



James Burton
1761-1837



Decimus Burton
1800-1881

Newsletter **Autumn 2020**

A PORTRAIT OF JAMES BURTON



This splendid portrait of the founder of St Leonards is in the possession of Guy Fearon, a descendant of the Burton family. For years it hung in the office of his father, a keen supporter of our Society in its earliest days. Subject to certain details to be agreed, it is to be on permanent loan to the Society. Inclusive of its frame it measures c. 5 feet by 4. The artist is unknown but the portrait is probably the original from which Maxim Gauci made his lithographic portrait, one impression of which is in Hastings Museum (a copy is displayed in South Lodge). The portrait will be restored to remove the appearance of dents.

Further research is needed to ascertain when and where it was painted, but the evidence points to James being depicted seated in the library at Mabledon, Burton's house near Tunbridge Wells, later extended by Decimus. He would appear in the portrait to be in late middle age.



Decimus Burton's design for the symmetrical terrace of 11 houses, 72-82 Marina

The Society is currently assembling a detailed submission to Historic England for the listing of this terrace, which is in much need of protection. We are grateful to two local architectural authorities, Iain Exley and Stephen Gray, for their help with this. An example of the possibilities for restoration is provided by 72 Marina, pictured below. The affinity of this terrace to the part of Adelaide Crescent in Hove, which was built to Decimus's design in the reign of William IV, is clear.

Decimus held off from developing the Marina terrace for 20 years because of prior commitments and technical issues concerning sea defences

and water supplies. It was a prime parcel of land. When he did proceed with it, it was with the Adelaide Crescent concept he had had in mind back in the mid 1830's. It was so successful that an almost exact replica of it was erected as 89-99 Marina, the last of these having its own detached billiards room. The cream of European aristocracy and the well-to-do flocked to take holidays in these residences.

Iain Exley has been responsible for exemplary restoration work on a number of the balconies of neighbouring properties in the terrace.

Appreciation of some of the superb architectural qualities of St Leonards, often concealed by much neglect and crude alterations, is we believe one of the reasons why more and more people are choosing to move here (as we refer to on page 7) and in many cases to join the Society.



EVENTS ON HOLD

For the reasons everyone understands, we cannot commit at this stage to restarting events. We were due in March to put on a talk on Vandeleur Benjamin Crake & Family and their contributions to the cultural and architectural heritage of St Leonards. They are associated in particular with the baronial Highlands Gardens. This talk will be reinstated as soon as circumstances allow.



Similarly, we have had to suspend our usual annual programme of events and visits. We will keep members closely informed when any of these can be re-arranged.

In the planning had been another event at the Kino in Norman Road, following the one a year ago on Henry Rider Haggard; and a long deferred trip to Maritime Greenwich.



The Queen's House by Inigo Jones at the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich

A significant casualty this year is our AGM, due to be held in November. This cannot take place in the usual way owing to the restrictions on numbers of people gathering and other measures that we are required to take in connection with Covid 19. We have therefore decided to follow the example of the local civic society, the Hastings & St Leonards Society, in conducting the procedures by email.

We refer to the Society on page 7; a visit to their website will provide understanding as to how their AGM was conducted. The document accompanying this newsletter will similarly explain the procedures we propose to follow.

We naturally hope that as many members as possible will take part.

What was Decimus Burton really like? A personal view by Hugh Bryant

People may wonder. One of the reasons is that he has left little trace of his personality and little is known to have been written about the man in contrast to the work. We only have so much to go on, particularly as much material has been lost. Further details will no doubt be provided in Elizabeth Nathaniel's overarching biography currently being written, which may be preceded by two less tomes by other authors.

In the Spring 2020 newsletter we reproduced part of a letter dated May 17th 1872 from Decimus to Miss Sarah Birkett, who was a near neighbour at 8 Maze Hill. Decimus lived at The Cottage, Maze Hill, 200 yards up the road. Miss Birkett was the unmarried daughter of a solicitor and was born in Everton, Liverpool. She lived with her mother, Sarah Birkett, and father James Birkett, and she was some 37 years younger than Decimus according to the 1881 census; but Decimus, a lifelong bachelor, struck up a friendship with her and wrote to her, we might assume, frequently on his travels or when he was in London as was the case here.

