

The sad tale of the Margate architect and the Brighton poisoner

Anthony Lee

There was more than a streak of madness in the Edmunds family. William Edmunds, the distinguished Margate architect, died in Peckham House lunatic asylum and his daughter Christiana Edmunds, the Brighton poisoner, died in Broadmoor. William Edmunds was born in Margate in about 1801; his father was Thomas Edmunds, his mother Ann Edmunds. Thomas Edmunds was listed in *The Universal British Directory* of 1791 as being a carpenter; in 1795 he was living in a house owned by Joseph Hall, proprietor of Hall's library, on the north side of Hawley square.¹ By 1811 he was the proprietor of the White Hart Hotel in the Marine Parade² and later he became a 'surveyor of considerable eminence'³ and an 'intelligent builder.'⁴ His major claim to fame was as clerk to the works for the rebuilding of Margate Pier following the disastrous gales of 1808. It was his idea to raise the outer edge

of the Pier to provide a promenade for the fashionable visitors to Margate.⁴ There were, however, problems with the rebuilding; in April 1813, it was reported that: 'For several days past the outside wall next the sea, comprehending nearly the whole length of wall built since April last, and in length about 300 feet, has shown a tendency towards making a subsidation. Early yesterday morning the centre part of that length gradually and slowly pressed outwards, and at the same time downwards, about two or three feet from the great body of the work, unsettling and disjoining almost every stone on that side in such a manner, as to leave no doubt of the absolute necessity of taking down a considerable part of it.'⁵ It was suggested at the time that these problems arose because Thomas departed from the instructions of John Rennie, the Engineer employed to design the new Pier.³

Thomas and Ann had a number of children, some of whom were baptised at St. John's Church, Margate, although some were not. Several of the children died in childhood and Thomas Edmunds junior, born in 1792, was drowned with twenty two others when Sacket's

Hoy, going from Margate to London, was lost between Birchington and Reculvers in February 1802.⁶ The first event to really mark out the family was, however, a bizarre court case in 1815 involving Mary Edmunds, Williams Edmunds' elder sister, who was probably born in 1793. The case was brought by John Boys, a Margate solicitor influential in Margate's affairs at the time, and concerned three libels in verse, and two caricature drawings, supposed to have been produced by Mary Edmunds.^{3,7} The libels, all anonymous and in a disguised handwriting, had been placarded about the town, and duplicates had been sent directly to John Boys, ensuring that he could not ignore them. The first libel, in June 1814, concerned an iron roller used in the grounds in the centre of Hawley Square and repeated a rumor that Boys had borrowed the roller from Mummery, a coach master at Margate, and then sold it. The libel starts:



The Maidstone trial with Mary Edmunds on the right of the Judge

Is there a heart that can be found,
With foul dishonor blacken'd round
Whose deeds with infamy are crown'd-
Like B—s?

Lives there a man who does not hate,
The soul without one honest trait,
The damning guilt which rules the fate,-
of B—s?

and continues in like vain for a further six verses; all good stuff and obviously designed to anger Boys. The second libel concerned a disagreement over the organ in St John's church, accompanied by a caricature showing the devil filling the organ-pipes with sand. The final libel concerned a lime kiln at Margate and suggested that Boys was in league with the devil; the text was accompanied by a caricature of Boys and the devil in consultation.

When the case came to court at Maidstone in July 1815, the arguments centered on whether the libels were or were not in the handwriting of Mary Edmunds.³ One of the witnesses called for the defense was the 15 year old William Edmunds, who, when asked if he thought that the libels were written in Mary's hand, replied 'I do not believe it is.' Although the jury finally found in favour of John Boys, they awarded damages of only £10, compared to the £1000 damages claimed by Boys. Nevertheless, the court case must have put Thomas Edmunds to very considerable expense, despite the small damages awarded, but it was reported: 'that so well convinced are his numerous neighbours and friends of the innocence and worth of Miss Edmunds ... they have intimated an intention of raising a subscription to defray those expenses ... This intention is the more honourable to the town, and the more flattering to the feelings of the young lady, as, fortunately, such are the pecuniary circumstances of Mr. Edmunds, that no such relief is absolutely necessary.'³ We can never know for certain why Mary Edmunds produced these libels but it was probably related to the bad feeling existing between Boys and her father. Boys, who was a Director of Margate Pier, held Thomas Edmunds responsible for the partial collapse of the Pier wall described above.³

Thomas Edmunds died around 1824, and for a time William Edmunds and his sister Mary took over the running of the White Hart hotel⁸ although by 1826, the proprietor of the Hotel was listed in *Pigot's Guide* as George Creed.⁹ At the same time, William Edmunds, still in his early twenties, was following in his fathers' steps as a surveyor, and setting out on his career as an architect, his first commission being as architect to the new Church being planned in Margate, Holy Trinity Church.

