



LONDON, MONDAY, JUNE 16, 1828

Supplement

INQUEST ON CHARLES PRATT, ESQ.

On Saturday evening, J. W. UNWIN, Esq., the coroner for the district, and a jury composed of the most respectable inhabitants of the neighbourhood, assembled at the Plough Inn, Tottenham, to inquire into the circumstances leading to the death of Charles Pratt, Esq., a young gentleman who only attained his majority on the 23d of the last month, and who then entered on the possession of 200,000*l.* in funded, and 40,000*l.* in landed property.

After the jury had been empanelled, they proceeded to a spacious mansion in the vicinity, occupied by the deceased's mother, to perform the first and most disagreeable part of their duty,—that of viewing the body. After taking a hasty glance at it, they returned to the inquest-room, where the following evidence was adduced for their consideration:—

Thomas Cay, Esq., of Barddale, in Suffolk, stated, that on Wednesday, the 23d day of May last, he, accompanied by the deceased and Mr. Stephenson, started from the stables of the latter, in the Edgeware-road, in a phaeton, for St. Alban's, from whence they proceeded to a place adjacent, called No-man's-land, where they all arrived in safety.

The Coroner asked, what was the business of the party at the place he called No-man's-land?

Mr. Cay.—We went to see a fight.

Coroner.—How long may you have remained there?

Mr. Cay.—About an hour and a half.

Examination resumed.—On leaving the ground, we returned to St. Alban's, where we had some refreshment at one of the inns. We afterwards proceeded to town, and having a steep hill, called, I believe, Hollywell-hill, to ascend on the road, orders were given to the postilion to go at a slow pace; that he neglected, and notwithstanding our precaution he drove forward at a very rapid rate.

Juror.—Was he sober?

Mr. Cay.—I think so. The deceased called out to him to drive moderately, and asked him what the devil he was about. He still, however, continued to drive tremendously, and on coming to the bottom of the hill, and while passing a pig, the phaeton was upset, and they were all thrown out. None of

them escaped uninjured, but the deceased, falling on his head, sustained the most severe shock, and received a dangerous contusion over the left eye. Though in a state of insensibility he got on his legs, but almost immediately again fell, from weakness. By this time Mr. Burgess, a medical gentleman, came to their assistance, and on the deceased being removed to a neighbouring inn, he sponged his head and expressed a desire to bleed him, but this he objected to, saying that he was most anxious to reach home with as little delay as possible.

Coroner.—Then, at this time, he had recovered his senses?

Mr. Cay.—He had, Sir. He was subsequently removed to his own residence, where his body now lies. During the journey he got worse, and expressed great pain when the air reached his head. On his arrival, and up to the time of his death, which took place on Monday last, he was attended by Mr. Holt, and also by Sir Astley Cooper.

Coroner.—Do you think that the horses ran away, and that thus the postilion lost all control over them?

Mr. Cay.—I don't think they did; but the boy might not, at the moment, have had the necessary control. I must, however, repeat, that in my opinion he has been most culpable.

Coroner.—Where is the driver at present?

Foster, the beadle, replied, that he understood he had absconded, but he could not state the fact from any knowledge of his own.

Henry Stephenson, Esq., of Park-street, Grosvenor-square, corroborated the evidence of Mr. Cay in all its principal features, and added, that at the termination of the fight between Baldwin and O'Neill they retired to the Cross Keys Inn in St. Alban's from whence, after having had some refresh-

ment, they departed for London. On arriving at the top of a steep hill near the former town, he desired to descend it slowly; but on their reaching the centre of it, he set off with great velocity, and while turning at the bottom, a pig being on one side of the road, the wheels got into a kind of channel, and their phaeton was upset. He (Mr. Stephenson) fell undermost, and the deceased and Mr. Cay over him. The injuries he received were on his back and left shoulder, and he was dragged along with the carriage for a short distance on the road. This prevented his seeing in what position the deceased had fallen, but it appeared to him to have been on his head, as on that part he was the most severely injured. The deceased was removed to the White Hart Inn, and afterwards in a postchaise to town. He (witness) returned in the phaeton.

Juror.—Is it not customary with the drivers of every kind of vehicle to drive rapidly on arriving near the bottom of a hill?

Mr. Stephenson.—I believe so.

Juror.—Had the pig not been in the road, do you think that the accident would have happened?

Mr. Stephenson.—I think not.

Juror.—Then you are of opinion that it was the cause of the accident?

