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Treason: People, Power and Plot

The history of English monarchs is a tale brimming with assassination attempts. Queen Elizabeth I thwarted many attempts to replace her with a Catholic monarch, following her excommunication by the Pope. Two hundred years later, King George III acted with compassion after two separate assassination attempts. In this first episode of our three-part treason mini-series, we explore direct attempts to kill the monarch in the 16th and 19th centuries and their long-term impacts on the British legal system.

This is the first instalment of a three-part series exploring treason across the centuries. Episode two will examine the ripple effects of treasonous plots. And finally, in our third episode, we'll learn how enslaved Africans in the Caribbean revolted in an attempt to overthrow their oppressors and regain their freedom.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [SP 53/18](#), [KB 8/54](#), [KB 8/42](#), [KB 33/8/3](#), [TS 11/22/937](#).

If you're interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode, take a look at our overview guide to [criminal court cases in England and Wales](#). Our guides are presented in a very factual manner and do not address the horrors and violence of some of the topics covered. However, by sharing these resources we hope to support your further study.

For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcription

[Teaser clips, montage from episode interviews]

Tracy Borman: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Tracy Boreman.

Roger Kershaw: And I'm Roger Kershaw.

Tracy is a historian, author, and guest host for this mini-series. And I'm a records specialist here at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

Tracy: This is the first installment of a three-part series exploring treason across the centuries. In this episode, we'll look at direct attempts to kill the monarch in the 16th and 19th centuries. Episode two will examine the ripple effects of treasonous plots. And finally, in our third episode, we'll learn how enslaved Africans in the Caribbean revolted in an attempt to overthrow their oppressors and regain their freedom.

Roger: Listeners, please be advised that this episode contains brief descriptions of torture and execution as well as a short discussion of suicidal ideation and distress caused by mental illness. We will also be using terminology about mental illness from the time which may be considered offensive today.

[Pause for transition]

Tracy: A lot of people wanted Queen Elizabeth I dead. Quite a few of those ill-wishes tried to kill her. None succeeded, but the records of their attempts make for a very interesting read. To find out more about Elizabeth's would-be assassins, we turned to Dr. Dan Gosling, Principal Legal Record Specialist here at The National Archives.

Roger: So Dan, why did so many people want to kill Elizabeth I? Where did all these plots come from?

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Dan Gosling: Well, there are loads of reasons but there are basically three main reasons why people wanted to kill Elizabeth I during her reign, and they all boil down to religion. So in 1534, Elizabeth's dad, Henry VIII, declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England, and this put the realm at odds with the great Catholic powers of Spain and France-- not to mention the pope himself, but also put them at odds with those practicing Catholics within the realm. So when Elizabeth first became queen in 1558, these tensions had only intensified and this wasn't helped by the reigns of Elizabeth's half siblings - the Protestant Edward VI, and the Catholic Mary I. The Northern rebellion of 1569, which was an uprising led by English Catholic nobles who stormed Durham Cathedral and held a Catholic mass showed that there was still a groundswell of support for the old Catholic religion. With the right incentive, could these men and women be incited to treason? Secondly, there was a Catholic alternative to Elizabeth waiting in the wings for whenever someone successfully killed the Queen. If Elizabeth died without producing an heir, the next closest descendant to the English throne was Mary Queen of Scots, and her great grandfather was Henry VII. Mary was a Catholic, and from July 1567, was a queen without a realm, forced to abdicate the Scottish throne for her involvement in the death of her husband, Lord Darnley. Mary ended up taking refuge in England in 1568, meaning that anyone wishing for a Catholic alternative to Elizabeth didn't have to look far when plotting their treasons.

