

Richard Preston

The Baths on the Beach, 1826-46

The impressive neo-Classical baths on the Beach in Southampton, opened in 1826 and known for most of their short life as the Royal Gloucester Subscription Baths, are among the most transient of Southampton buildings (figure 1). Demolished in 1846, they are a classic example of a building out of its time and in the wrong location. They are one of a series of ambitious projects in the mid 1820s to tame the Mudlands on the southern edge of the town, capitalizing on the contemporary building boom and the euphoric, if doomed, attempts to redefine the town as a watering place to rival Brighton and Weymouth.

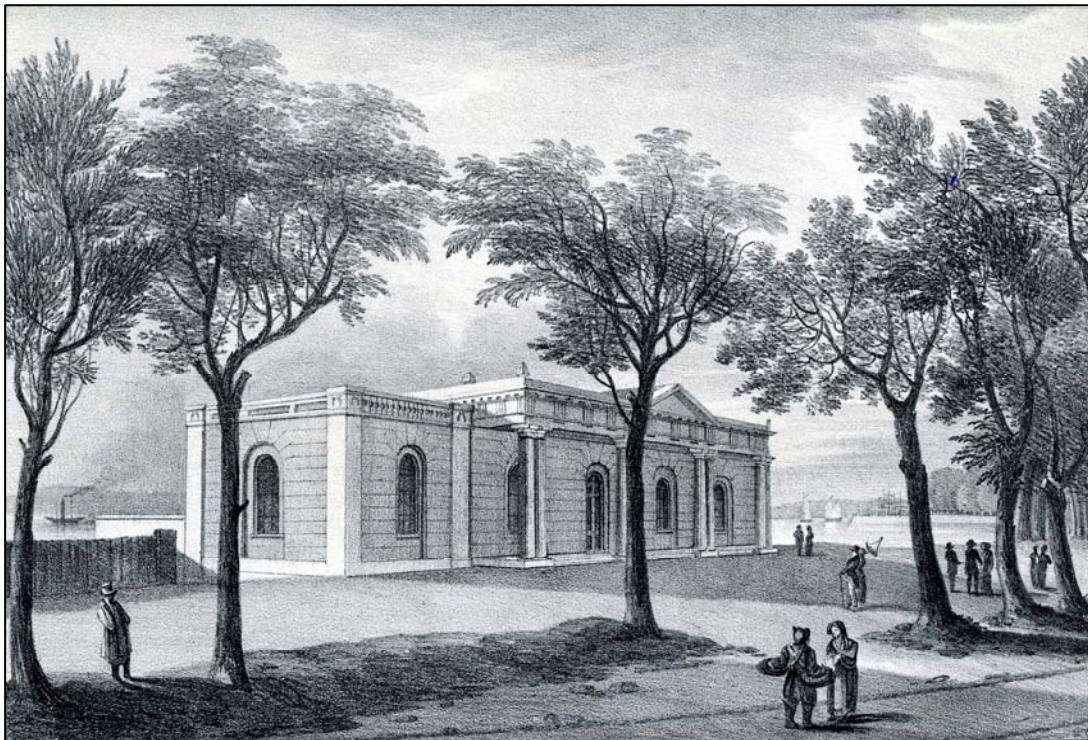


Figure 1. *Public baths Southampton*. Drawn by R Scrutton; printed by Engelmann, Graf, Coindet and Co of Soho; published by H Buchan, 1827

Earlier projects largely involved the creation of floating baths beyond low water mark, allowing sea bathing at all states of the tide. An abortive subscription was set up in September 1822 by a Mr Le May to build floating bathing machines at the end of the breakwater, at the bottom of Bugle Street. Consent was given by the Southampton Harbour Commissioners, but only on condition that it did not prevent them using the breakwater as a ballast quay. A more audacious scheme, backed by a subscription of £25 per share, was started in April 1824. The committee consisted mainly of local tradesmen and businessmen: Edward Rudd, grocer and tea dealer of Above Bar; Samuel Chaplin, grocer and tea dealer of High Street; Thomas Shaw, wine merchant of West Street; Charles Barker, merchant of High Street; Daniel Brooks, architect and builder of Orchard Place; John King of Marland Place; Mr Arthur, proprietor of a school in the Polygon; and, possibly the most active member, Joseph Clark, junior, hatter of High Street who had extensive shipping interests as the owner of vessels in the coal trade, and the managing owner of both the *George IV*,

