

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

Edward Oxford (1822-1900)

Edward Oxford was a young man who became famous, or more properly infamous, in Victorian Britain. It was a state that he said he had aimed for, and to that end took aim at Her Majesty Queen Victoria in a probably not very serious assassination attempt. His actions led both to his notoriety and to over twenty-five years detention at Her Majesty's Pleasure.

He was born in Birmingham on 19th April 1822, the third of seven children to Edward and Hannah Oxford. His childhood was spent in both Birmingham and Lambeth. Although his father died when Oxford was seven, his mother was always able to work, and he was sent to school in both places. Oxford and his mother remained close, despite their occasional parting due to her working habits.

After Oxford completed his schooling he took bar work, first from his aunt in Hounslow and then later at other public houses. By the age of eighteen he had grown up to be a pale youth, with brown eyes and auburn hair, around five foot six inches tall. At the start of 1840, he was working as a pot boy (barman) in The Hog in the Pound along Oxford Street in London, and living with his mother and sister in lodgings in Camberwell. He quit this job at the start of May 1840 without having further work to go to.

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A week after he quit his job, his mother returned to Birmingham on a regular trip to see family, and Oxford was largely left to his own devices. Some five weeks later, on the late spring evening of 10th June 1840, he took up a position on a footpath at Constitution Hill, near Buckingham Palace. It was 6pm. He waited for the young Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to be driven out from the Palace in an open carriage, and when they drew level with him, he fired two shots in succession from separate pistols at the Queen. She was four months pregnant at the time with her first child, Victoria, the Princess Royal.

Immediately, various members of the public seized Oxford and disarmed him. Oxford was quite open about what he had done, exclaiming 'It was I, it was me that did it.' What was not clear was exactly what he had done: he had certainly fired two pistols at their Majesties, but whether those pistols could have harmed anyone was never resolved. No bullets were ever found, and the Crown was unable to prove that the pistols were armed when Oxford discharged them. Once sentenced, Oxford always maintained that the pistols contained only gunpowder.

Oxford was arrested and charged with treason. After his arrest, his lodgings were searched and a box found, which amongst other fragments of his life contained the intricate rules he had constructed of a fictitious military society called Young England, complete with imaginary officers and

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correspondence. Members were to be armed with a brace of pistols, a sword, a rifle and a dagger.

Inevitably, his trial attracted much attention, and it was postponed until a thorough investigation had been made into both his background and his possible motives. Insanity was used as his defence. On Thursday 9th July, the Old Bailey was packed with those citizens fortunate enough to have obtained a ticket for admission. Oxford appeared largely oblivious to proceedings. The prosecution presented a large amount of witness evidence before various family members and friends testified that Oxford had always seemed of unsound mind, and that both his grandfather and father had exhibited signs of mental illness and were alcoholics. This was important to the Victorians, for whom both drink and hereditary influence were strong causal factors for insanity. His mother, in particular, told a sorry tale of domestic violence and intimidating behaviour from Oxford's father, which was rich in detail and must have had quite an impact at the trial. Oxford himself, she said, had always cried without apparent cause, and been prone to fits of hysterical laughter. When she had worked in a shop he would annoy the customers by laughing or making strange noises, and had been obsessed with firearms since he was a child.

Oxford's principal medical witnesses were Dr Thomas Hodgkin, who considered that he had a 'lesion of the will' - that he could not control his impulses - and Dr John Conolly, Head of the Hanwell Lunatic Asylum (now St

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Bernard's Hospital, Ealing), who believed that Oxford had suffered a disease of the brain, as evidenced by the shape of his head. Conolly had asked Oxford why he shot at the Queen, and Oxford replied 'Oh, I may as well shoot at her as any body else.' The defence called other medics too - Dr William Dingle Chowne agreed that Oxford could not control his will; while Dr James Fernandez Clarke thought Oxford was a hysterical imbecile. All agreed that Oxford was of unsound mind.