By the 1820s, the increase in population of Margate and the large number of visitors in the summer meant that St. John's Church was too small, and a new church was required. This coincided with worries in Parliament that many towns were now poorly served with church places, leading to the passing of an Act in 1818 for 'Building Additional Churches in Populous Parishes.' By this Act, the Church Building Commissioners would give half the cost of a new church, as long as half of the

seats in the church were free. In 1825, it was agreed that a new church should be built in Margate on high ground near the Fort. Advertisements were placed in the *Times*, the *Courier*, and the *Kentish Gazette*, in May, 1825.^{10,11}

'To Architects

The committee appointed to superintend the erection of a new Church at Margate, give notice that they are willing to receive plans for a Gothic church of the time of Henry the Third – to contain two thousand sittings – of which twelve hundred are to be free seats – and eight hundred sittings in pews. The Building is to be brick-cased, with stone and slated. The cost not to exceed sixteen thousand pounds, including the Architects commission.

The Architect whose plan shall be approved by the Committee will be appointed Architect to the Building – all the other plans will be returned.

The plans to be sent in by the 15th of June directed to the Rev. W. F. Baylay, Vicar of Margate.

Margate, May 19th, 1825.'

This gave potential architects only about three weeks in which to prepare and submit their plans, but, nevertheless, 24 plans were received. That finally accepted by the Committee was the plan submitted by William Edmunds, the *Kentish Gazette* commenting that this 'reflects the highest credit on so young an artist.'¹² The winning of the commission was a major fillip for Edmunds; *Kidd's Picturesque Pocket Companion*,⁴ published in 1831 when Edmunds was at the height of his career, concluded that Edmunds' 'professional success was in a great measure owing to the kindness and discrimination of the Rev. W. F. Baylay...'

These early days must have been exciting times for Edmunds. The foundation stone of the new church was laid on September 28th 1825 and was marked by a procession through Margate: 'The streets were lined with spectators, the flags were flying, the drums were beating and the music playing. The bells began to ring when the procession began to move and everything showed great gaiety and hilarity rather than a sacred ceremony.'¹⁰ And there in the procession, together with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sir Edward Knatchbull, the Member of Parliament for Kent, the Vicar, the Rev. W. F. Baylay, and all the local dignitaries, was William Edmunds bearing the plans for the Church.¹⁰

It quickly became clear that the original cost of £16,000 was not going to be sufficient. A notebook dated 1825, and probably written by Edmunds himself, estimated the final cost as £19,664 6s 5d.¹³ The *Times*, reporting on the plans for the church on 8th September 1825, said 'a handsome new Church ... at the estimated expense of £24,000 of which sum £18,000 has already been subscribed, is about to be erected at Margate, upon

the high ground on a level with the fort. The spot is already marked out.’¹⁴ The final cost turned out to be about £28,000.¹⁰

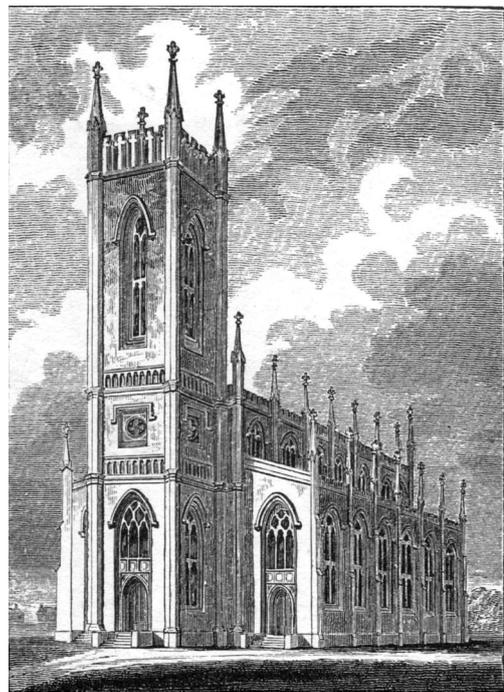
In December, advertisements for builders appeared:¹⁵

‘Trinity Church, Margate – persons willing to contract for the various works required in the erection of the above church are informed that the plans and specifications may be seen at the Town Hall, Margate on and after the 24th of November next ensuing. The tenders may be sent in for a portion of the above work, or for the whole; but, in case of a contract for the whole, the amount of each trade will be required to be specified. Each tender must contain a detailed list of prices, and be sent sealed with the names and residencies of the parties and their sureties endorsed thereon, addressed to “His Majesty’s Commissioners for building New Churches” under cover to “Mr William Edmunds, architect, Margate” on or before the 29th of December 1825. His Majesty’s Commissioners do not bind themselves to accept even the lowest tender, unless the same is considered satisfactory to them. Margate, Nov. 14, 1825.’

