

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

Broadmoor babies

Broadmoor was no different to any other institution which housed women of childbearing age. Like a workhouse, a prison or a charitable refuge, from time to time it admitted women who were pregnant, and who went on to have their babies within the institution. Confinements in the lunatic asylum were a rare event, but an event entirely in keeping with the ethos of the self-contained community that was Victorian Broadmoor.

The first patient to give birth in the Asylum was Catherine Dawson, who did so on 26th December 1866. That Boxing Day, at one o'clock in the morning, she was delivered of a baby boy in the infirmary ward in the female block. Her labour was short, with the medical staff noting that it lasted only half-an-hour.

Catherine was thirty-one years old, and a housewife from Chorley, near Liverpool. This new baby was her fourth child. On 27th October 1864 she had cut the throat of her middle child, twenty-two month old Matilda, at Toxteth Park in the city. She had also tried to kill her other children and had then attempted suicide. She was found insane before her trial, and detained until Her Majesty's pleasure was known.

She had initially been transferred from Kirkdale Prison to Rainhill Asylum (the Lancaster County Asylum) in Liverpool on 30th November 1864, where she had stayed for a little over fifteen months. It is unclear from her case notes why she was not immediately transferred to Broadmoor, as by that date the hospital had cleared its backlog of patients requiring admission from the older criminal lunatic accommodation at Bethlem, Fisherton House and other institutions. Rainhill held her until March 1866, when she managed to escape from the asylum. It took a month to track her down, and she was eventually discovered living once more with her husband, Henry. She was brought back to Rainhill, and this time moved quickly to Broadmoor on 15th May 1866.

On her arrival at Broadmoor she was instantly sick in the waiting room, and was confined to bed. The initial diagnosis was that her sickness had been caused by a dose of morphine administered to her to calm her during the journey south. It was not long though before the Broadmoor doctors concluded the true cause. During her month at large she had managed to become pregnant.

She appears to have been an aggressive patient while she was in Broadmoor. The authorities reported that she was quarrelsome, and that she imagined that tricks were being played deliberately on her. When her sickness subsided she was moved to No 2 Ward, then the ward for the more disturbed patients in the female block, and occupied her time with needlework until she gave birth. Her baby boy was immediately removed from her after his birth and handed over to a dedicated attendant, who looked after him but reared him artificially. Her notes record that the only remark Catherine

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

made at the time of birth 'was that there was a nasty smell in the room'. As the boy had been born on St Stephen's Day, the Broadmoor chaplain christened him Stephen. His baptism is recorded in the parish register for St Michael's, Sandhurst, with his mother's name incorrectly recorded as Caroline.

The mother did not ask to see her child until a week after the birth, and it was not until two months had passed that she was finally allowed to see him. She behaved strangely with him, placing him on his legs to see if he would walk already, and Stephen was taken away from her again on the same day, this time for good. Dr John Meyer, Broadmoor's first Medical Superintendent, wrote to Henry Dawson and asked him to make arrangements to collect his child.

Dawson was reluctant to accept his newborn son on the grounds of his own poverty. He was lodging in Birkenhead and trying to feed the two surviving girls. Instead, Broadmoor managed to persuade the officers of the Chorley Union Workhouse to take on the child of 'their' patient. Stephen was collected from Broadmoor on 25th February 1867 by the master and matron of the Workhouse, and taken back to Merseyside.

Catherine stayed in Broadmoor, her moods swinging between excitement and depression. She kept in constant contact with her husband, but she was often sick and unable to work. Her hands and wrists were scarred from breaking windows in the female block. When she was too sick, she could not write to Henry, and in 1871, after one particularly long silence, he wrote directly to the Broadmoor authorities asking whether his wife were dead or alive. Shortly after it was confirmed that she was still alive, he visited her. She remained ill for a few months, and he continued to write regularly to the authorities asking after her.

Though Catherine was slowly failing, it was Henry who died first, on 18th June 1872. The landlady of the house that Henry and his two surviving daughters had lodged in now took the remaining children on herself. Friends took Henry's place as correspondent, and continued to write to Broadmoor asking after Catherine.