Looking at the letter, one immediately notices the near-copperplate neatness of his hand writing. It is not untypical of the time and class of person. I am not a graphologist and a fairly amateur psychologist but this chimes with the classic draughtsmanship and attention to detail of his earlier designs. There are a few oddities of spelling in the letter, but he is 71, a very decent old age at that time, so he can be forgiven. (NB The average life expectancy for a British person born in 1800 was 35.)

But there is little wit or personality in the letter. There is plenty of low-key charm, politeness and diplomacy but nothing that would frighten the horses. I am looking through contemporary eyes, with a keen 2020 sense of humour perhaps, but the mention of the 'the precious bird', (some sort of stuffed avian handscreen - don't ask), without ruffling any feathers or even warranting an exclamation mark does appear to me a tad dull or reserved. One doesn't have to be a Whistler (b 1834) or a Wilde (b 1854) to provide a little lightness.

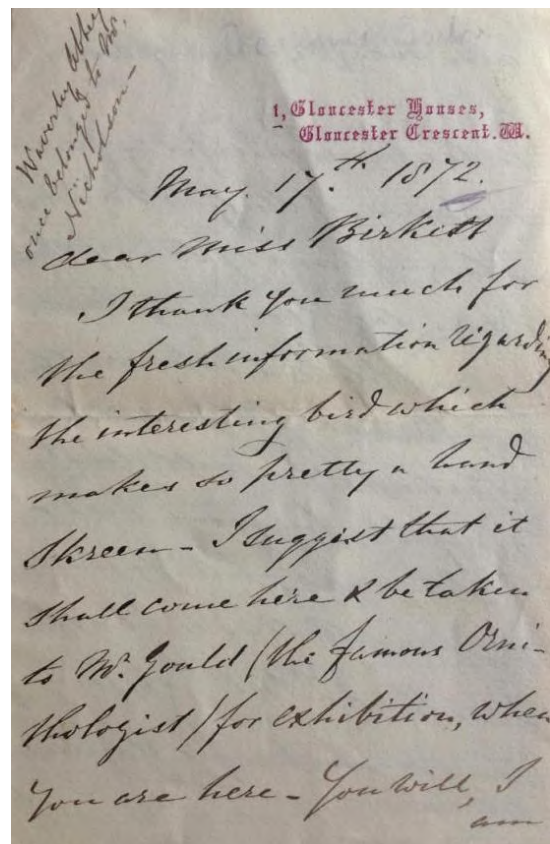
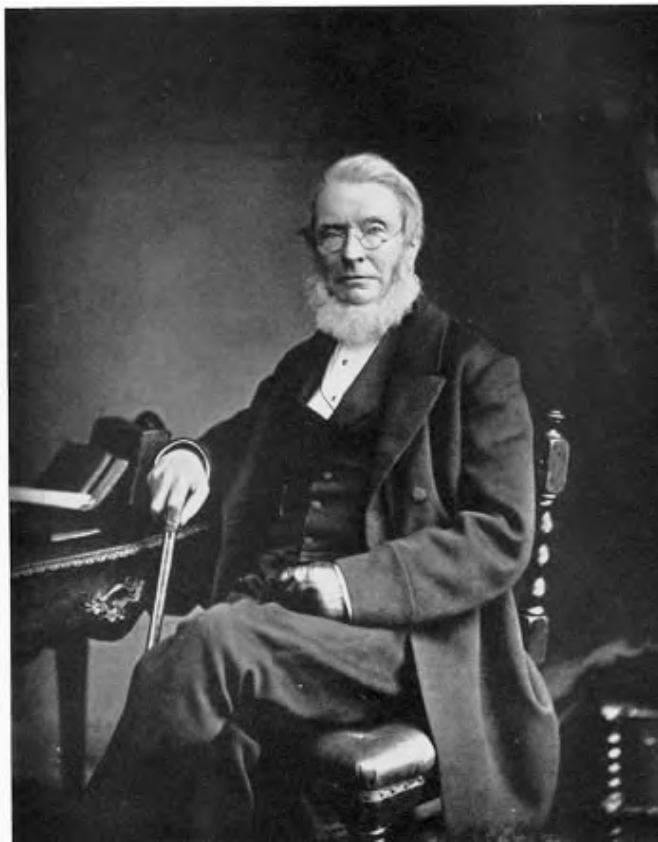
Similarly he observes without blinking the 'two milch goats' taken on board the steam yacht 'Eothen' in rough seas obviously to feed the baby on board. This cannot have been a regular occurrence but this matter again receives no exclamation mark and one is left waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like the goats, it is a tiny bit tame and anyone else writing to a young lady friend from Liverpool might have been more indulgent and milked it a little. Decimus does do chit-chat as well including mentioning the titled people he has stayed with and the places he stayed. People may call it name dropping, but if he is guilty of that, it would be par for the course, like royalty writing from a progress but also being polite to their hosts.