By the summer of 1826 payments were being made for the regular deliveries of Bath stone arriving by ship at Margate Harbour.¹⁰ By June 1827, it was reported that ‘The side-aisle roofs are covered in, and the whole building is level to the top of the same, being about 44 feet 6 inches from the paving. The jambs and sills of the south wall of the nave are fixing. The tracery of the side aisle is all fixed; that to the east window nearly completed. The whole of the mason’s and carpenter’s work in a very forward state; and it is expected that the nave will be covered in about the second week in August.’¹⁶ It was suggested that the church would be finished by 1st August, 1828, but this estimate was rather too optimistic, completion taking a further year, as made clear in a report of June 1828; ‘The building (with the exception of the Tower) completed as regards the masonry and brickwork. The tower about ten feet above the nave roof. The plastering of the interior completed, excepting under the galleries, and in the vestibule, Tower, robing-room, and vestry. The joiner’s work of the galleries nearly completed. Nearly the whole of the remaining finishings have been prepared for a long period, and the fixing of the same is rapidly proceeding.’¹⁷ The estimated finishing date was now suggested as September, 1828. The Church was actually consecrated on 11th June 1829.¹⁰

Whatever its weaknesses, the church, standing in a dominating position overlooking Margate, was certainly a church on a grand scale. Kidd’s guide⁴ described it as follows:

‘It consists of a nave which is fifty-seven feet high, and side aisles which are elaborately groined. The east end is terminated by a recess for the altar, having a very noble window thirty-two feet in height, filled with stained glass, and the west finishes with a deep recess for the organ, the front of which represents a shrine, and while sweetly harmonizing with, forms part of the architecture of, the church. The stone screen in front of the west gallery is richly ornamented with buttresses and pinnacles, and produces a very imposing effect. The arrangement of the ceilings under the galleries, deserves peculiar notice, from not having that gloomy appearance usual to such portions of churches, which Mr Edmunds has in this instance happily relieved by spandrills and pierced arches. . . . The tower of this church is 136 feet high, and is therefore visible at a considerable distance from shore . . . The exterior of the building is embattled and finished by decorated pinnacles, and carved finials.’



Holy Trinity Church, in an engraving probably by Edmunds.

Edmunds was also busy at this time with a number of other public buildings in Margate. He was architect for the light house, completed in 1829, and illustrated on the cover of *Bygone Margate*. He was responsible for the Droit House, which served as the offices of the Pier and Harbour Company. In 1829 he also completed The Boulevard, or Levey’s Bazaar, in the High street: ‘Few watering places can boast of a public building similar to the Boulevard here. Its fine classical stone entrance, which has been built under the direction of Mr. W.

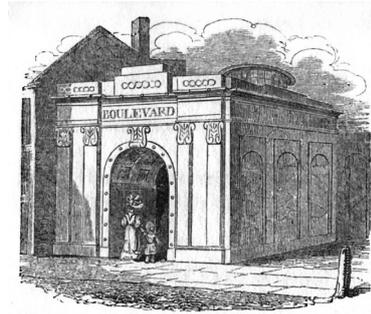
Edmunds, commands universal admiration. Its interior corresponds with the grand entrance, and is one of the most splendid fitted up saloons in the kingdom. It now takes the lead as a promenade, being about two hundred feet long, with a corresponding height, and stone floor; consequently very cool during the summer months. A thoroughfare has just been opened through this magnificent place, leading to the western extremity of Cecil square.¹⁸

Edmunds fame as an architect had by now started to spread. He was appointed architect for a new church to be built in Dover, Trinity Church, started in September 1833 and completed in 1835.¹⁹ He designed the new workhouse at Herne, consisting of a large formal quadrangle enclosed by two-storey buildings, housing 420 inmates; this opened in January 1836.²⁰ At about this time, he was also responsible for substantial extensions and improvements to the Kent and Canterbury Hospital.²¹ In 1839 a rather different kind of commission came his way. It was decided that Dover should give a grand dinner for the Duke of Wellington. A special Pavilion was erected for the occasion on the Priory Meadows, designed by Edmunds. As described in the *Times*,²² 'This structure is composed entirely of wood, and though the decoration of the interior of the building has been, of course, the principal object of attention, yet the exterior has also a very elegant appearance. The entrance to the dining-hall is by three distinct passages, all of which lead to the side opposite the chairman's table. The shape of the hall is nearly square, and the flooring of the side portions was made to rise gradually, so as to enable the gentlemen dining there to have an uninterrupted view of the entire scene. A long gallery, occupying the whole of one side, opposite the chairman, was appropriated to the use of the ladies. The Chairman, with his illustrious guest, and other distinguished persons, sat on a raised platform at the upper end. The decorations of the hall were exceedingly gorgeous and gay. Every part of the inside of the building, with the exception of the roof, was covered over with pink and white striped drapery; and the walls at regular distances were additionally ornamented by a variety of escutcheons, rare paintings, and tapestry. The ceiling was divided into three distinct apartments, and was supported by separate rows of pillars, likewise tastefully decorated with drapery. In front of the two first rows knights in armour were placed,

and it seemed as if these mute representations of ancient glory had again assumed their mortal forms in order to assist in honouring the greatest warrior of modern times. In all parts of the hall floated a profusion of flags; and the effect of this picturesque scene, when filled with the company, and lighted by the gas chandeliers, was brilliant in the extreme.'

