

## Sabrina Bicknell –the perfect wife?

**Sabrina Bicknell** (1757 – 8 September 1843), better known as **Sabrina Sidney**, was a British woman [abandoned](#) at the [Foundling Hospital](#) in [London](#) as a baby, and taken in at the age of 12 by author [Thomas Day](#), who tried to [mould her into his perfect wife](#). She grew up to marry one of Day's friends, instead, and eventually became a school manager.

Inspired by [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#)'s book *Emile, or On Education*, Day decided to educate two girls without any frivolities, using his own concepts, after being rejected by several women, and struggling to find a wife who shared his ideology. In 1769, Day and his barrister friend, [John Bicknell](#), chose Sidney and another girl, Lucretia, from orphanages, and falsely declared they would be

[indentured](#) to Day's friend [Richard Lovell Edgeworth](#). Day took the girls to France to begin Rousseau's methods of education in isolation. After a short time, he returned to [Lichfield](#) with only Sidney, having deemed Lucretia inappropriate for his experiment. He used unusual, eccentric, and sometimes cruel techniques to try to increase her fortitude, such as firing [blanks](#) at her skirts, dripping hot wax on her arms, and having her wade into a lake fully dressed to test her resilience to cold water.

When Sidney reached her teenage years, Day was persuaded by Edgeworth that his ideal wife experiment had failed and he should send her away, as it was inappropriate for Day to live with her unchaperoned. He then arranged for Sidney to undergo experimental vocational and residential changes—first attending a boarding school, then becoming an apprentice to a dressmaker family, and eventually being employed as Day's housekeeper. Having seen changes in Sidney, Day proposed marriage, though he soon called this off when she did not follow his strict instructions; he again sent her away, this time to a boarding house, where she later found work as a [lady's companion](#).

In 1783, Bicknell sought out Sidney and proposed marriage, telling her the truth about Day's experiment. Horrified, she confronted Day in a series of letters; he admitted the truth but refused to apologise. Sidney married Bicknell, and the couple had two children before his death in 1787. Sidney went on to work with schoolmaster [Charles Burney](#), managing his schools. In 1804, [Anna Seward](#) published a book about Sidney's upbringing. Edgeworth followed up with his memoirs, in which he claimed Sidney loved Day. Sidney herself, on the other hand, said she was miserable with Day and that he treated her as a slave.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabrina\\_Sidney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabrina_Sidney)

**John Bicknell**, the elder (baptised 1746 – 27 March 1787), was an English barrister and writer. He was co-author with [Thomas Day](#) of the [abolitionist](#) poem *The Dying Negro* from 1773.<sup>[1]</sup> Bicknell has also been credited with *Musical Travels through England*, a pseudonymous satire on [Charles Burney](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Bicknell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bicknell)



Sabrina, aged 75, engraving by Richard James Lane after Stephen Poyntz Denning