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George Stebbing (1775-1847) and Joseph Rankin Stebbing (1809-1874):
two lives examined



Figure 1. An oil painting of Joseph Rankin Stebbing'

Upon his death in 1874, Joseph Rankin Stebbing's contemporaries mourned the loss of one of the most important figures in Southampton's development as a City. His importance in founding the Chamber of Commerce, his role in the development of the Commercial docks, his prominence in local Freemasonry, amongst other contributions, quite rightly afforded him an esteemed place in Southampton's historiography. Stebbing's qualities were commented on by his peers who described him as a peacemaker and a man of compromiseⁱ. Stebbing's importance to Southampton is well known. However, an aspect of his life that is not so well known is how his progression to become such an important figure was clearly shaped was clearly shaped by his upbringing, his early years in Portsmouth, and the influence of his father.

Joseph's father, George Stebbing, was a reputable optician and nautical instrument maker in business in Portsmouth from just after the turn of the century until his death in 1847. He demonstrated many of the same qualities that would later be shown by his son. A contemporary, the Portsmouth Historian Henry Slight, described him as having 'a persevering mind not easily diverted'ⁱⁱ. His business activities brought him into contact with many significant people, including Sir Home Popham, Sir Benjamin Hallowell, and Matthew Flinders. In addition, George Stebbing was also pivotal in local Freemasonry, and a key figure in the establishment of the Portsmouth and Portsea Literary and Philosophical Society. Whilst not quite as prominent, and certainly not as successful in the sphere of local politics as his son, it should at least be clear that the influence of George Stebbing upon his son Joseph played a key role in developing his character and personal attributes. Although no portrait of George Stebbing is known, it is nevertheless possible to paint a vivid picture of the man and his character.

In 1804, the *Hampshire Telegraph* contained the following advertisement:

To Officers of the Navy, Army and Other: G Stebbing, from London, working optician and manufacturer of optical and mathematical instruments, begs to acquaint them that he has improved the day and night military and other telescopes. All kinds of telescopes, microscopes, sextants, quadrants, compasses, marine barometers, thermometers, globes. Telescopes altered to the improved plan, sextants quadrants etc. cleaned and repaired in a few hoursⁱⁱⁱ.

That this advertisement takes the form of an announcement, and that George Stebbing describes himself as from London, suggests that he had recently arrived in Portsmouth from the capital. Indeed, his twin children George James and Georgiana Stebbing were baptised in Portsmouth in 1803^{iv}. Stebbing himself had been born in London in 1775, in the parish of St. Andrews in Holborn^v. The Instrument trade in London was dominated by several well-established family firms. The Troughtons, the Adams, and Robert Bate appear to have controlled the market in London, possibly explaining Stebbing's move to Portsmouth. In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that any other instrument makers were active in Portsmouth during this period. His description of himself as 'from London' would appear to suggest a certain prestige in being an instrument maker coming from the Capital. There is no evidence to suggest what Stebbing's activities had been prior to his arrival in Portsmouth: his membership of the Vintners Livery Company may suggest a career as a Wine Merchant, although by the early nineteenth century the conventions that governed membership of the London Livery companies were becoming more relaxed. For a man such as Stebbing to be in a Livery Company unrelated to his profession is perhaps not as unusual as it might seem. Stebbing purchased his freedom of the Vintners Company in 1816 through redemption^{vi}; if he had been apprenticed through any other company he would have received his freedom through servitude.

That George Stebbing appears in Portsmouth at the beginning of the 19th Century is not surprising. The ongoing hostilities with Napoleonic France would have provided him with a sizeable market of naval officers passing through the Dockyard^{vii}. Stebbing was certainly not the only person arriving in the town during this period. Charles Dickens father John, for example, was among an influx of people that resulted from the growth of the local maritime supportive infrastructure. Portsmouth's status as a naval town, with the state being the main employer in the town through the Navy and the Dockyard, is reflected in the vastly different social and economic conditions when compared with a far more commercial port such as Southampton. George Stebbing also described himself in trade directories as an Optician. Clearly this trade would have proved far more reliable than that in nautical Instruments, which in a town such as Portsmouth was highly dependent on whether the country was at war. By the time Joseph Stebbing had established his similar business in Southampton, his premises had taken on the appearance of a Marine superstore, in which clients could purchase a number of goods, such as charts and chandlery^{viii}. In comparison, the illustration of his father shop in the Charpentier's Portsmouth guide suggests a far more spartan approach to advertising^{ix}.

