**Richard Dadd (1817-1886)**

**Melissa Campbell-Oulton**

**Chatham, Rochester, Cobham, Dover.**

Born on 1 August 1817 in Chatham, Richard Dadd was one of chemist and druggist Robert Dadd’s seven children and would become one of the most famous inmates of Bethlem Hospital for the insane. During his time at King’s School in Rochester, Dadd showed a notable talent for art, which would prove an essential coping mechanism for him in the future. His early work was surrealist in style, including his famous paintings of fairies and the supernatural. At the age of 20, Dadd moved to London, where he attended the Royal Academy of Art. It was due to his meticulous attention to detail that explorer Sir Thomas Phillips sought Dadd’s companionship on a tour of Europe, Asia and Egypt in 1842-43. In the early years of photography, his brief was to create an accurate visual record of the trip.

It was during this trip that he first displayed symptoms of mania, initially misinterpreted as sunstroke. He apparently recovered, but by the summer of 1843 he was exhibiting dangerous signs of madness. Convinced that he was ‘haunted by fiends’,[[1]](#footnote-1) he told his father that he wanted to ‘unburden his mind’[[2]](#footnote-2) to him in Cobham, near Rochester. His brother Stephen later recalled in horror that ‘My poor father in his affection for him allowed his prudence to be overruled and accompanied him alone, and thus has fallen a victim to his affection.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Richard Dadd had become paranoid that his father was the devil incarnate.

On 28 August the two men shared a meal at the Ship Inn at Cobham. The waiter recognized Robert Dadd and asked whether he should get him one bed or two for the night, in a nearby cottage. He answered, ‘This is my son, and one will be enough’, but as the waiter was leaving the room, Richard opened the door and said sharply, ‘Get two beds.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Later that evening the two men went for a walk and the following morning Robert Dadd was found stabbed to death in nearby Cobham Park. Suspicion immediately fell on his son, who was understood to be ‘labouring under mental aberration’.[[5]](#footnote-5) As his brother Stephen put it, ‘My God to think he should fall by the hand of his son Richard who loved him so dearly and whom he so dearly loved’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Immediately after the murder Richard fled to [Dover](/19c/19c-dover) Port, from where he escaped to Calais. After attacking a fellow traveller, he spent ten months in an asylum before being extradited and taken to Maidstone Gaol. He stood trial in Rochester in July 1844 – as the charge was read, Dadd retorted, ‘You say I am the murderer, you b-y villain.’[[7]](#footnote-7) He was found to be criminally insane, a diagnosis that saw him institutionalised, rather than being remanded in prison. At the age of 23 Dadd’s loss of autonomy coincided with the end of his time in Kent.

[Dickens](/dickens) was among those who remained fascinated by the case. The artist W. P. Frith told William R. Hughes that on one occasion he went with [Dickens](/dickens) and Georgina Hogarth to the [Leather Bottle inn](/dickens/pickwick-papers-leather-bottle), ‘where [Dickens](/dickens) was eloquent on the subject of the Dadd parricide, showing us the place where the body was found, with many startling and interesting details of the discovery.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Between the years 1843 and 1863, Dadd was an inmate at London’s Bethlem Hospital, where his painting for therapeutic and recreational purposes was encouraged. His collection of *The Passions* created throughout the 1850s reveals his own interpretation of murder, agony, brutality and betrayal. While ‘Murder’ is apparently self-explanatory, Dadd believed until his death in 1886 that he had in fact slain the devil, rather than his father. In the painting itself, the figures represent the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. These works are still held in what is now the Bethlem Museum of the Mind.

Dadd died in Broadmoor, having spent the vast proportion of his adult life in mental institutions (two of his siblings also suffered from paranoid schizophrenia). But while he had lost his sanity, and with it his independence, his extraordinary talent survived. In the twentieth century he provided inspiration for Angela Carter's story 'Come onto these yellow sands' and Freddy Mercury's song 'The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke'.

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1. Stephen Dadd to David Roberts. 3 September 1843. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen Dadd to David Roberts. 3 September 1843. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Dadd to David Roberts. 3 September 1843. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Dreadful Murder at Cobham Park’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Dreadful Murder at Cobham Park’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stephen Dadd to David Roberts. 3 September 1843. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Richard Dadd, the Parricide.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hughes 396. Hughes wrongly gives Dadd’s place and time of death as Bethlem, 1887. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)