

Christiana Edmunds (1829-1907)

Born in Margate, the daughter of a local architect, Christiana grew up in a household which had experience of mental illness and impairment. Her father was said to have gone mad before his early death, her brother died at the Earlsfield Asylum ('for Idiots') in London, and one of her sisters died allegedly by her own hand. Nevertheless, Christiana's was a comfortable, Victorian middle class background. She was sent to a private boarding school and then returned home to live as a 'lady of fortune'.

In the 1860s Christiana, her remaining sister and their widowed mother moved to a grand terraced house in Brighton. Christiana was now a middle-aged spinster, and one who suffered from a very modern, privileged ailment: boredom.

This boredom was suddenly alleviated in the middle of 1869, when Christiana met, then fell in love with her doctor and neighbour Charles Beard. Or at least, Christiana gave the impression that she had fallen in love. There is no suggestion that there was ever a relationship between her and Dr Beard, but there was an opportunity for secrecy and mischief, and both of these were sensations that Christiana found that she enjoyed.

There was a small problem, however, with this secret pursuit: Dr Beard was already married. As might have been expected, Dr Beard asked Christiana

to stop writing to him. But she did not stop. Instead, one day in September 1870, Edmunds visited Mrs Emily Beard, the doctor's wife, and presented her with a gift of chocolate creams. Mrs Beard ate some and was promptly and violently sick. Dr Beard accused Edmunds of poisoning his wife, although Edmunds refuted the allegation. After a last, climactic meeting in January 1871, Christiana was banished from the Beards' home for good.

And that might have been the end of the story, except that over the next few months there were more cases of people falling ill in Brighton after eating sweets and chocolates. Then on 12th June 1871, a man called Charles Miller, on holiday in Brighton with his brother's family, bought some chocolate creams from a sweet shop called J.G.Maynard's, ate a few, and gave one to his four year-old nephew Sidney Barker. Miller became ill but recovered. Barker died.

This was a matter of local interest and local intrigue. A coroner's inquest was held, and Christiana appeared as one of the witnesses. She said that she and her friends had also become ill after eating sweets from Maynard's store. There was evidence to support this statement, because tests discovered strychnine in the chocolates sold to Charles Miller. However, there was no proof of intent that anyone had deliberately sought to cause harm. A verdict of accidental death was recorded on the boy, and the shop owner John Maynard exonerated of blame. He destroyed all his stock.

Shortly after the inquest, three anonymous letters were sent to Barker's father urging him to sue Maynard for his son's death. The writer of the letters - later identified as Christiana, of course - hinted that the truth had not emerged in court. As if to demonstrate that, the random poisonings in the town continued during the summer.

Then the Beards decided that things had all got too much for them. They announced to their friends their intention to leave Brighton for a new life in Scotland. Christiana discovered the news. She had just enough time for one last round of poisoning. On 8th August she left Brighton to spend two days in Margate, attending to family business. Then she caught the train to London, before returning to Brighton from Victoria on Thursday 10th August 1871. On the same train were six parcels of poisoned fruits and cakes. One parcel was addressed to Mrs Emily Beard; another to Christiana.

By the time Christiana had made it home from the station, Mrs Beard's servants had taken delivery of a poisoned plum cake. They tasted the unsolicited gift and declared it dangerous. Dr Beard decided that he has a suspect, and he voiced his suspicions to the police. Christiana was arrested and her handwriting matched to that on the railway parcels.

Her committal hearing was in Brighton, but there was such local interest in the case that her trial was moved to the Old Bailey and was heard in January 1872. She was initially charged with the attempted murder of Mrs Beard but this was later changed to the murder of Sidney Barker. The

altered indictment was much to Christiana's disappointment, as she had hoped to be able to tell a tale of bourgeois scandal in the court room, dragging in the Beards and anyone else to her dramatic tragedy.

The theatre of her trial was to be her last public performance. The prosecution explained the facts: Christiana sent boys to buy poisons from chemists and boys to buy sweets from Maynard's. Once she had injected the sweets with strychnine, she either returned them to the shop or simply left them lying around for people to pick up. No motive was offered, and it remains possible either that Christiana was experimenting with doses before launching another assault on Mrs Beard, or that she may simply have wanted to try and blame Maynard's for her earlier assault. Equally possible is that she was simply lighting a firework in polite Brighton society, retreating a safe distance and then watching the display.

Her barrister set up the defence of insanity, but there was only the circumstantial, hereditary taint to offer as evidence, and the jury decided to convict her. She received the death sentence in court and then immediately claimed that she was pregnant. After a medical examination proved negative, she was sent to jail to await her fate.

There followed a Home Office enquiry into her mental state - supervised by William Orange, Broadmoor's head doctor - which concluded that hers was a suitable case for treatment at Broadmoor. He considered that she was 'morally defective' and unable to understand that what she had done was

wrong. Her sentence was respited but, most unusually, a life sentence was not substituted. Instead, the Home Secretary overturned the jury decision and made her 'not guilty by reason of insanity'. Various media commentators suggested at the time that this privileged outcome was a reaction to her privileged life.

She was therefore transferred to Broadmoor on 5th July 1872 as a 'pleasure' patient for indefinite care. She was forty-three years-old. She was wearing make up on her rouged cheeks, 'a large amount of false hair' and had false teeth. 'She is very vain', wrote Dr Orange.

Orange was nevertheless convinced that he had made the correct diagnosis. Within Broadmoor, Christiana continued a life of mischief-making. She liked to provoke the other patients to argument, to pass secretive correspondence and to hide contraband goods in her room. Orange once wrote that 'she deceives for the pure love of deception'.

Nevertheless, she was generally quiet and biddable, and she joined the ranks of the more trusted patients in the convalescent female block. She was allowed a needle and helped mend asylum clothes, and in her leisure time she played croquet and other games. She also continued to apply make-up daily until the end of her life. She liked to make a fuss of any male venturing onto the female wards and was a fixture at the annual New Year dance for female patients, at which she would like to be paired with the medical officers.

Christiana outlived the other members of her family. There were no attempts to gain her discharge. Even if there had been, such a move probably would have been resisted: though Christiana was not actively suffering from mental illness, her personality was disordered to such an extent that she was considered to remain a risk to public safety.

Gradually her own health weakened. By 1901 her sight was fading badly, and by 1906 she could hardly walk. As she entered the last year of her life, a final New Year dance approached. 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!

The Venus of Broadmoor died nine months later on 19th September 1907, aged 78. Her cause of death was given as senile decay.