She spent the last two and half years of her life in the infirmary in the female wing, losing weight and becoming weaker. She was never considered mentally well enough to discharge, and by January 1876 she had ceased speaking to the medical staff or being able to get out of bed. She rallied briefly and spoke coherently for the last time shortly before she died on 16th April 1876 from consumption, or tuberculosis, aged forty-one.

The story of the second child born at Broadmoor is rather different. This child arrived on 18th March 1868. He was also a boy, named Henry, and he was born to Mary Anne Meller, a stonemason's wife from Newington in South London. Mary was twenty-seven years old, and had already had four children when she became pregnant once again. She was a small and stout

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

woman, with dark hair. On 1st November 1867 she had attacked a widow who lodged with her and her family, hitting the woman over the head and then trying to cut her throat. Her victim, Mrs Mary Cattermole, managed to run from the house to safety. Mrs Meller was apprehended immediately and arrested shortly afterwards. Her trial in December was at the Old Bailey, and her GP testified that she suffered from regular but intermittent bouts of insanity. She had attempted suicide on previous occasions. The prosecution made no attempt to press her guilt, and after a short hearing she was found not guilty by reason of insanity.

The Governor of Horsemonger Lane Gaol was not convinced. He wrote on her transfer document that she was 'quiet and well-educated, betraying no symptoms of insanity'. Nevertheless he noted that she had attempted to poison herself while in his custody. She was admitted to Broadmoor on 14th January 1868, seven months pregnant.

Mary was in better health than Catherine Dawson had been when her son was born. She was allowed to nurse her child for around three weeks before her husband, William, came to collect the baby from the Asylum and take him home. Mary was also noticeably improved since her admission, and was employed regularly in needlework. The staff suspected her of having intemperate habits, and that it had been the drink that had driven her to attack Mrs Cattermole. She conceded that this might have been so. By 1869 the staff summarised her state as 'no doubt a bad-tempered woman but betrays at present no symptoms of insanity'. She was subsequently conditionally discharged into the care of her husband on 3rd May 1870.

But this was not the last contact between the family and the hospital. In February 1873, William Meller wrote to one of the attendants saying that his wife had recently begun drinking heavily again. Mary was pawning the family possessions for money to fund her alcohol addiction. Amongst other tales, Mr Meller recounted an evening when his wife had told the servants that she was going out to listen to a lecture. Since the venue was one where the couple had seats reserved for each event, Mr Meller set off to join his wife. Of course, when he reached the auditorium, she was not there.

Distraught, he set off for a nearby chemist's to buy some pills to calm his frayed nerves. In conversation, the chemist mentioned that he had just seen a drunken woman pass his shop, pursued by a mob of 'a couple of hundred people'. Meller raced out of the shop, found the mob, and then duly found his wife at the centre of it. It is unclear what she had been accused of doing. A policeman managed to disperse the throng, and Meller took his wife home in a cab, 'but she would not sit in the seat and I was compelled to bid her lie in the bottom of the cab.'

Meller asked the Broadmoor staff to write to his wife, because she took no notice of him, but he thought that she would take notice of them if they wrote. About the same time, there is a further, undated letter in the file

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

from Mary Meller herself. In it she asked Dr Orange, Broadmoor's Medical Superintendent, to visit her. 'I am miserable and unhappy and require your assistance', she wrote. She alleged that William had broken her nose, and stated that 'I would rather be under your care than be thus ill used'.

It seems likely that Dr Orange did write to the Mellers, as William addressed a further two letters to him directly in April 1873. From these we learn that Mrs Meller became more settled, and that subsequently she had been on a trip to Lancashire and Yorkshire and bought little Henry home - though whether for the first time or not is unclear.

The Mellers' family unit did not last significantly longer. Mary Meller died on 23rd December 1878 at the age of thirty-seven. She was buried in Nunhead Cemetery in Southeast London.

The next patient to give birth at the hospital was Margaret Crimmings, a twenty-six year-old servant from London. Unlike the other Broadmoor mothers in this story, she was a convict patient, rather than a 'pleasure woman', a prisoner considered to have developed mental health problems while in jail. She had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment on 11th October 1870 at the Middlesex Quarter Sessions for stealing two coats, apparently from her brother. It was not the first time that she had been inside - she had four previous convictions for theft and one for assaulting a police officer.