In 1812 the first European to circumnavigate Australia, Matthew Flinders, visited Portsmouth to view work that Stebbing was carrying out on developing a Compass and Binnacle for Sir Home Popham, a member of the Admiralty's chart Committee^x. Popham was a sea officer noted for his scientific achievements, and in 1800 had devised the Royal Navy's signal flag code, as used by Nelson's famous 'England Expects' signal at Trafalgar. The time that was required to work on these instruments was clearly substantial, for it was not until 1818 that the Admiralty had commissioned their sea trials aboard the Cork Squadron, Ireland, under Rear Admiral Sir Benjamin Hallowell. Most of the Captains stated that the compass and binnacle were an improvement on the current standard pattern, and the Stebbing Compass and Binnacle was eventually adopted^{xi}. Furthermore, in 1821 the Admiralty awarded Stebbing £100 for his improved binnacle. His instruments were fast gaining a reputation amongst naval officers. In 1818, the same year that the Cork Squadron had tested Stebbing's instruments, Captain Gordon of *HMS Commotion* requested an improved Stebbing compass and binnacle, as he felt that these were the only instruments that could cope with the fog that the ship would experience on the Newfoundland station^{xii}. This certainly alludes to their reputation and reliability.



Figure 2. Joseph Rankin Stebbing's shop in Canute Road, Southampton. An engraving by Philip Brannon, c1851.

Telescopes, along with swords, were a conspicuous symbol of status for military and naval officers^{xiii}. The correspondence of naval officers reveals much about Stebbing's business. In 1818 Commander Walpole of *HMS Curlew* requested a Stebbing Compass and Binnacle, as Stebbing was by far the most local supplier to the Dockyard^{xiv}. In 1834, the Captains of *HMS Aetna* and *HMS Raven*, both survey vessels, made it clear to the Admiralty that they would not go to sea without Stebbing repairing their instruments^{xv}. As well as providing a service for seagoing naval officers, in 1834 Stebbing repaired 13 Chronometers for the Royal Naval College in Portsmouth^{xvi}. But Stebbing was not simply content with providing instruments; he

also occupied himself with their development and improvement. After the solution to the Longitude problem by John Harrison in the latter part of the eighteenth century, instrument makers turned more towards refining and improving existing models. In 1810 he submitted a patent for using mercury to make minor improvements to compasses, with regards to magnetism. This was undoubtedly due to the increasing use of metal in ships. In 1826, along with William Kingston, the Master Millwright at Portsmouth Dockyard, a patent along with a detailed diagram was submitted for an instrument for improving the stability of ships at sea^{xvii}. In 1837, Stebbing wrote to the Editor of the *Nautical Magazine*, outlining his proposal for a lighting system to illuminate ships at sea, by way of red and green port and starboard lights^{xviii}. Tellingly, in 1807 Apsley Pellatt, a London glassmaker and associate of Stebbing, had submitted a patent for methods of lighting on board ships. Pellatt, a key figure in the development of glassmaking technology, produced a number of texts on the history of glass^{xix}. This relationship suggests from where Stebbing may have obtained the glass for his instruments, as his premises was too small for him to have been producing it on site.



Figure 3. A drawing of George Stebbing's shop in Portsmouth High Street from a contemporary guide. Note the difference to the appearance of Joseph Rankin Stebbing's shop, (see Figure 2 above).