Mr. Stephenson.—I am; but if due caution had been observed by the driver, it might have been avoided.

Foreman.—There is one question I wish to ask these gentlemen, and that is, whether there had been any affray before the fight, at the fight, or at the Inn at St. Alban's?

Both witnesses replied in the negative, and observed, that during the fight they had not even once descended from the vehicle.

The Foreman.—My reason for putting this question is, that a report is in circulation in this neighbourhood, which has gained very general credit, that the deceased, while witnessing the fight, was severely beaten by some of the by-standers, with whom he had an altercation.

Mr. Stephenson said that he had learned that the author of this unfounded rumour had even gone so far as to assert that he was an eye-witness to the transaction; and this it was, he supposed, which obtained so much credence for the falsehood. He therefore thought that he ought then to be brought forward to give to the jury what information was in his power, and thus enable them to judge for themselves.

Foster, the beadle, said that the person alluded to was an Irish hawk, named M'Carthy, who had since left that part of the country.

The certificates of Sir A. Cooper and Mr. Holt were here handed in, the purport of which was, that the deceased died in consequence of violent contusions on the head, proceeding, as the latter had been informed, by his being thrown out of a phaeton, through the neglect of the driver.

The evidence terminated here, and the Coroner summed up.

The Jury consulted for a short time, and not thinking there was evidence sufficient to send the postilion for trial, they returned a verdict of "Accidental death."

The deceased was one of the backers of Baldwin in his recent fight with O'Neill, and is said to have realized, though his life has been the forfeit of it, a large sum by the event of that battle.



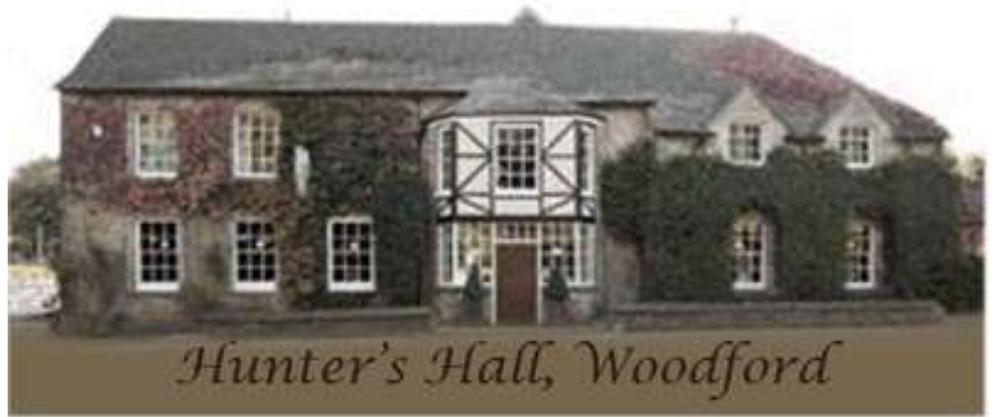
The phaeton is a four wheeled light carriage with two or four seats, mounted on springs, usually pulled by two horses and self-driven.

A postilion is a carriage driver who sits on one of the two horses.

