

Sarah Siddons' Memorabilia from the Garrick Club on loan to Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery

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Senior Curator, Nigel Blackamore, has been able to borrow from the Garrick Club, a framed tribute to Sarah Siddons consisting of three elements: a letter, a portrait and a small watercolour. A little research has revealed that this tribute was sold at the auction of books belonging to Edmund Kean, following his death in 1834 and listed as Lot 394.



Extract from George Robins Catalogue, 1834

394 Siddons (Mrs.) A. L. S., to Lord Avon, 1 pp. 8vo; original drawings of the house in which Mrs. Siddons was born, and her portrait by Horace Hone, A.R.A., from a painting by Lawrence of Bath, framed *very*.

£32
Dribble

Kean had acted with Sarah Siddons in Belfast and she at first referred to him as “a horrid little man”. Mrs Kennard who wrote a biography of Sarah Siddons records :

“Many are the stories given of Mrs. Siddons's first meeting with Kean, but all are unanimous that it was by no means a creditable performance so far as the young actor was concerned. It was in Ireland, either at Belfast or Cork. Kean had been engaged to act with her. As usual, instead of learning his part, he employed the interim between her arrival and the play in drinking with some friends, with such success that when he came upon the stage the whole of his part had vanished from his memory ; he was, therefore, obliged to improvise as he went on. Needless to say, his performance was a tissue of nonsense, sentences without meaning, drunken absurdities of all sorts. The audience was not a critical one, but Mrs. Siddons's disgust may be imagined”.



Edmund Kean as Richard the Third

Later she revised her opinion of him and recorded, only slightly less cruelly, that “he played very, very well” but that “there was too little of him to make a great actor”.

Kean had obviously thought highly of Mrs Siddons to have put together this tribute to her. One of the three items he frames is a letter from the actress to Lord Avon which exemplifies the way that she was accepted and honoured by society. She became a great favourite with King George the Third and his wife Queen Charlotte, and was appointed official reader to the princesses.

The second item is a portrait said to be a watercolour by Horace Hone from a painting by Thomas Lawrence but may be a copy by a lesser artist. The original by Lawrence is now lost. It was one of fourteen portraits that he painted of Sarah Siddons during her lifetime, a sign of his attachment to her. The first portrait dates from when he was 13 and working in his father's inn, the Black Bear at Devizes and she was performing at the Theatre Royal in Bath. He subsequently fell in love and proposed marriage to both of Sarah Siddons' daughters!



But is the third item that I find most intriguing, the small unattributed watercolour of the Shoulder of Mutton Inn in Brecon where Sarah Kemble, later Siddons, was born in 1755. In Campbell's biography of Sarah Siddons published in 1834 the author writes:



Illustration of "House in which Sarah Siddons is born" in Campbell's life of Sarah Siddons

A friend has obligingly written to me as follows respecting the house in which Mrs. Siddons was born:

" It is a public-house in the high street of this town, which still retains its appellation, 'The Shoulder of Mutton,' though now entirely altered from its pristine appearance. I send you a drawing of the house, not as it is at present, but as I perfectly remember seeing it stand, with its gable front, projecting upper floors, and a rich well-fed shoulder of mutton painted over the door, offering an irresistible temptation to the sharpened appetites of the Welsh farmers, who frequented the adjoining market-place".

There can be no doubt that the illustration in the biography is based on the watercolour in Kean's collection. But who then is the "obliging friend" and artist mentioned by Campbell? In the detailed Literary Remains of the Reverend Thomas Price, (1854) we find the answer. Jane Williams, the editor, records a considerable correspondence between the Reverend Thomas Price (Carnhuanauc) and Campbell. In a letter of 1831 Campbell writes to Price;



The more I read your letter, the better I like it. It is more than a bank note to me — so spirited — so much in the true style of a biographer's informant. Your little drawing adds one to the many proofs which I have met with in the course of my experience — that the art of drawing ought to be an established part of education. With that little sketch, what an impression you make, such as words could not effect. I write a prettier hand than you, eh! don't I? but I could not have made such a sketch.

This discovery has given me particular delight. My article in Brycheiniog (2019) brought to light the drawings the young Thomas Price had made for Theophilus Jones' second volume of his History of Brecknock. Following the writing of this article, I have been looking for further evidence of Thomas Price, the artist. This little watercolour can now be added to other examples of his work. These include the drawings he sent to Sir Charles Barry as possible subjects for murals that could be included in the new decoration of the Houses of Parliament, the corbels he carved for Ty Mawr in Llanfrynach and the watercolours he painted of animals in a travelling menagerie that visited Brecon in 1812.



*A Panther from the River Plate drawn
from the life .
Brecon Jul 7th 1812
Thos. Price
Cardiff Library*