These were significant names in Victorian medicine. Conolly was the man who had destroyed every form of restraint used at Hanwell and promoted a new 'moral' regime of mental health care through routine and responsibility. At the time of Oxford's trial the controversy surrounding his new ideas was in full swing. Clarke was an acclaimed medical author and a major contributor to *The Lancet*, while Hodgkin was an eminent pathologist who gave his name to Hodgkin's disease. Chowne was a respected manager at Charing Cross Hospital and a leading advocate of sanitary reform.

The next day, the jury returned to acquit Oxford on the grounds of insanity. He received the sentence of all such lunatics - to be detained until Her Majesty's pleasure be known, effectively an indefinite sentence, and one which gave rise to the Broadmoor term of 'pleasure men'.

Within weeks, Oxford had been removed to the State Criminal Lunatic Asylum at Bethlem, then in Southwark, to begin his sentence. Notes and

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other records from his time at Bethlem are available at the Bethlem Royal Hospital archives.

Some notes from Bethlem were copied up into his Broadmoor case notes. The entry for 16th February 1854 stated that 'No note has ever been made of this case, and no record kept of the state of his mind at the time of his admission, but from the statements of the attendants and those associated with him he appears to have conducted himself with great propriety at all times.' Indeed, he seems to have become a model patient, industrious and studious. He spent much time drawing, reading and in study, learnt French, German and Italian to a standard of virtual fluency, while obtaining some knowledge of Spanish, Greek and Latin, as well as learning the violin. The Bethlem doctors also reported that he could play draughts and chess better than any other patient. He also became a painter and decorator, and was gainfully employed within the Hospital. Of his crime, the notes stated that 'He now laments the act which probably originated in a feeling of excess vanity and a desire to become notorious if he could not be celebrated.'

Presumably his positive influence on the ward was missed by the Bethlem authorities when he was moved to Broadmoor on 30th April 1864, even if in general the London hospital was happy to be rid of the criminal lunatic class.

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Oxford's health on arrival in Broadmoor was stated to be good, though he suffered from constipation and some oedema (swelling) in his lower legs. By this date he was forty-two years old, and had been confined for nearly twenty-four years.

His notes on arrival in Broadmoor record: 'A well conducted industrious man apparently sane, has been rather out of health since last Christmas and has suffered from urethritis since his admission here - this he attributes to his having taken various unusual things to drink just before leaving Bethlem. He is now in better general health. He states that he fired a pistol charged with powder only at the Queen on June 10th 1840. That he did it under the impression that he should thereby become a noted person and that he had not the smallest intention of injuring Her Majesty.'

He carried on his diligent application to hard work at Broadmoor, working daily as a wood grainer and a painter and being very well-behaved. It was increasingly obvious that Oxford no longer posed a risk to anyone, and that he was also completely sane. Sir William Hayter, the Chair of Broadmoor's scrutiny body, the Council of Supervision, wrote to Home Secretary Sir George Grey in November 1864 stating that Oxford was of sound mind. Not only did John Meyer, Broadmoor's Medical Superintendent, testify to this, but also Charles Hood, a member of the Council and Oxford's previous physician at Bethlem. Hood said that Oxford had been sane since at least

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1854, when the patient was first in his care. Hayter suggested that Oxford was perfectly capable of being allowed to make his own way in the world.

Grey ignored the request. He had been Judge Advocate General in the Government in 1840, and perhaps he was uncomfortable with allowing the discharge of a case in which he probably had an interest. Instead, Oxford stayed on in the Asylum until September 1867, when new Home Secretary Gathorne Hardy began the process of agreeing to Oxford's discharge when he asked Hayter to provide an up-to-date report on Oxford's mental condition. Subsequently, Hardy offered Oxford release on condition that he went overseas to one of the colonies, and never returned to the United Kingdom. Oxford indicated that he was willing to accept the terms.

Meyer proposed that he arrange a passage to Australia for Oxford. Before Oxford's discharge, the patient was visited by twelve officers from the Metropolitan Police, who took notes about his appearance and photographed him, should he attempt to return. It was made clear to him that if he ever set foot again on the British Isles, he would be locked up for good. Sadly, no copy of the photograph survives in the Broadmoor archives.