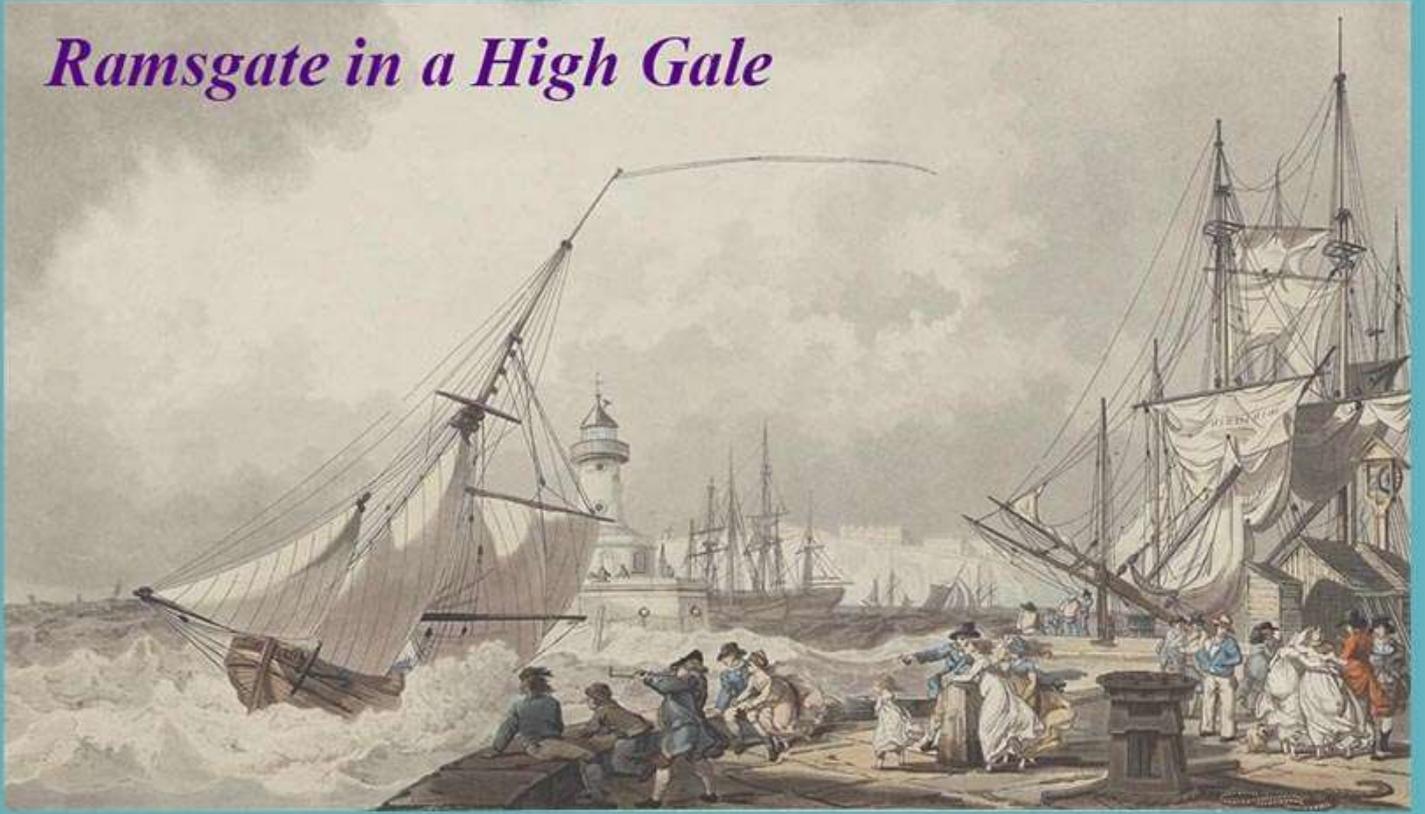
survived into adulthood.

In 1833, three years after Tom's retirement, they moved down to an elegant Georgian house, overlooking the sea, at 5 Wellington Terrace, Ramsgate. Their eighth child, Thomas Harry, was born there in 1835.

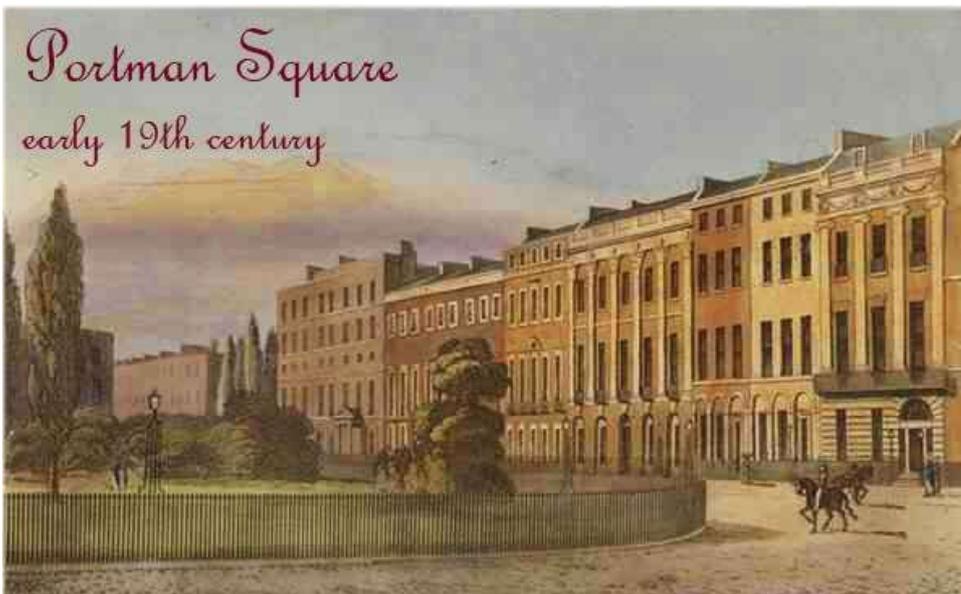
During the time that Tom and Sarah were in Ramsgate, an English family by the name of Box came from France and moved into another house in the terrace, from



Ramsgate in a High Gale



Portman Square early 19th century



where they too could look out upon the English Channel, breathing invigorating air that was untainted by the pungent odours of a nineteenth century metropolis.

