

THE PHYSICIAN FALSELY ACCUSED: The Persecution Of Doctor Bodkin Adams

When the Harold Shipman case broke in 1998, press coverage although fairly extensive was distinctly muted. Shipman was charged with the murder of Mrs Kathleen Grundy on September 7, and with three more murders the following month, but even then and with further exhumations in the pipeline, the often scurrilous tabloids kept up the veneer of respectability, and there was none of the lurid and sensationalist reporting that was to accompany the Soham inquiry four years later.

It could be that the apparent abduction and subsequent gruesome discovery of the remains of two ten year old girls has more ghoul appeal than that of a nondescript GP who had taken to poisoning mostly elderly women, or it could be that some tabloid hacks have long memories and were reluctant to jump the gun just in case Shipman turned out to be another much maligned, benevolent small town doctor, for in 1956, a GP in the seaside town of Eastbourne was suspected and at times accused of being an even more prolific serial killer than Harold Shipman. Dr Bodkin Adams would eventually stand trial for the murder of just one of his female patients; and was cleared by a jury in less than three quarters of an hour. How did this come about?

As the distinguished pathologist Keith Simpson pointed out, the investigation into Dr Adams started as idle gossip, “a mere whisper on the seafront deck chairs of Eastbourne” which first saw publication in the French magazine *Paris Match* - outside the jurisdiction of Britain’s libel laws. (1)

When the wagging tongues could no longer be ignored, Sussex Police were called in, and then Scotland Yard took over what was to become a months’ long investigation. The Shipman investigation was launched because of the strange circumstances surrounding Mrs Grundy’s will; (2) the investigation into Dr Adams began because of a *bona fide* bequest by a wealthy woman.

On August 21, 1956, a verdict of suicide was recorded on Mrs Gertrude Hullett; she had been killed by an overdose of barbiturates. By this time, police inquiries were already underway. (3) In her will, Mrs Hullett left Dr Adams £100 and a Rolls Royce car. Why would the police or anyone interpret this as a motive for murder by a well respected senior partner of a thriving practice? Undoubtedly, because this was far from the first such bequest received by Dr Adams. When Mr Hullett died in March of the same year, he had left the doctor £500 out of an estate of over ninety thousand; six years earlier, a wealthy widow, Mrs Edith Morrell, had also left him a Rolls Royce. (4)

Adams had in fact been named as a legatee in no less than 132 wills, an apparently staggering number. On the face of it, there was more than enough circumstantial evidence to warrant suspicion of foul play, but incriminating medical evidence was sorely lacking in both cases, though at the trial, medical evidence of a different kind was to surface which would shatter the prosecution case.

The police investigation was intense, but the first charges to be brought against Dr Adams were minor in comparison. In November, he was arrested and charged with thirteen counts of

petty deception including four relating to the cremations of former patients. One of them read: “in November, 1955, caused to be delivered to Dorothy Crisford a pair of elastic stockings, by virtue of a forged instrument...” He was remanded on £2,000 bail. (5)

These were purely technical offences, and the police were clearly scraping the barrel, undoubtedly many other doctors were equally loose in their prescribing practices, but much worse was to follow. Adams’ chief protagonist was Superintendent Herbert Hannam, a copper of the old school. Hannam had made his name in the Teddington Towpath murder case of 1953. He was known as The Count Of Scotland Yard, (6) though doubtless he had other less flattering sobriquets.

Following his arrest, two more former patients were exhumed, at which point Dr Adams contacted the Medical Defence Union.

On December 19, Hannam re-arrested Adams, and the GP was charged with the November 1950 murder of Mrs Morrell. At that time, murder was capital, so the doctor’s bail was revoked, and he was remanded to Brixton Prison. He was later charged with the murder of Mrs Hullett as well.

In the 1950s, television was still very much in its infancy, but the print media worked overtime churning out scurrilous stories about the case, so much so that there was genuine concern that it would be impossible for Adams to receive a fair trial.

On August 22, the *Daily Mail* - then a broadsheet - had carried a screaming headline:

YARD PROBE MASS POISONING
25 deaths in the great mystery of Eastbourne...
RICH WOMEN BELIEVED TO BE VICTIMS

while one American publication claimed Adams had murdered four hundred people! (7) Although the police cannot be blamed for the disgraceful tone of these reports, they did little if anything to discourage them. The Public Record Office catalogue contains over a dozen files relating to the case, including a Home Office file concerning leaks to the press. (8)

This would be the first trial in England in the 20th Century of a doctor accused of murdering his patients in the course of treatment, so naturally it was well attended by both press and public when it opened at the Central Criminal Court on March 18, 1957. (9)

As was the custom in cases of alleged capital poisoning, the Attorney General himself led the case for the Crown, and as was the custom in the 1950s, a defendant who was facing more than one murder charge was tried only for one murder at a time, though the Crown could choose with which to proceed first. Although Mrs Hullett had died much more recently, the Attorney General decided to proceed with the Morrell case, because, even though Mrs Morrell had been cremated, at her own wish, the evidence in the former case was even weaker.

