

The real-life Balloon Girl and Cardiff's Great Exhibition

130 years ago, the Great Exhibition welcomed a million people to Cardiff over six months of spectacle, performances and oddities.

Exhibits featured all the cutting-edge technology of the day, dazzling displays of electricity sitting alongside art exhibitions, exotic animals in menageries, a 9000-seater concert hall - and a balloon ascent, an event that was incredibly popular at the time. Balloons and the Aeronauts who flew them were the rock and roll stars of the day. This outdoor spectacle was organised by world-famous French aeronaut, daredevil and pioneer - Auguste Eugene Gaudron and the stunt would be performed by his new protégé 'Mademoiselle Albertina.'

The balloons of 1896 were not the balloons we know of today. The ascents were deeply dangerous stunts. Mademoiselle Albertina would be attached to the balloon by a thin chord, perched on a single metal bar for a seat, and once she had reached the required height of 10,000ft she would simply let go of the bar and float down to earth by parachute. To the cheers of the assembled crowds.

Before skyscrapers and planes, the highest most ordinary people had been was the top of a hill. So, Mademoiselle Albertina's Balloon ascent drew an enormous crowd, thousands of people gathered in Cathays Park and neighbouring rooftops to watch the spectacle. Disaster struck when, midway through the ascent, the wind changed direction and dragged the balloon out over the Bristol Channel with Mademoiselle Albertina still clinging below. The crowd watched in horror as it became obvious the balloon was spinning wildly out of control, and they were powerless to help her.

For days the people of Cardiff searched for a sign of the balloon and the Lady Parachutist, but she had disappeared, then four days later a body washed-up in the mud flats of Nash Point, Newport.

At the inquest that followed the accident it was discovered that Mademoiselle Albertina was not, in fact, a famous French Aeronaut but a 14-year-old girl from Bristol called Louisa Maud Evans. She had met Auguste Eugene Gaudon when working as a housemaid for a family who owned Wombwell's Circus and Menagerie.

Gaudron claimed Louisa was a fame seeker who had followed him to Cardiff to the Great Exhibition begging him for the opportunity to go up in a balloon. He claimed she told him she was 21 years old and had experience of making ascents before. When the Exhibition committee asked Gaudron to provide a Lady Parachutist to draw even larger crowds, Gaudron offered Louisa the opportunity to perform under the guise of Mademoiselle Albertina, for a small fee. In truth, Louisa had never been part of an ascent before and had no training. She was a child.

Gaudron had sent Louisa up into the skies of Cardiff without even a rehearsal or proper safety measures in place. He was reprimanded and fined £5, but the next week he was in Glasgow sending another young woman up in a balloon.

We know little of Louisa's real motives for making the Cardiff balloon ascent but if her dream was to be famous or to be seen, she did make her mark. The laws around children taking part in dangerous pursuits were changed. And over 25,000 people attended her funeral procession. Louisa is buried in Cathays Cemetery, with a memorial paid for by the people of Cardiff (through public subscription in the *Western Mail*).

The end of Louisa's story may be tragic, but in *Balloon Girl* we are choosing to celebrate her life, her bravery, adventurous spirit, and curiosity.

The balloon ascent was part of an Exhibition that aimed to celebrate the technological advancements and wonders of the age, but we have to ask at what cost? 130 years later it feels like we are still asking that same question.

Louisa's story has inspired plays, books, and motivated people to explore her life in depth. There is even a group of people who meet every year at her grave to mark her passing.

Here are two books that can offer more insight into the story;

<https://www.waterstones.com/book/the-balloon-girl/rosemary-chaloner/9780995482111>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Aerialists-historical-fiction-Today-bestseller/dp/0008473196>