But I think the strongest incentive to kill Elizabeth the first came from the Pope himself in February 1570 when he published a papal bull called *Regnans in Excelsis*. This was a papal bull to excommunicate Elizabeth I. And it opens, "But the number of the ungodly has grown so strong in power, that no place is left in the world which they have not tried to corrupt with their abominable doctrines. Among others assisting in this work is the servant of vice, Elizabeth pretended Queen of England, with whom the most nefarious wretches have found refuge. This same woman, having acquired the kingdom and outrageously usurped for herself the place of Supreme Head of the church in all England and its chief authority and jurisdiction, has once again plunged that same kingdom back into a wretchedly unhappy condition."

In the excommunication, the pope absolved all Catholics from fealty to the Queen and encouraged attempts to restore the realm to the true Catholic faith. Usually, the pope wasn't so blatant with his intentions so instead of saying, "Oh, yes, please do kill Elizabeth I," Papal responses were more along the lines of, "If you have the opportunity to return England to the true Catholic faith, then please do so." The implication being that Elizabeth would have to at the very least be deposed.

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So it's this Catholic cocktail of Mary Queen of Scots, the papal excommunication, and of dissatisfied English Catholics that inspired the majority of attempts of Elizabeth I's life for most of her reign.

Roger: Strong words from the Pope. He's certainly not being subtle. I can see how this would embolden would-be assassins.

But, before we get into the plots themselves, can you tell us about the paper trail? How do we know what we know about these attempts?

Dan: So we know about almost all of these plots from two sets of sources and these are held at the National Archives. There are letters and correspondences collected by the government in relation to these plots, and they usually end up in the state papers collections. And it's these collections that have the cyphers used by Mary Queen of Scots, for example, or the letters seized by the government which details specific plots. The National Archives also hold the trial records of most of these plots. Treason was the most serious criminal act you could commit and therefore all the trials were heard in the Court of King's Bench... or for Elizabeth's reign, the Court of Queen's Bench. From the 15th century, the officials of this court began to separate records relating to treason trials and other trials of particular concern to the crown, and they locked them away in a closet for safekeeping. This series is known as the 'Bag of Secrets', the Bagga de Secretis, named for the leather bags which the records are kept in. Now held in modern series KB8, these records describe not only the attempts on Elizabeth I's life, but also Anne Boleyn's treason, the trial of the Gunpowder plotters, and the aftermath of the Gordon Riots.

Roger: Let's get into the plots themselves. What stories emerge from the 'bag of secrets'?

Dan: These records are so interesting because they describe in detail the plots against Elizabeth's life. The most well-known of these are those associated with Mary Queen of Scots such as the Ridolfi plots of 1571 to 72, or the Babington Plot of 1586. But it's the lesser known plots that tend to contain really interesting details. For example in 1583, a man called John Somerville who was inspired by a desire to return England to the Catholic faith, declared that he would go up to the Court and shoot the Queen through with a pistol. He was captured enroute to London with a pistol, gunpowder, and bullets. Another plot in 1598 describes an individual plotter, Valentine Thomas, who planned to deliver a petition to the Queen so that he could get close enough to kill her. He was arrested and thrown in Marshalsea Prison before he could act, however, but then

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implicated himself further by using a piece of coal to write a poem on the walls of his cell. "I shot at a very fair white, and in the loosing of my arrow, my elbow was rested. But I melt for grief to lose such a game having so fair a mark. But if I had won that game, to the great comfort of England, and profit of himself." It's these incidental details that are described in the court records.

There are also some really interesting examples of attempted murder by poisoning. The most sensational of these is probably that of Edward Squire who was tried in 1598. Squire had met with agents of the Spanish King Philip while a prisoner in Seville, where they hatched a plan to kill the Queen. Squire was given a poison contained in a double bladder wrapped in parchment and paper, and sent back to England with instructions to smear the pommel of the Queen saddle with the poison so that when she next went for a ride and put her hand on the pommel, she would poison herself. Squire then used the remainder of the poison on the arms of the chair in which the Earl of Essex was accustomed to sit aboard his ship, in the hope that this would weaken the English fleet in advance of a Spanish invasion. Unfortunately for Squire, the poison didn't work and he was arrested and executed for his crimes.

