

Agnes McCrea (Mrs James Marke Wood)¹
and
Esther Rosamond Marke Wood (Contessa di Sant'Elia)²

Mother and daughter, these two women spent many happy years at Deal, in east Kent, and gave considerable gifts to the town – both were extremely wealthy and generous with their wealth.

Agnes McCrea was born in Halifax, Yorkshire, the only daughter of Irish-born Henry Charles McCrea³, who was a successful manufacturer particularly during the prime years of the Industrial Revolution following the Great Exhibition of 1851. Her mother (born Esther Jane Walsh) was the only daughter of Henry's business partner, descended from prominent Yorkshire identities. Artistic and musical, no doubt Agnes received private tuition in both fields, and would be at home with a governess while her four brothers were at school, but she may have attended a finishing school. At the time of the 1891 census her daughter had a German governess.

In 1872 Agnes married a Liverpool shipping merchant and banker, James Marke Wood. They would have three children, but the elder daughter (named for her mother) died soon after her birth in 1878. The surviving children were James (born 7 May 1876)⁴ and another daughter (named for Agnes's mother but known by her second name) Rosamond⁵ (born 20 Sept 1881).

Rosamond's education included childhood summers spent in Cumberland where she learnt to ride, and abroad (possibly in company with the German governess named in the 1891 census), possibly she attended a European finishing school.

Young James's education was at Harrow and Cambridge. He was a crack shot and would "shoot" at Bisley. Two years before his sister's lavish wedding in the cathedral at Genoa, he married in the London parish of Westminster, a much quieter affair. His wife⁶ had been married before and divorced, but as that marriage had been in a registry office both she and her former husband were able to marry again in religious services. They would not be together for long - James died after a short illness in May 1903⁷ leaving no children - a tragedy for the family, and his young wife.

Five years later the death of her husband left Agnes extremely wealthy, with assets that included a considerable fleet of merchant ships, sold soon afterwards to the Furness shipping line.

The family's Liverpool mansion (named The Towers) is presently a boutique private hotel. At the time of her death Agnes also owned a villa in Pallanza, Lake Maggiore, but whether it had been a long-time possession is not known. While the children were young summer holidays were spent at The College at Kirkoswald in Cumberland rented from the Featherstonehough family, and Rosamond spoke fondly of learning to ride there with her uncle a connection of P.G.Woodhouse. After her husband's death Agnes purchased a much smaller residence in Deal (Kent) adjacent to Walmer Castle and named Walmer Place. It would be her principal residence until her own death in 1927 when it was inherited by her daughter.

Henry McCrea had been born in Dublin, the eldest son in a middle class family – his father and grandfather were owners of academies where young men were prepared for university, but neither Henry nor any of his brothers followed the teaching profession. McCreas and related families arrived from Scotland with the Ulster settlements of the 17th and 18th centuries as agents of the original "planters".

When his father died c1840 Henry was already at Halifax in Yorkshire, where his factory making woollen furniture fabrics would employ many Irish, and an Irish coachman. Later he would be spoken of as an example of a "perfect English gentleman", but presumably Ireland was considered part of England during the Union years.

McCrea connections were Presbyterian and Methodist, but Henry's family seem to have attended the Church of Ireland and in Halifax he and his children worshipped in the Anglican church of John the Baptist, and he and his wife would be buried in its graveyard, although the church itself has gone.

1 1842-1927

2 1881-1965

3 a sister (Edith Gertrude) was born in 1858 but died shortly after birth

4 the third of the name

5 also as Rosamund

6 Dorothy Falla nee Lucas

7 appendicitis?

Henry had married in that church in 1841, and thirty years later the lavish wedding of Agnes and James was conducted there also, officiating were the deacon, the local vicar, and Henry's son Herbert, then Vicar of Painswick in Gloucester. The family would contribute to the building of a parish church in the village of Warley where they had their home (built in the Georgian period) with an extensive garden¹.

The Marke Wood family were also church benefactors, contributing to the funds that built the Liverpool Cathedral, principally towards the cost of the reredos behind the main altar. The cathedral was consecrated not long before Agnes's death, and her burial service there was graced with organ music that she had written, the choristers trained at her expense and dressed in cassocks she had paid for.

