Edward grew up in a working-class household where literacy existed, but was never guaranteed. His father could sign his own name, something many men of his class could not. That small detail matters. It helps explain something seen much later in Edward’s life, when he writes clearly and forcefully to the press decades after his conviction.

His childhood ended early. In June 1841, when Edward was just six years old, his father died suddenly at the age of twenty-nine. The family were living at Lawley Street in Aston. Eliza was left a widow with four young children and little security.

Four years later, she remarried a gun finisher named Richard Hines. Neither Eliza nor Richard could sign their names. They made their marks on the marriage register, a quiet reminder that even within a single household, education and opportunity could divide lives sharply.

By 1851, the blended family was living in a Birmingham court dwelling. Edward was sixteen and already working. The census records him as a jeweller, a description supplied by the head of the household, his stepfather. In Birmingham, this did not mean luxury. It meant skilled metal work, precision, and long hours. Young men entered these trades early, often as assistants, learning accuracy and trust.

This work connects closely with Edward’s later occupation as a scale beam finisher, a specialist trade involving the manufacture and finishing of precision weighing mechanisms used for jewellery, gold, and coinage. Rather than drifting between occupations, Edward was trained within a single skilled environment long before his life became defined by the courts.

Sometime after 1851, Edward left the family home. There is no record of why. There rarely is. It may have been work, conflict, or simply the pressure of too many people in too small a space. What followed marked a sharp break in his life.

In January 1854, an Edward Edwards was convicted of larceny in Warwickshire and sentenced to eight months’ imprisonment. While absolute certainty is impossible, the timing and trajectory align closely with Edward George Edwards.

Four years later, his name appeared again, this time loudly and repeatedly, in the Birmingham newspapers. In 1858, George Edwards stood before the courts charged with stealing from the person. The reports are vivid and unkind. They describe him approaching children in the streets, persuading them to hand over coins for safekeeping or to obtain change, then returning worthless substitutes.

One paper wrote that he induced children to place their money in his hands under the pretence of changing or securing it, before substituting a piece of lead or other worthless object. Another described him as “a sharp and practised hand”, claiming he had for some time past infested the streets, his manner plausible and artful.

The language is theatrical and moralising. The reader is meant to see not just a thief, but a corrupter of innocence. Almost a Dickensian figure, shaped as much by the pen as by the offence.

Some reports went further, hinting at aliases and prior convictions. Whether this was confusion, exaggeration, or careless journalism is impossible to know. What is certain is that Edward George Edwards was convicted in 1858 and sentenced to ten years’ penal servitude.

Transportation followed.

In October 1862, Edward boarded the convict ship Merchantman in London. The ship took on convicts in Bermuda before arriving at Fremantle in February 1863. His physical description survives. He was five feet one inches tall, stoutly built, fair complexioned, with light hair, light hazel eyes, and a round face. There were no distinguishing marks. No scars. No tattoos. No photograph. Just words on paper.

He was recorded as literate and employed as a scale beam finisher. Even here, in a system designed to reduce men to numbers, his skill and education were noted.

He received his Ticket of Leave within weeks. Like many expirees, he followed work rather than opportunity. Fremantle. Toodyay. Eventually, the Greenough district.

He settled at Bookara, not as a favoured settler or rewarded explorer, but as a man leasing land, building slowly and precariously, without protection or privilege.

In 1868, Edward married Rose Ann Poole at the Government Schoolhouse on the Middle Greenough Flats. Rose Ann was the daughter of John Poole, himself a transported convict. Their marriage joined two families shaped by conviction, labour, and endurance.

Together they raised a large family and built a life on the flats alongside the Poole and Stokes families.

By the 1870s and 1880s, Edward appears in records not as a criminal, but as a settler. He worked. He registered deaths. In 1885, he was fined one pound for a minor breach of the Scab Act and, notably, was not identified as an expiree. On paper at least, the past was receding.

Then came 1888.

The Greenough floods destroyed everything. Water swallowed the flats. Wells collapsed. Crops vanished. The Traveller’s Rest Inn was flooded to the eaves. Edward’s mudbrick house was destroyed. Families fled to the eastern hills.

For months the water did not recede. When it did, winter rains brought it back again. Men dug trenches by hand. Maitland Brown supervised the blasting of channels with gelignite. The land resisted them all.

Edward and his family were listed among those in need of assistance. Relief funds were raised across the colony. And yet, none of that relief reached Bookara.

Six weeks after the flood, fire came. A bushfire surrounded the Edwards home and burned it to the ground. A newspaper reported that the family were left without bedding, without clothing, and without a stick to call their own.

Later reports claimed that no distress had been permitted to occur.

Edward read those reports.

In November 1888, he wrote back.

Writing under his own name, Edward George Edwards addressed the editor directly. His words are controlled, articulate, and furious.

After we were burnt out on the 11th of April, he wrote, we had nothing to call our own, but it seems to us that our case has been quite forgotten.

There was no family placed in a worse condition than my own were after the flood and fire. At the present time they are in rags, and as for household furniture, we have six or seven old packing cases.

He accused others of exaggerating losses and receiving help they did not need.

Those that stand in the least need, he wrote, can always get the most help.

He described risking his life repairing a dangerous flood damaged well to earn money for clothing for his family, only to remain unpaid months later.

I have risked my life in repairing one rotten old well, he wrote, but although I have done this nigh three months, I have not been paid for it yet.

This is Edward's voice. Not the voice given to him by newspapers in 1858, but his own. Literate. Measured. Angry. Demanding fairness, not pity.

After the floods and fire of 1888, George and Rose Ann Edwards did not leave Bookara. Instead, they rebuilt. Using what materials they could gather, they built another mudbrick house. That cottage still exists today, though now in ruins. Its remains stand as a quiet marker of persistence rather than prosperity.

The Edwards family were already socially excluded before their religious conversion. Although they attended St James' Church at Greenough, they were not fully accepted. Poverty, difference, and lingering prejudice shaped that experience.

When Seventh day Adventist colporteurs arrived in the district, including Brother Fred Reekie, followed in 1897 by Brother and Sister James Hindson, the Edwards family were among those visited. The Hindsons offered religious and health publications, including Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation by Uriah Smith.

George Edwards bought the book and read it carefully.

Through that reading, he became convinced that Saturday was the true Sabbath. He spoke openly with his sons Jack, and Arthur. As a family, they attempted to observe both Saturday and Sunday, caught between conviction, tradition, and the realities of farming. For a time, they returned to Sunday observance, not from rejection of belief, but from necessity.

In 1900, further guidance arrived. Pastor Jessie Pallant came from Perth and stayed with the Edwards family for three months. He worked quietly among several households at Bookara and the Greenough Flats.

By the end of these studies, a Seventh day Adventist Company was formed, with twenty five members. Meetings were held in the kitchen of Richard Hollingsworth's former inn, a space large enough to gather, study, and belong.

For families long accustomed to the margins, this was not just a church. It was a community.

Loss returned again in 1907 when Edward's son Frank Victor Edwards drowned off the coast north of Dongara. Edward lived another eight years.

He died on 25 April 1915 at Bookara. He was found dead in bed by his son Jack. The cause of death was recorded simply as old age.

Edward George Edwards lived eighty years, from the streets of Birmingham to the flood scarred flats of Bookara. He was described as artful and dangerous in youth. He spoke for justice and dignity in later life.

Both voices remain. And together, they tell the truth.