

Broadmoor Revealed: Some patient stories

Christiana Edmunds (1829-1907)

The most celebrated Victorian female patient at Broadmoor has been remembered for the cause of her admission rather than any wider social impact. This is perhaps a reflection on how scandalous women fulfilled the voyeuristic delight of Victorian society. For Christiana was a woman who satisfied certain stereotypes, and her story included sex and murder. The tabloids christened Christiana 'The Chocolate Cream Poisoner'.

Born in Margate, Kent, the daughter of a local architect, and sent to private school, Christiana grew up in a household already touched by insanity. For the Victorians, the mental illness found in Christiana's close family would prove to be a strong factor in her own diagnosis. Hereditary insanity was marked: her father had apparently gone mad before his early death, and two of her siblings died in adulthood, a brother in Earlsfield Asylum in London, and a sister allegedly 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'. From the age of around fourteen, she lived alone with her sister and their mother, an aging landlady.

Little is known about her early adult life, except that as a party to an independent income, she did not need to work. The family moved to

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Brighton in the mid 1860s. Her recorded history properly begins when in the middle of 1869 she first met, then fell in love with a Dr Charles Beard who lived nearby. She sent him love letters, and, to begin with he reciprocated her friendship. In such times, any form of intimacy was significant, and it appears that they carried on some level of romantic relationship for the next few months. The nature of this level has to remain a matter of conjecture, and the extent of the relationship may have been greater in Christiana's mind than in reality. Dr Beard always maintained that there had been no affair in a physical sense, but even if it was purely an emotional affair, some sort of connection had been made.

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. Whatever he was up to, it was unwise. During 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'. Edmunds did not stop. By now, she was used to calling on the Beards from time to time, and she used this familiarity to take additional action. One day in September 1870, Edmunds visited Mrs Emily Beard, the good doctor's wife, with a gift of chocolate creams for her. Mrs Beard ate some of the chocolate, and was promptly, and violently sick afterwards. Dr Beard accused Edmunds of poisoning his wife, although Edmunds refuted the allegation. Instead, Christiana complained that she was as much a victim as Mrs Beard, for the same chocolates had made her

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sick too. Beard withdrew his accusation, but Edmunds was banished from the Beard household, after a last, climactic meeting in January 1871. Dr Beard also wished to banish Edmunds from his life, but in this respect he was not successful. The letters continued to arrive at his offices, sometimes forwarded to him from home, two or three times every week. He ignored them.

This might have just become another case of a spurned lover, except that over the next few months there were many further cases of people falling ill in Brighton after eating sweets and chocolates. None of these cases was newsworthy on its own, despite their personal drama. All of them featured a violent sickness, which passed quickly and without lingering harm. Consequently, stories of them 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 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 altogether a more serious episode. It was necessary to hold an inquiry into the tragic event. Amongst those who came forward to give evidence at the inquest was Christiana, who claimed that she and her friends had also become ill after eating sweets from Maynard's store. She blamed Mr Maynard for some personal discomfort caused the previous year,

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when the wife of a good friend had suffered a similar event. There was evidence to back this up, because tests before the inquest discovered strychnine in the chocolates sold by Maynard's. What was not resolved at this inquiry was how the strychnine had come to be within the chocolates. As a consequence, a verdict of accidental death was recorded on the boy, and the shop owner John Maynard exonerated of any intentional poisoning. He destroyed all his stock.

If, at the time, Barker's death was considered to be an unfortunate accident, there followed a series of occurrences to arouse suspicions of foul play. Shortly after the inquest on Sidney Barker, three anonymous letters were sent to the boy's father urging him to sue Maynard for his son's death. All the letters suggested that the 'young lady' who spoke to the inquest would be prepared to help in further proceedings. Did someone know more than had been discovered at the inquest? Also, the poisonings continued. A palpable sense of fear crept through the streets of the seaside town: where and who would the poisoner strike at next? The Police had no leads, and no obvious way of protecting the local population. They decided to make a public appeal. 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.

That action became part of the endgame. Another element was the imminent departure of the Beards from Brighton to a new life in Scotland.