The Sparks and Box families often dined together. It is unlikely though, that the children would have joined them at table, considering that there were eight in the Sparks family and the Box's had about ten.

When you think about it from that perspective, a whole new logic emerges to the dictum that children should be seen but not heard.

But then, many of the Box children were considerably older. George Modd Box and his wife,

Susanna, had at least sixteen children between 1807 and 1830, including Amelia, who was in her mid twenties at that time.

It is quite likely that the Box and Sparks families had known each other previously, as George, Susanna and family had been living in a large house in Enfield between 1824 and 1831 and at Snaresbrook, next to Woodford, before that.

George Modd Box (his mother's maiden name was Modd), was a lawyer, more specifically a notary, meaning that he dealt with ecclesiastical matters. He was in partnership in a law firm in Knightrider Street, just down from St.Paul's, in London. In 1832, George dissolved his old partnership and started a new one with his eldest son, John. It might well have been at that point that he and his large family had moved over to France for a few years, before moving back over to Ramsgate.

Thomas and family moved up to London in April 1837, renting a house in Seymour Street, near Portman Square.

It is no coincidence that the Box family, who had left Ramsgate before the Sparks', were living nearby.

Sarah gave birth to her ninth and last child, Ernest Algernon Sparks, in June, 1837, eighteen days before Queen Victoria came to the throne.

If we consider that Sarah became pregnant with her first child in about March 1825, that means that she had been pregnant for about 81 of the intervening 147 months and possibly breastfeeding for most of the rest, though it is just as likely that they employed wet nurses. Breast feeding was considered by many society ladies to be just a bit too animalistic.

In 1837, after building a family of nine children, Tom was still just thirty-five years old and Sarah was just twenty nine.

Although they had been cautious, it had been observed on a couple of occasions, by the curtain-twitching servants, that Amelia Box and Tom Sparks had gone out from their respective houses in Seymour Street, which is just north of Oxford Street, and headed off in the same direction at roughly the same time.

By this time, Thomas' twenty five year-old younger brother, Robert Harry Sparks junior, had been married for two years to Mary Klingender.

Robert was the only member of the family then working at Sparks and Co., though as a clerk rather than as a chemist and druggist, as his elder brothers had been. The technical side of the business and, perhaps, the general management, had been taken over by William Foster White: an intelligent young man of the same age as Robert.

Any doubts as to whether anything was going on between Tom and Amelia Box, were dispelled when Robert, who was living above the business, at 134 St.John Street, with his wife and one year-old baby, received a letter from Tom on 21st November, 1837.

Upon discovering that Tom was on his way, with Amelia, to France, Robert turned to William White and exclaimed "Tom has bolted!"

This was certainly the sort of phrase that a couple of young men would use in private at the time, but it's reference to a horse breaking free from control, does imply that Robert saw his brother's flight from the marriage as an escape.

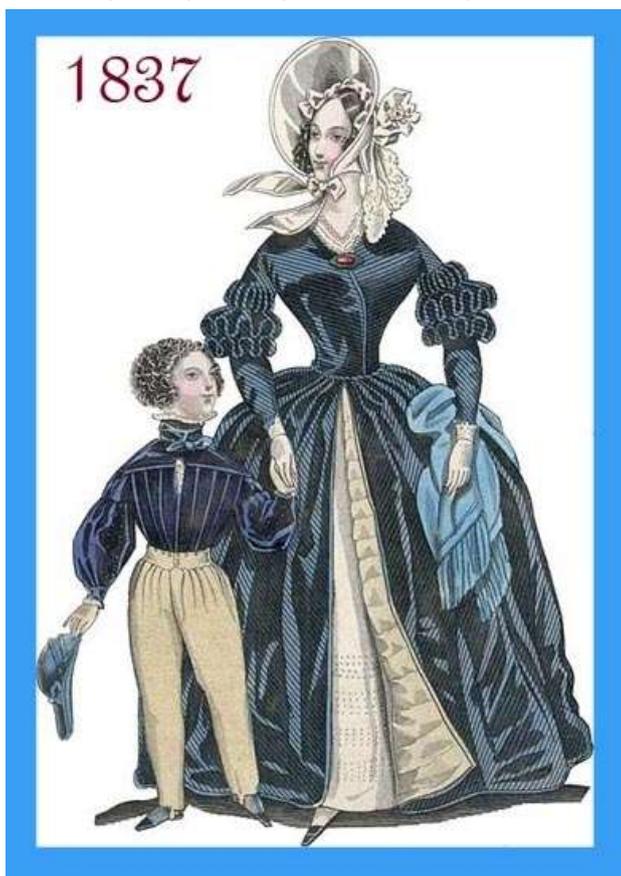
Along with Tom's note to Robert, he enclosed a four page letter, which he asked Robert to deliver to Sarah. Both of these letters can be viewed at the London Municipal Records centre.