The couple were patrons of the arts, and directors of the Walker Gallery which (according to her obituary) had hosted an exhibition of her paintings – unfortunately the Gallery has no record of it.

Rosamond would become a Roman Catholic when she married. Her husband was an Italian nobleman, Luigi Arborio Mella – Conte di Sant'Elia, of a Sardinian family². The Italian royal family were also from Sardinia, and Luigi and his family held positions at court – in the year of his mother-in-law's death he is named as "Master of Ceremonies to the King of Italy". Later Rosamond would claim that the marriage was more for adventure than for love, as she had been told by a fortune teller that it would last only two years³. The fortune teller was wrong! Rosamond and Luigi would remain married - but there were no children and for much of the marriage they would live apart, but Rosamond would always be "Contessa di Sant'Elia". Divorce or annulment - or hint of judicious separation - would only result in scandal and she would lose the social eclat of her title and position. Luigi would never have given up his annual allowance from her⁴ - or the opportunity to visit London for such events as the Silver Jubilee of King George V. His arrivals from Rome to meet her in London were duly reported in the *Times* society pages when the two would proceed to Claridges, not her house in Grosvenor Square.

The beautiful invitation to their wedding is engraved in French as well as Italian. Luigi is "figlio" of "La Contessa Maria Arborio-Mella di Sant'Elia dei Conti Serra"⁵, the French section adds the information that he was "lieutenant dans l'Armee Italienne", and during the first World War he was a serving officer when Italy was on the same side as France and Britain.

Rosamond would be a Lady in Waiting to Queen Elena, and become a close friend of other royalty. She wore the badge of her office when she was presented to King George V and Queen Mary in 1930, and several times refers in her 1935 journal to her "cyffre" on its blue ribbon⁶. In later years she would receive further honours from the Italian government⁷.

It may have been during the 1920s that Rosamond became acquainted with Sir Austen Chamberlain and his wife, Ivy. She often mentions the Chamberlains in the pages of the journal she kept during the Jubilee season of 1935 in a circle of friends that included other notable Conservatives. The Chamberlains were her neighbours in the Hampshire town of Warsash where she had a home "Springfields". She writes of it being let while she resided with the friend she called "Chillie" - Sir Warden Chilcott⁸.

Chilcott (a former politician representing a Liverpool constituency) had been an intermediary in one of the meetings between Chamberlain and Mussolini. A man of mystery, he has been described as "flamboyant". A wartime pilot in the Royal Naval Air Service, and a keen amateur flier after the War, he had a private aerodrome on his estate. Rosamond does not mention his aeroplanes, but she was a regular passenger on his luxury yacht, a former Q ship, renamed the *Dolphin*.

Her 1935 journal gives a vivid account of being Chilcott's hostess when he entertained the ex-Queen of Spain for a Mediterranean cruise. The voyage was engineered by Ivy Chamberlain, but she would accuse her host of rudeness to their Royal (and trying) guest. Rosamond's abrupt departure ends the journal entries - and seemingly her friendship with the Chamberlains. After Austin's younger half-brother became prime minister Chilcott drops out of the public eye, and he seems to have been largely forgotten after his death in 1941. Although Rosamond wrote of his protecting her when Italy came into the war and she was technically an "enemy alien" he was already dead –and her supporter was her neighbour at Deal, the Warden of the Cinq Ports. She would spend the next four years "interned" as a permanent resident of Claridges.

1 now reconstructed

2 born Sassari, 2 Dec 1873, died Alghero (Sassari) 26 Jun 1955

3 "A pleasant and amusing interlude" - 1935 journal

4 quoted in her 1935 journal as £3000

5 daughter of the Conte Gaspare Serra

6 returned to the Savoy Royal Family in her will

7 Dec. 1956 she was given "The stella dela solidaria Italian first class" - an article in the Italian newspaper *La Voce Degli Italiani*

8 Sir Henry Warden Stanley Chilcott 1871-1942, MP Walton Div.(Liverpool) 1918-1929

During the pre-War years and after the Contessa's name appeared often in the society pages of the *Times* (and no doubt other journals). In spite of her fear of returning to Italy after the rise of Mussolini she was generous to Italian organisations in London. The *Times* noted that in December 1934 she hosted a joint meeting of the British Italian League and the Anglo-Italian Dante Society at her home in Grosvenor Square. The *Times* also referred to garden parties and charitable events such as a bridge tournament held at her home, although she spent much of her time as a resident of Claridges – particularly when the Conte joined her, but she was at the town house (one of the few not divided into apartments) when visited by distant relatives from New Zealand during the 1950s.