On a more personal note, Edmunds had married Ann Christiana, eldest daughter of the late Major Burn, in 1828.²³ They had a daughter Christiana who was probably the daughter whose birth on 29th August 1829 was announced in the *Times*.²⁴ In 1832, at which time William and Ann were living in Hawley square, they had a daughter, Mary.²⁵ Another daughter, Louisa, was born a year later. A son, Arthur Burns, was born on 19 October, 1841.²⁶

Although all the signs were that Edmunds' career as an architect, was flourishing, this was a difficult time to be working in Margate. Margate was a place of considerable discontent; there was a wide-spread feeling that the Margate Pier and Harbour Company and the Margate Commissioners for Paving and Lighting were running Margate for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of the population at large. Edmunds was particularly vulnerable to such a charge since he was both Surveyor to the Margate Pier and Harbour Company and Surveyor to the Commissioners for Paving and Lighting. Making matters worse, there was evidence of financial mismanagement at the Pier and Harbour Company. A variety of charges had been preferred at public meetings in 1836-37 against the Treasurer (F. W. Cobb) and Edmunds, particularly by Joshua Waddington, a Director of the Company, and John Sterland, a Proprietor of the Company, and formerly a Director. The charge against Edmunds concerned an invoice for stone, amounting to £305.²⁷ Sterland claimed that the invoice, made out by Edmunds in the name of Jonathan Duncan, was made out without Duncan's knowledge or authority, and was entered by the Treasurer into his cash book as paid, but with no receipt for payment. In a bizarre twist, the invoice 'was deposited in the iron safe at the Droit office, from which it was privately abstracted by some person then unknown.' The invoice was subsequently found among the papers of the late Deputy Chairman of the Company, Mr Thomas Cobb, who committed suicide in February 1836.²⁸ At a special meeting of the Margate



Levey's Bazaar (top) and Trinity Church, Dover (bottom)

Pier and Harbour Company called in January 1837 to consider the charges against F. W. Cobb and Edmunds it was said that the 'false' invoice was made out by Edmunds, but upon the direction of the then Chairman of the Company, the late Dr Jarvis, and that although 'delivery of the Stone was delayed' it 'eventually arrived, and was paid for.'²⁹ At the very least, this was argued to be evidence of slack financial management, and perhaps the sign of something a lot more serious.

In 1837 Edmunds' salary as Surveyor to the Margate Pier and Harbour Company was £200 per annum, but it was proposed as part of a general process of reform to reduce this to £100, seemingly agreed to in October 1837.³⁰ In 1840, his salary as Surveyor to the Margate Commissioners for Paving and Lighting was reduced from £84 to £60, and even then his salary was higher than the £40 paid to the Surveyor at Ramsgate.³¹

The great successes in Edmunds' career were all achieved by his late thirties; there is no mention of any architectural work by Edmunds between about 1839 and his early death on 15th March, 1847.³² He seems to have continued as surveyor to the Margate Town Commissioners up until his death, since the Kentish Gazette reports that 'Wm. Caveller, Esq., was unanimously elected Surveyor, in the room of W. Edmunds, Esq. Deceased'³³ but otherwise his name disappears from the printed record. The sad truth about the last years of his life finally emerged at the trial of his daughter Christiana for murder.

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In the autumn of 1871 and winter of 1872 the case of Christiana Edmunds gripped the public imagination;³⁴ an editorial in the *Times* called her attempt to 'scatter death throughout a town [Brighton] in the pursuit of a selfish aim' an act of 'cold blooded indifference' typical of 'the most vicious and cruel forms of criminality.' In 1870 Christiana Edmunds was living with her mother in lodgings in Gloucester Place, Brighton. Almost opposite was the surgery of Dr Beard, a married man, with whom Christiana had formed a friendship 'that seemed to have ripened into a state of things which did not ordinarily exist between a medical adviser and his patient.'³⁵ In September 1870, she visited Dr Beard at home and gave his wife a chocolate cream 'very disagreeable in taste and resulting in nausea.' Mrs Beard recovered, but Dr Beard suspected that Christiana had tried to poison his wife; although he told no one else of his suspicions, he refused to have anything further to do with her. In response, Christiana devised an elaborate plan to divert suspicion from herself and to regain Dr Beard's friendship, by putting the blame on a Brighton confectioner, John Maynard, making it seem that he had been selling contaminated chocolates to the public.

She set about buying large quantities of the poison strychnine from a local chemist, Isaac Garrett, claiming that she wanted it to destroy some cats. Initially Garrett refused to sell her the poison, but 'she said she had a garden, and the cats destroyed the seeds in her garden, and [she] pressed me to let her have some. She said she was a married woman, and had no children, and there was no fear of mischief, as the poison would never go out of her hands or those of her husband.' So she got her supplies.

Starting in March 1871, Christiana paid a number of boys to buy bags of chocolate creams from Maynard's shop. She poisoned these with the strychnine, and then left them in various shops in Brighton, in the hope that unwitting shopkeepers or customers would eat the chocolates, become sick, and blame Maynard for their illness. When this failed, she asked a small boy to buy some chocolate creams for her from Maynard's. She opened the paper bag the boy brought her, said the chocolates were too large and sent him back to exchange them for smaller ones. But, it was alleged, she had swapped the chocolates the boy gave her for poisoned ones, so that when Maynard put the returned chocolates back out for sale, it was chocolates laced with poison that were being sold. A few days later, four year old Sidney Barker eat some chocolate creams bought by his uncle from Maynard's shop, swiftly sickened and in just half an hour was dead. Christiana assumed that this would lead to Maynard's conviction for murder, and, to help matters along, even testified against Maynard at Sidney's inquest, claiming that she herself had purchased some chocolates from Maynard and become ill after eating them. However, the jury was not convinced and returned a verdict of accidental death.