Although much of Tom's handwriting is difficult to decipher, the general flow is easy enough to glean. There are references to his despicable behaviour, for which he made no excuses and sought no forgiveness, along with declarations of love for the children. The over-all tone though, was a somewhat matter-of-fact declaration of the inevitability of this outcome.

Tom's reason for asking Robert to deliver the letter, was so that he could be there to comfort Sarah in her great distress.

There is no particular mention in any of the subsequent divorce court documents, of Sarah being beside herself with grief, which leads one to wonder if perhaps, after all those years of maternal servitude, the independently wealthy Sarah might actually have breathed a large sigh of relief.

Nor do their marital problems seem to have interfered with their business interests.



There is a record from March, 1838, of Tom being involved in compensation deals for land that was being taken by the new railway companies. I do not have the details of the specific land involved. It might have been Tom's, but was more likely part of the seventy or so acres that Sarah had inherited from her father.

This business was probably finalised whilst Tom and Amelia were briefly in London in May 1838, during which time they stayed in rooms that good, helpful younger brother Robert had arranged for them in Wilmington Square, Finsbury, which is just a short walk from St. John Street.

Perhaps in memory of the street from whence they had fled together, or perhaps through a lack of imagination, they were travelling under the names of Mister and Missus Seymour.

A servant in that boarding house, later stated in court, that "during the occupancy of the said lodgings, they constantly lay naked and alone in one and the same bed and frequently had the carnal use and knowledge of each other's bodies and committed adultery together."

We get an impression also, that Tom and Amelia were not exactly being ostracised by their families.

Robert and Mary, his wife, came and dined with them on most evenings during their two week stay and, on one occasion, Amelia and Mary went out shopping together for baby things.

Amelia must have been about six months pregnant at the time.

On another occasion, Susanna, Amelia's mother, accompanied by three more of her daughters, came to visit Tom and Amelia. Tom had even told the servant that they were expecting this visit, which all seemed quite relaxed and congenial.

One's first impression would probably be that Tom and Amelia, having run away and lived in sin, would be shunned by society. This is probably what would have happened, if they had been living in a small community, such as Tottenham. But London in 1838, was just starting to move from the free-wheeling moral laxity of the enlightenment, into the repressed, self-righteous moralizing of the Victorian period. Bearing in mind also, that the Box family had been living in more sophisticated France, before Ramsgate, it is easy to think that they would not have been overly fussed about their daughter moving back to France and living in a bogus marriage. It is likely that Amelia had friends in French society and it would have been easy enough to carry off the subterfuge of marital respectability.

Tom and Amelia again returned briefly to London, in November 1838, renting two floors of a house in Grosvenor Place, then again in March 1839, when they stayed at the Somerset Hotel in The Strand.

Two months later, they were staying at Hatchett's Hotel in Piccadilly, when Tom received a summons to attend the divorce court.

After Tom's departure, Sarah had moved from Seymour Street firstly down to Tunbridge Wells for thirteen months, then down to Brighton, where she and the children lived in a large Regency terrace house, along with five servants.

The fact that neither Tom, the defendant nor Sarah, the plaintive, bothered appearing at the divorce hearing in person, indicates that they saw this procedure as little more than a legal formality. Both were represented by lawyers.

The tone of the judgement, by which the divorce was granted, shows that the judge, who was a member of the legal profession, but also linked to the church, took a far more serious view.