After the War most of the references are to her successes with her steeplechase horses¹. Although she confessed to the "sin" of living off her capital, she continued to be wealthy, profiting from a hobby that often carried more losses than wins..

While her mother was alive, and afterwards, Rosamond spent periods at Deal staying at the home purchased by her mother, Walmer Place. The handsome Edwardian structure had been built by a Dutch merchant (Albert Ochs) at the beginning of the century, as a close neighbour of Walmer Castle, home of the Warden of the Cinque Ports. Mistakenly written as being purchased by James Marke Wood within a few years of its building, the house and grounds were well-established before it was purchased at a 1909 auction. An account of *Walmer Castle's Neighbour* by Julie Deller gives details of the property and illustrations include a copy of an advertisement that confirmed that it was not purchased earlier.

Rosamond wrote of her homes in England in 1935 (when she was spending more time at Warsash). She said of the Kent town and her mother's home there "my dear mother endowed the Victoria Hospital and [the Marke Wood Recreation Ground]."

At the opening of the recreation ground in 1930 it was announced that before she died Agnes had given half of the £4,000 cost, and the contribution was honoured by the park being named for the family. Before its opening Rosamond had added a drinking fountain of Cornish granite ... a shaft encircled by a bronze relief of playing children and the inscription "tis love that makes the world go round". At the unveiling she spoke of her mother's wish : "To provide a recreation area with playing fields for the people and children of Walmer...[with] meadow-type [grounds] – no building except as pavilions and shelters for recreational purposes". The hospital no longer exists - but it is good to know that the Recreation Ground bearing the Marke Wood name is still much used. (Correction: The Deal Victoria Memorial Hospital is still open and serving the local community.)

Five years after the park was named Rosamond wrote of the neglected Walmer House - "The house and grounds have been tidied up and improved..." and added "I might let it".

At this time, when staff would have been a problem, she preferred to stay in the smaller house on the estate rather than the main house which then fell into disrepair and was demolished, to be replaced by flats.

When James Marke Wood died besides the mansion in Liverpool Agnes had a house in Gloucester and the villa at Lake Maggiore. She considered Walmer Place her private retreat, no doubt enjoying the Italianate gardens which had been established when the house was first built, and which she painted. By the time of her mother's death Rosamond was seldom in Italy, fearing the regime of Mussolini, much admired by the Chamberlains and Chilcott. In 1935 she wrote of the relaxation she enjoyed at Walmer Place much as her mother had done. The plain cooking there was more enjoyable (and no doubt healthier) than the lavish meals of her Grosvenor Place chef.

The grounds of Walmer Place featured a large paddock for horses. By the 1930s the stables with accommodation for grooms and coachmen would house motors not carriages, and visiting chauffeurs. No doubt Chillie's magnificent Hispano Suiza was given pride of place when he visited her there. Besides his magnificent yacht and a racing launch, he was also a pilot with a private air-field in Hampshire. He and Rosamond worked together in developing the estate and its golf-course, and her journal tells of her mare ("Yes Father") with a colt ("The Kid") foaled at Warsash. Her horses were for racing, and although she may have rested her favourites at Deal, with a successful string of 'chasers she had her main stables at Wexford in Ireland. The *Times* regularly reported her winnings and her attendance at fashionable race meetings such as Ascot and the Grand National, and noted the expensive dressmakers she favoured. Her journal shows that she preferred the informality of "Point-to-Point", where she supported the lady jockey and amateur rider, Kit Walters.

In 1934 her portrait was painted by a personal friend, Simon Elwes, whose subjects that year would also include the Duke and Duchess of York. It was exhibited by the Royal Academy and would receive a favourable review.

¹ jockeys include Francis Felix, later the writer of racing-based detective stories who notoriously was thrown by her champion.

