

Franks Forages No 27

Mary Somerville; A truly remarkable Woman.

Following a recent poll, Mary Somerville is to appear on the new £10 note to be issued by the Royal Bank of Scotland in 2017.¹

Mary Somerville was born in Jedburgh on 26th December 1780,² the daughter of Vice-Admiral Sir William George Fairfax RN, (flag captain to Admiral Adam Duncan at the Battle of Camperdown) and sister of Sir Henry Fairfax b1790), 1st baronet of The Holmes, Roxburghshire. She spent her early years at the family home in Burntisland.³ In an age when girls were not expected to receive a good education, but to be home makers and therefore receiving very little encouragement, it was very difficult for a woman to achieve. However, her uncle, Rev. Dr Somerville, afterwards her father-in-law and minister of Jedburgh saw her rare qualities and valued and encouraged her. She took an early interest in nature and the universe, studying the heavens at night and learning about the living world around her.

In 1804 she married her first husband, her cousin Samuel Greig, commissioner of the Russian navy. He was not interested in science or literature and had that prevailing prejudice against learned women. Samuel died in 1807 leaving Mary a widow with two young boys, however in 1812 she married her first cousin Dr. William Somerville who was very supportive of her in her study of astronomy and mathematics. She became acquainted with the leading scientists of her day, especially Sir John Herschel and her studies resulted in the publication of her best known work, "*Mechanism of the Heavens*". For all her scientific achievements, she retained a strong Christian faith throughout her life. In later years she moved to Italy, living on Capri. She died in 1872 aged 92 and is buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Naples. Her studies led to the discovery of the planet Neptune. After her first marriage when she left home, her mother gave her £20 to buy a shawl or something to keep warm. However, she spent the money on the portrait by Sir Arthur Shee of her father painted shortly after Camperdown. This picture she gave to her nephew, Sir William Fairfax (2nd. Baronet) and it now hangs on the stairs at Charlecote.

Somerville College at Oxford is named after Mary and several famous women were educated there.⁴ Although having no direct connection with Charlecote, she deserves recognition as part of our heritage. *Frank Storr*



Mary Somerville, portrait by Thomas Phillips (1834) Scottish National Gallery



The Fairfax home in Burntisland



Plaque over the door (see right)

1. <http://www.scotsman.com/business/mary-somerville-to-appear-on-new-royal-bank-of-scotland-10-note-1-4026889>
2. Martha Somerville. *Personal Recollections of Mary Somerville*. Echo Library 2009 based on the original published by John Murray 1874
3. <http://www.burntisland.net/somerville-family-history.htm> 4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somerville_College,_Oxford