The autopsy on Mrs Hullett had been performed by Francis Camps, who along with Keith Simpson and Donald Teare was the leading pathologist of the day. Camps had made a very meticulous examination, but could find nothing that would assist the prosecution. Why Mrs Hullett should have even been considered a murder victim at all was curious, because on

April 11, 1956 she had sent her daughter what was in effect a suicide note; (10) Gertrude Hullett was only fifty years old, but she had been suffering from depression after the death of her second husband.

Her first husband had died in 1950, and it was actually Dr Adams who had introduced her to the then recently widowed Mr Hullett. Her spouse to be was somewhat older than her, and the loss of two husbands in such a short period was evidently too much for the poor woman. Adams had offered her psychiatric help, but she had refused this, and had even contemplated throwing herself off Beachy Head. (11)

There is certainly reason to believe that Adams knew she intended to commit suicide, and it is not impossible but unlikely that he may have colluded with her as is evinced by his strange behaviour when he was alerted to her condition, but it is more likely that he simply panicked.

Many years later, the trial judge, Lord (earlier Sir Patrick) Devlin wrote a book on the case. He stated categorically that it was not plausible that Adams was present at her death, (12) and by implication that he was totally innocent, although when he was interviewed by the *Times* he told the paper that while Adams was certainly not a serial killer “It’s possible he hastened the end of some of his patients. I think I would perhaps best describe him as a greedy mercy-killer.” (13)

Whatever, suicide is a surprisingly common cause of death, and neither fame nor fortune are antidotes for severe depression or simple unhappiness, as is evinced by the long list of celebrity suicides in the modern era. (14) And there was no hint of suspicion directed either at Dr Adams or at anyone else when another of his patients committed suicide in the thirties; fifty-four year old Dr Kenneth Saunders, a distinguished Orientalist, burnt himself to death. (15)

Had Dr Adams been tried today, the Crown would have proceeded with both murder charges in order to apparently strengthen the prosecution case by stressing what is known in law as the similar fact evidence of the alleged crimes.

Similar fact evidence can be damning. In this case, two wealthy widows and the husband of one of them making bequests to the same GP, and then conveniently dropping dead, wrecks of foul play, but like plain facts out of context and more often statistics, similar facts can prove absolutely nothing, or even the opposite of what they appear to indicate. Keith Simpson pointed out caustically that Mrs Morrell, who had suffered a stroke, had been given a year at most to live, yet had survived for two and a half years under the doctor who had supposedly murdered her. In order to dissolve this similar fact nonsense, we should at this point consider some background to the cases, and to Dr Adams.

John Bodkin Adams was born January 21, 1899 in Randalstown in (what is now) Northern Ireland. (16) He registered in 1921, and the following year became a junior partner in Eastbourne, where he was to spend the rest of his life, later becoming a senior partner.

Eastbourne is a wealthy town, and has a large elderly population; it is by tradition a place where many affluent people retire to live out their days in comfortable nursing homes, so it is hardly surprising that some of its doctors have many elderly patients. Although Adams does not appear to have been a particular good doctor, he was a deeply committed Christian, and

more importantly appears to have had a bedside manner which beguiled many of his older patients, particularly the ladies.

A confirmed bachelor, he not only never married but had no interest in sex at all; his interests, apart from his work, were first and foremost money, which he hoarded, big cars, charity work, and, somewhat surprisingly, clay pigeon shooting, at which he excelled. He was devoted to his mother, who died in 1943; and by hard work had built up a thriving practice. The reader should bear in mind that when Dr Adams first set up shop there was no National Health Service and indeed no antibiotics. Even as late as the 1950s, much of the value of general practice was in the laying on of hands, as it were. And there was precious little a doctor could do for an elderly patient who was dying slowly and in great pain other than “ease the passing”, as Lord Devlin put it.

As one of the doctor’s biographers pointed out, “Rich patients were two a penny in Eastbourne, and the bequests to Dr Adams were small in relation to the estates”. (17) There appears also to have been a practice at the time in Eastbourne - and perhaps in other places - to render elderly patients nominal bills on the understanding that the tending physician would receive a bequest in the patients’ wills. (18) This may sound ghoulish, but it is certainly not immoral.

