

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

Christiana Edmunds (1829-1907)

The most celebrated Victorian female patient at Broadmoor has, like Edward Oxford, been remembered for the cause of her admission rather than her industry within the hospital. She fulfilled the voyeuristic needs of Victorian society. The tabloids christened Christiana 'The Chocolate Cream Poisoner'.

Born in Margate, Kent, and sent to private school, she and her sister lived alone with their mother, a landlady. For the Victorians, the lives of her close family would prove to be a strong factor in Edmunds's own diagnosis. Hereditary insanity was strong - her father had apparently gone mad before he died, and two of her siblings died in adulthood - a brother in Earlsfield Asylum in London, and a sister apparently by her own hand. Nevertheless she came from a very comfortable, middle class background, and was described at her first trial as 'a lady of fortune, tall, fair, handsome and extremely prepossessing in demeanour'.

Nothing is known about her early adult life, except that as the possessor of an independent income, she did not need to work. The family moved to Brighton in the mid 1860s. Her story properly begins when in the middle of 1869 she met, and fell in love with a Dr Charles Beard who lived nearby. She sent him love letters, and he reciprocated. There was an intimacy, and it appears that they carried on some level of romantic relationship for the next year. Dr Beard always maintained that there had been no affair in a physical sense, but affection had obviously passed between the two of them.

There was a small problem, however: Dr Beard was already married. He now found himself a respected member of the local community who was being disloyal to his wife. At some point in the summer of 1870, the burden of deceit became too much, and Dr Beard asked Edmunds to stop writing to him - 'This correspondence must cease, it is no good for either of us'. Subsequently, one day in September 1870 Edmunds visited Mrs Emily Beard, with a gift of chocolate creams for her. Mrs Beard ate some of the chocolate, and was sick afterwards. Dr Beard accused Edmunds of poisoning his wife. Edmunds complained that the same chocolates had made her sick too. Beard withdrew his accusation, but Edmunds was banished from the Beard household, and also from Dr Beard's life.

That might have been that, except that over the next few months there were further cases of people falling ill in Brighton after eating sweets and chocolates. None of these cases was dramatic, with all of them featuring a violent sickness, which passed quickly and without lingering harm. Stories spread by word of mouth rather than through the local media. Then on 12th June 1871 a man called Charles Miller, on holiday in Brighton with his

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brother's family, bought some chocolate creams from a sweet shop called J.G. Maynard's, and gave one to his four year-old nephew, Sidney Barker. Miller became ill but recovered. Barker died. An inquest discovered strychnine in the chocolates sold by Maynard's, and a verdict of accidental death was recorded on the boy. The shop owner John Maynard was exonerated and he destroyed all his stock.

Despite these events, the poisonings continued. Shortly after the inquest on Sidney Barker, an anonymous letter was sent to the boy's father urging him to sue Maynard for his son's death. Six prominent local women also received parcels of poisoned fruits and sweets - including Mrs Beard again. This time two of Mrs Beard's servants had eaten a poisoned plum cake and fallen ill. Edmunds claimed that she too had been one of the victims. She visited John Maynard to say that she and her friends had become ill after eating sweets from his store; she visited the police and told them she had received one of the poisoner's parcels. A sense of fear crept through the streets - where and who would the poisoner strike next? The police had no leads and no way of protecting the local population. Brighton's chief constable placed an advertisement in the local newspaper offering a reward for any information which led to the arrest of the poisoner. It was at this point that Dr Beard decided to go to the Brighton police and voice his suspicion that Edmunds might be the person behind it all. She was arrested a week after the advert was placed. The police began to ask around about Miss Edmunds and what she did, and soon enough evidence was gathered to charge her with the attempted murder of Mrs Beard.

Her first trial began in Brighton on 24th August 1871, roughly at the same time as Henry Dodwell, another Brightonian in Broadmoor, found his term of office at the Industrial Schools placed under pressure. Dr Beard testified to the events of September 1870, when his wife had fallen sick after eating chocolates. A boy called Adam May testified that he would run errands for Edmunds, taking forged prescriptions to druggists to obtain poisons. He would also purchase sweets and chocolates for her from Maynard's. A chemist called Isaac Garrett testified that he had known Edmunds as 'Mrs Wood' for four years, and that in March 1871 and two subsequent occasions he had supplied her with strychnine. She had said she wanted to poison some local cats which had become a nuisance. Garrett said that a local milliner called Mrs Stone had vouched for Edmunds's good character.

It quickly became apparent that enough evidence existed to charge Edmunds with sending the poisoned parcels too. Arsenic had been found in them, and she was also shown to have purchased arsenic. By 7th September she was also charged with the murder of Sidney Barker. The prosecution was convinced that the note to Barker's father, as well as the notes included with the poisoned parcels, had been written by Edmunds. Her handwriting was a direct match. It was suggested that throughout the

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spring and summer of 1871 she had been experimenting with her poisons, before intending to launch a further attempt to kill Mrs Beard. The prosecution alleged that at the same time she had made accusations against Maynard's, and also reported her own sickness in an attempt to cover her tracks. It was sensational stuff, and while some of these ideas remain supposition, the notion of Edmunds's unrequited love driving her to murder was one all too eagerly consumed by the press.

