

# Trailrope

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N<sup>o</sup> 59 in. C. 17. in. Church Yard, London.

An exact Representation of M<sup>r</sup> LUNARDI'S *NEW BALLOON*.

as it appeared with Humphreys 23 May 1785.

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## The Sensational Scandal of the Flying Fat-Lady

St George's Fields were, until the late 18th century, an area of open and rather marshy ground centred on the present day St George's Circus. It was bounded approximately by Brook Drive, King Edward Walk, Morley Street, Pocock Street, Great Suffolk Street and Newington Causeway, about 150 acres in all.



The swampy nature of the land was a deterrent to the formation of roads, although there were tracks across the Fields from mediaeval times which were passable in dry weather. Parts of the Fields remained under cultivation, using the traditional strip system of agriculture right up till the end of the 18th century.

But as the population grew in London, more and more boundaries were raised and buildings raised. The construction of Blackfriars Bridge (1760- 69) was followed by the improvement of the south side approaches. These greatly increased the accessibility of the fields for recreation and amusements.



It was here that in June 1785 Mrs Sage became the first English woman to make a balloon ascent. She did so under the guidance of an Italian, Vincent Lunardi, who had become

a popular hero the previous year after making the first demonstration of hydrogen ballooning in this country.

The flight was on June 29th 1785, when Lunardi, his friend the wealthy Old Etonian Thomas Biggin, a Colonel Hastings and Mrs Letitia Sage met at St George's Fields, on the south bank of the Thames, where 'very safe' seats were sold at 2/6d and 'very best' seats at 3/6d.



The original plan had been for all four to ascend in the balloon but Lunardi had not reckoned on the Junoesque Mrs Sage.



Letitia Ann Sage (nee Robinson) was an actress and dresser at Drury Lane theatre, who was married to a Cheapside haberdasher, and who weighed an impressive 200 lbs (allegedly).

She hadn't thought to mention this to Lunardi, and the gallant Lunardi hadn't thought to ask about her weight, but he and Colonel Hastings gave up their intentions to fly that day, and Mrs Sage and Mr Biggin climbed into the gondola together. Thrown by this new arrangement,

Lunardi failed to lace up the door properly and as the balloon slowly rose into the air the crowd's last sight was of Mrs Sage on all-fours attempting to re-lace the door.

Now, in a bid to reduce wind resistance, Mrs Sage had thoughtfully dressed in a low-cut silk dress that day, and so at the sight of her, all décolletage and on her hands and knees, the crowd put two and two together and assumed that she had 'fainted' and Mr Biggin was administering his own improvisational aerial 'first aid'.



Unaware of the innuendoes that circulated below them, Mr Biggin and Mrs Sage tucked in to a picnic of cold chicken and Italian wines until the balloon descended into field at Harrow, cutting a rut through the hay crop.

The farmer, outraged by the ruination of his harvest, approached Biggin with violence in mind, but he and Mrs Sage were saved by a gang of Harrow schoolboys, who had seen the flight of the balloon and followed its progress. They had a whip-round to pay off the angry farmer and carried Mrs Sage on their shoulders to a nearby pub. She was the first female aviatrix in England (and maybe, one of the first members of the Mile High Club - Mr Biggin being the other).

Mrs Sage later described her impressions of the flight from St George's Fields in 'A Letter to A Female Friend'. This she compiled from notes made at the time, adding that she was 'infinitely better pleased than I ever was at any former event of my life'. I hope her husband didn't read it.

Written mainly by Michael Hartley.

## DID YOU KNOW THERE IS A THRIVING GROUP OF ENTHUSIASTS BUILDING AND FLYING MODEL BALLOONS?

SOME ARE NEW DESIGNS AND SOME ARE COPIES OF FULL SIZE BALLOONS.

### Indoor Model Balloon Meet. 15 March 2025. Llangollen. Denbighshire.

The BBM&L were well represented at this meeting, with council members and Friends of the Museum being a large proportion of the over 20 teams present. Using the large hall of the Eisteddfod building, model balloons could be flown continuously, and without the problems of weather, nor the need for a tether line. In the words of the founder Andy Marshall, 'have a good time, and enjoy yourselves' – we certainly did.

Inflations continued throughout the day, with a few competitions held in the afternoon. The main emphasis was to have fun.

Several people had been busy building models over the winter period, so this meet was an ideal location to check them over and show them off.

One of the new models, was a replica Viva design built in 2 days by a very enthusiastic schoolboy. It was only made from plastic and

sticky tape – but was a remarkable achievement.

Another item that drew a lot of interest was provided by the BBM&L. In our store for several years has been a bag of blue and gold material. The week before the event I decided to retrieve it from the top of the racking and take it to Llangollen to allow the experts to inspect it.

During a lull in the proceedings after lunch, the pile of fabric was tipped out of its bag and laid



out. It was found to be a Montgolfier Replica!!

Further research has revealed that the balloon was none other than a Charles Saffery 1,200 cu ft model that he had built in 1982. He named it 'Premier Voyage' and registered it G-FYDH. It was seen at several events in the bi-centennial year of 1983, but was then 'put away'.

Charles Saffery passed away in January 1999, and the BBML was donated many items from his estate – but this was the only large balloon. On inspection, the envelope had suffered some damage in the past that had been repaired by Charles. We used a (small) handheld burner to inflate the envelope, which then floated gracefully to the ceiling of the hall. Considering its age and that it had been unused for at least 25 years, it was in remarkably good condition. This was confirmed by it remaining inflated after landing back on the floor.

After 3 or 4 flights it was decided to return it to its bag. But it was agreed that it should not remain bagged up for another 25 years. It may make an appearance at the BBM&L luncheon, or next year's inflation day who knows...

Indoor Model Meet, 15 March 2025. Llangollen, Denbighshire.