one of the first Isle of Wight steam packets, and the *Lord Beresford*, the second steamer to run between Southampton and the Channel Islands. Chaplin, Shaw, Baker and King were all Harbour Commissioners. Chairman of the committee was William Chamberlayne, MP for the borough and lead figure in the projected development of Southampton as a watering place. The project attracted two rival plans. The first, accepted, plan by John Doswell Doswell, surveyor to the Harbour Commissioners and to Southampton Corporation, was on the same principles as that of 1822. He planned to place his floating baths at the end of a jetty - overlain with a promenade and carriage road - extending some 300 yards southward from the Platform until it reached low water mark. A mud wall was to be built from the end of the causeway to the corner of the Beach, enclosing an area of 20 acres. The head of water from this would, he believed, keep the outer point of the causeway free of accretions. The jetty would also serve as a landing stage for passengers, obviating the need for those disembarking to wade ankle-deep in mud at low tide. The estimated cost was over £7000. A second, rejected, proposal, by Thomas Dyson (1771-1852) then of Chichester, came from a different tradition. Part of a pioneering family of civil engineers, Thomas had between 1818 and 1821 been joint contractor for the ill-fated Portsmouth and Arundel Canal, incorporating the Chichester Ship Canal opened in 1823. His plan was for a deep basin 60 yards wide and about half a mile long to be excavated parallel to the Beach and about 100 yards inland. The soil taken out of the basin was to form a wide and commodious road alongside. The basin was to be kept pure by sluices at the ends nearest to the Itchen and the Quay, receiving and discharging the water. The width of the basin was to be increased annually by taking away large quantities of gravel for ballast. The estimated expense was between £4000 and £5000.

The parameters of the accepted scheme were profoundly altered by the decision two months later to connect the floating baths with the Platform not by a conventional jetty but by a chain pier on the catenary principle. Inspiration came from the chain pier designed by Captain (later Sir) Samuel Brown at Brighton, opened in November 1823. Projecting nearly 1200 feet into the sea, it was a landmark on the Brighton seafront for over 80 years until destroyed by storm in December 1896. The Southampton pier, to extend 750 feet from the Platform, was on a similar plan. Captain Brown - engaged as consultant - estimated its cost at £6500. Two floating baths - part of Doswell's original plan although he had provided no precise specifications - were to be moored at the extremity of the pier, in the full stream. One for each sex, they were to have gratings at each end and perforated bottoms in order to afford a constant supply of running water. A new feature was the building, on dry land either side of the entrance to the pier, of six handsome marble baths - offering vapour, fumigating and shower facilities - and a refreshment room. Two parallel subscriptions - for the chain pier and for the warm and cold baths - were set up. A Corporation lease of the required land was granted in July 1824, and legal advice taken as to the need for an Act of Parliament. Promises of support however, and an artificial optimism promoted through the local press, could not hide the fact that subscriptions were disappointingly low. Not even the assurance of William Chamberlayne - holder of shares costing over £400 - that he would take up any unsold shares rather than risk the abandonment of the scheme could save the subscription. By November 1824 the scheme was, almost literally, dead in the water. The *Southampton Herald* could not resist a pun: "A wag remarked, the other day, that the projected

baths were all vapour, and the Suspension Chain Pier Company, having *suspended* their engagement, were a *Pierless* Company."