He was born in 1800, the 10th child of James Burton, then aged 39. In those times, because of progeniture and fashion, the younger sons of the gentry might be steered off to the clergy. Not for them the drama of first or elder brothers who might be packed off into the army or elsewhere. Two elder brothers included William Ford Burton (gunpowder manufacturer) and James Burton (an Egyptologist who married a slave girl) while Decimus stayed close to home in Tonbridge at first and was possibly close to his father; and I fancy I can see the intelligent, reserved and 'Fauntleroyesque' teenager visiting the building sites in a carriage with his more brusque hard-nosed builder of a father, the biggest residential property developer in Britain, and learning some of the lore of labourers, quantities, footings, materials, etc.

continued ...

But Decimus may have paid a price for being a child of older parents and may well have been less vital than his brothers. His late arrival might have made him susceptible to physical or mental weaknesses which may have contributed, with the death of both parents in 1837, to his change from go-to architect in the 1820s and 1830s to a jobbing architect designing homes for the middle classes who paid their bills, were easier to please and may have been less scattered. Before the railways came the journeys on the roads, of course, could be horrific.

Certainly the battles with the increasingly insane AWN Pugin would have been formidable and costly and Decimus was a diplomat and no pugilist. Tastes in architecture changed within his lifetime. Public buildings became more Gothic, more fussy, more Victorian; not quite his thing. He could turn his hand to any style of architecture, of course, but there would have been the usual Young Turks coming through architecturally and he could not and did not keep up. He became more 'The Cottage' and less 'Wellington Arch'.



There is a postscript to the letter. Decimus has earlier spoken of what Mrs Brassey had told him. To report a possible visit to him in London from a lady unchaperoned would have been seen as very indiscreet but Decimus, *toujours la politesse*, smoothes this out and reassures Miss Birkett and indirectly Mrs Brassey with a placatory PS saying, "Mrs Brassey and Miss Seacombe called here on Wednesday". (My italics).

Decimus may well have been the sort of person we all know who is incredibly charming and nice but make you feel you want more, and eventually you want to shake them. Until we get more information, possibly contemporary letters describing him, we can of course only make a guess at what he was like.

This is very much my personal interpretation. Other views would be welcome.

Science by the Sea

Society member Chris Lewcock reports on progress with proposals by the Hastings Urban Design Group (HUDG) for the future of the now disused parish church. The listed 1961 building by Adrian and Giles Gilbert Scott replaced the original James Burton church destroyed by enemy action in World War II. Details of the new proposals appeared in 'Hastings in Focus' in August, setting out plans to make it the centrepiece of a £2.5m flagship 'Science-on-Sea' initiative. It is hoped that this will lead a fleet of projects in the £25m borough-wide investment plan which the Town Deal Board will be submitting to Government early in 2021.

