

MRS LETITIA SAGE

Mrs. Sage is something of a mystery, although she is described as an “actress, aeronaut, wardrobe-keeper.” She was born Letitia Ann Hoare, and followed two of her sisters into the acting profession.. What is known is that by 1773 Letitia Hoare was living as the common-law wife of Mr. Sage, a haberdasher in Cheapside. She appears to have made her debut as an actress on April 24, 1773 but her stage career never really took off. Soon after 1780, it seems she exchanged acting for publicity and the more enterprising aspects of production, and maybe by this route came into contact with Messrs. Lunardi and Biggin. After her sensational ascent in Mr. Lunardi’s balloon she was for many years afterwards almost entirely fugitive.

With regard to her aviation fame this is down to her becoming the first female to take to the skies. On 29th June 1785 Mrs Letitia Ann Sage became the first female aerialist, carried aloft in Lunardi's hydrogen balloon from St George's Fields, London along with Mr George Biggin. The gondola was draped in swags, but the gate had a neat arrangement of lacing so that the watchers on the ground could see the people up in the air.

Mrs Sage was described as Junoesque, and apparently weighed in at over 200 pounds. On the day she wore a very low cut silk dress, apparently to aid 'wind resistance'. Her fellow passenger was the dashing George Biggin, a young and wealthy Old Etonian.

Unfortunately the balloon was overloaded. (Afterwards Mrs Sage blamed herself because she hadn't told Lunardi her weight and he'd been too polite to ask). Lunardi seemed to have no qualms about stepping out and letting the apparently inexperienced Mr Biggin take to the air with Mrs Sage. Unfortunately in his haste to depart, Lunardi failed to do up the lacings of the gondola door. As the balloon sailed away over Picadilly Mrs Sage was on all fours re-threading the lacings to close the door. Apparently the crowd assumed she had fainted or possibly something far more exciting was going on between her and Mr Biggin.

The flight followed the line of the Thames westwards finally landing heavily in Harrow on the Hill where the balloon damaged a hedge and gouged a strip through the middle of an uncut hayfield, leaving the farmer ranting abuse and threats. The honour of the first female aeronaut was saved by the young gentlemen/boys of Harrow school who had a whip-round to pay off the farmer and then carried Mrs Sage bodily, in triumph, to the local pub

According to the New London Magazine I:4 (October 1785), p. 178:

It is perhaps a true observation, that there is no enterprise, however dangerous or difficult it may be, but the female mind can summons courage enough to undertake it. An instance of this we have in Mrs. Sage, who unites to the tenderness peculiar to her sex, that manly fortitude which constitutes the heroine. Mr. Lunardi having engaged to ascend the atmosphere, accompanied by a lady and gentleman, on Wednesday, June 29th, 1785, about 150,000 people, of all ages and descriptions, were assembled in St. George’s-Fields. The day was clear, and the sun shone with uncommon splendor; but Lunardi did not ascend. That natural politeness which all foreigners possess, in acts of obliging their friends, induced him to give way to the pressing solicitations of Mrs. Sage and Mr. Biggin, when it was found that the balloon would not mount aloft with the three adventurers: the master of the ceremonies therefore mortified himself by staying behind, and permitting his friends to make their visit in a duet to the clouds. It was about a quarter past one when the firing of two guns, within the circuitous space, gave notice that the balloon was going to ascend; and, in about two minutes afterwards, it rose gradually, at about

fifteen or twenty yards from the earth, making its direction towards Astley's Amphitheatre, against which it would probably have struck, if Mr. Biggin had not thrown out a considerable quantity of ballast. Being lessened of its burthen, it mounted with velocity, and got to an amazing height in space of half an hour, making its way towards the west, as if proceeding towards Oxfordshire. After continuing about half an hour in this direction, it veered something to the northward. The appearance it made was really beautiful, and its easy ascent gave the public such an opportunity of viewing the whole distinctly, that every spectator seemed to be perfectly satisfied. Mrs. Sage at first seemed a little agitated when the cords were loosened; but collecting herself, she bid adieu to her earthly friends, and mounted on a pinnacle of height which no woman ever before visited. They descended safely at half past two, in a common field, a little beyond Harrow on the Hill, about thirteen miles from the place of their ascension.

and

Mr. Biggin is a young gentleman of good family, and takes a peculiar delight in scientific experiments. When Mr. Lunardi first ascended with his balloon from the Artillery Ground, it was the desire of Mr. Biggin to accompany him; but the balloon was found incapable of carrying them both. He was a second time disappointed on the 13th of May, 1785, by reason of some mis-management and confusion that took place in the operation of filling Mr. Lunardi's balloon with inflammable air; the consequence of which was, that Mr. Lunardi ascended alone, but soon after made a rapid descent, occasioned by the bursting of the balloon. On Wednesday the 29th of June, 1785, Mr. Biggin, in company with Mrs. Sage, ascended from Mr. Arnold's Rotunda in St. George's-Fields. The sight was uncommonly grand, and afforded ample satisfaction to the numerous spectators. He had a pair of oars with him, but did not use them whilst he was visible to the people of the earth. As there was no valve to let out the rarified air, the only method of forcing a descent was by cutting the balloon. After a very agreeable journey they alighted a little beyond Harrow on the Hill, and were received by the young gentlemen and neighbors with the utmost politeness and friendly attention. It was the intention of Mr. Biggin, in the true spirit of enterprise, to have proceeded farther, after having parted with his companion; but he was prevented by the people about him.





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