In spite of the at times outrageous press coverage, Dr Adams was not without his supporters; one patient left him £500 while he was on remand in Brixton! (19) During his time in prison between December 20, 1956 and April 8, 1957 he received no less than a hundred and fifty letters of support. (20)

Adams was defended by the distinguished QC Geoffrey Lawrence, who like the rest of the defence team had done his homework thoroughly. When the four nurses who had tended Mrs Morrell at the end of her life were called as prosecution witnesses, the crime reporter Percy Hoskins pointed out that the old lady had left them more than she had left Adams, and that he would have made more from her fees by helping keep her alive than by killing her. (21)

Although they were ordinary women with no axes to grind, the nurses had clearly been “got at” by the police, and their evidence was well rehearsed, unlike that of the star expert witness for the prosecution, Dr Douthwaite. At this time, when there were still full committals, witnesses were called at the magistrates’ court, and would repeat their evidence at the trial later, but if Dr Douthwaite thought he was going to simply repeat his earlier evidence at the Old Bailey, he was in for a shock.

All the injections Mrs Morrell had received had been recorded by the nurses in their report books. Normally, such books would have been destroyed after the death of the patient, but not this time, and when they were dramatically produced, the prosecution case fell apart at the seams. It was also clear that the nurses had been coached by the prosecution, and in spite of claiming otherwise, that they had colluded, or perhaps more charitably they had put their heads together to agree on what to say. If the nurses were made to look dishonest, Dr Douthwaite was made to appear foolish when his expert evidence appeared to suggest that Mrs Morrell’s previous doctors had tried to kill her as well, or that any doctor who administered morphine or heroin to a terminally ill patient must have dark motives.

As the trial neared its conclusion, Devlin summoned Attorney General Manningham-Buller and Defence Counsel to his chambers and asked the Crown what it intended to do about the

second indictment. He told both parties that in the event of an acquittal he would entertain an application for bail, something that was at that time unheard of in a murder case. (22)

Devlin's summing up was clearly biased towards the doctor; in this case, he said, the defence is manifestly a strong one, and so it was, for at the end of what was at that time the longest murder trial in English criminal history, the jury retired for a mere three quarters of an hour before finding Dr Adams not guilty of capital murder. (23)

On the doctor's acquittal, the prosecution entered a *nolle prosequi* on the second murder charge, which was in effect a coward's way out, but as one chronicler pointed out, the indictment for the murder of Mrs Hullett was based on unsupported evidence of an administration of drugs, (24) and if Manningham-Buller had proceeded with the case he would have been shot down in flames in double quick time.

Dr Adams was at once bailed on the minor charges which had been brought against him earlier in the inquiry, but he was to all intents and purposes a free man. And a richer one after selling his story to the *Daily Express* for ten thousand pounds. This was one of the few newspapers that hadn't pre-judged him, and deserved the scoop.

The medical journals had of course followed the case, and it is clear that the profession in general was not impressed with the quality of the evidence proffered. The *British Medical Journal* reported extensively on the trial but was purely factual, while in its April 20, 1957 edition, the *Lancet* contained some comment in the *Medicine and the Law* column under the title *Shortening of life*, mostly from the judge's summing up.

In July, the doctor appeared at Lewes Assizes (25) where he pleaded guilty to fourteen charges under the *Forgery, Larceny, Cremation and Dangerous Drugs Acts*. The judge said that Adams "had a flourishing and lucrative practice and had gained nothing by the stupid forgeries". (26) As a result of this he was struck off the *Medical Register* on December 30, 1957, but on November 22, 1961 he was restored at the age of 62. By this time he was not in the best of health, and had had a kidney removed.

He continued to live in Eastbourne, and to shoot clay pigeons. When he died in July 1983 at the age of 84, the doctor who had commanded such enormous press coverage when he had been branded a serial killer merited a single sentence on the front page of Britain's leading broadsheet. (27) But it would not be long before tongues started wagging again. The following week, he was branded a mass murderer in the same paper by former Detective Chief Superintendent Charlie Hewitt, who had worked on the case as a junior officer. (28)

Hewitt featured heavily in a then newly published book by two hacks, *Where There's A Will*, the thesis of which is that Adams was really a serial killer who had murdered no end of people, and that only now could the truth be told. The book had obviously been in preparation a long time before his death, and just as obviously could not have been published when he was still alive, because the good doctor had supplemented his pension with the odd libel writ over the years.

Where There's A Will is scurrilous, totally untrustworthy, and was written with an ulterior motive besides making money from scandalising a man who was no longer in a position to defend his reputation.