Legal proceedings in Brighton were halted, as it was felt impossible to find a jury who would not be prejudiced by what they had read of the case. Edmunds was taken to Newgate Prison in London, and her case was heard instead at the Old Bailey in January 1872. She was placed on trial solely for the murder of Sidney Barker. The evidence from the earlier trial was repeated, of poisons purchased and of love gone bad. There were more witnesses now - various people had come forward to say that Edmunds sent boys to buy sweets for her from Maynard's shop. Shortly after, she would return the sweets, indicating that the wrong ones had been purchased in the first place. These sweets would then be returned to their jar for resale, and alternatives purchased in their stead. There were also witnesses who had seen her leave bags of Maynard's sweets lying around in other shops and public places. Gradually, the events of the last eighteen months came to light.

Her barrister set up the defence of insanity. Several well-known authorities testified on her behalf. Dr William Wood argued that she satisfied the principal MacNaughton Rule - she could not distinguish right from wrong. He had worked previously at Bethlem, and now ran private asylums in London. He was also a regular expert witness in insanity cases. Drs Charles Lockhart Robertson and Henry Maudsley, the famous psychologist, argued that Edmunds belonged to the 'morally defective' group of lunatics - a Victorian precursor to the later term of psychopath. Robertson was a friend of Maudsley's, and the Superintendent of the Sussex County Asylum. He was particularly interested in women's mental health, and had pioneered the use of Turkish baths to calm female patients. Between the three of them they offered a heavy tilt towards a verdict of not guilty, but insane.

Then Edmunds's mother took the stand to deliver the tale of family madness, which had eventually trapped her surviving daughter. It was here than Edmunds's defence unravelled. Her counsel, rather than leaving it at that, sought to introduce examples of what he considered to be Edmunds's irrational behaviour. But it transpired that these examples were more odd than insane, and the court's sympathy drifted away from her. The jury, asked to deliver their verdict, found her guilty of murder, and did not recommend mercy.

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The defendant remained in the dock to hear her fate. The court report describes her as being dressed neatly, with black velvet cloak and gloves but no bonnet, her hair arranged 'coquettishly'. Before sentence was passed, she asked to be tried on the original charges too, of attempting to murder Emily Beard, so that she might be able to describe the nature of her relationship with Dr Beard. It was, of course, too late for that.

Edmunds faced the gallows. Her immediate response was to claim that she was pregnant - a pregnant woman could not be hanged until after she had given birth. So the business of the court was not done yet. A jury of matrons was immediately empanelled from amongst the spectators to examine Edmunds in an ante room. The court adjourned until she and they returned half an hour later. Asked for their verdict, they declared that Edmunds was not pregnant. The law would take its course.

She was returned to Lewes Prison to suffer the extreme penalty of the English legal system. But the medical evidence presented at her trial had not gone unnoticed. On 23rd January 1872 Dr William Orange, Broadmoor's Medical Superintendent, visited her with Sir William Gull from Guy's Hospital at the Home Office's request. Their report summarised her case as follows: 'This woman appears to have had a tranquil, easy and indifferent childhood and womanhood up to a period of about three years ago...The acts were the fruit of a weak and disordered intellect with confused and perverted feelings of a most marked insane character...The crime of murder she seems incapable of realising as having been committed by her though she fully admits the purchasing and distributing the poisons as set forth in the several counts against her. On the contrary she even justifies her conduct'. They declared her to be insane, and the Home Secretary respited her sentence to one of Her Majesty's Pleasure, and she was transferred to Broadmoor on 5th July 1872.

On her arrival, she stated her age to be 43. She was wearing make up, a wig - 'a large amount of false hair' as it says in her notes - and had false teeth. 'She is very vain', wrote Dr Orange. The surgeon at Lewes Prison who signed her transfer documents had obviously done so reluctantly. He was most unimpressed with the diagnosis of insanity, writing that after ten months of supervision he could not be satisfied either that Edmunds was insane, or that she was not responsible for her actions. He did, however, say that she was of a delicate constitution, and prone to being hysterical.

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As with patient Dodwell, Dr Orange was nevertheless convinced that he had made the correct diagnosis. When Edmunds's other brother died shortly after her admission, she showed no grief. Orange also considered her deceitful, because she immediately began to try and smuggle in clothes or beauty aids. Her sister was complicit in this. One letter asked for clothing; another talked about ways to find and apply make-up while in the asylum. Her sister began to send her gifts too, and it was the gifts that irritated the matron of Broadmoor's female wing. The final straw was the receipt of a cushion stuffed with false hair during 1874. The matron complained to the Superintendent that Edmunds was amassing and hoarding hair in her room, and that no further gifts should be allowed. Dr Orange was initially reluctant to interfere with behaviour which he saw as self-indulgent, but largely harmless. The matron, however, put her foot down.