Roger: Poisoning the queen's saddle is very specific. And, I have to say, I'm not terribly surprised that that one didn't work.

So, of all the plots you've looked at, which came the closest to succeeding? Did the queen have any close calls?

Dan: I mean, arguably, none of these plots really came that close to succeeding. Because of the number of threats to Elizabeth during her reign, she had a pretty comprehensive circle of spies and statesmen who could root out plots before they progressed to a point that endangered the queen. However in some cases, these plots were allowed to proceed in order to implicate more important plotters. The Babington Plot, which finally brought about the downfall of Mary Queen of Scots, is probably the most famous of these plots that was allowed to continue. On 6th of July 1586, Anthony Babington wrote a letter to Mary Queen of Scots outlining his aim to assassinate Elizabeth and put Mary on the throne. Mary's response, recorded in the so-called Gallows Letter, was sent on 17th of July but intercepted and deciphered by Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's spymaster and his men. In the letter, Mary authorised the plot to kill Elizabeth. However, Walsingham sat on this knowledge to allow the plot to progress and further implicate Babington and by association, Mary. Elizabeth had proven reluctant to execute her cousin in the past, so there needed to be sufficient evidence that Mary wished her harm. Babington wouldn't be

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captured until August. He and his co-conspirators were found guilty of treason, and more importantly, had implicated Mary Queen of Scots in their plot. Mary was tried in October 1586 and executed in February 1587.

Roger: My next question is about what happened to the failed plotters, but I can't imagine it's anything good...

Dan: Yeah, so nothing good happened to these failed assassins. Those that were found guilty of high treason were executed. Men were hanged, drawn and quartered, and women were burnt. And this punishment stayed in place for centuries and it was still in place in the early 19th century; and I think this is where the most detailed description of this hanging, drawing and quartering actually comes from an 1814 Act which altered this punishment. And it says, "Whereas in certain cases of high treason persons convicted are to be drawn on a hurdle to the place of execution, and there be hanged by the neck, but not until they are dead, but that they should be taken down again. And that when they are yet alive, their bowels should be taken out and burnt before their faces. And afterwards, their heads should be severed from their bodies and their bodies be divided into four quarters. And their heads and quarters to be at the King's disposal." Now, this is how Babington and six of his co-conspirators met their fates on 20th of October 1586. However, their execution was said to have been so harsh that when it came to executing the remaining conspirators on the following day, Elizabeth ordered instead that they'd be hanged until they were dead, after which their bodies could continue to be castrated and disemboweled.

Roger: Well, I think "nothing good" is an understatement here, Dan. Those are really *brutal* punishments.

Dan: [laughs] Yeah, sorry about that, but I do think it speaks to how seriously the state took these attempts on the monarch's life.

Roger: But aside from the intensity of the story and its shock value, why do you think it's worthwhile to study these Elizabethan treason records?

Dan: I think what's really interesting about these records is how the state responded to these attempts against the Crown and attempts against the government. And this is what the records at The National Archives tell us. They tell us how the state responded to these plots, they tell us how these people went about trying to assassinate the king or queen, and I think they're really important at getting a sense of what drove people to this extreme act. Like, the punishments for

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treason were the worst punishments you could have. So if you actually went through with attempting to kill the king or queen, you must have really wanted to do it. And the records are really interesting in showing not only the state's response, but the motivations of these plotters and what drove them to these acts.

[Brief musical transition]

Tracy: Keeping with the theme of motivation, we're going to spend the rest of this episode on a single attempt to kill King George III. Unlike many of the plots against Elizabeth I, it's unclear why James Hadfield tried to shoot the king in the year 1800. The threat of the death penalty deterred all but the most determined of Elizabeth's enemies, but James Hadfield may have turned to treason precisely because the punishment was death.

Chris Day will be taking us through this story and the way it changed treason laws and Britain's treatment of the mentally ill. Chris, before we start, tell us what you do at The National Archives?