Like all police officers, Charlie Hewitt is a devotee of what the journalist David Rose called *The Police Infallibility Principle*, (29) which states that if someone is acquitted of a serious crime, the courts must have got it wrong. In *Where There's A Will*, Hewitt blames the Attorney General for failing to secure Adams' conviction, and the Crown for proceeding with the Morrell murder charge instead of other charges which were, of course, much stronger. (30) Two such *stronger* cases were identified as the elderly sisters Hilda and Clara Neil-Miller, but at page 41 the authors report that when they were exhumed "...post-mortems were held on the bodies of both sisters [but] forensic scientists could find nothing to assist the police other than the fact Clara had died of pneumonia and not coronary thrombosis, as Adams had stated on the death certificate". In other words, there was no evidence these two elderly ladies were murdered, they simply died as do all elderly people, eventually.

Chapter 13 of the book is a lament that Dr Adams was not put in the witness box at his trial, and a plea for the end of the right to silence - at criminal trials if not totally. Hewitt said that Manningham-Buller did not foresee Adams' Counsel keeping his client out of the witness box because he saw the cross-examination of Adams as a chance to make political capital and glory. (31) Had Adams been cross-examined, all the other supposedly damning evidence including similar fact *evidence* about other murders could have been introduced.

Hewitt's whining is especially ironic as anytime police officers are accused of impropriety they are the first to invoke their right to silence. (32) It is true that a defendant who declines to take the stand can create a bad impression, but it is manifestly not true that only the guilty need to hold their tongues. In his summing up, the judge directed the jury on this, and in Dr Adams' case there were very good reasons for him to decline to testify.

Part of the doctor's appeal to especially elderly female patients may have been his gift of the gab. As Devlin pointed out, "Dr Adams was not a sensible man; he was on the contrary a stupid, obstinate and self-righteous man. He was also an indiscreet and incessant talker". (33) Adams was not so much convinced that he would be cleared but regarded the allegations with disbelief, and "teetered volubly on the edge of catastrophe". (34) He had too a curiously ambiguous turn of phrase; just before he was charged on December 19, 1956 he is alleged to have said: "Can you prove it was murder?" and "I did not think you could prove murder. She was dying in any event."

It was only after being charged that he finally heeded legal advice and shut up. (35)

Devlin suggests too that Dr Adams may not necessarily have said everything that was attributed to him. (36) Prior to the *Police And Criminal Evidence Act* of 1984, police "verballing" of suspects was both widespread and common as well as extraordinarily effective, although it was usually applied to suspects who had previous convictions. (37)

With regard to Adams' failure to testify, there was also the question of the fallibility of human memory. As Mrs Morrell had died some six years previously, it would have been very easy for him to make some seemingly trivial mistake in his evidence, and put his head in the noose. As things turned out, the production of the nurses' report books made any such testimony superfluous. There can also be other *bona fide* reasons for a defendant declining to take the stand. (38) When Dr Leonard Arthur was tried for murdering a Mongol baby a quarter of a century later, he too declined because he had made his position clear. (39)

In Dr Adams' case also there was the question of believability. Police officers tend to be credible witnesses, if only because practice makes perfect. Although Dr Adams had testified in court before, he was, as is evident from Devlin's book, the sort of person who would not have made a credible witness, especially as he was on trial for his life. A bad witness is not necessarily an untruthful witness, and by the same token a good witness is not necessarily a truthful one. The nurses who testified against him were, apparently, truthful witnesses, but when the report books were produced, their evidence had to be seen in a different light. And although Dr Douthwaite testified in a confident manner, the skilful cross-examination of Geoffrey Lawrence tore his bland assertions of calculated murder to shreds.

Although there is still controversy and talk about the innocence of Dr Adams, this is akin to the claims that John F. Kennedy was shot by the CIA or the Mossad rather than by Lee Harvey Oswald. Certainly the medical establishment never had any doubts about his innocence. Bodkin Adams may not have been the best doctor in the world, but he was no murderer. Even his apparently grasping attitude towards money was not all it seemed. After his death, the ten thousand pounds he had received from selling his story to the *Daily Express* was found in a bank vault in the original envelope, (40) and although he had many rich patients and grew fat off their fees, Adams was not a mean man; there is ample testimony to his generosity towards his less affluent patients, and indeed to the people of Eastbourne in general.

Notes And References

(1) *FORTY YEARS OF MURDER*, by Professor Keith Simpson, published by Panther/Granada, London, (1984 reprint), page 255.

