

Jean Watts

The Marquis of Lansdowne and his castle in Southampton

John Henry Petty, then Lord Wycombe, purchased the site of the old castle in Southampton for £1,395 some time between 1804 and March 1805 on which to build a mock Gothick edifice. The first lot included “the site of a Windmill, late a Banqueting House of tenement and the Castle Hill and all edifices and buildings thereon erected.” Southampton Record Office has various indentures and deeds dated between 1804 and 1809 showing purchases of tenements and land in the Castle Hill area by the Marquis. Gerald Mornington in his book *Southampton's Marquis and other mariners* suggests that it was Lord Wycombe's interest in sailing which brought him to Southampton and that it was at Itchen Ferry that he found mariners to instruct him. It was there that he purchased a yacht from the Bryer family and renamed it *Frisk*. It was also perhaps an interest in his ancestry and in particular his great-great-grandfather, William Petty (born in Romsey in 1623, knighted by King Charles II, died in 1687, buried in Romsey Abbey), that encouraged his partiality for the area. It was certainly the town (*Fig 1*), developed into a spa since the discovery of the chalybeate spring, and its convenience for sailing that ensured he chose Southampton when deciding on a more permanent home.



Figure 1. View of Southampton High Street from the Bargate, c. 1810. The tower of the Marquis's castle can be seen on the extreme right.

But why he chose to build on a brownfield site in a cramped area of town rather than in what the guidebook of the time calls “the salubrious environs” is perhaps part of his somewhat quixotic character.



Figure 2. Earl of Wycombe in 1796

Lord Wycombe (Fig 2) - he only became Marquis of Lansdowne on the death of his father in 1805 – was born on 6 December 1765. His mother died in 1771 when he was only five years old, and his younger brother, William, died at the age of nine. His father, Lord Shelburne, who became Marquis of Lansdowne in 1784, went abroad for a long period after his first wife’s death, so it must have been a very lonely childhood. He was thirteen when his father married for a second time in 1779. Lord Shelburne was an able man with a wide range of interests and was a patron of the arts and sciences, but he was not a popular man. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography says “though possessed of great abilities he was wanting in tact, and without any skill in the management of men.” He was what we

would now call a control freak and wanted to direct his son’s life in the manner in which, he the father, planned. Of course, this did not bode well for good relations between the two men and no doubt contributed to some extent to Lord Wycombe’s refusal to follow the political career mapped out for him. *The Times* reported in December 1786 that “[Lord Wycombe] is said to be a young nobleman of very promising talents, and who has, by the judgment and wisdom of his father, been trained and educated in a line that at present bids fair to make him an honour to himself and an advantage to his country.” This prediction was not to be fulfilled. He was Member of Parliament for High Wycombe, he did attend the House of Commons and spoke there occasionally but he spent a considerable time abroad. Indeed he was probably one of the most widely travelled members of Parliament having visited France, Sweden, Spain, Italy and the nascent United States where he met George Washington and could have used these experiences to greater effect.

The Earl chose to travel, to sail (becoming a very hands-on sailor according to Gerald Mornington) and to follow his own interests. *The Times* on 30 July 1792 notes that “Lord Wycombe is now at sea in a cutter of his own, and she is both ably manned and elegantly freighted.” He pursued an enthusiasm for nautical experiments, obviously influenced by Sir William Petty’s invention of a double-bottomed boat. As Lady Betty Craven notes in 1806

“The Marquis of Lansdowne, who was extremely fond of aquatic excursions and delighted in nautical experiments, had prepared a vessel, which he had built at Southampton under the superintendence of a skilful engineer. His Lordship wished to try how the vessel would sail without ballast, it being double bottomed.”

Unfortunately the experiment did not go well and the boat capsized leaving Lady Betty Craven to raise the alarm.

Lady Holland, a friend and correspondent of both father and son commented in 1799: “Arduous would be the attempt to decipher Lord Wycombe’s character. The most predominant feature is the love of singularity.” Another example of his contrary ways is described in this quote from *The Times* written in February 1863 at the time of the death of his half-brother, the third Marquis, “In London he [the second Marquis] was a marked man – remarkable for his disregard of dress, and for the pride he took in appearing on the coldest days in winter without a great coat and without gloves.”