Chris Day: Hi. Yeah, so I'm head of Modern Domestic Records at The National Archives. I work with a team of people who work on the records of government departments which are primarily concerned with the administration of domestic Britain from 1782 when the Home Office was founded through to the present day.

Tracy: What a fascinating treasure trove that must be. And actually, it's the inspiration, the Georgian period, for the story we're going to be talking about. So can you set the historical stage for this attempted assassination? What do we need to know to understand this story?

Chris: So in 1800 when the assassination attempt takes place, George III had been on the throne for about 40 years. Things at the time are going quite well for him as a Monarch. His prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, is powerful in parliament and the country, supports the king and the king supports him. And the king himself is extremely popular with much of the population having recovered from some of the setbacks to his reputation that occurred around the loss of the Americas in 1783. At the time as well, the Act of Union, which unites the kingdoms of Britain, so Scotland, England, Wales, and so forth and Ireland under George was being finalised, becoming to force the next year. But 1800 is not without problems for Britain both overseas and at home. It was at war with the French Republic, which was not going amazingly well, very expensive war, French Republic resisting quite willfully. And the ideas of the French Revolution that had come out

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of the Republic were in Britain. And those were combining with economic difficulties and poverty leading to some rumblings of revolution, of republicanism, of revolt. And at this point, the monarchy is still very public, the public could approach them. And this for George is something he's very committed to, but it was fraught with danger. So in 1800, it's not the first time there's been an attempt made in his life.

In 1786, a woman called Margaret Nicholson, who had basically become deluded to believe that she was carrying sort of the phantoms of royal children, had attempted to stab him. And in 1790, a man called John Frith, again, a man with a long history of unusual actions and statements has thrown a stone through his carriage window as he made his way to the state opening of parliament. And both of these people had been sort of quietly sent to St. Bethlem Hospital, that being sort of one of the earliest hospitals in London specialising on people with mental health issues, that's where we get the word bedlam from.

So on the day we meet this new assassin, James Hadfield, the 15th of May 1800, there had already possibly been an attempt on the king's life actually. He was in Hyde Park reviewing troops when a bullet struck a man next to him, thankfully not fatally. He was noted, the king, by his contemporaries for a certain quality of sort of resilience to a certain extent and a belief in carrying out his duty. So he didn't cancel his publicly publicized trip to the theater to that evening.

Tracy: So let's get right into the story then, tell us more about James Hadfield and his attempt to kill the king.

Chris: So James Hadfield in 1800 is sort of in his early 30s, 31, 32. His date of birth is not super certain. He lives and works as sort of a journeyman silversmith near Clerkenwell in the city of London. On the evening of the 15th of May, 1800, having heard that the king would be at Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, he borrows the admission, he wasn't a wealthy man. So it's three shillings and six pence he borrows from an acquaintance. He goes home for dinner. I think he has a shave. He goes for a walk to what he says consider himself, and then he heads to Drury Lane. It's an area he would've known well with the sound of things. He later claims that he has two wives, his lawful wife, who he lives with, and a sex worker called Young who works around Drury Lane, says that he loves her more of the two wives.

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He bought tickets for the theater, and he sits very quietly in the pit, the stools, to wait for the play to begin. The man sitting next to him says later in a deposition that there was nothing unusual about Hadfield. He sat in silence, and he was seemingly un-agitated, not at all concerned. Just before the show began, George III arrives in theatre's royal box. He's accompanied by his son, the Duke of York, who Hadfield, who'd been a soldier, had actually served with previously. The king made himself visible to the crowd as it was customary who rose to sing national anthem. And as this happened, Hadfield sets about his work. He stands up on his bench and takes out concealed pistols and aims them in the king's direction. The crowd moved to restrain him very, very quickly, obviously, but he manages to get a shot off in the direction of the king, but it misses. He's tackled, and the report basically says that he's bundled from the pit of the theater into the orchestra pit beneath where the musicians sit.