The warrant for Oxford's release arrived at Broadmoor towards the end of October. His passage was arranged for a month later. Accompanied by Charles Phelps, the Steward at Broadmoor, Oxford travelled to Plymouth on 26th November 1867. The next day he boarded HMS Suffolk for Melbourne.

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He remained on board for several days, waiting as the ship was detained in port, until she finally left on 3rd December. Phelps was made to sign an affidavit that 'To the best of my knowledge and belief Oxford was on board when she sailed.'

Oxford certainly sailed to Australia, though the rest of his life is less well documented. In the Broadmoor archive, the only subsequent intelligence about Oxford comes from a letter from George Haydon, one time Steward at Bethlem, to Dr David Nicolson at Broadmoor in 1883. Haydon quoted an article from *The Age*, a Melbourne newspaper, of which he had been made aware. The article, included with the letter, is about a man called John Oxford, and is dated 4th May 1880. John Oxford was named as the man who shot at the Queen many years ago, and had subsequently been a patient in an asylum before he was discharged to Australia. He had recently been convicted of stealing a shirt and spent a week in jail. Upon his release, the prison governor had asked the police to keep an eye on him, 'in consequence of the old man's eccentric conduct'. To that end the police had arrested Oxford for vagrancy, and the article reported that he was up before the bench again. He was remanded for further medical examination. Haydon's update ended there.

Sources indicate that there is further correspondence from Haydon elsewhere to suggest that Oxford later changed his name to John Freeman, and published a book called *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* in 1888.

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Certainly the book exists, but there is nothing in the Broadmoor archive which confirms that he was its author. These other sources quote Haydon as reporting that Oxford was a house painter by trade (carrying on the skills he learnt in hospital) and had married at some point before 1888. Oxford's suggested date of death is 1900.

Queen Victoria suffered several other assassination attempts during her reign, mostly from subjects who, if not legally insane, were certainly considered by the general population to be mad. One of those was another Broadmoor patient, Roderick MacLean, who shot at her at Windsor Railway Station on 2nd March 1882. MacLean was sent to Broadmoor after his trial, but unlike Oxford he did not recover, and remained there until his death in 1921. It was MacLean's case that resulted in a change in sentence for those found to be criminal lunatics, from the traditional 'not guilty by reason of insanity', to the more condemnatory 'guilty, but insane'. The motivation for the law change is always levelled at the Queen's response to MacLean's not guilty verdict: 'Insane he may have been, but not guilty he most certainly was not, as I saw him fire the pistol myself.' This is not entirely true: the Queen did not see MacLean shoot, though she did hear the report of his pistol. However, her displeasure at MacLean's innocence was real, and she pressurised Prime Minister Gladstone to change the law. It is unclear exactly what Victoria hoped to achieve by this, though she alluded to the view that if Edward Oxford had been hanged all those years ago, it

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might have deterred those potential regicides who came after him. Forty years of being shot at had not mellowed Her Majesty.

Mark Stevens, Berkshire Record Office

Sources:

Notes about Oxford at Broadmoor were taken from the relevant case book (D/H14/D2/1/1/1), and his case file (D/H14/D2/2/1/96), here at the Berkshire Record Office. The outgoing correspondence about Oxford's discharge can be found in D/H14/A1/2/4/1, with the Home Office letters in D/H14/A1/2/5/1. Haydon's letter to Nicolson is within a file of newspaper cuttings D/H14/A5/1/3; some personal accounts for Oxford can also be found in D/H14/D3/3/1/1. The latter indicate that he was despatched to Australia with around twenty-two pounds in his pocket, most of it received via Haydon at Bethlem.

You can read the transcript of Oxford's trial on the Old Bailey website at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=def1-1877-18400706&div=t18400706-1877#highlight>. Oxford also has a brief Wikipedia entry at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Oxford.

Oxford's treasonous act made a good subject for Victorian artistic interpretations of the scene of crime. A copy of one of these interpretations is in the Guildhall Library, and at the time of writing could also be viewed online at http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/art/78507/Edward_Oxfords_Attempt_to_Assassinate_Queen_Victoria_and_Prince.