

Profile: Sara Banerji

An Original view of the world

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I meet Sara Banerji in the London Place house at the foot of Headington Hill which she has called her home on and off for 60 years. It's cosy, colourful, and decorated with paintings from the many chapters of her life and quirky sculptures bursting with character, each upcycled from old building materials, wood, wire and *The Times* newspaper.

Philip Pullman described Sara's view of the world as "original and vivid" and her conversation is bright and interesting, with never a dull moment.

Describing her family as impoverished aristocrats, Sara's ancestral home was Tylacre in North Wales which is now a convent. It was in her father's family for generations and carried a curse, that if it was to go out of the family's hands, the heir would die a violent death.

Indeed, her father's older brother, Piers, an explorer who lived in Africa, perished in a biplane accident shortly after the house was sold. This brother, however, left a legacy in that her father was mad about Africa, and the adventuring spirit that both clearly inherited lives on in Sara.

During the Second World War, Sara lived in many rambling manors, including a 60-bedroom house in remote Scotland; Beckley Park, in Horton-cum-Studley, built as a hunting lodge for Charles I, which they shared with uncles, aunts and 16 cousins, and then The Old Parsonage in Stanton Harcourt for 66 a week.

"It was called The Plague House back then," she says, laughing, "and it was owned by St John's College. If there was a plague we would be evicted at short notice so the academics could safely quarantine themselves. My mother lived in perpetual fear of infection in Oxford!"

After the war, when Sara was 13, her father, Sir Basil Mostyn, returned from service with the King's African Rifles and announced they were all moving to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Sara recalls: "My mother was absolutely horrified, but off we went, me, my seven-year-old sister and a new baby, rather like *My Family and Other Animals* but worse! My other brother had to be left behind because he wasn't well.

"After six weeks on a troop ship, we reached Cape Town and then took a train for three days and nights through the Kalahari Desert to reach Harare which was known as Salisbury back then.

"That was my first experience of anywhere outside the UK. I was overwhelmed with excitement.

"Everything was so new – it was warm and bright and there was amazing food, fruits I'd never seen before, and carved giraffes everywhere. I was amazed.

"For the whole journey, my poor mother was worried that my father wouldn't have remembered to come and meet us at the station, but he did, although he carried the wrong baby out of the carriage and had to be sent back in for the right one!"

Sara's father had built the house they were to live in himself.

"It was in the middle of nowhere, a one-roomed roundhouse with an ox-blood and mud floor and straw roof," she says.

"We were used to dilapidated old places but this was wildly different. I actually had a wonderful time – my sister and I just rode all day long. I boarded in Harare briefly but it didn't work out so that was the end of my education."

The family returned to the UK after three years, without Sara's father, and she travelled to Europe, as an au pair or teaching English as a foreign language.

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Sara Banerji will be staging an Artweeks exhibition at her Headington home on six days later this year. Right, one of her many quirky sculptures



went to the British Embassy and asked to be repatriated, they would find me a job because that was cheaper than sending me home!" she says.

She also worked as a puppeteer for a German Theatre Company in Vienna, making puppets, dolls and statuettes with clay heads. She says: "I started making these when I was in Rhodesia and never really stopped – and I still make sculptures of people now."

Between adventures, Sara was a reluctant debutante and explains: "My mother insisted so I was presented to the Queen by my great aunt Princess Evelyn in a dress from a charity shop with olive oil in my hair because we couldn't afford Bryl Cream. I must have looked frightful.

"At the time, I was waitressing in a cafe and every day the same young man came for a coffee. I tried to pick him up but he was so haughty I asked his name and he said,

"There's no point in telling you as you won't be able to pronounce it' but I persevered and eventually asked him out. He finally capitulated and we've now been happily married for over 60 years."

Ranjit was an Indian Bengali Brahmin reading law at Christ Church and when he and Sara started to see one another both families were aghast. Both the Bishop of Bombay and Monsignor Elwes in Oxford warned the couple against the relationship.

"We completely ignored everyone," recalls Sara, "and when my mother realised how much we did love one another she scraped together enough money for a ticket to India and I followed him there to marry him.

"Then, as I was getting on the plane, my sister quipped, 'he probably has another seven more wives over there'. It was such a relief to see him standing there waiting for me all alone.

Sara and Ranjit were married in India where they brought up their children.

She says: "Memsahibs don't work, so I was dreadfully bored at first after continual change and adventure. Then a neighbour gave

me a giant horse called Cromwell. He threw me off the first time, but I rode him every day and even raced him. I also painted all the time."

Sara likes to record everywhere she has been with a picture so that not only does she have a visual record, but looking at the painting brings back memories not only of the place depicted but of when and where she was living at the time and whole chapters of her life.

"Ranjit always encouraged me to paint and sculpt, and to write too, and I wrote my first two novels in India," says Sara, who has had 11 novels published and now runs a writing workshop at the Albion Beatnik bookstore in Jericho.

"I just thought that if you had the energy and persistence to get through a whole novel on a typewriter, how could any publisher dare to reject it?"

Returning to Oxford was testing as mothers had no right to bring children born outside the UK back into the country. Ranjit could only get a visa for himself and the children if he became a student.

He took an MBA but he wasn't permitted to earn anything so Sara borrowed the money

for two ponies and gave riding lessons to keep the family afloat.

Moving into the house next door to her mother, she also set up Henfield Lady Gardeners.

She recalls: "I needed to generate a better income and I knew all these ladies, the parents of my children's friends, who had time on their hands, knew one plant from another and would garden for a pittance as they didn't really need the money.

"I ran this team looking after 30 gardens including two stately homes."

Sara now enjoys cultivating an enormous allotment from which she harvests plums, apples and pears and makes huge quantities of jam which, like her sculpture, condenses her many experiences into something tangible.

"I sell the jam locally and when I open the house for Artweeks," she explains, "it's a wonderful community event and I love the visitors who come to visit. They're such interesting people and we have such fun. It's always a new adventure."

● Sara's Christmas Artweeks exhibition is open November 19, 20, 26, 27 and December 10 and 11 from 4-7pm at 7 London Place, Oxford.

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Philip Pullman described Sara's view of the world as 'original and vivid' and her conversation is bright and interesting. Describing her family as impoverished aristocrats, Sara's ancestral home in North Wales had been in her father's family for generations and carried a curse, that if it was sold, the heir would die a violent death. Indeed, when it was, her father's older brother perished in a biplane accident: an explorer who lived in Africa, his legacy was that her father was mad about Africa, and Sara clearly inherited this adventuring spirit.

During Second World War Two Sara lived in many rambling manors, including Beckley Park at Horton-cum-Studley near Otmoor and The Old Parsonage in Stanton Harcourt. 'It was called The Plague House then,' she laughs, 'and was owned by St John's College. If there was a plague we would be evicted immediately so the academics could quarantine themselves. My mother lived in perpetual fear of infection in Oxford!'

After the war, when Sara was 13, her father Sir Basil Mostyn returned from the King's African Rifles and announced that they were moving to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). 'My mother was horrified' chuckles Sara, 'but off we went, with my seven-year old sister and a new baby rather like My Family and Other Animals but worse!'

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