After this failure, Christiana wrote three pseudonymous letters to Sidney's father, signing the first 'An Old Inhabitant and a Seeker for Justice,' the second 'C.G.B.,' and the third 'A London Tradesman now a Visitor at Brighton.' In these letters she urged Barker to 'take proceedings against Mr. Maynard' and suggested that if he did not he, Barker, would be a negligent parent and complicit in future poisonings. 'No parent could let the loss of his child be passed over in this cursory way. The Brighton public earnestly hope you will do something, for who knows where this may end?' Finally, in August, Christiana stepped up her campaign and sent boxes of arsenic-laced fruit and cake to two Brighton women, Mrs. Boys and Mrs. Beard; Isaac Garrett, the chemist who supplied her with strychnine, also received a box of arsenic-laced fruit. Now, finally, Dr Beard reported his suspicions to the police, telling them that he believed that Christiana had tried to poison his wife the previous

autumn, although he had no proof of this, and that he believed Christiana had sent his wife and Mrs Boys the poisoned cake and was also responsible for the death of Sidney Barker.

The police initially arrested Christiana on the charge of the attempted murder of Mrs Boys and Mrs Beard, but, after linking her to the murder of Sidney Barker, they changed the charge to murder. Because of the intense interest in the case in Brighton, and the fear that she would not get a fair trial in that town, the trial was shifted to the Central Criminal Court (the Old Bailey) in London, where her trial started on January 1872. A correspondent of the *Daily News*³⁶ painted an atmospheric picture of the trial:

‘The scene of yesterday’s trial is a room in which a surgeon would be ashamed to cut off a leg, or a professor of a reputable college to deliver a lecture in. It is a square well, with a lid on the top of it. Nothing can be meaner than the fitting up of the Court room. On one side – the west – is a range of dingy glass, with the jury box below. On the north side runs the “bench” which is, in fact, a prolonged elevated platform, with a cushioned seat against the wall, and a series of trumpery mahogany cabinets at intervals in front. In the centre is a wooden canopy overshadowing the municipal official seat, above which is bracketed into the cloth-covered panel an antique sword – presumably that of Justice. The position of the judge who tries the case is on the right of this seat of state; on the left extend the seats of aldermen, under-sheriffs and privileged people. On the eastern side of the court is a bank of benches, set apart for privileged spectators and the representatives of the press. On the south side is a large wooden pen, which constitutes the dock, glass panelled on both sides, but open at the front, and a gallery above it contains as many of the representatives of the general public as can find room in its confined precincts. The well, or centre of the court, is sacred to the officials, the members of the bar, the barristers charged with the conduct of the case, the solicitors engaged, and the reporters. As the clock strikes ten the jury, previously summoned, are ordered into the box. An usher shouts silence. And the empty bench fills with ermine, gold chains, and frills. Mr Baron Martin leads the way, followed by Sheriff Truscott, with aldermen and under-sheriffs bringing up the rear. In the bustle of the official entrance it is hardly noticed that the dock likewise receives its occupant in the shape of a woman attired in black velvet trimmed with fur, who is followed by a hard-faced female warder and a male gaoler. The bench rustles into composure as the clerk of the court reads the indictment, accusing the demure, quiet-eyed

woman at the bar of wilful murder...The indictment concluded, the clerk calls upon the demure, quiet-eyed woman to plead. “Not guilty” is what she says in a firm but low voice, followed by a momentary aversion of the face...’

Many Victorians believed that a person’s character could be read from their facial features and so the newspapers gave a full description of Christiana’s appearance:

‘Short of stature, attired in sombre velvet, bareheaded, with a certain self-possessed demureness in her bearing . . . rather careworn, hard-featured woman of 35, or thereabouts...The face is plain, decidedly plain; the complexion rather dark, with some colour underlying the swarthinness. The forehead, and whole forefront of the head, is large, and projects with somewhat exceptional prominence. The dark hair, parted down the centre, is lightly drawn back, and coiled in a heavy plaited knot round the back part of the crown. The face gains character as one studies it minutely...There is considerable character in its upper features, spite of the plainness; the quick flash of the large dark eye, once noted, suffices to blot out the first conception of common-place. But the character of the face lies in the lower features. The profile is irregular, but not unpleasing; the upper lip is long and convex; mouth slightly projecting; chin straight, long, and cruel; the lower jaw heavy, massive, and animal in its development. The lips are loose – almost pendulous - the lower one being fullest and projecting, and the mouth is exceptionally large.



