The Jarry sisters, les aristocrates, des chiffons aux richesses

Maria Louisa, born in 1818, and Alphonsine Sarah Jarry, born in 1822, were the daughters of Frenchman Etienne (otherwise known as Stephen) Jarry and his wife Sophia Milbourn. In 1851 the family lived in Halifax. Stephen ran a French school and provided an excellent French library for his students. However, this image of middle class contentment gave no inkling of Etienne’s incredible past.

According to Malcolm Bull’s Calderdale Companion, Etienne was born at Versailles in 1775, his dad being a steward for King Louis XVI - yes, incredibly so. Little Etienne performed as a chorister in the Chapel Royal from the age of five. But this lifestyle was to come to an abrupt end with the French Revolution in 1789 and the beheading of the King in 1793. People associated with the King were hunted down and often slaughtered. Etienne found himself begging for bread for several years – and there was no cake! Amazingly he survived and, being an able man of good character, became a secretary to a general, travelling through Europe. He signed up to the French army and saw plenty of action. Eventually wounded by a British sabre in Spain in 1809, Etienne was brought to England as a prisoner of war and was released at Northampton at the end of hostilities. In 1812, aged 36, he married 20 year old Sophia within the Church of England, having converted from Catholicism. Etienne’s occupation was given as a ‘French Prisoner of War’. Sophia had been orphaned at the age of six and her siblings were agricultural labourers. Etienne and Sophia settled in Halifax. In 1818, Etienne was listed in a Trade Directory working in ‘British Lace manufacture, wool shops’, before teaching French. Despite all his adventures, Etienne lived until an incredible 82 years of age.

In the 1840s, the sisters were governesses. Maria worked for John Birkbeck at Anley and Alphonsine worked in Halifax where she taught John Lister, the last inhabitant of Shibden Hall who first deciphered the code to Anne Lister’s famous diaries. After the death of both of their parents in the 1850s and equipped with a sizeable inheritance, the sisters moved to Fern Hill on Constitution Hill in Settle with their aged aunt Sarah who died in 1863.

Alphonsine helped with the work of the Church and Sunday school for over 40 years. When she retired, she was presented with a purse containing more than 50 guineas with letters from over 80 people.

The sisters were remembered in the Craven Herald 1923 series ‘A Veteran’s Reminiscences of Settle’. The sisters were born in Halifax rather than ‘some foreign shore’, but after their dad’s early years it’s no wonder the sisters appreciated the ‘peaceful quietude of life in England’.

Maria died in 1893 and left her estate to Alphonsine who died in 1912, aged 89, leaving the equivalent to over £1.1 million today. Three-quarters of that went to charity. That’s not bad for the daughters of a Versailles escapee! Alphonsine generously donated to the Settle church endowment scheme for pew rents, and to a charity set up by Rev’d John Robinson - ‘the object of the charity is the benefit of the aged and infirm of the Parish of Giggleswick’. She left a

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legacy to the Halifax infirmary where her dad had died, together with a portrait of him which subsequently went missing.

It’s not clear where the family money came from, although Etienne clearly moved in high circles. One of the executors of his will was Sir James Stansfeld from Halifax, a neighbour and ‘Radical’ Liberal MP who was the first cousin of George Stansfeld. This could explain why the girls moved to Settle from Halifax.

A William Morris stained glass window and plaque in the Church reads: ‘To the memory of two sisters devoted to kind and good works…. Erected AD 1913 by parishioners and friends.’ Their grave is in a prime position, right next to the door of the church.

Maria Louisa Jarry died April 17th 1893 aged 75 years. Until the day break.
Alphonsine Sarah Jarry died 6th Nov 1912 aged 90 years, Sarah Chapman died Jan 30th 1863 aged 75, C2

This account has been compiled as part of the Settle Graveyard Project which has recorded gravestone inscriptions, updated church records and researched the lives of those buried. Life stories can be found on dalescommunityarchives.org.uk, ‘settle graveyard project’. The ‘Old Settle’ family tree on ancestry.co.uk includes the families buried in the graveyard. The project is ongoing and welcomes queries and information on settleresearch@gmail.com. Latest news and events are on the Facebook page ‘Settle Graveyard Project’.

Thanks to Pamela Jordan with her help in the compilation of this account.

The life stories of people with italicised names have been researched as part of the graveyard project.

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