The first few months of her sentence were spent at both Westminster and Millbank Prisons in London. The Prison authorities considered her to be insane. She was also heavily pregnant. Would Broadmoor be prepared to take her on?

Dr Orange replied positively, and she was admitted on 10th May 1871, eight months pregnant. Described as having brown hair and grey eyes, being stout and standing only five feet tall, she was single. Dr Orange wrote in her notes that she 'talks nonsense saying that she was frightened at Millbank and that I was the person who frightened her...it is evidently her desire to be thought insane at present'.

Her child was born soon after, at 5.15am on the morning of 8th June. The first girl to be born in Broadmoor, she was christened Margaret Julia by Broadmoor's visiting Catholic priest on 1st July. Margaret senior was allowed to nurse her baby at first, doing so 'in a sensible and affectionate manner'. But on 12th June she began to act oddly - suggesting that she had known the attendants for ages, but that now they were using false names; that the nurse helping her was not holding the baby properly; and that people were being unkind to her. Diagnosed as entering a maniacal state, her baby was taken from her.

With no husband or partner to care for the illegitimate child, Broadmoor wrote to the St Marylebone poor law guardians, where Margaret had spent

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

time in the workhouse during 1870, to confirm their duty to take the baby. The guardians acknowledged their obligation, but still asked whether Broadmoor could allow the baby to stay with its mother. Dr Orange replied that 'the mental condition of Margaret Crimmings is such as to preclude the possibility of leaving the child under her care...as under any circumstances the child is deprived of its mother's care its removal from the Asylum would appear to be desirable on all accounts.'

The Assistant Matron of St Marylebone Workhouse came to collect Margaret Julia on 19th July. Sadly she was to have a very short life outside the asylum. Her death occurred at the workhouse nursery, Southall School, on 19th August 1871, when she was only ten weeks' old. The guardians wrote that her death was due to 'debility'.

Margaret remained at Broadmoor, and was pronounced recovered from her mania by August. She was employed in the asylum laundry where she was an industrious worker, occasionally prone to excitable outbursts but otherwise diligent.

As a convict prisoner, Margaret's sentence had a defined end date of March 1877. Several years of good behaviour and hard work meant that the Home Office was prepared to consider releasing her early. As she approached the last year of her sentence, the Broadmoor staff began to make enquiries as to who might take care of her. Her brother had previously visited her and so he was asked if he might help. He was happy to do so, and to offer her accommodation at his lodgings in central London. Once reassured on that point, her order of licence for release arrived from the Home Office, and she was duly discharged on 9th February 1876. The staff paid her fare from Crowthorne and she took the train up to London, reporting her arrival at her brother's house to the Metropolitan Police.

Despite Margaret's good behaviour, her life outside did not probably change much as a result of her Broadmoor experience. She is almost certainly to be found in another cell, this time in a police station in Paddington, at the time of the 1891 census.

Another couple of years passed before the fourth Broadmoor baby arrived on 23rd February 1873. Another girl, christened Elizabeth Margaret, she was born to Margaret Davenport, a thirty-one year old housewife from Warrington, Lancashire. Like Catherine Dawson, Margaret Davenport had also been detained in Kirkdale Prison, and was transferred to Broadmoor on 26th September 1872, when she was four months pregnant. She had been detained there a little over two months previously, after she had killed her two daughters.

Her younger daughter, also Elizabeth, was twenty-two months old, and her elder daughter Margaret, six, when in June 1872 she had held their heads under water in a pan mug until they drowned. She had then attempted to

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

hang herself and to cut her wrists but had been unsuccessful. She laid the children out in their beds and made dinner for her husband.

She had been found insane when she was due to plead at her trial at the Liverpool Assizes. The supposed cause of her illness was given on her admissions statement to Broadmoor as 'family troubles'. She had married Joseph Davenport in 1862, after they had met while working as servants for a landed Cheshire family. They had an impoverished background, and two sons had died through illness in infancy. Margaret had apparently been taken ill after the birth of the first Elizabeth, becoming depressed and twice being found wandering the streets at night. The local Police felt that she was the victim of domestic neglect. She had returned to her native Shropshire for a break shortly before she committed the murders, and on her return her family had believed that she was recovered. At her first committal hearing she had stated that 'I was very much provoked before I did it. I was made in hell.'