One of Hastings' greatest strengths and selling points is its maritime character, reflected in British national history, its fishing fleet and its heritage as one of the earliest seaside resorts. The HUDG scheme proposes a 'seaside outpost' of the internationally renowned Science Museum to be created in the maritime-themed church. Chichester Diocese has already agreed to donate the building and land; and the Science Museum has shown strong interest in possible use of their mothballed maritime gallery. The Nautical Maritime Trust (the Shipwreck Museum) and the Burtons' St Leonards Society have expressed support.



The Gilbert Scott church and its boat-shaped pulpit; fish are represented in the marbled floor of the sanctuary.

With much sadness we report the death in August of Nick Buse. Nick joined the Society in 2017 and later became an invaluable treasurer, a role he performed with great professionalism. During this time he ensured that our financial affairs and accounting were in excellent order. More importantly, we shall miss Nick for his unfailing courtesy, friendliness and good humour. A nicer man one could not have hoped to meet. His death after a short illness, borne with courage, came as a great shock to us and especially of course to his wife Barbara and their children, to whom we extend our condolences. We shall all miss him greatly.



Nicholas John Buse
1942-2020

The Society's website

We have been making some changes to our website to make it more easily navigable and usable. In particular we have made it possible to complete the membership application form online. Please encourage others to explore the site and to join (but remember the two double s's!).

www.burtonsstleonardssociety.co.uk

We have also opened a Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/Burtons-St-Leonards-Society-114026503799266>

Content will be added shortly and suggestions will be welcome. Please write to:

info@burtonsstleonardssociety.co.uk

Many people are taking advantage of relatively low property prices and moving from London and other areas to St Leonards. Here they can enjoy a better quality of life, appreciate the historic heritage and the beautiful natural environment—and the sea air! We plan to start a publicity drive which we hope will reach many of these new arrivals. Some of them have come because they were already taking an interest in the Burtons' new town. Many are asking us for information on their historic properties or neighbourhoods. Others, we think, will be keen to learn more.

The Convent site

Many people have expressed interest in the current situation regarding the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus in Magdalen Road.



The Hastings & St Leonards Society have recently posted an article provided by the Burtons' St Leonards Society: 'The Convent of the Holy Child, St Leonards on Sea – Thoughts on its future'. You can read it at:

<http://hastingsandstleonardssociety.org.uk/>

We recommend membership of this Society, of which we are a corporate member. However, the Society also organises, when possible, Open Events at which updates are provided on major issues affecting the borough.

Membership of the Society

Application details can be found on the Society's website:

www.burtonstleonardsociety.co.uk

Membership subscriptions for 2020/21 were due on April 1st 2020. We appreciate that the Covid 19 regulations have changed all our routines but the Society still needs to cover its running costs – this year with no income from events.

Subscriptions remain the same as in previous years:

Single membership £15.00 — Joint (2 people living at the same address) £25.00.

How to pay:

Bank Transfer:

HSBC

Sort Code: 40-40-09

Acc No: 01215248

Please identify the payment with your name.

By Cheque:

To Burton's St Leonards Society

South Lodge

St Leonards on Sea

TN38 0BA

Note for existing members

If you are paying your membership subscription through your bank at an old subscription rate, we shall be very grateful if you would amend this to the current rate(s) shown above.

Readers may like to know that the **Decimus Burton Society**, based in Tunbridge Wells, is now well established. We maintain very close links with them. Reports of their creation and first AGM can be found in earlier editions of our newsletter.

Their activities and resources available can be found on their website at:

<https://www.thedecimusburtonsociety.org/>

They also have a Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/DecimusBurtonSociety/>

Both are excellently illustrated and highly informative.

The development of the former Archery Ground of St Leonards

Many readers will recall the long fight by STAG (Save The Archery Ground) with support from the Burtons' St Leonards Society and the Mount Residents Association to prevent the application by Gladedale for intensive housing development on the Archery road site. This would have involved much tree-felling, horribly unsympathetic design and a densely overcrowded site. Against all odds, it seemed, the Council agreed with the campaigners and turned the scheme down. A much improved application, for which consent was given, came forward from Gemselect. Examples from their current marketing are pictured below: **Archery Crescent and Terrace**. In the centre: the old slab block college before its recent demolition. This building and other devastations to the area were the catalyst for the conservation effort that has been devoted to the original St Leonards and which has continued now for more than 50 years.