Perhaps the impetus to build something permanent at Southampton was a result of Lord Wycombe meeting Lady Giffard, wife of Sir Duke Giffard, a baronet with an estate in County Meath. This occurred in the later stages of his affair with Mrs Wyndham, wife of Hon. Frederick William Wyndham, British minister in Florence. She had followed Lord Wycombe to Dublin and the affair was a matter of concern to his father. Indeed Mr Wyndham took him to court in 1800 for criminal conversation, a civil suit brought by a husband against the lover for trespass; in short, suing the lover for monetary damages. The case was found non-suited but the anxiety and time taken up with visits to Italy to secure witness statements must have taken their toll. In 1802 Sir Duke Giffard died but his widow and Lord Wycombe did not marry until 1805. The first Marquis had died on 7 May that year and the couple married in London only a few days later. It is possible that they were planning their marriage and their new home in Southampton between 1802 and 1804. Lady Bessborough was perhaps voicing the views of the many when she wrote that the new Marchioness was “a vulgar Irish woman near fifty and larger than Mrs Fitzherbert (at least, this is the account given of her). I suppose it is point d’honneur, for she has liv’d with him publickly as his Mistress for some years past.”

It would be extremely neat if it could be proved that the architect John Plaw was responsible for the design of the castle. John Plaw moved to Southampton in 1797 before emigrating to Canada in 1807. He is said to have designed the Barracks building still standing at the old Ordnance Survey offices in London Road and also planned buildings in Albion Place. Certainly there is mention in deeds and conveyances of “John Plaw, architect, a trustee appointed by the Marquis of Lansdowne”, and it is possible that he and the Marquis were involved together in building plans – perhaps the castle, perhaps Albion Place or other areas in the town. This may account for references in correspondence

concerning the Marquis's gift of the statue of George III in 1809. In August that year, writing to offer the statue to the corporation, the Marquis mentions "the high sense I entertain of the disposition to accommodate me which the gentlemen of the Corporation were pleased to manifest with a reference to my present undertakings." The Town Clerk is instructed to reply

"... the sentiments your Lordship have been pleased to entertain of the disposition manifested by the gentlemen of the Corporation towards you, in reference to your buildings in this Town ... conscious as they are, that in accommodating your Lordship no injury or inconvenience has been sustained by the public."

This suggests that there was a helpful atmosphere in which business matters could be decided to the mutual satisfaction of both the Marquis and the corporation..

One architect who did work for the Marquis was John Linnell Bond, responsible for "a room erected at Southampton Castle for the Marquis of Lansdowne after the manner of the Moorish architecture of Granada." Despite the magnificence of the castle as shown in *Fig. 3*, it did have drawbacks as an anonymous writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in September 1809 states:

"[the castle] is built with brick, covered in white composition. The round tower and upper apartments command a fine view of the Southampton Estuary, the river Itchen and the surrounding country but it has no ground and the base is entirely blocked up with small houses belonging to the poorer inhabitants."

Skelton's Guide notes that the apartments "are more remarkable for their singularity, than for their size, or their magnificence." The kitchen, measuring 39 feet by 20 feet is thought to be "scarcely inferior to that belonging to his grace the duke of Norfolk, at Arundel." There is a "truly Gothic" dining room measuring 40 feet by 20 feet containing a life size portrait of George III in painted glass.

Although the Marquis and Marchioness are reported to be in residence in their castle as early as 1805, it would seem that the building of the castle was work in progress as this quote from the *Observer* in 1809 suggests.

"The Marquis of Lansdowne's Gothic Castle at Southampton, which we cannot help considering as a proof of the wealth rather than the taste of the owner, is carrying on with spirit; and yet we question whether part of the work will last until the whole is finished, another settlement having lately been discovered in the advanced South Wall, and that weighty mass of masonry is prevented, by props, from burying in ruins its beggarly neighbourhood."