Also in 1874 the authorities intercepted clandestine correspondence sent to the chaplain at Lewes Prison. Dr Orange noted that he had no objection at all to Edmunds corresponding with the chaplain, but her decision to do so secretly was 'in conformity with her state of mind to prefer mystery and concealment'. In 1875 her room was twice searched and various concealed articles were recovered. Dr Orange wrote that 'she deceives for the pure love of deception'.

She was evidently perceived by the male doctors as Broadmoor's painted lady, and as a creature motivated by romantic desire. Notes made in 1877, as she approached the age of fifty, related her daily life as one of embroidery and etching; but also maintain that she 'affects a youthful appearance' and that 'her manner and expression evidently lies towards sexual and amatory ideas'.

Her life at Broadmoor continued in this vein for another thirty years. She presented no danger to any staff or patients, and unlike some patients she showed no obvious signs of insanity. Many times her notes described her as being obsessed with her personal appearance. She won the battle to wear her own clothes eventually. We know this because she sent out a parcel of them to a Wokingham lady for repair in 1887, and the parcel was sent back to the Broadmoor steward, who made a fuss because he was not expecting it. She sewed, she painted, she made herself up and demanded attention from the male staff when she met them; she was quiet, she was well-behaved, and she showed no remorse for her crimes. And in doing all these things, she grew into an old woman.

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Perhaps if she had been one of the Broadmoor women who had acted while suffering from post-natal depression, she might have been discharged. But there was no clamour for that, nor any regular petitions to the Home Office, letters in the newspapers or campaigning friends to ask questions on her behalf. Dr Orange even noted in 1884 that he did not actually have any paperwork authorising her detention, because the Treasury Solicitor had lost it all. Perhaps if she had swapped friends and files with Dodwell then they would have both regained their places in Brighton society.

Gradually her health weakened. In 1900 she was bedridden for a while with flu. By 1901 her sight was fading badly, and she could barely see out of her right eye. She rallied in time to attend the asylum's annual ball in 1902, but her mobility decreased, and by 1906 she could hardly walk to go anywhere. Laid up in the infirmary, and closely observed by the medical staff, a snippet of conversation between her and another patient was entered into her case notes:

Edmunds: How am I looking?

A: Fairly well.

Edmunds: Are my eyebrows alright?

A: Yes.

Edmunds: I think I am improving. I hope I shall be better in a fortnight. If so, I shall astonish them; I shall get up and dance - I was a Venus before and I shall be a Venus again!

She died about a year later on 19th September 1907, aged 78. The cause of death was given as senile decay, or old age.

Edmunds had a lasting effect on some of the professionals around her. Her case had been notable, and Dr George Blandford used it to illustrate his book *Insanity and its Treatment*, quoting Dr Orange's report on Edmunds. In 1892 he was preparing a new edition of his book, and wrote to Dr David Nicolson, Orange's successor, asking if he could have an update on how Edmunds had changed during her twenty years at Broadmoor. Dr Nicolson replied that he had seen no change in Edmunds during the 15½ years he had known her.

Most significantly, hers was apparently the first capital trial witnessed by the great English barrister Sir Edward Marshall Hall. Marshall Hall would later make a name for himself by taking on the defence case in a number of high profile English murder trials, earning himself the title of 'The Great Defender'. Another Brighton resident, he was only thirteen at the time of Edmunds's trial, but it is generally accepted that he joined other spectators at the Sussex Assize hearings, and perhaps he was captivated by the legal theatre which surrounded Edmunds.

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This sense of performance was something that attached itself to Edmunds, and as a result her case has leant itself to dramatisation. She was the subject of an ITV *Saturday Night Theatre* film as part of its *Wicked Women* season in 1970, where Anna Massey starred as Edmunds. The story has also been broadcast as *The Great Chocolate Murders* on Radio 4 in 2006.

In Brighton, Christiana and the other characters in her story are still well-known and regularly used in written or dramatic works. The facts of the case have become a popular path travelled by those interested in Victorian true crime. The facts have told a story of sorts, but still an incomplete one, for Edmunds leaves behind a sense of mystery in terms of her motivation. She never denied her actions, or offered up an explanation of what she was trying to achieve. It is unclear whether she wanted to have Dr Beard or to ruin him. The Broadmoor doctors might have supposed that all was vanity with her, but that has left us with only shards from the mirror containing her reflection. The search to discover the Venus of Broadmoor goes on.

Sources:

Edmunds's Broadmoor notes can be found in D/H14/D2/2/2/204 and D/H14/D2/1/2/1/

There are some accounts of her trials available free online via the New York Times. These are:

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9A01E1DD113EEE34BC4B53DFBF66838A669FDE>

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=980CE6DC113EEE34BC4053DFBF66838A669FDE

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9B00E2D71739E43BBC4951DFBF66838A669FDE>

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9A06E3D9113EEE34BC4E52DFB4668389669FDE>

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9C00E0DB113EEE34BC4B53DFB4668389669FDE

The official proceedings of the Old Bailey provide little detail about the case.

There is a wikipedia entry for Edmunds, but it is fairly basic:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christiana_Edmunds