According to the lawful proofs made before us in this cause aforesaid, that Thomas Hougham Sparks after the solemnization and consummation of the said marriage being altogether unmindful of his conjugal vows and not having the fear of God before his eyes but being instigated and seduced by the Devil did in the years and months commit the foul crime of adultery.

Although Tom and Sarah were thus divorced, the judge also stated that neither of them could remarry whilst the other was still living.

Sarah and the children stayed for quite some time at Oriental Terrace, Brighton.

At some point she lived in the Cavendish Hotel in Jermyn Street, in the exclusive St. James's area of London, before moving over to Paris, most likely during the 1850s. She was certainly there by about 1859, when her son Thomas Harry Sparks, was churchwarden at the English Church in Paris.

The family at that time, were living in a house at 9 Rue de la Ferme des Mathurins, Paris. This is where Sarah's daughter Laura Sibella Sparks died "after a few days of intense suffering, in 1863.

We know that by 1870, Sarah and at least her daughter, Mary Ann, were living at the Windsor Hotel in the Rue de Rivoli, just beside the Louvre.

Sarah's life of ease and luxury at the Windsor Hotel, would have been severely restricted when, during the Franco-Prussian War, the Prussian army encircled and besieged Paris from September, 1870.

Food became so scarce, that the Parisians were reduced to eating whatever they could find, including horses, dogs, cats, rats and even a couple elephants from the zoo.

Efforts were made, back in England, to raise funds for the relief of English people during the siege. In fact Sarah's daughters, Ellen and Annette joined forces with the Rev. Dr. John William Smyth, rector of the Steppingley Parish Church, Bedfordshire, to make sure that emergency supplies and provisions reached British citizens stuck in Paris.

One cannot help but wonder how, in the first place, these young English ladies expected to send food parcels through the Prussian siege and secondly, how it would look for the English residents to be tucking into their picnic hampers, whilst their neighbours were picking the last morsels off the back legs of the last rat.

On the other hand, considering the opinions of the French on traditional English cuisine, they might well have opted for starvation rather than succumb to the ignominy of surviving on bubble-n-squeak and deep fried Mars Bars.

For various tactical reason, the Prussians decided not to bombard Paris with artillery during the siege, but changed their minds as the winter dragged on into the start of January, 1871, when ending the siege quickly became a lot more appealing. They then fired 12,000 shells into the city over 23 nights in an attempt to break Parisian morale through terror bombing.

One particular breakage resulting from the bombardment, was of a collection of fine Chinese vases owned by Sarah Sparks, including a couple that had been stolen from the Chinese Summer Palace in Peking, by French and English soldiers, after a siege there, during the second Opium War, in 1860.

About 400 people perished or were wounded by the bombardment of Paris, but it did force the French to surrender on 28th January.

It would be interesting to know if Sarah's death on 9th January 1871, nineteen days before the end of the siege, was linked to those hard times. Might she have starved to death? She could have been killed by the exploding shell that shattered her porcelain collection? It is just as likely though, that she caught some disease that arose during the siege.

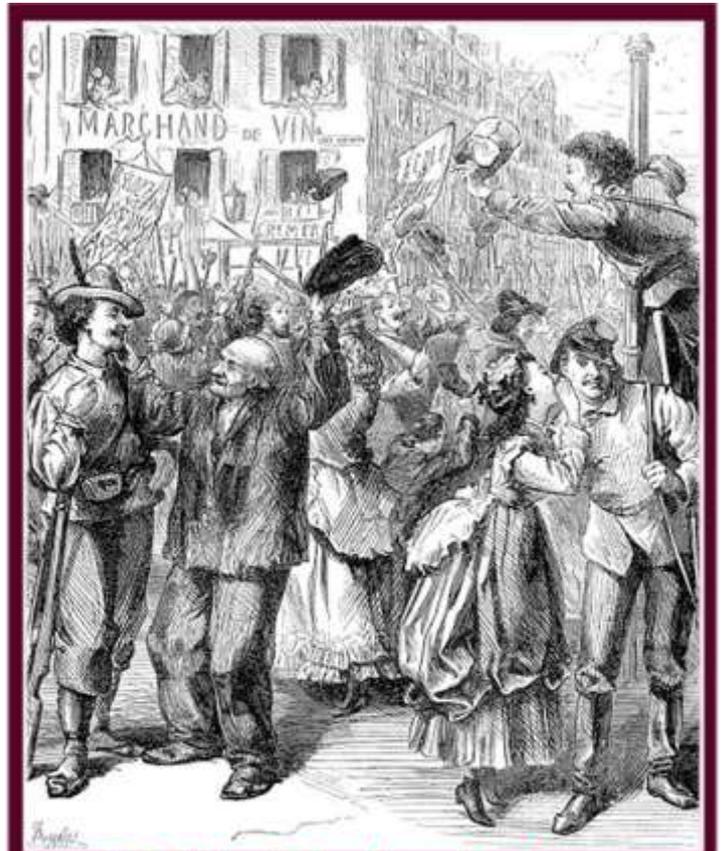
Sarah's daughter, Ellen Sparks must have been greatly impressed by the Reverend Smyth's efforts to get bland English food to her mother, because she married him in October 1872. She was 40 years old and he was 61.