He's then taken into the musician's room, which is a room off the orchestra pit, where it's basically a green room, I suppose. Amazingly, King George III and his son come to see Hadfield after this and speak to him possibly to try and establish why he tried to shoot at him. And reportedly, he says "this is not the worst of it" to them. That's his statement to them. There are other accounts of what he says, but in the official sources that's what he's quoted as saying. Other sources say that he told the king, "God bless your royal highness, I like you very well, you are a good fellow," which seems somewhat counterintuitive to his actions, but we'll come to that later, I suppose. But that's not mentioned in the official documents in The National Archives. However, he does reiterate in the document throughout his interrogations that he bore the king no ill will and did not intend to harm him. And those interrogations take place that evening. So at 10:00 PM that night, he's already with the Privy Council, the monarch's closest advisors, to be interviewed as was customary with people who were likely to be accused or have been accused of treason, which we'll come to. He tells the Privy Council, he's very forthcoming in his answers, that he had not intended for the bullets to hit the king. And he says, "It might be thought so that he, as in Hadfield, might be killed as a consequence."

Tracy: Well, the plot thickens. And I have to say, what really strikes me is the bravery of George III and the peril that he faced throughout his long reign. It's not a side to George III's reign that we necessarily hear a lot about. Let's look at Hadfield's motivation and reasoning. Do we know anything about that and what led him to do something like this?

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Chris: Yes. So we know lots about Hadfield's motivations because he was not at all unforthcoming about them to the Privy Council, but they are not necessarily coherent. But he read the accounts for exactly what he did and why he did it when he's interviewed. And there's no reason to suspect that he is lying or holding back. So his examinations before the Privy Council and testimonies of others who knew him or witnessed his crime were made public almost immediately, such was the interest in this. And The Times was pleased to note as early as the 17th of May 1800, so two days after the attack, that Hadfield did not seem to be a revolutionary as was worried initially or a Jacobin, a French Republican, but was "deranged in his mind" and that the crime which had been so providentially defeated originated in this most humiliating and deplorable calamity which flesh is air to, i.e., Madness, I suppose. So Hadfield had been a soldier, in fact, served in the same unit as the Duke of York. He'd been badly injured in battle during an engagement in the French Revolutionary wars. In 1794, he had sustained a sword wound to his head and then subsequently been captured by the French, who had by all accounts tortured him.

He claimed that he had been handcuffed, manacled, flogged, and beaten by his captors. And these seem to be the causes of his distress and his delusion. It seemed to have sort of forced a mental health crisis and a sort of psychosis in him. He claimed when he was being interviewed by the Privy Council that he did not feel his beatings. He said "somebody else felt it for him," God, and he claimed to speak to God or be spoken to by God directly. Said he didn't need to go to a church because he can be in the closet, the loo, I suppose, and it's like being in church because he has a direct line to God. He's discharged from the army in 1796 on return to Britain, and he continues to suffer quite an acute psychosis or mental health crisis. So he's discharged from the army in 1796 on return to Britain. He still seems to suffer from the symptoms of quite a severe psychosis or mental health crisis. So he tells the Privy Council despite his release from captivity, he had been "in prison five years and three quarters," so that was from his capture to the present day, even though he had been in prison less time than that. "His blood and bones had been let loose, his father in his spirit had lashed him." And I think further by that he means deity as opposed to his father, who I don't think is living.

Despite being fervently religious as was said, he didn't attend church, God spoke to him directly when he was alone. Whether or not he would've articulated the voices he heard as being God when in prison is hard to determine. What we do know is that on his return to England, he became involved in a millenarian cult, which might account for the divine attribution to his delusions. He'd

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come under the influence of a man called Bannister Truelock, which is a fantastic name, a shoemaker who prophesied the second coming. It was said he had convinced Hadfield that his death would bring about the apocalypse and therefore the second coming. Hadfield himself told the Privy Council that, "He knows when he is at an end, the world is to be at an end. He was told it by him that made him." Hadfield claimed that the purpose of his attempt was never to harm the king, never for the bullets to hit him. He kept saying he was actually a very good marksman because he'd been a soldier, and if he'd meant to hit him, he would've. He believed, and the reason he did it as he explained, was that if he was to be seen to fire on the king, then either he would be killed by the crowd or he would be arrested for treason and then executed by the state for his crime, and that would bring about the end of the world.