The scheme for warm and cold baths was resurrected in early 1825, an integral part of an ambitious plan to improve the Beach made essential after a calamitous gale on the night of 22 November 1824 had washed away most of its gravel and caused Henry VIII's brass cannon, then on the Platform, to sink into an immense cavity. A subscription for improvements was set up in January 1825. Its aims were "to reduce the offensive accumulation of mud on the flat shore, to deepen the water so that the tide will seldom be out, to slope the embankment to prevent a recurrence of the late destruction" and "to extend the promenade from the Platform to the south-east point of the Beach". The subscription lists were headed by William Chamberlayne. Plans and estimates were prepared gratuitously by Daniel Brooks. On the back of this, the subscription for the new baths - at £10 per share - was revived. Events moved inexorably forward. A Corporation lease, with the restrictive covenant that the buildings were only to be used for baths in order to prevent the economic development of this pristine area of seafront, was obtained. The building tender of Daniel Brooks was accepted in March 1825. A new site - midway between the Platform and Canute's Point - was finally agreed in June. Excavations began in July on a new channel to convey salt water to the baths - "an attempt to confine the tidal waters of Southampton in a hole made in the beach". The corner stone was laid by Edward Rudd on 13 September. An embankment for enclosing the water was completed in April 1826, and the baths themselves opened in November 1826, the cost of build being over £800. A seamless chronology that hides the fact that suspension of work on the improvement of the Beach in October 1825 - when funds ran out - had undermined the very viability of the new baths. It left them isolated, connected to the Platform to the west not by a spacious tree-lined roadway but by an exposed, salt-sprayed and unmade path in, as the *Southampton Herald* (20 November 1826) put it, a "dreadfully dilapidated state": to "the laugh of visitors, and the disgrace of the inhabitants" (anonymous letter of 16 October 1826 to the *Herald*).

The new baths - or *Thermae* - were splendidly neo-Classical. The *Southampton Herald* described them as a handsome, chaste Grecian edifice, with an elegant portico on fluted stone Doric columns. The interior comprised a grand promenade room, eight bath rooms each elegantly fitted up with marble baths, twelve dressing rooms for the plunge bath, furnace rooms (a fault in which nearly destroyed the building by fire in February 1827) and bath keepers' apartments. They were to the designs of George Draper. It was one of three local commissions he undertook in 1827, complementing the rebuilding of St Nicholas's Church, Millbrook (contract signed in January) and the addition of the rather overpowering "modern-antique tower" on the south-east wing of Netley Fort for William Chamberlayne. Draper was a prolific architect, originally of London but now of Chichester. His work is characterized by Howard Colvin (*A biographical dictionary of British architects, 1600-1840*, 4th edition, 2008) as in either "a somewhat old-fashioned Georgian style" or "the Gothic of the day". The baths fit into the first tradition, in the same classical mode as Chichester Infirmary (later the Royal West Sussex Hospital and now flats), on which he was working contemporaneously, the rebuilt St Bartholomew Church, Chichester (1828) and the Eyre Coote column in the grounds of West Park, Rockbourne, near Fordingbridge (1827). Other works include St Mary the Virgin, Littlehampton (1826), St Mary, Sennicoats (1829), West Dean vicarage, Sussex (1833), Iron Acton rectory,

Gloucestershire (1831/2), Goodwood race stand (1830) and the Egyptian-style monument to Sir Harry Burnard Neale at Walhampton near Lymington (1841). Draper exhibited drawings of the Southampton baths at the Royal Academy in 1827. No expense seems to have been spared in the construction. Building materials, including the heavy stone used for the foundations, were brought in by sea, using the newly-cut tidal channel to deposit them directly on the building site. Temporary workshops and mess house were erected for the masons. The fact that the trees in Scrutton's drawing appear to be newly planted suggests an element of landscaping. They were probably supplied from the nursery of W H Rogers, who had earlier provided trees to line the promenade to the west.

The new baths were in emulation of the finest baths in Cheltenham. The first superintendent, Mr J Trinder, himself came from that town. Not further identified, he is likely to have been related to the William Trinder, proprietor of the Regent Baths in Cheltenham, who became insolvent in February 1830. The opening advertisement (first printed in the *Southampton Herald* of 13 November 1826) listed the services on offer, with their price: Medicated Vapour and Shampooing Bath (5s), Sulphur Vapour Bath (5s), Sulphur Water Bath (5s.6d), Warm Bath (3s) - with 1 guinea subscriptions for eight -, Warm Shower Bath (2s), Cold Shower Bath (1s), Private Tepid or Buxton Bath (5s), Private Tepid or Usset Bath (5s), Whooptong or Paste Bath (7s), Hip Bath (1s), Small Slipper Bath (1s), Large Public Swimming Bath (1s). Attendance for the warm bath was an extra 6d and shampooing 1s. There was a News Room, taking provincial and London newspapers, and a Promenade Room which doubled as a reading room and, in season, a concert room. Southampton guide books were rather late in picking up the new baths, but when they did the eulogistic exaggerations flowed. To Thomas Baker in his *Southampton guide* of 1829, they "combined the *utile et dulce* of bathing in a remarkable degree". William Palin, in *The new Southampton guide* published the same year, thought the baths "perhaps not surpassed by any watering-place in England". Lengthy essays on the relative benefits of warm and cold bathing were introduced into the guides. There was a committee of management, with Joseph Clark junior as managing director: a post he held simultaneously with the managing directorship of the Itchen Floating Bridge Company.