From the configuration of the lips the mouth might be thought weak, but a glance at the chin removes any such impression...³⁶

A picture of Christiana, published in the *Brighton and Hove Gazette*, bears some resemblance to this description.

The case for the prosecution was that Christiana had killed Sidney Barker with poisoned chocolate creams. The defence did not try to deny that Christiana had bought strychnine and put it into chocolates which she gave to children. However, they did try to argue that there was no direct proof that the strychnine taken by Sidney Barker came from the prisoner. In case this defence failed, they also put up a second line of defence, that ‘her moral sense is almost

entirely gone from her, and that she does not understand the difference between right and wrong...’ The grounds for this line of defence will be described later, but both failed: ‘The jury retired to consider their verdict at ten minutes to four o’clock, and returned into court exactly an hour afterwards with a verdict of *Guilty*.’ The judge passed the sentence of death, to which Christiana listened ‘without any apparent distress.’ She was then asked ‘the customary question put to all women under sentence of death, as to whether she knew of any cause in her condition why execution should be stayed. The meaning of this was interpreted by a female warder, and she replied, through her, that she was pregnant. Thereupon, according to an ancient usage, which has long been rare, a jury of matrons, chosen from among ladies who happened to be in court at the time, was forthwith empanelled to try the issue which the prisoner by her answer had raised. In that they were assisted by Dr. Gibson, the prison surgeon, and by Dr. Beresford Ryley, of Woolwich, who chanced to be among the audience. The result was a verdict that the prisoner was not pregnant. With that the trial ended, and the prisoner walked unaided from the bar.’

Despite the decision of the jury, the Home Secretary decided to reprieve Christiana on the grounds of insanity, committing her to Broadmoor Prison for the Criminally Insane, where she died in 1907.

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What were the grounds for suggesting that Christiana was insane? The defence lawyer argued that insanity ran in the family. He claimed that both of Christiana’s grandfathers ‘were perfectly imbecile, and were both in a state of unsound mind,’ although no direct evidence was presented for the insanity of her grandfather on her father’s side, Thomas Edmunds. Evidence that others of Christiana relations were afflicted with insanity came from a principal witness for the defence, her mother, Ann, who painted a very sad picture of the family. She and William had a son, Arthur Burns Edmunds, who was subject to epileptic fits from a child. Because of his violent behaviour she could not continue to look after him and in 1860 he was taken to Earlswood Asylum, where he remained until 1866, when he died there. They also had a daughter who was said to have suffered from hysteria, and died at 36. Ann’s father, a Major in the Army, died at the age of 43: ‘He was paralysed before he died, and died in a fit. He had to be fastened in a chair, and was quite childish before he died.’ Christiana had also suffered from some form of paralysis in 1853, being paralysed on one side and in her feet so that she could not walk. But of especial interest is what we learn about William Edmunds. Ann reported that: ‘In 1843 my husband became insane, and was sent to a private

lunatic asylum at Southall, where he was confined till August, 1844. He was very strange in his manner a long time before he was sent there. He raved about having millions of money, and attempted to knock down his medical man with a ruler. He had to be confined in a straight jacket before going to the asylum. He had two attendants before he was sent there. In August, 1844, he returned home from considerations of expense. He was better, and remained home until March, 1845, when he had to be sent to the Peckham Lunatic Asylum. He remained there until March, 1847, when he died in the asylum. For a considerable time before his death he was paralysed, though he could move. He was all drawn on one side. He was about 47 when he died.’

Further information about Edmunds was provided at Christiana’s trial by Dr Steward, the proprietor of the Southall Park asylum. Stewart described how Edmunds entered the asylum in 1843, ‘on the usual medical certificates that he was a dangerous lunatic. The exciting cause of the malady was stated to be “the loss of the sale of a house.”’ Edmunds was described ‘as being fond of good living but did not drink hard. The case was one of acute mania, and the patient was very violent and restless, and eventually became paralysed. . . . He was constantly talking nonsense . . . he thought he was worth millions of money.’ Dr Henry Armstrong, the proprietor of Peckham House asylum reported that Edmunds died on 15th March 1847 from ‘general paralysis’ from which he had suffered for three years.

There is no way of knowing what these last years were like. Southall Park asylum was a small private asylum. Few asylums at the time were purpose-built; most were adapted country mansions or other large houses.³⁷ This was the case of Southall Park, a stately red-brick mansion standing in a fine park in Southall.³⁸ It was opened as a private asylum in 1838 by Sir William Charles Ellis. A handbill of 1839 describes the asylum as being suitable ‘for any Lady or Gentleman whose mental state may require a separation from their immediate friends and connexions.’³⁹ The handbill continues: ‘The Park and Gardens afford ample space for every variety of home exercise; and the neighbourhood abounds with retired rides. The House is within a cheerful view of the road, but sufficiently distant from it to be free from any interruption or annoyance from the passengers. . . . But the principal advantages to be afforded are the domestic association and family union, which are invariably kept up with all the inmates, whose states do not preclude the propriety of such a plan. In short, Sir William and Lady Ellis and their Patients form a family circle; and in this respect the Establishment differs from almost every other. . . . Horses, Carriages, Billiards, Music and such other Amusements, as are in the habit of being used by

persons of rank, are provided.’