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The intrigue culminated on Thursday 10th August 1871, when six prominent local men and women, including Mrs Emily Beard, received parcels of poisoned fruits and cakes, couriered on a train to Brighton from Victoria Station. This time, two of Mrs Beard's servants had been invited to taste her gift; they had duly eaten a poisoned plum cake and fallen ill. Mrs Beard's household was not alone: one of the Beard's neighbours had also been poisoned, along with the editor of the local newspaper. And, once again, Christiana Edmunds had received one of the poisoner's parcels. When the Police arrived to remove her parcel, she told them that that she feared for her safety, as it seemed impossible that the culprit could ever be found. 'How very strange', she said, 'I feel certain that you'll never find it out'. After she had shut the door on the local boys in blue, she took up her pen and paper, and wrote her latest letter to Dr Beard, drawing much attention both to Mrs Beard's near miss, and to the Barker inquest earlier in the summer.

Christiana was taunting the Police, and she was taunting Dr Beard; in fact, she was taunting everyone. Did she want to be caught? If so, she had sown the seeds of her own capture. It was after he received that latest letter that Dr Beard decided to go to the Police and voice his suspicion that Christiana Edmunds might have something to do with it all. He handed over the large cache of letters which she had continued to write to him, even after her banishment from his presence. That he had kept these letters, secretly, meant that they were potentially incriminating to him as well; but

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he concluded that the seriousness of the situation required him to face his own, social judgement. The Brighton Police decided to test his theory. They wrote to Edmunds about the Barker case, and received a reply in the same hand as the doctor's correspondence. They decided that the matter warranted further investigations.

Christiana was arrested a week after that last batch of poisoned parcels arrived. Immediately, the Police began to ask around about Miss Edmunds and what she did, and suddenly, many small and unconnected incidents began to make sense. It did not take long to discover that she had left Brighton on Tuesday 8th August to spend two days in Margate, attending to family business. Further enquiries indicated that she had then caught the train to London, before returning to Brighton from Victoria on the Thursday in question. She was on the same train that carried the poisoned post, and had been placed at the scene of the crime. However, what exactly was the crime? The Police worked forwards from Dr Beard's letters. They concluded that the motive must be sex: Christiana was demonstrably in love with Dr Beard, and had decided that her only hope at union lay in the removal of Mrs Beard from this mortal coil. Edmunds was charged with attempted murder.

This set the scene for her committal hearing, which began at the Brighton Police Court one week after her arrest, on 24th August 1871. Christiana appeared decked in black: a long silk dress, a lace shawl, and a veiled

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bonnet. Over the course of three hearings over the next fortnight, many witnesses provided pieces in the jigsaw. 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. There were others who were called to the stand, too, placing Edmunds at the scene of other poisoning events, hitherto unknown.

It quickly became apparent that enough evidence existed to charge Edmunds with additional offences. Arsenic had been found in the last batch of parcels, and Edmunds was also known to have purchased arsenic as well as strychnine. Secondly, those who had received the recent poisoned gifts all appeared to know the Beards or have some knowledge of the poisoning case. Most significantly, the name of Maynard's kept returning. It was Christiana who had drawn attention to herself and to Maynard's at the time of the inquest into Sidney Barker's death, when she had provided evidence of her own poisoning. Now, a handwriting expert concluded that the addresses appended to the parcels, the signatures of 'Mrs Wood' in Mr

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Garrett's books, and even the notes handwritten to Sidney Barker's father, were all by the same author as that August letter to Dr Beard. The handwriting was a direct match. That author had also been a regular customer at the sweet shop, placing herself at the centre of all that had gone on in Brighton that summer. The direction of the prosecution changed, probably to Dr Beard's great relief. The case was no longer about his wife, and his relationship with Christiana. On 7th September, Edmunds was charged with the murder of Sidney Barker, and it was this new charge on which she would stand indicted.

The story now suggested by the prosecution was that after Christiana's failed attempt to poison Emily Beard in September 1870, her subsequent poisoning spree had been occasioned by a wish to blame Maynard's for the whole affair. The suggestion was that by casting guilt elsewhere, Christiana believed she could reassure Charles that he had no grounds to banish her. The truth was that no one was really sure what she had hoped to achieve. An alternative argument doing the rounds was that Christiana had taken to experimenting in preparation for a renewed attempt to kill the obstacle to her own, personal happiness. Throughout the spring and summer of 1871, these experiments had been meted out allegedly on animals and innocent passers-by, with different dosages of poison being trialled and the results noted. Whatever, it was all sensational stuff, and while some of these ideas were purely supposition, the notion of Edmunds's unrequited love driving her to murder was one all too eagerly consumed by the press.

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The case was scheduled to be heard at the Lewes Assizes, close to Brighton, until it was felt impossible to find a jury who would not be prejudiced by what they had read in the newspapers. Instead, Edmunds was taken by train to Newgate Prison in London, and her case was heard at the Old Bailey on the 15th and 16th January 1872. She was placed on trial for the murder of Sidney Barker.