Rosamond had many homes throughout her life. The Marke Wood family home in Ullet Road, Liverpool, is now a boutique hotel, and other homes where she lived in Italy have also long been converted into hotels. She may have had rooms at the royal palace in Rome when her husband was an official at the Italian court.

After the rise of Mussolini she did not return to Italy, fearing that (as she was now an Italian rather than English) her right to travel outside that country would be withdrawn. In spite of political differences she was regularly invited to diplomatic functions and charity events in London and even substituted for the wife of the Italian ambassador. There was no hint that she was permanently separated from her husband (Luigi met her regularly in London, but only at Claridges). Rosamond admired his manners, but clearly was not in love with him.

The political success of Stanley Baldwin and the death of Sir Austen Chamberlain before his half-brother became Prime Minister no doubt restricted the political interests of her friend Sir Warden, who must have shed his admiration of Mussolini and was associated with Churchill in the anti-appeasement camp. He would die not long after Italy entered the War (his will, probated soon after his death was written in 1939) Rosamond would later write of finding refuge in Chillic's stable when she was "friendless and alone"¹, but this would have been only a brief period before his death.

In writing intimately of Chilcott she seems to have believed he was a widower, perhaps discovering only at the end of their association that he was married. She feared he would remarry to beget a son and heir² - but he was not free.

At Warsash he was building terrace houses for sale (largely financed by the Halifax Bank) with recreation facilities including the golf club based on the Hook House estate³. Rosamond was involved in the conversion of the stables into handsome clubrooms⁴. *Whos Who* gave Chilcott's hobbies as Racing and Yachting. Although she enjoyed the hospitality of his yacht, Rosamond possibly found the lively *Javelin* on which they watched the Jubilee Regatta more to her taste. She considered him a good driver in his fine car, and commented that there were "far too many cars on the road" implying that not all drivers were as skilful.

In her diary she wrote of going to Oxford at Easter, and seeing wildflowers that she remembered from her childhood in Cumberland. One of her mother's gifts had been the hall for the parish church of Kirkoswald, where the portraits in oils she had painted of the children (James and Rosamond) still hang where the present day children have their play group. The family regularly stayed at The College⁵, from 1588 the home for generations of the Fetherstonhaugh family⁶. The Marke Wood family must have rented the place while its owner was a military officer serving in India. The families remained friends, and Rosamond remembered Bronwen and Timothy Fetherstonhaugh in her will.

Luigi died in 1955 to be succeeded in the title by a nephew in Argentina. Rosamond made her will at that time, the address shown is Warsash, although she spent little time there, and spent most of her time in London or Deal.

She would leave the bulk of her estate to Peter Stuart-Heaton, whose young son was taken to see the old lady not long before her death. Mark Heaton was told that Rosamond was his "Great Aunt", but she was a distant cousin⁷. In 1935 Rosamond had attended the Olympia Horse Show with "The Heatons" and shared their box.

Only her youngest McCrea uncle (Arthur Selby McCrea) was alive at the end of World War II, when he left a considerable fortune made from investments - to charity, and to relations. Rosamond is not named in his will. No doubt he was aware of her even more considerable fortune, and as an "enemy alien" she could not have inherited.

Rosamond died in London, January 1965, and a funeral service was held in the Farm Street Church, Mayfair - a beautiful church designed by Pugin, which would have been not long restored after extensive damage in the Blitz. According to her wish she was buried with her family in the Church of England section of Liverpool's Smithton Road Cemetery, but in accordance with Catholic rites - her crucifix buried with her.

1 She also acknowledged the support of Lord Willingdon and Sir Cuthbert de Houghton

2 Chilcott had married before the turn of the century - his wife was presumably alive in 1940 when a writ was served on him for a debt he owed her.

3 Bryan WOODFORD *Warsash and the Hamble River...*2006

4 the 5-star hotel at Sassari (for sale c2005) advised that renovations were carried out by the Count and his English Countess

5 shown as the Marke Wood address in a 1903 directory

6 after Henry dissolved the monastery to which it was attached

7 their grandmothers were sisters, Amelia and Esther Walsh.