Also like Catherine Dawson, the Broadmoor doctors did not let her nurse her baby. They considered that her mental state made it unsafe for her to do so. Instead, little Elizabeth was taken from her mother at birth, and reared on cow's milk by elsewhere in the Asylum. It is unclear who decided to name the girl after her dead sisters. Her mother saw the baby frequently, but under supervision. The doctors noted that on more than one occasion Margaret expressed the hope that her new daughter would die.

The Broadmoor authorities tried to get her husband to take care of the child. They wrote to him in early April, but he refused, saying, like Henry Dawson, that he was too poor to be able to take charge of it. The medical staff's next move was similar: to write to the Poor Law Guardians for Warrington Union and ask them to take charge of the child instead.

Unlike the Chorley Guardians in the earlier case, the Warrington Guardians did not see this as the logical outcome. Replying to Broadmoor in May 1873, they saw no reason why the able-bodied Joseph Davenport could excuse himself from the care of his only living child. They dared Dr Orange, Broadmoor's Medical Superintendent, to provide a legal authority upon which he could base his request.

Dr Orange did not give up easily. He saw no benefit to anyone in having the child remain at Broadmoor longer than necessary. He wrote again to the Guardians suggesting that under statute, the child's legal place of settlement was Warrington; that the father was destitute; and that the mother might destroy her child. But the Guardians disputed whether Joseph Davenport was destitute - he was a working man of working age, employed as a carter, who would be turned away from their workhouse, and they accepted no need to provide poor relief to his child. The Guardians also felt uncomfortable - possibly less morally and more financially so - with the removal of such a young child from its parents.

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

The Home Office was compelled to make a decision in the matter. In July, it instructed Broadmoor's Council of Supervision to send the girl to Joseph Davenport. Dr Orange wrote to him again. He sent a long reply in September, once again pleading poverty, and also saying that he had a bad leg which meant that he was currently out of work. Dr Orange forwarded it to the Warrington authorities, saying that he would send the child to its father but would be grateful if they could stand by if Joseph Davenport refused to take custody of his daughter. He also threatened Joseph Davenport will legal proceedings if he did not agree voluntarily to the arrangement. Finally, in late October 1873, when she was eight months old, an attendant took Elizabeth on the long journey to Warrington and delivered her to her father. She would only live for another two years, dying as a toddler towards the end of 1875. Joseph Davenport himself died fourteen years later on 18th June 1889.

Margaret senior continued to be a Broadmoor patient while her family's story was played out. She stated that the other patients threw knives at her, and that she was visited by them at night, with one particular patient taking the form of a serpent. Dr David Nicolson, Deputy Superintendent, wrote that 'when spoken to she covers her face with her hand, shuts her eyes and looks downwards and away from the speaker, with an air of intense timidity and shyness'.

By January 1890 Dr Nicolson, then Superintendent, was of the view that Margaret could be discharged to an ordinary asylum. For several years she had been withdrawn and uncommunicative but otherwise well behaved. Her discharge was arranged therefore to the Rainhill Asylum once more, and she was transferred there on 10th February. She remained at Rainhill for a further twenty-two years, dying on 3rd February 1912 by choking on her food.

There was a gap of nearly six years before the next time the Broadmoor staff delivered a child. This one entered the world at eight o'clock on the morning of 14th January 1879 after a long labour. Another boy, William, he was born to Catherine Jones, a thirty-three year-old farmer's wife from Llanllyfni, Caernarvonshire. Described by Dr Orange as 'of respectable appearance but with a decided air of melancholy', she had come from Carnarvon Prison on 9th September 1878, where she had been in custody since May. She told the hospital authorities that she was pregnant when she was transferred, so they had been prepared for the birth since her arrival.