He couldn't take his own life, commit suicide, to bring about the end of the world because that would be a sin. So there's a question there, I suppose, about his motivations which he doesn't allude to in his interrogations. It wasn't the case that he was actually primarily suicidal, his millenarian fantasies and after sort of mystical gloss. He's interviewed by a guy called Sir John William Anderson, who's an alderman of City of London who goes to see him after he'd met with the Privy Council. He asked him, "Why did you shoot the king?" And Hadfield replies he was tired of life. And then Anderson says, "Well, why didn't you take your own life?" And he says, "Well, if I took my own life, I would go to the devil." I mean, saying that suggests that his primary motivation was suicidal ideation is improbable compared to it because it's a lot of effort to go to get oneself killed. I think there were probably other ways in Georgian London that you could get yourself murdered. Either way, I mean, all of this puts the state in quite a peculiar position. So Hadfield is obviously not a well man, but he had knowingly and lucidly planned to fire on the king. And as far as the definition of the treason act is concerned, that counts as compassing and imagining the king's death. So the purchasing of pistols, the going into the theater, the buying of a ticket, the standing up in the theater to fire on the king, these things all prove it, and he has an intent there. So this is clearly a case of treason, but the person who's committed it is clearly very mentally unwell. So how do you handle that?

Tracy: Well, it gets curiouser and curiouser. As you say, I think perhaps Hadfield's statement can't be taken at face value that he simply wanted to be killed rather than killing the king is quite an elaborate way to go about it. Well, take us forward in the story, what happens to Hadfield after he misses his shot and is apprehended?

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Chris: So it's interesting. So I was talking earlier about Margaret Nicholson, that would be assassin from the 1780s, the king stopped her from being killed by the mob around her after she tried to stab him by saying the poor thing is mad, and then subsequently intervened to ensure that she wasn't tried for treason. But the difficulty was basically Hadfield has clearly committed treason. And also there is no legal or formal mechanism for the incarceration of severely mentally ill people in 1800 for their own or others' protection. There's no Mental Health Act in 1800. So the authorities have limited legal means to deal with someone who committed a crime, one of unsound mind. At this point, if you are acquitted for reasons of insanity for a criminal offense, as far as the law is concerned to a certain extent, you are free to go, which obviously is not possible in this case really for a whole variety of reasons. There are some sort of ways that the authorities get round this to incarcerate people in mental health institutions, but they are not formalised, so it's difficult as well. Insanity itself is really difficult to prove as far as legal precedent is called at this point. It is a total loss of control, the complete lack of ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and Hadfield doesn't demonstrate that at all. He seems to have been cognisant of his actions. So he's indicted quickly for treason, for compassing, imagining, i.e. planning the king's death proved by his overt acts. The clerk of Hadfield's employer identifies Truelock as an influence on him, as the one who'd given Hadfield the idea. He's also charged.

Now the interesting thing about this case as well is we were talking earlier about how Hadfield seemed to go to a lot of effort to find himself killed by the state. If he had shot at an ordinary citizen, even if he intended to miss, he probably would've been tried for attempted murder and Truelock for aiding and abetting him at the Old Bailey, and they probably almost certainly would've been convicted. They wouldn't have had access to particularly good legal representation, they probably would've been hanged. But the severity of a treason charge and the magnitude of it basically gives the defendant more privileges because of what they face. They get to see their indictment and the list of witnesses against them in advance, which other criminal trials at the time don't necessarily get to see. And they attract the assistance of really the greatest lawyers in the land, because basically this can make reputation. So despite the fact that Hadfield has almost no money, he gets as a lawyer Thomas Erskine, who's probably the greatest lawyer of his generation, to defend him. Has previously successfully defended people from treason charges.