Simpson devotes a chapter to the Bodkin Adams affair in his autobiography, and leaves the reader in no doubt as to his belief in the good doctor's total innocence.

(2) There is a school of thought that says every murderer leaves one deliberate clue. Shipman committed his first murder in March 1975, and was either extremely careful or extremely lucky until the murder of Mrs Grundy, but although he protested his total innocence in the face of overwhelming evidence right up until the end, it is difficult to credit that a man with a reputed stratospheric IQ could have believed he could have got away with such a stupid and clumsy forgery, especially as the victim's daughter was a solicitor.

(3) *The Times*, August 22, 1956, page 5.

(4) As Simpson wrote sneeringly, out of an estate of over a hundred thousand pounds, she had left Adams "an elderly Rolls-Royce" and jewellery valued at £275. In his book, Simpson spells the name Morell thus, although the correct spelling appears to be Morrell.

(5) *DOCTOR ON 13 CHARGES...*, published in the *Times*, November 27, 1956, page 4.

(6) *The Strange Case of Dr John BODKIN ADAMS and the views of those who knew him*, by John Surtees, published by SB Publications, Seaford, (2000), page 61.

(7) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, page 154, (ibid).

(8) HO 287/240.

(9) *The Times* for March 19, 1957 published a photograph of members of the public queuing up outside.

(10) *The Times*, August 22, 1956, page 5, (op cit).

(11) These famous cliffs are a notorious suicide black spot; in January 2005, a man who had been facing serious sex charges threw himself off them. Accompanied by his wife!

- (12) *Easing the Passing: The trial of Doctor John Bodkin Adams*, by Patrick Devlin, published by Faber & Faber, London, (1986), page 218.
- (13) *The Times*, June 11, 1985, page 10.
- (14) The writer Virginia Woolf, the poetess Sylvia Path, the author Ernest Hemingway, the rock musician Michael Hutchence, and later his lover Paula Yates, to name but five.
- (15) *The Times*, November 13, 1937, page 16.
- (16) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, pages 5 & 10, (op cit).
- (17) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, page 77, (ibid).
- (18) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, page 37, (ibid).
- (19) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, page 72, (ibid).
- (20) *The Times*, July 27, 1957, page 4.
- (21) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, page 16, (op cit).
- (22) Devlin, *Easing The Passing*, pages 178-89, (op cit).
- (23) Devlin said the jury was out for 46 minutes, another author reported 43 minutes, at any rate it appears to have been a surprisingly easy verdict for them to reach considering that a man's life was at stake.
- (24) *The Best We Can Do*
An account of the trial of John Bodkin Adams, by Sybille Bedford, published by Penguin, Harmondsworth, (1961), page 220.
- (25) Assizes were replaced by Crown Courts in 1971.
- (26) *The Times*, July 27, 1957, page 4, (op cit).
- (27) *Doctor dies*, published in the *Times*, July 6, 1983, page 1.
- (28) *The Times*, July 11, 1983, page 3.
- (29) *A CLIMATE OF FEAR The Murder of PC Blakelock and the Case of the Tottenham Three*, by David Rose, published by Bloomsbury, London, (1992), page 88.
- (30) 'WHERE THERE'S A WILL...' *The Sensational Life of Dr John Bodkin Adams*, by Rodney Hallworth & Mark Williams, published by The Capstan Press, Exeter, (1983), pages 61 & 58 respectively.
- (31) Hallworth & Williams, *Where There's A Will...*, page 61, (ibid).
- (32) In April 1998, a former paratrooper, Christopher Alder, died on a police station floor after receiving a head injury. At the inquest, where it was ruled he was killed unlawfully, five police officers refused to answer any questions about the circumstances of his death on the grounds that to do so could be "prejudicial". This scenario is sadly typical.
- (33) Devlin, *Easing The Passing*, page 10, (op cit).
- (34) Devlin, *Easing The Passing*, page 212, (ibid).
- (35) Devlin, *Easing The Passing*, page 211, (ibid).
- (36) Devlin, *Easing The Passing*, page 212, (ibid).
- (37) A defendant's previous convictions would not generally be known to a jury, but a defendant who accused police officers of fabricating a confession ("It's a fair cop, guv" is the classic) would have his past misdeeds revealed, which would usually result in a conviction. Clearly this would not have worked with a doctor of impeccable character. The *Police And Criminal Evidence Act* largely put an end to such nonsense by the taping of police interrogations.
- (38) As our American cousins say.
- (39) The charge was eventually reduced to attempted murder, and the doctor was cleared.
- (40) Surtees, *The Strange Case of Dr John Bodkin Adams...*, page 122, (op cit).