A change of proprietor in June 1829 led to far more aggressive marketing, suggesting that take-up had been less than anticipated. The new proprietor, Thomas Hoystrop, was an entrepreneur through and through. Not yet 30 years old, he had started in the grocery trade and was, at the time he purchased the baths, an estate, house, yacht and general commission agent and accountant. Leasing his shop and house at 3 Bernard Street, and selling his furniture and effects, he moved with his wife (Elizabeth Rumming Hoystrop, daughter of a Wiltshire farmer) and four children into the domestic accommodation at the baths. He immediately rebranded the establishment as the Royal Gloucester Baths and Promenade Room. The implied connection with William Frederick, 2nd Duke of Gloucester ("Silly Billy") - reinforced by the use of the royal cipher at the head of his advertisements - was doubtless spurious, although the Duke was an honorary burgess of the borough. An advertising war was begun with the newly-refurbished Long Rooms, a rival supplier of warm and cold baths much nearer the centre of the town. The baths were available 24 hours a day. Hoystrop's advertisements appealed to modern susceptibilities and expectations. To quote the original advertisement first run on 8 August 1829:

"Hot, cold, shower, and the only medicated, vapour, and shampooing baths in the south west of England.

These beautiful and elegant baths have been fitted up at an immense expense. The hot baths are of solid marble, and fitted up in the most modern manner with convenient dressing and waiting rooms. Each bath supplied with at least 100 gallons of pure Sea Water. The shower baths are on a new and improved principle, by which the force and quantity of water can be regulated and made to any degree of heat. The medicated, vapour, and shampooing baths since their introduction into this country have so often superseded Medical Assistance in a variety of disorders attending the human body, particularly the most inveterate Scrofula and skin diseases, rashes, eruptions, gouty and rheumatic affections, stiff joints, and all those disorders dependent on a morbid circulation of blood, yield to the influence of these celebrated Baths.

The valuable assistance the Proprietor has acquired combined with his own personal attention, he flatters himself, these superior baths may be raised to that scale of eminence, to which they are so justly entailed.

The *Royal Gloucester Promenade and Subscription Rooms* will continue to be regularly supplied with the London morning and evening papers, the *Weekly Court Journal*, and provincial news, &c.

Refreshments provided, and may be had at the Bar at moderate charges ...

The ladies' baths are under the immediate attention of Mrs Hoystrop."