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So Hadfield's trial begins on the 26th of June, 1800, so very, very quickly after his attempt on George III's life. And Hadfield pleads not guilty. So Erskine basically does some things which are relatively novel at the time for these sort of cases to change the law. He requests and gets permission for doctors who specialise in mental health to meet with Hadfield prior to the trial to assess his mental state and then calls them as expert witnesses in the trial. At the trial, he makes much of Hadfield's loyal service in the army and the terrible treatment he suffered being a soldier and a veteran, but also his continued professions of patriotism up to and after his attempted shooting. He also has people come and give evidence to Hadfield's derangement, people who knew him, the effect that his treatment in captivity and the injuries to his head had had on him and his "frequent fits of insanity". So he brings up the fact, for instance, that Hadfield's wife at some point had to apply to the local authorities, to parish authorities to request a strait jacket during one of his more pronounced episodes of psychosis because he was so agitated. So Erskine is successful. The jury finds him not guilty "being under the influence of insanity at the time". But this, again, as I say, creates an issue for the crown, this acquittal. So having received the verdict, the lord chief justice who's presiding over the trial immediately ruled that Hadfield's liberty was not consistent "with the safety of the king or his subjects". So he's remanded to Bethlem, and he spends the rest of his life there.

Tracy: Well, they say truth is stranger than fiction, and that was certainly the case here. What an utterly gripping case and so full of high drama and also very significant, and I think you really brought that across, Chris. But how would you sum up why this story is worth researching and learning about?

Chris: It's sensational for one thing. Hadfield's testimony gives an insight into the experience of people who are quite clearly suffering sort of wartime trauma. This kind of thing we'd recognise in the First World War with shell-shock, I suppose, and what that can do to a person. And it also gives an insight into the life of a relatively unremarkable working class person in Georgian London, his descriptions of his life and his habits prior to the crime. But the real thing about it is that it changes the way the country treats mental illness. And this comes back to the importance and sort of magnitude of treason. Treason is different and more significant than any other crime. And so as a result, when it goes wrong for the crown when they try and convict someone of treason, they usually end up changing the law to make sure it doesn't happen again. And this is the case with Hadfield. So very shortly after his acquittal, parliament began working towards a new treason act

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to deal with defendants who are found to be insane. We do have a treason act in 1800 passed very quickly afterwards, but actually these sections which were in reaction to Hadfield are sort of hived off into a discrete piece of legislation, The Criminal Lunatic Act 1800. This act basically provided courts with the power that people who were charged with treason, murder, or other serious crimes, if they were declared by the jury to be insane, they were to be kept in strict custody until his majesty's pleasure shall be known. It's effectively an indefinite sentence to incarceration, and it has a significant impact on the way criminal justice operates in this country. It is not repealed till 1981. And for the 19th century, much of the 20th century before the passage of the Mental Health Acts and so forth, it is one of the main ways that Britain deals with what we call criminal insanity, I suppose. So Hadfield's case is a landmark in the codification of legal treatment of mentally ill people in Britain, but also shows the importance of treason in shaping constitutional settlement of Britain and that's why I think it's worth researching.

Tracy: It's utterly extraordinary. And clearly, Hadfield wanted to change his own history, wanted to end his life effectively, but instead, he changed the entire course of British legal history. Chris, thanks so much for telling the story to us.

[outro music plays]

Roger: Thanks for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew.

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Roger: Listeners, we need your help to make this podcast better! We need to know a bit more about you and what themes you're interested in. You can share this information with us by visiting smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ontherecord, that's [repeat]. We'll include that link in the episode description and on our website. You can also share your feedback or suggestions for future series by emailing us at OnTheRecord@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Tracy: And Finally, Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.

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