Sarah's daughter, Mary Ann Sparks, then 44 years old, stayed on in Paris after the siege, during what became known as the Paris Commune.

After the defeat of the French by the Prussians, the weakened central French government thought Paris too dangerous, chaotic and unruly a place in which to run their administration, so they removed to Versailles, leaving Paris in the hands of the militia who had fought against the Prussians.

Seizing the opportunity, the disgruntled lower middle and working classes took control and, by March 1871, had formed a socialist administration of the city.

Efforts by the Versailles government to use troops to quell the rebellion, met with failure as many of the soldiers were sympathetic to the cause.



The Illustrated London News

October 1870

An English imagining of the excitement of Parisian youth, marching to the barricades to thrash the Prussians



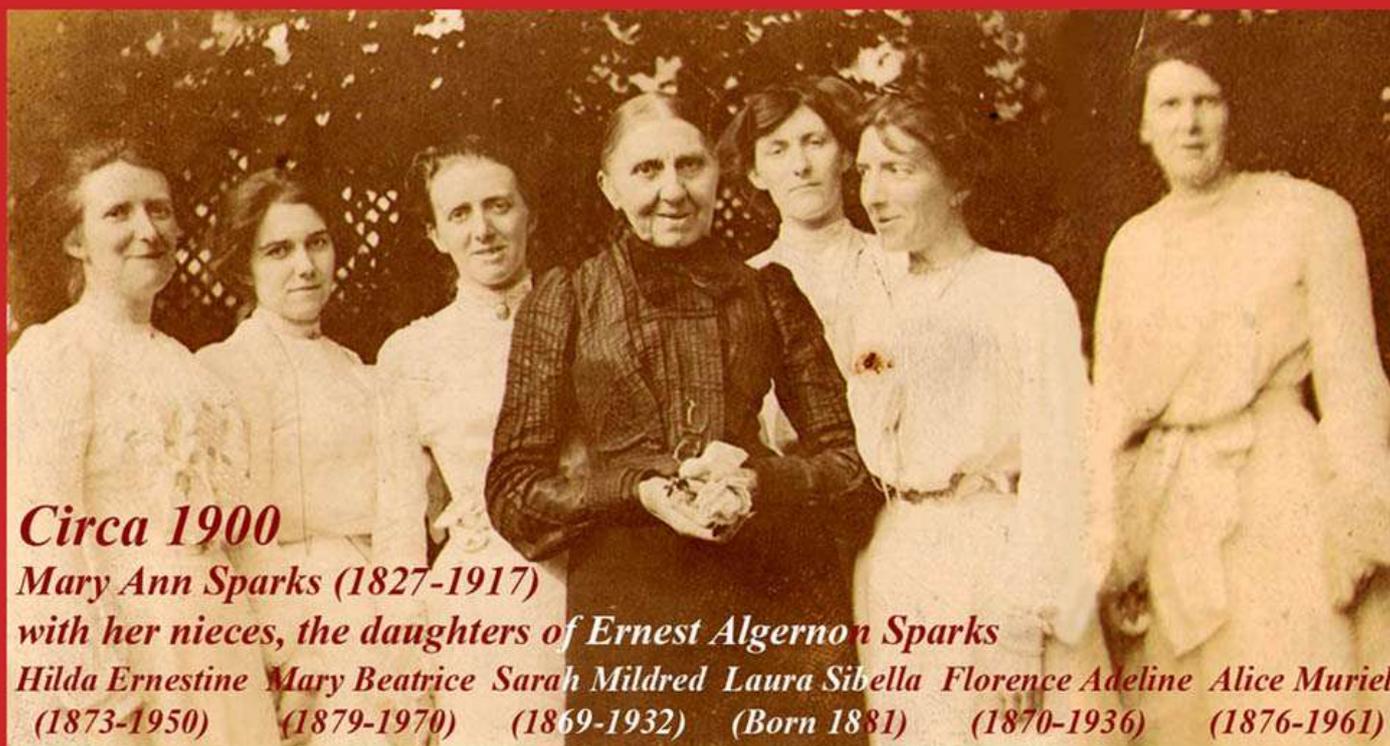
*Rue de Rivoli, Paris 1871,
during the Commune*

During the two months of its existence, the Paris Commune instituted many radical reforms. A strong feminist movement also arose at this vibrant time.