Ellis died in 1839 and his wife took over the asylum for a while, but in 1843 when Edmunds entered the asylum, it was licensed to J. B. Steward and G. W. Daniel; in 1844 it contained 9 lunatics.⁴⁰ In 1850, an anonymous author provided a description of what he termed ‘an ordinary middle class establishment of the present day.’⁴¹ The author suggested that the accommodation would be arranged according to the fees charged, there being three classes of paying patients. Two guineas per week would be the fee if use of the comfortable parlour was required; one guinea per week was charged for more crowded conditions and the lowest rate would be fifteen to sixteen shillings per week. The bedrooms would be very much after the fashion of a ladies’ boarding school, with white dimity curtains and chintz hangings at the windows. There would be a garden, perhaps an orchard and a meadow for outdoor exercise and recreation. The expenses of a prolonged confinement in such an asylum could quickly reduce the lunatic and his family to pauperism.³⁷ Indeed, Ann reported that Edmunds left Southall in August 1844 ‘from considerations of expense.’³⁴

After a period at home, Edmunds was sent to Peckham House Lunatic Asylum, in March 1845. This was a very different kind of asylum. Peckham House was also formerly an old private mansion standing in large grounds but by 1844 the asylum contained 203 pauper lunatics and 48 private lunatics.⁴⁰ By 1846, this had increased to a total of 402 patients.⁴² However large this may seem to us, at the time it must have seemed simply enormous; in the early nineteenth century there were few institutions, including factories, as large as this. As described by Andrew Scull,⁴³ the scarcity of trained managers and the poverty of the management techniques of the period made the size of such asylums all the more remarkable, particularly since those housed in the asylum were likely to be people who had failed to respond to conventional efforts to manage and control their behaviour. These asylums were likely to be overcrowded, with few attendants looking after the patients; the close contact between patient and physician of which Sir William Ellis boasted at Southall Park was unlikely to be the case at Peckham House, even for the private patients. An inquest on a pauper patient whose death in Peckham House was attributed to severe neglect heard that in one block, 56 pauper lunatics were housed in 14 cells downstairs, 2 dining-rooms and 6 rooms upstairs, with just three ‘keepers’ looking after them.⁴⁴

The Commissioners on Lunacy⁴⁰ reported in 1844 that Peckham House ‘has always been a source of trouble to us upon the subject of diet. It has, on several occasions,

been specially visited on this account, and frequent remonstrations have been made.’ On alternate days dinner at Peckham House for the paupers was ‘meat, potatoes and bread’ and ‘soup and bread’; ‘the soup is made from the liquer in which the meat for the whole establishment, (private patients, paupers and servants) is boiled the previous day, together with all the bones, with the addition of barley, pease, and green vegetables.’ On the seventh day dinner was ‘Irish stew and bread.’⁴⁰ Things were so bad in 1844 that the Commissioners thought they had to explain why they allowed the asylum to continue to operate: ‘It may be asked if we have not been too lenient in renewing, from time to time, the licences for the Peckham ... Asylum. Your Lordship, however, must be aware, that in consequence of the deficient accommodation in public asylums, if licences were withdrawn from houses containing large numbers of paupers, there would be no alternative, but to send the patients to workhouses, or to board with other paupers, where they would not have the care which they now receive under regular visitation and supervision.’ Fortunately, the Commissioners reported in 1847 that many of the problems identified in their 1844 report had been addressed, including an increase in the number of attendants.⁴⁵

We do not know from what mental illness Edmunds was suffering nor to what extent his illness was genetic and to what extent it was triggered by external events. His initial breakdown in 1843 was said to be triggered by ‘the loss of the sale of a house.’³⁴ Exactly what this means is unclear, but perhaps it is related to the following advertisement that appeared in the *Times* in April and May 1842: ‘Margate – to be Sold, or Let, with immediate possession, a first-rate and excellent House, situate in the best of Fort-crescent, Margate, having been let on lease for 14 years the term expiring at Lady-day. The house and premises are in perfect repair, and in every way calculated to receive a respectable family. For particulars apply to Mr Edmunds, architect, Hawley-square, Margate.’⁴⁶ Whilst in Southall Park asylum, Edmunds was said to be ‘constantly talking nonsense . . . he thought he was worth millions of money.’ Edmunds was not the only man associated with the Margate Pier and Harbour Company at that time to suffer delusions. A Director of the Company, Robert Pringle, committed suicide in 1842. At his inquest it was said that he had ‘for some time past, laboured under a deep-rooted delusion, in reference to something going on at the Margate Pier - that he was under confinement for something he had there committed, but was unable to state what; that all the clocks and bells in the town had been stopped till the verdict should be given; that he was sensible it would be against him, and that he

