Richard Dadd (1817-1886)

Dadd was born on 1st August 1817 in Chatham. He was the fourth of seven children, a total of four of whom would eventually die insane. His father, Robert, was a chemist and the first curator of the Chatham and Rochester Literary and Philosophical Institution’s museum, and Dadd attended The King’s School at Rochester. When he was seventeen, the family moved to London, and at nineteen he was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools where he completed his training as an artist.

The young Dadd was influenced by both literary and classical themes, and by the early 1840s had begun to create the fairy paintings for which he would become best known. In due course, his work attracted the patronage of Sir Thomas Phillips, a solicitor from South Wales who had been knighted for his part in ending a Chartist riot. Phillips wished to undertake the Grand Tour of classical sites across Europe, and he recruited Dadd to accompany him as his personal artist.

They began their journey in July 1842, travelling first through Belgium, Germany and Switzerland before reaching Italy, then moving on to Greece, Turkey and Palestine. By the time they reached Egypt Dadd had begun to exhibit signs of mental illness. His health seems to have deteriorated very quickly from this point. He and Phillips crossed to Malta and then to Italy
again. He experienced his first desire to kill when he saw the Pope at a
public appearance in Rome.

Dadd was sent home from Paris in July 1843. A doctor consulted by the
family recommended that Dadd was committed to a private asylum and put
under immediate restraint. This caused a crisis. On 28th August 1843, Dadd
asked his father to accompany him to an inn at Cobham, near Gravesend in
Kent. After enjoying a meal together, they walked to nearby Cobham Park
where Dadd killed his father by stabbing him with a knife.

Dadd fled to France. Two days later he attacked a complete stranger. He
was arrested by the French authorities and identified himself as a wanted
man. Initially, he was sent to a French asylum at Clermont, before he was
extradited to England in July 1844. He never stood trial for the murder of
his father, and was found insane when he came to plead. He was sent to
the criminal lunatic ward at Bethlem on 22nd August 1844.

Notes from his stay at Clermont indicate that Dadd believed that his father
was the devil, and that the ancient Egyptian god Osiris had ordered his
murder. This was a delusion that Dadd maintained for the rest of his life.
Some notes from his time at Bethlem describe Dadd’s state: ‘For some years
after his admission he was considered a violent and dangerous patient for he
would jump up and strike a violent blow without any aggravation and then
beg pardon for the deed. This arose from some vague idea that filled his
mind, and still does so to a certain extent, that certain spirits have the

© Berkshire Record Office 2009
power of possessing a man’s body and compelling him to adopt a particular
course whether he will or no.’ Dadd also began painting again, a habit he
would continue throughout his time in asylum care.

Dadd made the great trek to the Berkshire countryside on 23rd July 1864, a
few days short of his 47th birthday. He settled in to his new accommodation
quickly. He received money from his family regularly, and in the patients’
account books in the Broadmoor archive his careful signature records his
receipt of brushes and board that he purchased for his work.

Dadd was a tranquil patient, whose illness only became apparent during
conversation. His notes regularly state his seeming contentment, as well as
the continuation of his delusions. In summer, he used to like to sit and
watch the other patients playing cricket. He suffered from gout, but
embarked on some large commissions: he painted decorations around the
stage in Broadmoor’s central hall, and a mural along one wall in the medical
superintendent’s house, work which, like most of the hall decorations, is
now lost.

In the summer of 1885 Dadd fell ill and was taken to the Broadmoor
infirmary. There he remained until his death on the evening of 8th January
1886, aged 68, from tuberculosis. He was buried at Broadmoor.