It would be interesting to see the catalogue that listed many of her jewels sold by Hampton & Sons 15 March 1960, after her porcelain had been sold by Sotherby's. The balance of her jewels and effects would be auctioned after her death by Bernard Thorp & Partners May 1965. Costume collectors were able to buy dresses she had worn, and a catalogue of garments belonging to the Contessa showed a picture of a gown worn by her mother, Agnes, made by a London dressmaker who made dresses for Queen Alexandra – possibly it was the dress worn at Rosamond's wedding.

Mother and daughter were both presented to Queen Alexandra in 1903, not long after her brother's death. Rosamond would be presented again in 1930, this time to George V and Queen Mary. The *Court Circular* of 29 May 1930 announcing "Presentations associated with the diplomatic corps" - one of the debutants was: "The Contessa di Sant Elia [wearing] "a Florentine gown of peach blossom de soie, embroidered in a mesh design of rosy pearls, silver thread and diamante on an underdress of shell pink crepe satin, the hem flounced with pale rose tulle [its] train of 15th century point de Venice hung from a cape of old Italian lace clasped with jewelled knots mounted on silver and rose lame and lined with pastel pink Genoese velvet. Ornaments...diamonds, royal insignia conferred by the King of Italy and the Italian royal cypher. She carried a fan of peach-pink ostrich feathers..."

It would be interesting to compare Rosamond's wedding dress - possibly decorated with the same lace as an heirloom from the Sant'Elia family. Clearly Rosamond loved clothes – reminiscing of her Italian years she described some of the dresses she wore, with hats decorated with ospreys, and coats of corded silk and "smart black broadtail".

Surprisingly no portrait of Agnes has been found, nor is she featured in society pages as Rosamond has been. The *Times* recorded that the Conte arrived in London to attend several of the Jubilee functions with the Contessa (including the service in St Paul's) but he did not stay. After the festivities were over she thankfully went to spend some time at Walmer Place. She would record her pleasure, enjoying the freshness of her garden produce and the plain cooking of Mrs Spinner - better than her London chef could provide! There with her companion Miss Graff she took long walks with her small dog, and relished in the simplicity of it all.

Rosamond's racing successes seem to have begun when *Phantasy* won the Beaufort Handicap, in 1927. After the War years there were many more. Her obituary would refer to her colours "cerise with white hooped armlets..." *Antiar* (bred in France) was named as a successful horse and *Pneumatic* (bought for 65 guineas) won 17 races. Also winner of 17 majors (including the King George VI Plate twice) was her 'chaser *Halloween* - purchased in 1951. Ridden by Fred Winter and trained by Bill Wightman, the ex-hunter's placings included a second in the Cheltenham Gold Cup in 1953 and 1955, and a third 1956. An obituary of Winter (d 4 April 2004) refers to *Halloween* as failing in his early races, but his previous point to point jockey told the trainer that the secret was to ride with an easy touch and leave the horse to make his own decisions – no doubt good advice for any stayer!

At her requiem mass the list of those in attendance was headed with her "cousin" Mr Peter Stuart-Heaton, and Mrs Peter Cazalet, "wife of her trainer". The Cazalets may also have been family, connected through the marriage of James Marke Wood's sister who married Killigrew Wodehouse. Mrs Cazalet was the American step-daughter of P.G. Wodehouse.

Mr Stuart-Heaton also received the portrait by Elwes, which in turn was left to his son Mark Heaton¹, together with the wedding invitation and the volumes that contain Rosamond's journal.

1 Resident Launceston, Cornwall

Acknowledgements

This account of the Contessa and her mother could not have been written without the generous help of Mark Heaton who shared the pages of Rosamond's 1935 journal and to Brian Woodford who had already researched much of the story of the Warsash development. Visits to Halifax and Liverpool added to the story of the two women.

Before the easier access provided by the world wide web it took rather longer to check newspaper entries, but several libraries in England and Australia found the information I wanted in their clipping files. My late friend "Lorri" obtained the English certificates that told me of Rosamond's brother and his marriage - my cousin Janelle Penney and her colleagues at the Auckland Maritime Museum gave me information about James Marke Wood and his ships. Paul Henman of Sweden sent me (by email) copies of Agnes's water-colour painting and Sally Logue of Kirkoswald took photographs of the village hall and The portraits of James and Rosamond. The solution to the Heaton connection came from Jenny Hossack of Tasmania.