

## Sir William Curtis (Bart) 1752-1829 "Billy Biscuit"

William Curtis was born on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1752 in Wapping, East London. He was the son of sea biscuit manufacturer Joseph Curtis and Mary Tennant. Along with his brother Timothy he inherited the family business on the death of his father in 1771. The business prospered through trade with the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars and William was a founding partner of bankers, Robarts, Curtis, Were, Hornyold, Berwick & Co. who were taken over by Coutts. He married Anne Constable in 1776.

William was elected as a Member of Parliament for the City of London in 1790 and held the seat continuously for 28 years until his defeat in 1818. He was returned to the Commons again in 1819 where he represented Bletchingley and in 1820 he was elected again for the City of London. He did not contest London at the 1826 election, when he was elected for Hastings. William was an Alderman of the City becoming Lord Mayor in 1795-96.

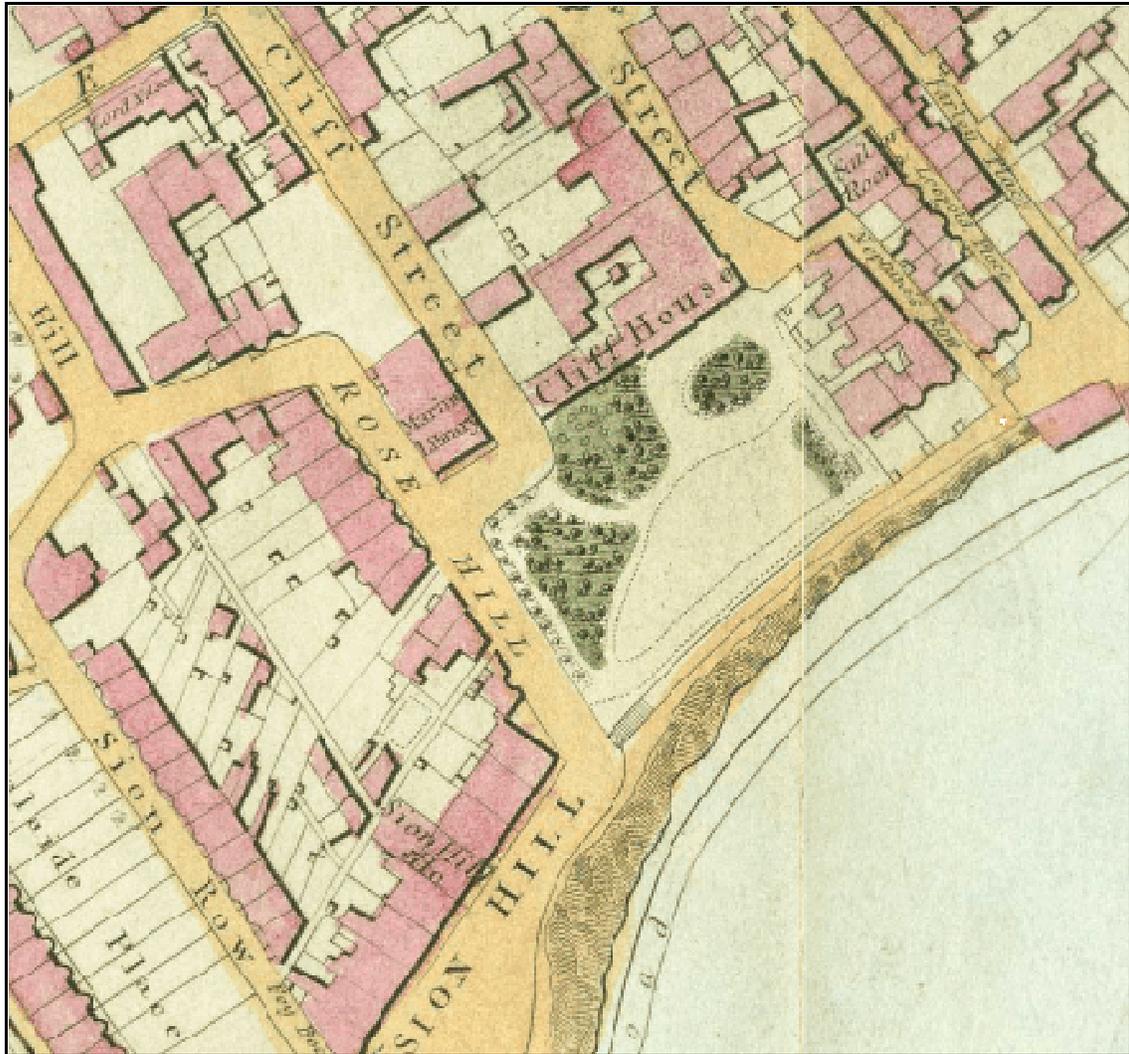


William's ambition, business acumen, effrontery and wealth became legendary. Although a friend of royalty, in particular George IV, he was a rather portly figure who was often mocked by rivals for his humble origins and supposed lack of education. The definition of the three R's as "reading, 'riting and rithmetic" is attributed to him and taken from a speech made at a dinner given for the Board of Education. Presumably he was conscious of the irony of his words.

This caricature depicts Sir William dressed in a Kilt when he attended King George IV on his "Northern Excursion" in 1822. He became known as "Bonnie Willie".

He was created Baronet of Culland's Grove in 1802. A baronetcy is the only hereditary honour which is not a peerage; baronets are commoners. A baronet does not receive an accolade, which is the ceremony that confers knighthood. Baronet's are styled "Sir" like a knight, but rank above all knighthoods except for the Order of the Garter and the Order of the Thistle.

Sir William moored his luxury yacht Emma at Ramsgate where he eventually purchased Cliff House adjacent to Sion Hill overlooking the harbour. Sir William's friendship with King George IV advantaged the town when the King visited his Kingdom of Hannover in 1821 and stayed at Sir William's residence on his outward and return journeys. Official records have it that the King was so pleased with the reception given him by the people of Ramsgate that he commanded the Harbour to be designated as the Royal Harbour of Ramsgate. A leading cartoonist of the time produced a cartoon depicting the King and Lady Curtis together under the watchful eye of Sir William. This cartoon gave rise to the view which suggests the King was also very pleased with the reception given him by Sir William's wife.



The site of Cliff House is now occupied partly by the multi storey car park and partly by the Royal British Legion building. Westcliff Mansions buildings occupy the former grounds of Cliff House.

Ramsgate undoubtedly benefitted from its association with Sir William, who became Chairman of the Trustees of Ramsgate Harbour. Cliff House remained as Sir William's residence until he died there in 1829 aged 77. According to his obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine*: "*The great respect and regard which Sir William has acquired at Ramsgate was most conspicuously displayed on his decease. Every shop was closed during the whole week his remains lay in the town; and his funeral was numerously followed half-way to Canterbury.*" Sir William's final resting place is in the crypt of St Mary's Church, Wanstead along with his father and uncles.

Cliff House was left to his widow Anne along with £2,000 in money and an annuity of £2,000 per year. Anne died three years later in 1883.