

Edward Oxford (1822-1900)

Edward Oxford was born in Birmingham on 19th April 1822, the third of seven children. His childhood was spent in both Birmingham and Lambeth. Although his father died when Oxford was seven, Oxford and his mother remained close, despite their occasional partings due to her work.

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 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 arranged.

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 Oxford always maintained that the pistols contained only gunpowder.

Nevertheless, he was arrested and charged with treason. His lodgings were searched and a box found, which amongst other fragments of his life contained the intricate rules of a fictitious military society called Young England, complete with imaginary officers and correspondence. Members were to be armed with a brace of pistols, a sword, a rifle and a dagger.

Inevitably, Oxford's trial attracted much attention. 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 Oxford's defence was presented. Various family members and friends testified that Oxford had always seemed to be of unsound mind, and that both his grandfather and father had exhibited signs of mental illness and were alcoholics. His mother told a sorry tale of domestic violence from Oxford's father. Edward himself, she said, had always cried without apparent cause, and been prone to fits of hysterical laughter.

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 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 '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.'

He was moved to Broadmoor on 30th April 1864, shortly after the male wards opened. His health on arrival in Broadmoor was stated to be good, though

he suffered from constipation and some 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 stated that he was '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 carried on his diligent industry at Broadmoor, working daily as a wood grainer and a painter. He was also very well-behaved. It was increasingly obvious that Oxford no longer posed a risk to anyone and that he was no longer unwell. Though Home Secretary Sir George Grey refused to discharge him - Grey had also served as a minister when Oxford fired his shots in 1840 - his successor, Gathorne Hardy, agreed to Oxford's discharge in 1867. 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.

The warrant for Oxford's release arrived at Broadmoor towards the end of October. His passage to Australia 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. Phelps was made to sign an affidavit that 'To the best of my knowledge and belief Oxford was on board when she sailed.'

Oxford sailed to Australia and made something of a success of his new life. He married, served as a churchwarden in Melbourne and published a book called *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* in 1888, under the pseudonym of John Freeman. He died in 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 also a Broadmoor patient, Roderick Maclean, who shot at her at Windsor Railway Station on 2nd March 1882. Unlike Oxford, Maclean did not recover, and remained at Broadmoor until his death in 1921.