

A.G.K. Leonard

Rose Foster ... A Remarkable Little Lady

Current postcards of Trafalgar Square may now feature Marc Quinn's eye-catching and controversial marble sculpture 'Alison Lapper Pregnant', which was initially due to occupy the plinth outside the National Gallery for 18 months following its unveiling on 15 September 2005.

Alison Lapper is noteworthy not only as the artist's model but in her own right as artist and photographer and as a mother, notwithstanding her disability in being born without arms and with severely shortened legs – the result of a rare congenital malformation, medically termed phocomelia i.e. with limbs like a seal's flippers.

Born in 1965, she has lifted herself from an institutional upbringing, through college and university to a First Class degree in Fine Art and painting professionally with a mouth-held brush. Her achievements were recognized in 2003 by award of the MBE for services to art.

Her spirited autobiography 'My Life in My Hands', recounts her assertion of independence, earning admiration for her talent and strength of purpose, powerfully articulated.

Alison Lapper has had to surmount barriers of prejudice and embarrassment but society today is generally better informed and more supportive towards people like her than was the case a century ago; then there were few opportunities for them to secure any sort of personal and financial independence other than by exhibiting themselves as circus and sideshow 'freaks'.

Outstanding among them before and between the Wars was Rose Foster, recalled by postcards issued for publicity and income-earning purposes.

The first that came my way was published anonymously, cheaply printed in black and



The 'little lady' is here styled 'Miss Rosina' – her baptismal name. This postcard was produced by S.A. Chandler & Co., Southampton & Exeter. This firm was first listed in the Southampton directory of 1910-11 at 132 Above Bar; it moved in 1931 to 11 Commercial Road, continuing there until the early 1950s.

white, showing her smartly dressed, seated on a stool and smiling bravely at the camera – and the world. It was captioned 'ROSE FOSTER. Age 26. Height 26 ins. Weight 5 st. 3 lbs. Born at Southampton'.

This example was posted from Blackburn on 21 July 1915, to Mrs. J. Parker, living at 41

Northcote Road, Portswood, Southampton, with the unremarkable message 'Dear Louie, I am on my way home for a few days ... Your loving sister Rose'.

I did not initially connect the writer of its firmly pencilled words with the subject of the postcard itself, thinking that the card emanated from someone who had bought it at a 'freak and novelty show' where the 'little lady' was being exhibited to a curious public.

Later, I acquired another of these cards, clearly signed on the back 'Rose Foster'; this was distinctive enough to establish her as the writer of the first card.

This was afterwards complemented by another, an anonymous production, showing her cheerfully knitting, sitting beside a descriptive poster, most of which can be read under a magnifying glass:

ROSE FOSTER

Nature's Strangest Mistake
The Eighth Wonder of the World (Alive)
Late Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros.
Shows, America

Miss Rose Foster, aged 26 years, height 26 inches.

She is utterly devoid of either hands, arms, feet or fingers; she can read, write and knit, dress herself and adjust her own hair, put on her blouse and fasten it up behind, without the slightest aid whatsoever. She is very jovial, entertaining, musical and highly intellectual – knowledge she has gained during her eight consecutive seasons with the great Barnum and Bailey Show, during their European and World Tours.

Miss Foster was truly named by Dr. Ziebler of New York City, U.S.A., 'Nature's Strangest Mistake'. She is undoubtedly one of the most astonishing freaks in the world and on no less than four occasions she has appeared before Crowned Heads of Europe.

This little lady is only too pleased to answer any proper questions you care to put to her. You will find her very charming and quite a little lady to talk to. She is very healthy, always jolly and independent of everybody. She can get about anywhere without the least assistance. She is very domesticated and can attend to all her household duties.

The poster concludes with mention of her receiving a salary of 75 dollars per week and the availability of postcards bearing her original signature.

These she effected holding a pencil between the toes of her left foot, whereby she had obviously become quite an accomplished writer.

Her poster publicist had thus pressed matters too far when describing Rose as 'utterly devoid of hands, arms, feet or fingers'. In a later account, reissued in 1920, printed at Boston, she informed patrons of a further American tour that,

I have two small stumps from my shoulders, measuring 9½ inches. On the left stump I have one finger, supposed to be a thumb, with no nail on it, and on the right, one little finger with nail but no bone...On my right thigh I have a foot measuring two inches, with two toes on it. On my left thigh I have a little larger foot, with four toes upon it, with which I can write, use scissors, or pick up pins from the floor and manage to crawl about.

I am grateful to Dr. Vanessa Toulmin of the National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield for kindly providing me with a copy of the leaflet sold for a quarter dollar to Americans interested in the 'Life Story of Mermaidia' – as Rose Foster was then being styled. In it she wrote,

I was born in a little village called Highfield, two miles out of Southampton, my parents being poor working people. I was their second baby, my sister being

one year and eleven months old [she later had another sister and two brothers, all perfectly normal]. My mother never knew the cause of my being born in this strange and curious way. There were a lot of rumours about that she had been frightened but this was not so.

Rose added that she had now ‘appeared before more than one hundred doctors, including the one attendant on the late Queen Victoria. They all pronounced me to be one of Dame Nature’s strangest and greatest mistakes’.



On this postcard, issued without name of printer or photographer, Rose is shown knitting, flanked by a poster clear enough in focus to be read with the aid of a magnifying glass – as quoted in the article.

She told her ‘kind friends and patrons’ that she was born a big baby, weighing 7lbs, whose body itself was ‘truly formed’ – as confirmed when ‘subjected to the X-Rays’ at the Royal South Hants Hospital, Southampton in 1918. She soon became adept at crawling around – there is no mention of any attempts to provide her with artificial limbs or aids.