Although perhaps Stebbing's best-known son, Joseph Rankin Stebbing was not the first born. His eldest son, George James Stebbing, sailed on *HMS Beagle* as a

supernumerary, listed as being the Librarian and chronometer keeper. Also present on *HMS Beagle* was Charles Darwin, on the voyage that would see him formulate many of his theories on evolution. George James Stebbing would later become an employee of the newly founded Meteorological Office, as a working optician^{xx}. Admiral Robert Fitzroy, who had been the Captain of *HMS Beagle*, headed the new department. Towards the end of Stebbing's life his eldest son must have been something of a disappointment however, as before his move to the Meteorological Office in London he had set up a rival nautical instrument business in Portsmouth. George Stebbing's trade cards at the time state quite clearly that 'his son has opened a shop in Portsmouth, in opposition to him, and being of the same Christian name causes injury to him, and the junior members of his family'^{xxi}. It is not difficult to come to the conclusion that George Stebbing would perhaps have been far more impressed with the activities of his younger son Joseph, who had at least moved to another town to set up his business. That George Stebbing would probably have wished for his sons to carry on his business is evident in that each of his three eldest sons were formally apprenticed to him at the age of 14: George in 1817, Richard in 1819, and Frederick in 1821^{xxii}. Richard later served in the Royal Navy as an armourer and master-at-arms^{xxiii}. He first served on board the *HMS Warspite*, a 76 gun third-rate, in 1829, at the age of 23. He later served on board a number of Survey vessels, including a 5-year period on board *HMS Herald* while she carried out surveying work in the southwest Pacific^{xxiv}. The ship was captained by Henry Kellet, who had been a customer of George Stebbing's whilst a Lieutenant onboard *HMS Raven*, another Survey vessel, in 1834^{xxv}. He was finally discharged from the Royal Navy in 1864. That two of George Stebbing's sons were either employed or associated with the surveying and exploring sections of the Royal Navy alludes to both the influence that Stebbing must have had within this sphere, and with his clientèle.

No evidence exists to suggest that Joseph was formally apprenticed to his father, although he must surely have been learning the trade in an informal manner. That he became so successful in contrast to his elder brothers, given their formal apprenticeships, is striking. Joseph's younger brothers Horatio and Edwin both also moved to Southampton, the former appearing to have been an employee of P&O. His naming is not as unusual as it might seem, Nelson having been regarded at the time as something of a secular saint. Yet another son, Edwin Stebbing, was listed in Southampton trade directories as a Life Buoy maker. The junior members of Stebbing's family, referred to in his trade cards, would have comprised George Stebbing's children with his second wife, Charlotte from their marriage in 1822, after the childbirth-related death of his first wife, Mary in 1816. Mary had borne 9 children in 13 years, including 2 sets of twins. Clearly her health had been fatally affected.

Initially George Stebbing appears to have lived in Broad Street, Portsmouth. Later he moved to the High Street, the main thoroughfare in Old Portsmouth. This move suggests that Stebbing was successful, as the High Street has been described as the hub of local affairs^{xxvi}. It was the location of the most prestigious businesses, the most respectable institutions, and the most popular meeting places. A contemporary guide described it as 'the principal and very handsome street, which extends the length of the town, adorned with many excellent shops: indeed, its general appearance may rank it amongst the finest streets of London'^{xxvii}. Stebbing was clearly successful, for by the time of his death he had opened a Branch shop at no 5 the Common Hard Portsea, opposite the dockyard's main gates. This new shop would have been nearer

to potential clients, and suggests that businessmen such as Stebbing were either moving or branching out of Portsmouth's traditional centre.

It has previously been suggested that Joseph Rankin Stebbing's middle name may have originated from the maiden name of his mother, Mary^{xxviii}. Research has shown that Joseph was certainly named after the founder of the Phoenix Masonic Lodge in Portsmouth, John Rankin^{xxix}. A builder, Rankin was contracted to build no.2 dock in the Naval Dockyard, along with Thomas Parlby^{xxx}. From Plymouth, Parlby had earlier undertaken work at Devonport Dockyard. He had other interests in the Portsmouth area, for in 1797 along with Henry Templer, another builder of docks, he leased 100 acres of Fleetlands farm to Captain James Bowen^{xxxi}. John Rankin's will, proved in 1814, named George Stebbing as an executor. Rankin also left Stebbing a Masonic snuffbox that he had been presented by the Phoenix Lodge^{xxxii}. His obituary described him as 'universally lamented'^{xxxiii}.