She had also killed one of her children, the youngest of three, her eighteen month-old daughter Sarah. Catherine's was considered by the medical men to be a classic case of 'puerperal mania', or of dangerous postnatal depression. She had already attempted to cut her daughter's throat at the family farmhouse, when on 9th May 1878 her husband William left her alone with the child in the kitchen for a few minutes. On his return, the child was dead, with blood trickling from its nose and ears. Catherine said that the child had fallen from a chair, but her past history meant that this story was

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

challenged. Later the same day she confessed to one of her servants that she had placed her hand over the toddler's mouth until she had suffocated. Her case proceeded to a full trial at the local Assizes, where the jury acquitted her on the grounds of insanity.

Catherine could not speak, read or write a word of English. She was Welsh, and Welsh was her language. When she arrived at Broadmoor, she could not communicate with any of the staff, and another Welsh female patient was drafted in to translate for her. Catherine was also very ill, showing signs of pleurisy, as well as being pregnant. Confined to bed, her husband visited her for a brief spell in late October 1878. He too spoke no English and arrived with a handwritten note introducing him to the Broadmoor staff, and asking whether they could recommend him lodgings during his visit.

The fact that no one could understand Catherine was a source of concern to both the Broadmoor doctors and the Home Office. As little as two months after Catherine's arrival, Medical Superintendent Dr Orange was of the view that she should be transferred to a Welsh-speaking asylum as soon as her health was up to it. When she rallied, after December 1878, Orange sought to transfer her to an asylum nearer her home before she gave birth.

The Home Office took a different view, possibly as it was so soon after her admission, and instead asked Dr Orange to find 'some respectable woman, who can speak the Welsh language' to act as a dedicated attendant to Catherine. The hospital authorities noted this request, but employing a dedicated member of staff to act as translator was not seen as practical. So the other Welsh patient, who came from Glamorganshire and could only speak a little Welsh, continued to act as Catherine's interpreter during her time at Broadmoor.

After the birth, her baby boy was removed from her immediately. Given her previous medical history, it was felt too risky to leave the child with her, and one of the female attendants took charge of the child. She was allowed to see her baby, and William Jones was also very eager to take care of his child. He visited regularly, and took the three-month old baby home on 16th April, with the female attendant accompanying him on the journey. At roughly the same time, the Home Office finally delivered the warrant Dr Orange had requested to remove Catherine to the Joint Counties Lunatic Asylum at Denbigh in north Wales.

Catherine's health then took another turn for the worse, and she was bedridden again. Her transfer was postponed. But as before, she rallied, and by July she was well enough for her transfer to be effected. A female attendant from Denbigh arrived to collect her on 29th July 1879, and escort her by train back to Wales. She had been in Broadmoor for a little over ten months.

The last paper on her file is a letter written on behalf of William Jones in January 1880. In it, he said that his wife seemed rational and sane in

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

Denbigh, but that her general health was worse, and he ascribed this to the inferior diet at Denbigh compared to the one at Broadmoor. He asked for Dr Orange's help in gaining his wife's discharge back home.

Catherine remained detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure only a little while longer. By the time of the 1881 census, she was back home with William senior, William junior and the other children at Llwydcoed Fawr in Llanllyfni.

Hers was not the last Broadmoor baby, but was the last for which the case details are currently open for research. Together the five children were placed back into Victorian society and those who lived to adulthood would have had no recollection of the place where they had spent their first few weeks of life. The hospital had no further business with them, and their stories would remain separate from Broadmoor until now.

Sources:

The Broadmoor archive is held at BRO. The case file references for each of the patients are as follows

Catherine Dawson (D/H14/D2/2/2/113)

Mary Ann Meller (D/H14/D2/2/2/146)

Margaret Crimmings (D/H14/D2/2/2/177)

Margaret Davenport (D/H14/D2/2/2/212)

Catherine Jones (D/H14/D2/2/2/280)

And their case notes can be found in D/H14/D2/1/2/1.

Correspondence about some of the cases can be found in the Superintendent's letter book D/H14/A2/1/4/1.

None of these patients are yet well known, so although other sources, such as trial details, will be available locally, the only one freely available online is that of Mary Ann Meller. Misspelt Miller, her trial transcript is at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=def1-105-18671216&div=t18671216-105#highlight>.