The circumstances of the case had set tongues wagging all over the metropolis, and it was not surprising to find the court room full of journalists and other onlookers. Christiana did not disappoint them, appearing once more before the court resplendent in black, this time of velvet with a fur trim. She was bareheaded, and though her age was stated to be thirty-five, for the first time her audience could see that she might be older than those stated years. Her black hair was parted centrally and plaited, so that it was drawn back and down the back of her head. The Times reporter was rather uncomplimentary, suggesting that she had a 'long and cruel' chin, her lower jaw 'massive, and animal in its development'. Despite that, he was prepared to concede that 'the profile is irregular, but not unpleasing', and that there was 'considerable character in its upper features'. Her lips occasionally pressed together in a look of 'comeliness' that turned to 'absolute grimness'. The portrait was painted: a woman who thought herself more than she was, an amatory, predatory woman. It is this caricature that has stayed with her.

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She took copious notes of proceedings, her dark eyes flashing up and down as she dipped her pen into the inkwell. The evidence from the earlier hearings was repeated, of poisons purchased and of love gone bad. There were more witnesses by 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 MacNaughten 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.

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Then Edmunds's mother took the stand to deliver a long tale of family madness, which had eventually trapped her surviving daughter. Edmunds, for the only time in court, reacted to proceedings. Contemplating her mother laying bare the family soul, she cried out: 'This is more than I can bear'. In the end, it was futile testimony anyway. As her counsel moved on, Christiana's defence unravelled. There was evidence of hereditary insanity, to be sure, but there was nothing else to offer to back up the opinions of the medical men. There was nothing obviously insane about Edmunds's own life. Any sympathy the court had drifted away from her. When the jury was asked to deliver their verdict, they found Christiana Edmunds guilty of murder, and did not recommend mercy.

The defendant remained in the dock to hear her fate. Neatly dressed, she was still wearing her black velvet cloak with its fur trim. She had added a pair of black gloves to her courtroom attire, and her hair was now arranged 'coquettishly'. Before sentence was passed, she asked to be tried on the original charge too, of attempting to murder Emily Beard, so that she might be able to describe the nature of her relationship with Dr Beard. If she was to go down, she surmised, then he would go down beside her. It was, of course, too late for that.

Edmunds faced the gallows alone. Her immediate response was fittingly dramatic: she claimed that she was pregnant. It was a legal tradition that a pregnant woman could not be hanged until after she had given birth. A

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great murmur erupted around the court: so the business of sentencing was not done yet. Immediately, the court officials began to cry out for women of a certain age to make themselves known to them. A jury of matrons was duly empanelled from amongst the spectators in the room, and retired to examine Edmunds in an ante room. A doctor was summoned. The court adjourned until an hour later, when both Edmunds and this latest jury returned to the room. 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, and there was popular sentiment locally towards sparing Edmunds's life. On 23rd January 1872, Dr William Orange, by now Broadmoor's Medical Superintendent, visited her together 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

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insane, and after some consideration the Home Secretary, Henry Bruce, respited her sentence to one of Her Majesty's Pleasure.

This was quite an unusual decision, overturning as it did the verdict of a jury. It was not uncommon to have the death sentence commuted to life imprisonment, and there were other Broadmoor murderers who had been transferred with such a tariff. Their guilt, however, remained. Christiana had been absolved from hers by two professionals, contrary to the result in the courtroom. The Times bemoaned this unsatisfactory situation in a leader piece on 25th January, even if it did agree that the outcome had been the right one. It wondered aloud on the wisdom of politicians permitting a jury to give 'a solemn verdict which they know will be afterwards reversed'. The decision was unpopular back in Brighton too: the Home Secretary had effectively saddled the ratepayers with Christiana's upkeep from now on, creating another large bill to pay. Certainly her case had been a big ticket item, making full use of venues, discourse and precedent. Perhaps the attention was thrilling, though the fact that a verdict could be legally correct yet medically unsound was a conclusion of little importance to Christiana. She had achieved a more basic ambition. Gull and Orange had given her back her life, and she was therefore transferred to Broadmoor as a pleasure patient on 5th July 1872.

On her arrival at the Asylum, she was forty-three years-old. She was wearing make up on her rouged cheeks, a wig ('a large amount of false

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hair') and had false teeth. 'She is very vain', wrote Dr Orange at the time. 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.