Family

Highfield, where Rose Foster was born and grew up, was then a developing village outside Southampton, created a parish in its own right in 1847. Since the 1920s it has become a favoured residential suburb of the expanding city and the centre of one of its universities.

The Highfield parish registers, preserved in the City Archives, document her family background. They record the marriage on 9 January 1882 of Henry Foster Archibald – 22, bachelor, boot-maker – and Eliza Amy Blake, 18, spinster. She was the daughter of a local grocer, while the groom’s father was entered as ‘Henry Archibald, gentleman’, which may have meant no more than that he was retired.

Their first child was baptised Florence Louis Amy in January 1883. Their second, born on 8 October 1884, was christened Rosina Kate five days later; the annotations ‘privately’ and ‘received into congregation November 16, 1884’, suggested her unusual circumstances and the fear that she might not live for long.

In the event, notwithstanding her physical deficiencies, she was evidently a lively child, keen to help her young brother Lewis Bertram, born in February 1888, and responsive to her mother’s efforts to help her learn to feed and dress herself and later to read and write, using a pencil held between her toes.

The 1891 census listed the Foster family at 7 Crown Street, Highfield, part of which was occupied by Eliza’s father, James Blake, and his wife; he was then described as a market gardener. Their boot-maker son-in-law had by

then given up using the surname Archibald, being listed as plain Henry Foster.

Later in the 1890s, he and his family moved away from Highfield, perhaps already starting their travels with their daughter Rosina – now usually called Rose. Life cannot have been easy for their parents, to whom little or no professional care or support would then have been available.

Public exhibition of a deformed girl as a ‘freak’ now seems demeaning and embarrassing, but a century ago it might have enabled her to gain a measure of independence and status, as a member of the fraternity of a major travelling circus or ‘museum of human curiosities’.

The poster written when Rose Foster was 26, i.e. in 1910, referred to ‘her eight consecutive seasons with the great Barnum and Bailey Show’. Ten years later, in her account sold to the American public, she wrote,

I have travelled extensively, visiting all the principal towns and cities in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, also South and North America, France, Brazil, Spain, Canada, Germany and Switzerland.

She went on to tell her American readers,

When I arrived at the age of 26 years I began to seek for myself a husband. I soon found the gentleman who I thought would make me a good partner in life. After courting him a little over five years, I became engaged to him. Everything was arranged for our marriage. Two days before the wedding he was taken ill with pneumonia and died. I had plenty of admirers but not one seemed to take his place. He was the jolliest dispositioned fellow I had ever come across.

Three years passed slowly away, when another Mr. W came my way. Feeling lonely and quiet, I accepted his offer. I courted him eight months, then we were married. So today I am proud to say I am

a happy married woman. My husband is normal. He stands six feet in height and his weight is 175 lbs.

She added that at 36, she herself weighed 73 lbs and her height was still 26 inches.

Her husband remains a shadowy figure, not further mentioned. He was presumably the man standing beside her in front of the large motorised caravan bearing her name, photographed in the 1920s at Bitterne, on the eastern side of Southampton.

The weekly newspaper for the travelling entertainment community, *World's Fair*, published news of her travels from time to time. In 1924 it reported that she had an accident at Boscombe, where she fell out of a car and broke a foot.

She continued on the ‘showland’ scene, evidently enjoying increasing personal respect. In October 1932, *World's Fair* published a photograph of her, captioned ‘Miss Rose Foster, the well known Novelty, celebrated her 48th birthday on October 8th. May she live long to enjoy her good health’.

The description ‘novelty’ was by then preferred to ‘freak’, which had unfortunate and offensive connotations.

Earlier in 1932, Rose had arranged a special film show for her parents to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

Rose maintained her family connections. The previously mentioned postcard of 1915 was sent to her sister Louie, who had married John Frederick Parker. Between 1912 and 1917, they were living at 41 Northcote Road, Portswood – a suburb adjoining Highfield.

From about 1937 to 1960 they had their home nearby at 12 Belmont Road, where Rose evidently went to live with her sister after giving up touring with ‘Freak and Novelty Shows’.

Her mother, Eliza Amy Foster, suffered a heart attack and stroke in 1946 and also came to live

with her daughters at Belmont Road. She died there on 4 July 1952, aged 89.

In October 1954, *World's Fair* gave front-page space to the news,

Miss Rose Foster, the well-known Showland novelty, celebrated her 70th birthday on Saturday. Although this was just a family celebration, flowers, cards and greetings were received from a wide circle of friends and she was visited by the Mayor and Mayoress of Southampton.

(This mayoral visit was not reported in the Southampton papers, presumably because it was a private one.)

The *World's Fair* report added, 'Miss Foster's health has not been too good for the past two years, following a fall downstairs in which she injured her spine.'

No report of any 75th birthday celebration can be found, which suggests Rose Foster died some time before 1959, but no obituary or notice of death has yet been located for this remarkable 'little lady' who so bravely faced up to her physical handicaps.

Does any reader know more about her?

Thanks for help in locating various references to Rose Foster are due to David Whitehead of *World's Fair* and Stephen Smith.



Rose Foster, possibly with her husband, and another couple, sitting outside her sizeable motor caravan, photographed in the early 1920s on the land off Bitterne Road, Southampton, called 'The Hampshire', which was a favourite stopping place for travelling fairs and 'freak and novelty shows.' The stylish living wagon (which has 'Miss R. Foster' painted on its door) was mounted on an adapted ex-US army World War I vehicle.