Figure 3. Southampton Castle, c. 1806

Even after his death building continued, as was reported in Skelton's Guide in 1815, "In its present state, Southampton Castle must be regarded as an incomplete structure, but very considerable additions are now going forward." Perhaps no architect would wish, from a professional viewpoint, to be associated with a building that appeared already to be in danger of collapse.

Regardless of the castle's state and site the town at least was happy to enjoy the hospitality of the noble couple and to gossip about their activities. Royal patronage had moved elsewhere by the end of the 18th century and the corporation was hoping that visits to his castle by the Marquis would renew Southampton's attractions and, having

made him an honorary burgess, their hopes appeared to be realised when the *Hampshire Chronicle* reported in August 1805, "The vast number of gentry constantly visiting at the Castle, and the spirited conduct of its noble owner, bid fair to be productive of general good to this town." Again according to the *Hampshire Chronicle* the Marquis and his wife attended the races in 1806, "with elegant new carriages and liveries, displayed a most brilliant appearance on the race ground." In August 1807 the *Chronicle* reported that

".. the inhabitants ... were spectators of the grandest illumination that has ever taken place in this town. The Marquis and Marchioness of Lansdowne gave a grand fete.... to a grand assemblage of high life and fashion. The internal appearance of the Castle was beautiful beyond description; the superb windows of stained glass, and the vast number of glass lamps on the outside displayed a very magnificent appearance... as did also the display of the table before supper, the doors having been thrown open for the gratification of the public."

The Marquis in his castle was therefore an economic asset to the town, and welcomed by the corporation.

Unfortunately this happy state of affairs was not to last. The Marquis died on 15 November 1809 at his London house. He had been suffering from a liver complaint for some time and his physicians' prescription of mercury can surely only have hastened his end.. His widow continued to visit Southampton and again it is obvious that work on the castle was still on-going. In October 1811,

Lady Bessborough, perhaps forgetting the acerbic comments she had made at the time of the Marchioness's marriage, wrote that she went "to see the strange house Lord Lansdowne built here". She reports the Marchioness had told her that

"near a hundred houses belong to her and are to be pulled down. It must already have cost many thousands and will many more..... It is however a great ornament to the town which it overtops; the view is as beautiful as a bird's eye view can be, and the rooms are crowded with fine things of every description brought from Lansdowne House".