Dr Orange was nevertheless convinced that he had made the correct diagnosis. Edmunds's behaviour in his charge did not conform to social norms. When her surviving brother died shortly after her admission, she showed no grief, and appeared to be completely unmoved by the loss. She was also deceitful. As soon as she was transferred, she immediately began to try and smuggle in clothes or beauty aids. Her younger sister, Mary, was complicit in this. One letter asked for clothing; another talked about ways to find and apply make-up while in the Asylum. Orange attempted to reason with Mary, insisting that Christiana was able to partake of any comfort that she required. It was to no avail. Mary began to send Christiana gifts too, and it was the gifts that caused great irritation to the matron of Broadmoor's female wing. Inside every parcel was some sort of contraband, hidden within another item. Each one needed time and attention to search. It appeared to be attention-seeking on the part of both of the Edmunds women, and it was more than the matron could bear. The final straw was the receipt of a cushion stuffed with false hair during 1874.

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The matron complained to Orange that Edmunds was amassing and hoarding hair in her room, and that no further gifts should be allowed. The Superintendent 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, Broadmoor intercepted clandestine correspondence sent to the chaplain at Lewes Prison, with whom Christiana had struck up a bond during her time in custody. 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'. Presumably the chaplain was intended to become a Dr Beard substitute. Still, Christiana's webs of intrigue continued. In 1875 her room was twice searched and various concealed articles were recovered on each occasion. Dr Orange wrote that 'she deceives for the pure love of deception'.

Edmunds was a patient who required micro-management. She was a bundle of contradictions. Generally quiet and biddable, she joined the ranks of the more trusted patients in the original female Block. She had access to the Terrace and the gardens, and probably delighted in causing mischief through playing croquet and other games with her fellow patients. For she was certainly disruptive, as a note of 1876 indicates: 'her delight and amusement seem[s] to be in practising the art of ingeniously tormenting

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several of the more irritable patients so that she could always complain of their language to her whilst it was difficult to bring any overt act home to herself'. The same note suggests that her room is still being regularly searched, and that when her mother visited, she would omit her make up and try to look as desperate as possible.

The subject of Christiana's make-up appears often in her notes. She was evidently perceived by the male doctors as Broadmoor's painted lady, and as a creature motivated by romantic desire. They were the sole males in regular contact with her, and she appears to have been determined to maximise their attention to her. A note made in 1877 by David Nicolson, as Edmunds approached the age of fifty, related her daily life as one of embroidery and etching; but also maintained that she 'affects a youthful appearance' and that 'her manner and expression evidently lies towards sexual and amatory ideas'. It seems certain that at the annual Christmas dance for female patients, no doctor or male attendant could escape a dance with Christiana.

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

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to the Broadmoor steward, who made a fuss because he was not expecting it. Otherwise, she became less disruptive. She sewed, she painted, she made herself up and demanded acknowledgement 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.

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. It never seems to have crossed anyone's mind that she might be discharged to rejoin society. As the years went by, her remaining family died, and she was left alone at Broadmoor.

Gradually her own 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. As she entered the last year of her life, a final Christmas ball approached. Laid up in the infirmary, and closely observed by the medical

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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 nine months 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 many 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 original report on Edmunds. In 1892, Blandford was preparing a new edition of his book, and wrote to 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 fifteen and a half years that 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

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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 Brighton Police Court hearings, and perhaps he was captivated by the undoubted sense of legal theatre which surrounded Edmunds and her woman in black persona.

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 BBC Radio 4 in 2006, and recently become part of Steve Hennessy's series of Broadmoor plays.

In Brighton, Christiana and the other characters in her story are still well-known and used regularly 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, though still an incomplete one, for Edmunds leaves behind a sense of mystery in terms of her motivation. She is a character who always seems within grasp and then disappears beyond reach. She never denied her actions, nor offered up an explanation of what she was trying to achieve.

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She was certainly a slave to adulation, and must have thrived on the publicity that her criminal actions generated. She must also have enjoyed the secrecy attached to the affair on which she embarked with her doctor neighbour. Perhaps her motive was no more than to enjoy all these experiences. It is unclear whether she wanted to have Dr Beard or to ruin him, and there is no firm evidence that she ever sought to correspond with him again after August 1871. It is, though, too neat an ending to conclude simply that all was vanity with her: that this unusual woman can be reduced to a female stereotype, a frustrated spinster whose desires eventually destroyed her. Not enough of her survives in the records to be able to see the true Christiana, and she has left us with only shards of the mirror containing her reflection. The search to discover the Venus of Broadmoor goes on.

Mark Stevens, Berkshire Record Office

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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, though it is fairly basic:

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