Marx, Engels and the leaders of the communist movements of the early 20th century, all stated that the Paris Commune was the first example of 'the workers' taking control of their destiny away from the exploiting Capitalists, though Marx later claimed that a key reason for the Commune's eventual defeat by the French army, in May 1871, was that their leadership was too decentralized and democratic and, thereby, unable to mount a co-ordinated defence against the army.

This lesson was not lost on later Communist leaders and we see the results in the tight centralized control and repression of the people in the Soviet Union, China, etcetera.

We do not know what role, if any, Mary Ann Sparks played in The Commune, but according to members of the family, she was not really particularly intellectually endowed and was heavily involved with the church, so it is unlikely that she was at the barricades, fighting for radical ideals.



The Seymour Family

Amelia had her baby with her when she and Tom visited London in 1839, though we have no further records of its fate. She and Tom did however, have a daughter christened in April 1840, at the Anglican Chapel in Saint-Servan-Sur-Mer, (Saint-Malo) on the coast of Brittany. This could have been the same child, born in about August 1838.

Another daughter, Louise Madelaine Isaure Seymour, was born in December, 1849, in the town of Moulins, in the centre of France

In the meantime, it seems that at least some of the Box family had moved over to Liege, in Belgium, where George, the father, died in 1848

In 1853, Amelia had another daughter, Emily Ethel Seymour, born in Belgium.

In 1855, we see in Brussels, the marriage of Emma Dorothy Box, the daughter of Amelia's eldest brother, John Box, who had taken over his father's law practise in London in 1832.

One of the witnesses at this wedding was Thomas Seymour, "uncle of the bride," whose residence is shown as Dinant, in the south-east of Belgium. He is also shown as being a "proprietor". So, maybe Tom was running a business in Belgium.

The next we see of the Seymour family, is Tom, Amelia and the two younger girls, Louise and Emily, living on the British island of Jersey, during the census of April 1871, where Tom's occupation is shown as 'Independent, Money in Funds and Land.'

It might well be that they had been living in Belgium or France until the Prussian invasion of September 1870, when they considered it judicious to take the short step over to the British islands just off the French coast.

They must have stayed on in the Channel Islands for some time, because Emily was married in Guernsey, in 1876, to Benjamin Casson, who was an officer in the York Militia, whose regiment must have been stationed there.

Benjamin Casson eventually reached the rank of colonel.

He and Emily seem to have had just one daughter, Amelia Ethel Mary Inkersley Casson, born in 1881, who, at the rather late age of 31, married the widowed and equally over-named George Smee Odling-Smee (a Justice of the Peace, with a coat of arms), in 1912. The younger Amelia does not seem to have had any children of her own, perhaps due to a subconscious resistance to producing a child with such a ridiculous surname.

Apart from the girls mentioned here, Tom and Amelia Seymour apparently also had three sons who survived into adulthood, though I do not have any details of their lives.

It seems that Tom and Amelia moved about quite a bit during their lives together, but at least they stayed together, finishing up in a comfortable house called Hythe Cottage in Obelisk Street, which is close to the water in Southampton, on the south coast of England.

They shared this house with Laura Ellen Green (born 1829), the daughter of Tom's sister, Louisa.

Thomas Hougham Sparks died in Southampton at the ripe old age of 77 years, in 1879.

Amelia and Laura stayed on in Southampton, at least until the census of 1881.

Although unconfirmed, it could be that Amelia died in 1889, living in an old people's home in Bristol.

As we have seen, many of Sarah and Tom's children also survived into adulthood and even into old age.

Their youngest, Ernest Algernon Sparks, studied at Cambridge and then Inner Temple, where he became a barrister. He played a leading role in a famous libel case of 1877, where the artist James Whistler sued the critic John Ruskin. He was then the Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions, from 1880 and died in 1899.