Archery Terrace

The early Victorian listed villas, which survived the destruction of the Archery Ground, have now been carefully and sympathetically restored.

Burtons' St Leonards Oysters

In the last newsletter we recounted how an enterprising local butcher had named one of his varieties of sausage the 'Burtons St Leonards sausage' - made after an old recipe which may have been current in the Burtons' time. Now it's the turn of the oyster. Although the Covid 19 crisis has caused the Society to abandon its planned events for the rest of the year, it has not slowed down our researches and responses to enquiries. Indeed, both have significantly increased. We now recount two which at first sight are unconnected but on reflection can be recognised as related.

First, the Society recently acquired the original of an October 1838 pencil drawing (reproduced below) depicting a view of the seaward elevations of James Burton's Bath House and Library with the 'beehive' between them and to the east his No 14 Marine Parade. The mast above the library was a signal post erected for the St Leonards Regatta, held a short time before this drawing was made. Looking more closely, we see a pipe discharging to the sea from the Bath House. We should not be shocked as the practice of discharging raw sewage to the sea was common to all coastal communities until well into the 20th century. Locally it ceased in 1970 with the commissioning of Edgar Baxter's* pumping houses, holding tanks and long sea outfall at Bulverhythe.

Then one of our members escorting her great grandchild to a visit to the western end of the Goat Ledge at a recent low tide spotted an oyster.

John Mainwaring Baines, the curator of Hastings Museum from the 1930s until the 1970s and an early member of our Society, recorded in his 1956 *Burton's St Leonards* most of what we know about the early days of the St Leonards New Town. A seemingly insignificant record of an minor unlawful act and his reflection on it provide the clue to why these two finds are related.

In 1838 a man was prosecuted for poaching at the oyster beds of St Leonards. There are no such beds today.

So now we know the 'blue flag' status of the Victoria Beach of Burtons' St Leonards is not just proven by chemical tests but nature itself. Oysters have returned because we ceased dumping our raw sewage in the sea 50 years ago. While celebrating this achievement we should be mindful that there is much more we need to do before our local oysters are fit for human consumption and other marine life can thrive.



* Edgar Baxter was the successor to Sidney Little as Borough Engineer of Hastings. Our Chairman, Christopher Maxwell-Stewart, was an intern in Mr Baxter's Office during vacations while studying for his first degree in civil engineering.



The Burtons' St Leonards Society

The Society was registered in 1970 but conservation efforts leading to its foundation began in the 1950s. Our campaign, backed by various organisations such as the Civic Trust and the Georgian Group, resulted in the designation of Burtons' St Leonards as a Conservation Area by the local authority in 1969. Our aims are to:

- encourage high standards of architecture and town planning in St Leonards-on-Sea and prevent unsympathetic development
- stimulate interest in and care for the beauty, history and character of the area of St Leonards-on-Sea and its surroundings
- encourage the preservation, development and improvement of features of general interest, in particular the contribution made by James and Decimus Burton to the architecture and town planning of St Leonards-on-Sea.

The Society keeps a vigilant eye on local planning applications, especially those affecting listed buildings, and on alterations to such buildings made without planning consent.

For more information, please visit our website at:

www.burtonsstleonardssociety.co.uk

For further information, eg on specific events or for advice on architectural or planning matters, please email:

info@burtonsstleonardssociety.co.uk

Please however note that because of the large numbers of requests for technical or historical advice, we can only provide this free of charge to members. In other cases we make a charge of £25 except where the query is simply and readily answerable.

Email

If you have an email address which you think we may not hold, we shall be glad to have it. It will not be communicated to others except with your express consent. Use of email saves us a very considerable amount of time and money in printing and postage, and means that we can ensure that members receive communications much more rapidly than is otherwise possible.

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October 2020