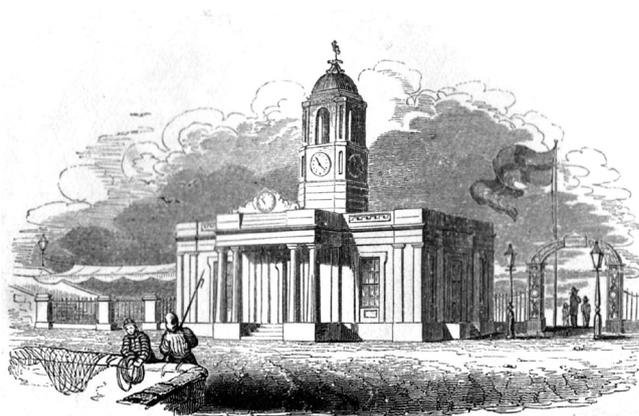
should be dragged to the place of execution. He appeared quite rational on every other subject, but as soon as any allusion was made to the Pier, he would commence crying and giving himself in custody.⁷⁴⁷ It would be surprising if all these events at the Pier and Harbour Company had no effect on Edmunds' mental state.

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This has been a sad tale. Edmunds' career as an architect started so well, but was so short. Of his works, little remains. The churches at Margate and Dover were demolished following damage in the Second World War. His lighthouse survived until the great storm of 1953, when the sea undermined the timber piles supporting the Pier, and it toppled into the sea. The Droit House, although destroyed in the Second World War, was reconstructed in 1947. A number of his drawings have, however, survived; these show that he was a skilled draughtsman. A few of these drawings were incorporated into *Kidd's Picturesque Pocket Companion to Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs* and other sketches and plans can be seen in the East Kent Archive Office. His map of Margate of 1821 was the first detailed street map of the town.

Notes

- 1 *The Times*, March 30, 1795.
- 2 *Holden's Annual Directory*, 1811.
- 3 *Substance of a report of the trial in an action between John Boys, Attorney, and Miss Mary Edmunds, both of Margate for three alleged poetical libels*, London, 1815.
- 4 *Kidd's Picturesque Pocket Companion to Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs and The Parts Adjacent*, W. Kidd, London, 1831.
- 5 *Kentish Gazette*, April 1, 1813.
- 6 *The Times*, February 12, 1802; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 72, part 2, 1802.
- 7 *Kentish Chronicle*, July 21, 1815.
- 8 *The Times*, May 22, 1824.
- 9 *Pigot and Co. Directory for Kent*, 1826-27.
- 10 Walton, High Merscy. *A short history of Holy Trinity Church Margate*, 1932.
- 11 *Kentish Gazette*, May 24, 1825.
- 12 *Kentish Gazette*, June 21, 1825.
- 13 East Kent Archive Office R/U19/131.
- 14 *The Times*, September 8, 1825.
- 15 *The Times*, December 9, 1825.
- 16 *Report of the Church Building Commissioners*, 1826-7.
- 17 *Report of the Church Building Commissioners*, 1828.
- 18 *Kentish Chronicle*, August 18, 1829.
- 19 *The New Dover Guide*, William Batcheller, 1845.



The Droit House

- 20 Herne village plan; www.herneandbroomfieldpc.kentparishes.gov.uk/userfiles/File/ParishPlanPart1.pdf
- 21 Kent Archive Office MH/T4/P1/1 .
- 22 *The Times*, August 31, 1839.
- 23 *Morning Chronicle*, January 4, 1828.
- 24 *The Times*, September 1, 1829.
- 25 *The Times*, February 7, 1832.
- 26 *The Times*, October 21, 1841.
- 27 *Kent Herald*, October 13, 1836; *Kentish Observer*, November 24, 1836.
- 28 *Kent Herald*, February 4, 1836.
- 29 *Kentish Observer*, February 2, 1837.
- 30 *Canterbury Weekly Journal*, April 27, October 14, 1837.
- 31 *Canterbury Journal*, December 1, 1840.
- 32 *The Lady's Newspaper*, March 20, 1847.
- 33 *Kentish Gazette*, May 11, 1847.
- 34 *The Times*, September 1, 8, 9, 1871, January 16, 17, 1872; *Daily News*, August 25, 1871, January 16, 17, 1872.
- 35 *Reynold's Newspaper*, January 21, 1872.
- 36 *Daily News*, January 16, 1872.
- 37 Parry-Jones, William. *The Trade in Lunacy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.
- 38 Measom, George. *The official illustrated guide to the Great Western Railway*, 1860.
- 39 Southall Park, Handbill, April 1839, in the papers of the Society for the Improvement of the Conditions of the Insane. Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.
- 40 *Metropolitan Commission on Lunacy. Report to the Lord Chancellor*, 1844.
- 41 Anon, *Familiar Views of Lunacy and Lunatic Life*, London, Parker, 1850.
- 42 *Report of the Commissioners in Lunacy to the Lord Chancellor*, 1846.
- 43 Scull, Andrew T. *Museums of Madness*, Allen Lane, 1979.
- 44 *The Times*, May 15, 1845; *The Era*, May 25, 1845
- 45 *Commission in Lunacy: Further report to the Lord Chancellor*, 1847.
- 46 *The Times*, April 11, May 2, 1842.
- 47 *Canterbury Journal*, September 3, 1842.