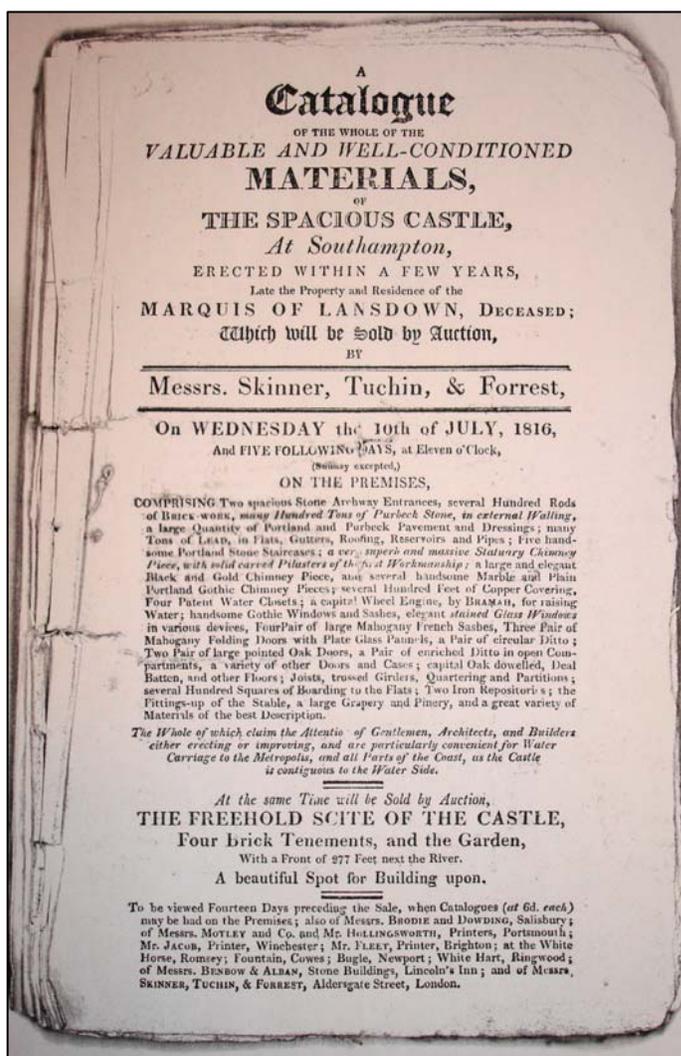


Figure 4. Front page of catalogue for sale of castle, July 1816 Wiltshire & Swindon Archives, 451/226

However, in July 1816 the "valuable and well-conditioned materials of the Spacious Castle at Southampton", which had been "erected at an immense expense", were sold at auction. Lots included a "handsome black and yellow marble solid gothic chimney piece in the Dining Room, a pair of large and capital pointed gothic folding doors 13 feet by 6 feet 2 studded with iron, large lock and key, 4 brass flush bolts with knobs, 2 of ditto 6 feet in length, 2 brass handles, and the large moulded frame with 2 Portland stone plinths and long step between" from the Grand Hall. Also "the very large and handsome carved statuary marble chimney piece of exquisite workmanship, the two 4 feet pilasters in solid statuary 6 inches in diameter, carved in imitation of Roman Fasses, bound together with the battle axe, and covered with

large enriched helmets" in the Drawing Room. Not all lots were of such quality or magnificence. In addition to vast quantities of lead, brickwork, Purbeck and Portland stone, there was the brickwork forming two melon pits in the garden, the

complete erection of the wood and glass forming the Grape House and Pinery, stables, hayloft, icehouse and the “patent water closet and apparatus fitted up in deal with the bason [*sic*], service and soil pipe and cistern lined with lead” in the servants’ quarters.

At the same time the site was to be sold by auction “the Freehold Scite [*sic*] of the Castle, four brick tenements, and the Garden with a front of 277 feet next the river.” The site was eventually sold, the mound lowered slightly and the Zion Chapel erected there in 1823.

Thus the castle was sold for salvage, its material carted away by architects, builders, carpenters and anyone with an eye for a bargain. Some of the brickwork and stonework must have found its way within the town to repair or rebuild houses. However, it is possible that some identifiable items may still be found in the vicinity. Hamble Cliff House is situated on the shores of Southampton Water just below what is now the Victoria Country Park. According to P. Campion in *A Recent History of Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset* published as part of the Wessex Series in c1923, it was built in 1809, “The stone used in the construction of the house, the massive Gothic design oak doors and the rare examples of mullioned windows and tracery are all of an earlier date than 1809 and were probably brought from Southampton Castle.” It is possible that the materials came from what was left of the original castle. However, looking at Hamble Cliff House it is easy to picture the stone windows with their gothic pointed tracery as coming rather from the salvage sale, in which case the 1809 date would seem to be incorrect.

Another possible piece of architectural salvage from the castle may have found its way to Romsey. In the proceedings of the Southampton Rambling Club in 1913 Mrs Suckling, local historian, took members round Romsey and reported “Mr Curtis allowed his garden to be seen. It stands on a portion of the site of the Abbey paradise. One of the windows in the house came from Southampton Castle.” According to Kelly’s directory of 1915 Josiah Curtis, glove and gaiter maker occupied 6 Church Street. It is now the Marie Curie Cancer Shop and it is possible the window referred to stands behind the till.

The block of flats, Castle House, now stands on the site of the Marquis’s castle. Its inhabitants must enjoy the same views as did the Marquis in the rooms and towers of his home. It is tempting to wonder what would have happened had not the Marquis died so young. It is doubtful that the castle was structurally strong enough to survive for many years. Its building seems to be at one with the Marquis’s idiosyncratic nature and would surely have become a white elephant before too long. Nevertheless, the castle and its owner and family must have proved a great, if only short-lived, ornament and interest to the town.