George Stebbing's prominence in Freemasonry is also clear from records of Lodges of which he was a member. In 1806 he joined the Vectis Lodge of Peace and Concord in the Isle of Wight, before transferring to the Phoenix Lodge in Portsmouth a mere 15 days later^{xxxiv}. He served as master in 1816 and represented the Lodge at prestigious events throughout the Isle of Wight, Southampton and Dorset^{xxxv}. The Lodge made a glowing tribute to George Stebbing shortly after his death in 1847: he was described as the father of the Lodge, who 'when the Lodge was in a position of difficulty and embarrassment, zealously and resolutely maintained his post'. There had clearly been problems with a fluid membership, as the Lodge's membership records show that an extremely high number of members were Naval and Army Officers^{xxxvi}. The Lodge also recorded their recognition of his 'unwearied attention, the zealous interest and cordial feeling, combined with extensive knowledge and information'^{xxxvii} that was manifested in Stebbing. These are certainly qualities not unlike those that his son Joseph would later go on to exhibit in Southampton. In 1871, when negotiating with William Bulpett to purchase the Itchen Navigation Canal, Joseph Stebbing wrote:

'...I will go at once unto the matter and by promptness and energy do my best... I propose to make something of it myself as a good deal of time and trouble much overdue and I think I shall succeed'^{xxxviii}.

As well as in the sphere of freemasonry, George Stebbing would also be instrumental in developing another local learned organisation. In 1818 Stebbing, along with his friend Dr. John Porter, founded the Portsmouth and Portsea Literary and Philosophical Society^{xxxix}. The scope of this new group was broader than its title suggests. Lectures were given on a wide variety of subjects, and were advertised and reported on in the *Hampshire Telegraph*. In 1832 a certain young Joseph Stebbing, who would have been aged 23, lectured the society on pneumatics. George Stebbing demonstrated an apparatus that was described as a philosophic toy^{xl}, donated by Apsley Pellatt, the London glassmaker and pioneer of street lighting. The group seem to have interested themselves in collecting specimens and curiosities, and later assembled a Library. Stebbing donated a number of items to the society's collections: a Dusk Grebe in 1824, a vampire bat in 1828, and seven birds in 1827: a tufted auk, a parroquet auk, a brown gillinala, a fufous kingfisher, a Croatian Buzzard, a red winged ariole and a tropic bird. The Society also held an Art Exhibition in 1826, in

which George Stebbing exhibited 3 paintings, *le Jardinier*, *the Marriage of Louis XIV*, and a *Portrait of Mr Stebbing*.

Initially the Society met in rooms at Stebbing's home, until in 1831 a fine Headquarters was built by a young Thomas Ellis Owen, later a very prominent figure in the development of Southsea. Stebbing was among the members who leased the land on which the Headquarters was built^{xli}. Whilst the Society proved to have a short lifespan, it was among the earliest such bodies attempting to cater for the interests of middle class professionals seeking enlightenment, something of a requirement of sociability^{xlii}. It was perhaps prophetic that when attempting to set up the Society, several of Stebbing's friends attempted to dissuade him, as they felt it would be impracticable. Perhaps his friends were conscious of the fortunes of other similar organisations, such as the Phoenix Masonic Lodge. That Stebbing was not dissuaded alludes to his perseverance.

That Joseph Rankin Stebbing would later go on to be pivotal in setting up organisations in Southampton is surely more than a coincidence. Joseph Stebbing perhaps took on a more public role than his father: George Stebbing never appears to have entered local politics, for example. Meanwhile Joseph Stebbing became an Alderman and served a term as Mayor of Southampton in 1867. Whilst George has been described as being the father of his Masonic Lodge, Joseph would become an even more important figure, becoming a Provincial Grand Secretary. The Historian Roy Porter has suggested that organisations such as the Freemasons and Literary and Philosophical Societies reflected a growth in a broader scientific and cultural minded society within the provinces. Intellectual activity was becoming increasingly integral to middle class values, in addition to other factors such as wealth and property. Membership of such groups proved to be a foundation for wider social leadership, the kind of leadership that was later exhibited by Joseph Stebbing.

