

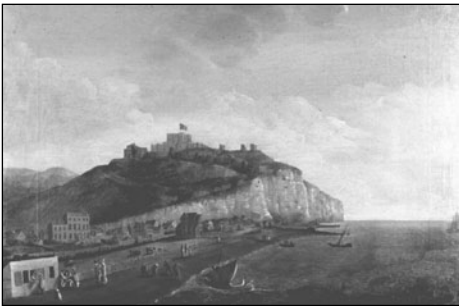
Around Dover Museum – Sarah Rice

An Independent Woman of Means

Vronni Ward – Dover Museum

Without a doubt Sarah Rice (1754-1842) was a woman of great stature and eminence in the Dover community. She was the Beyoncé Knowles of the 18th and 19th Century! Married to Captain Henry Rice of the British East India Company, she lived in the imposing Clarence House built (date unknown) in a wonderful position with views across the English Channel as well as at Bramling House in Ickham which commanded a view of the boats mooring for favourable winds to sail to France.

Sarah Rice came from a seafaring family. Her father, John Samson (sometimes spelt Sampson) and her Uncles Brooke and James were all captains of East India Company ships and were extremely wealthy. The family was of Huguenot stock, settled in East Kent from France in the 17th century, where they manufactured copies of China porcelain, known as Samsonware. Sarah's mother, Margaret Walton, traced her decent from the Anne Marlowe who kept a public house in Canterbury until 1629. She was the youngest sister of Christopher Marlowe the famous playwright.



Painting of Clarence House owned by Dover Museum on loan to Dover Town Hall

The house was built, in Dover, on land between what is now Russell Street and Woolcomber Street. Nearby, before Castle Street was built, was a donkey stable providing tourists rides along the beach. The donkeys took a liking for Sarah's flower garden... and she got quite grumpy about it!

Unfortunately, we have no painting of Sarah and so we are unsure as to her appearance. She was described as “not exactly handsome, but a smart looking girl.” However, she took care of her appearance buying her clothes in London; a bill survives for a sarsenet pelisse (a long silk cloak often trimmed with fur) from R & G Thompson of Cocks spur Street and another for furs from P. Poland & Co, located next door to the Lyceum. She was clearly a formidable, matriarchal figure that inspired a number of characters in English literature. It was said that the characters of Mrs Norris in Mansfield Park who has been described as ‘a cruel, righteous busybody’ and/or Elizabeth Bennett in Pride and Prejudice who is ‘bold, intelligent, and independent, with a witty sense of humour’ by Jane Austen were based on her. It was also said that she was one of two local personages on which Charles Dickens (1812-1870) based the character of Betsey Trotwood, in Dickens' David Copperfield. Betsey was portrayed as a woman of independent nature with strong views. She did not care for public opinion, and she drove her carriage herself through the streets of Canterbury in defiance of public opinion ...very much like Sarah herself. Another example of her forceful character was demonstrated in an encounter with the Duke of Wellington. When a gun battery was stationed near her house in Dover she was offended as much by the sight of it as by the

sound. She had all the shutters closed and invited the Duke of Wellington, then at Walmer Castle, to call. Mrs Rice explained to him that she would have to continue in darkness as long as the guns remained, whereupon the duke gave orders for the battery to be moved forthwith.

A scurrilous story about Sarah's large fortune relates to how Captain Rice bet a friend ten guineas that he would succeed in marrying the heiress (who brought with her a dowry of £30,000). He succeeded in his quest, bringing his ship, the Dutton, into Dover harbour in order to give a ball at which he proposed. Henry and Sarah married on 29th January 1776 when he made generous settlements on his wife and future children, Henry Junior and Edward. Henry Rice, as well as being Captain of the British East India Company, owned Dover's Latham, Rice and Co bank together with a company which managed homing pigeons.

Upon Henry's death in 1797 Sarah became the managing director of the bank Latham, Rice & Co. They did not confine their activities to banking, describing themselves as "merchants and agents." They kept a fleet of fast small ships to trade and to obtain news quickly from agents in Calais and other continental ports. For more speedy return of the information, they organised a carrier pigeon service.

She retired from her banking position in 1811 in favour of her son Edward. By this date, the annual sums available to each partner had increased: Samuel Latham £1,600 and Henshaw Latham and Edward Rice £800 each. These were respectable sums in a provincial town like Dover.

Her relationships with her sons were emotionally mixed. Her eldest, Henry, went up to Cambridge and took holy orders. He was by all accounts a ladies' man, a gambler

and a spendthrift. He married Lucy Lefroy whose family were close to the Austen family...hence, the references in Jane Austen's novels. Jane Austen took a shine to Henry who, according to her, was 'a pleasant boy who had bright eyes.' She wanted Sarah to buy the vicarage attached to an adjoining parish. However, Sarah would have none of it, which led Jane Austen to proclaim that she was 'a perverse and narrow-minded woman to oblige those whom she does not love.' Although Sarah shared her affections differently between her two sons, in terms of money she treated them equally. She bought Henry a house in Essex and Edward, Danecourt House near Dover. The younger son Edward married Jane Austen's niece - Elizabeth Knight. Jane's brother Edward had been adopted by the Knights. Edward Royds Rice went into parliament as a Liberal MP (1837-1857) and prospered. In contrast, Henry had his money left to him in trust in her will and was constantly going into debt. Interestingly, Sarah specified that after Henry's death, his sole surviving daughter would get the bulk of his inheritance, again just the interest but that it was to go to her alone for her sole use and not for any debt of her husband or any husband she happened to marry. Sarah was obviously aware of the problem of married women not having any property to call their own.



Clarence Hotel, Dover



Burlington Hotel, Dover 1898

However, following her death in 1842, her beautiful Clarence House was sold to the Clarence Hotel Company. The company took years to build the hotel and they found that they had over-stretched themselves financially and eventually had to lease the hotel to the Imperial Hotel Company which opened the Imperial Hotel in 1867. Its fortunes were chequered closing in 1871 and it later it changed hands to become the

Burlington Hotel (1897) which was demolished in 1949 after extensive war damage. The site is now subsumed within the St James' Retail Complex.

Sarah Rice was truly an independent woman and in the words of Beyoncé Knowles and Destiny's Child: "The shoes on my feet, I bought 'em. The clothes I'm wearing, I bought 'em... All the women who independent. Throw your hands up at me. All the honeys who making money. Throw your hands up at me. All the mamas who profit dollars Throw your hands up at me!"

Here at the museum, we have our new Channel Crossing temporary exhibition open until May 2024, do pop in and let us know what you think. We open: Monday to Saturday 9.30am to 5.00pm. Open Sundays in the summer 10.00am to 3.00pm. Admission is FREE. Tel: 01304 201066 www.dover.gov.uk/museum

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