George Stebbing died in 1847. His place of residence on his death certificate was given as Yarborough Cottage, Southsea^{xliii}. This suggests that Stebbing had joined the growing number of professionals who were retiring to this resort town. After his death Stebbing's business was taken on by Samuel Browning, who was in business up until near the end of the century.

That Joseph Rankin Stebbing became so successful after moving to Southampton from Portsmouth is also symbolic of wider economic and social issues in the region. Although the presence of the Navy contributed greatly to Portsmouth through the supportive infrastructure that it required, it also proved a constraint upon commercial seaborne trade and led to a smaller, more rigid middle class. Admiralty control of the Harbour and military land ownership thwarted the city's attempt's to construct a commercial port until 1968^{xliv}. Southampton's earlier development of its commercial port in the mid-nineteenth century was in a less restricted environment where local commerce was not transcended by Governmental priorities. This gave more opportunities for the development of mercantile activity and associated social structures. This is reflected in the fortunes of George and Joseph Stebbing. Whether Joseph could have played a similar role in Portsmouth to that he did in Southampton is doubtful due to the differing social and economic conditions of the two towns.

Although much is known about Joseph Stebbing's prominent public life, and now his roots, his private life does provide several points of interest that have been highlighted by historians. Why is so little known about his children? How did he come to be a bachelor until his 50's, when he appears to have married Mary Creed? Why did they marry in Bermondsey, South London, when they were both residents of Southampton? And what light can research shed on the background to Joseph Rankin Lambert, who mysteriously appears in Southampton in the 1851 census? Further research into these areas will hopefully further inform our understanding of one of Southampton's most important figures. It should at the very least be clear, however, that Joseph Stebbing's life in Southampton can be viewed in strong continuity with that of his father in Portsmouth. Joseph Stebbing was clearly influenced greatly by his father, and expanded upon the example that he had been provided by his upbringing.



Figure. 4. Joseph Rankin Stebbing in his later years

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Notes

- ⁱ Temple Patterson, A., 'A History of Southampton, 1700-1914, vol. 2: the beginnings of modern Southampton 1836-1867', Southampton Record Series, volume 24, p.52.
- ⁱⁱ Slight, Henry, Chronicles of Portsmouth, (1828), p.31.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hampshire Telegraph, 7 May 1804.
- ^{iv} International Genealogical Index.
- ^v Guildhall Library [**hereafter GL**] MS6667, St. Andrews, Holborn Baptism register 1771-1780.
- ^{vi} GL, VC MS15209/1, Vintners Livery Company Membership Register, fol, 49.
- ^{vii} Stapleton, B. and Thomas, J.H., (eds), The Portsmouth Region, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1989), p.59.
- ^{viii} Southampton City Records Office P106/31, engraving of J.R. Stebbing's shop.
- ^{ix} Charpentier's Strangers Guide, (1842). The panorama of the High Street that accompanied this guide is available in the Local History section of Portsmouth Central Library.
- ^x Flinders, Matthew, Private Journal 1803-14, the Mitchell Library Transcript, (Guilford: Genesis, 1986), p.311.
- ^{xi} May, W.E., 'The Binnacle', Mariners Mirror, 40, (1954), p.28.
- ^{xii} National Archives [**hereafter NA**], ADM 1/863, letter from Captain Gordon to the Admiralty.
- ^{xiii} Readers of the Sharpe novels will be aware that Bernard Cornwell has Wellington present Sharpe, when raising him from the ranks, with a specially inscribed telescope in gratitude for saving his life.
- ^{xiv} NA ADM 1/2719, Commander Walpole to the Admiralty.
- ^{xv} United Kingdom Hydrographic Office [**hereafter UKHO**], 1834 no. 449, George Stebbing to Captain Beaufort.
- ^{xvi} UKHO, 1834, no. 449.
- ^{xvii} British Library [**hereafter BL**], Patent no. 3363 (1810), Sea and Land Compasses, George Stebbing, and 5435 (1826), Instrument for ascertaining the trim and stability of ships, George Stebbing and William Kingston.
- ^{xviii} Nautical Magazine, (1837), p.488.
- ^{xix} BL Patent no. 3058, 1807, Methods for lighting the inside of ships, Apsley Pellatt; Pellat, Apsley, Memoir on the origin, progress and improvement of glass manufactures, (London: BF Holdsworth, 1821); Pellat, Apsley, Curiosities of glass making, with details of the processes and productions of ancient and modern ornamental glass manufacture, (London, 1849).
- ^{xx} Freeman, R.B., Charles Darwin: a companion, (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979), p.266.
- ^{xxi} Clifton, G., Directory of British Scientific Instrument Makers 1550-1851, (London: National Maritime Museum, 1995), pp.263-4.
- ^{xxii} GL, VC MS15209/1.
- ^{xxiii} NA ADM 139/20/1965, Royal Navy Continuous Service Engagement Book of Richard William Stebbing.
- ^{xxiv} Navy List, December 1846.
- ^{xxv} UKHO 1834, no. 449 and 1835, no. 481, George Stebbing to Captain Beaufort.
- ^{xxvi} Webb, J., 'An Early Victorian Street – The High Street, Old Portsmouth', The Portsmouth Papers, 26, (1977), p.3.
- ^{xxvii} Charpentier's New Portsmouth Guide, (1839), p.28.
- ^{xxviii} Kemish, Norman, 150 years on: Southampton Chamber of Commerce 1851-2001, (Southampton: Chamber of Commerce and industry, 2001), p.12.

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- ^{xxix} Howell, A., History of the Phoenix Lodge no. 257, 1786-1893, (Portsmouth: privately printed, 1894), p.267.
- ^{xxx} Riley, R.C., 'The Evolution of the Docks and Industrial Buildings in Portsmouth Royal Dockyard, 1698-1914', The Portsmouth Papers, 44, (1985), p.12.
- ^{xxxix} Hampshire Records Office [**hereafter HRO**], 186M86/6/1/1, Lease of Fleetland Farm, Alverstoke.
- ^{xxxii} NA PROB 11/1562, will of John Rankin of Alverstoke, Hampshire. It contains no evidence to suggest that Mary was Rankin's daughter.
- ^{xxxiii} Hampshire Telegraph, 29 September 1814. His residence as given as Berry Place, Gosport. His wife's obituary in the Hampshire Telegraph on 17 February 1806 had described Rankin as 'of His Majesty's Dockyard'.
- ^{xxxiv} Howell, History of the Phoenix Lodge, p.69.
- ^{xxxv} Ibid, p.75.
- ^{xxxvi} London Museum of Freemasonry, Phoenix Lodge no. 319 membership registers.
- ^{xxxvii} Howell, History of the Phoenix Lodge, p.135-6.
- ^{xxxviii} HRO, 13M48/1/1, Itchen Navigation Canal papers.
- ^{xxxix} Reports and Proceedings of the Portsmouth and Portsea Literary and Philosophical Society, (1823-1839).
- ^{xi} A philosophic toy appears to have been some form of apparatus for conducting scientific experiments.
- ^{xli} Portsmouth City Record Office, X/313A/1/9-10, Title Deeds relating to the Headquarters of the Portsmouth and Portsea Literary and Philosophical Society.
- ^{xlii} Porter, Roy, Enlightenment, (London: Penguin, 2000), p.22.
- ^{xliii} Portsmouth Register Office. Copy of George Stebbing's death certificate, in the author's possession.
- ^{xliv} Riley, R.C., 'Military land use as a determinant of urban development – the case of Portsmouth', in Bateman, M. and Riley, R.C. (eds.), Geography of Defence: Spatial Impact of Defence Policies, (Oxford: Routledge, 1986), p.79.