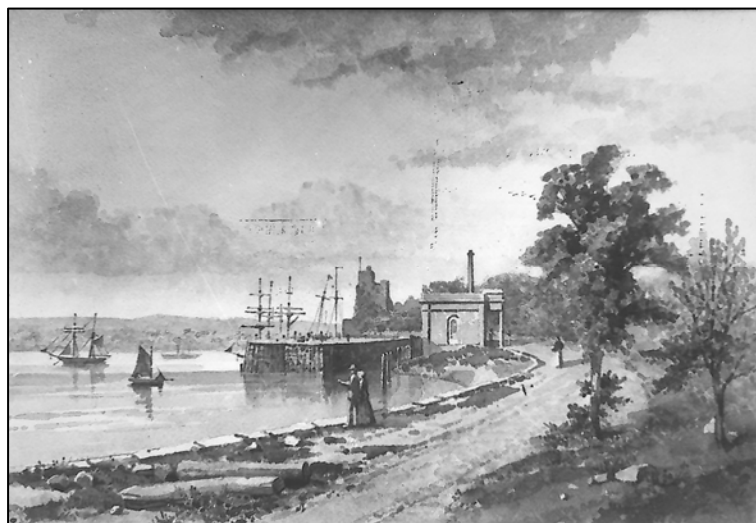


Figure 2. The Subscription Baths viewed from the east, c.1830

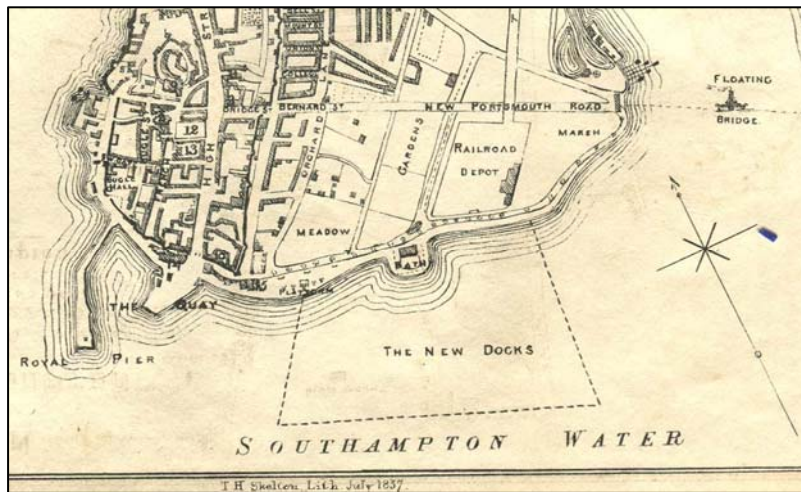
New services were introduced. 'Portable warm sea water baths', made to any desired temperature and conveyed to all parts of the town on the same plan as in London, Brighton and Paris, were advertised in September 1829. The availability of strong and pure sea-water in people's houses would "obviate all the

trouble of oftentimes making a useless Fresh-water Bath". The Promenade Room hosted social events designed to attract the *elite* of the town and neighbourhood. Select quadrille parties were organized for both winter and summer seasons: the room brilliantly lit, with comfortable fires in winter, "a choice band", tea and coffee, wines and fruit. Speciality concerts were organized, such as "Signor Valentini, Professor of the Harmonica Mandoline and his son, the incomparable Ventriloquist, from Venice" in June 1830. Ice creams and other refreshments were available in the lobby.

Visitors in the first month of Hoystrop's tenure included the Marchioness of Westmeath, sister to the Marquis of Salisbury whose extra-marital affairs had been the talk of society, the Marquis of Douro, elder son and heir of the Duke of Wellington, and Lord Ashtown of Chessel House. But any new momentum quickly subsided as a deteriorating economic crisis, fuelled by bank failures, the rival claims

of such mud-free south coast resorts as Brighton and Weymouth and the physical isolation of the baths took their inexorable toll. The side view reproduced as figure 2 shows the poor state of access. The baths were mortgaged to John Bill, chemist of Oxford Street, London on 18 June 1830. The exhibition in December 1831 of a floating model of a patent steam vessel, with no projecting paddle wheels or cases, suggests a search for new streams of income. Hoyland had applied a month earlier to the committee of management to be released from his covenants, possibly a ruse to force a reduction in his rent. A year later - in June 1832 - he finally left, to become a grocer in Godfrey's Town. He died in July 1833, aged 33 years, his widow recorded the following year as a beer retailer in the same suburb. The baths disappear from local directories and guides in the early 1830s, although any precise chronology of disuse is impossible. The end however is clinically demarcated.

Plans to build new docks in Southampton in 1836 made the baths, so long on the periphery, the pivot around which the projected development hinged. Any chance of survival rested on the land remaining in corporation ownership. James Whitchurch and Joseph Hill, members of the town council with land on the River Itchen capable of being made into rival docks, urged that the corporation should reserve to itself the frontage from the Crosshouse to the Platform. Let as buildings, this they forecast could produce £9600 over the course of twenty years. The baths would be converted into a hotel, for which the baths company would be glad to pay an increased rent of £100 *per annum*. Lack of local support freed the Southampton Docks Company to apply for the block of land it originally sought which, as figure 3 illustrates,



threatened to engulf and to annihilate the baths. The land earmarked for the docks incorporated three corporation leases. Two insignificant leases were quickly purchased: a series of oyster coves for £100 and 50 acres of mudland granted to

Figure 3. Detail from a plan of Southampton drawn and lithographed by T H Skelton, July 1837

the late William Lintott for £400. The lease to the baths, granted unconditionally by the corporation and with over 80 years unexpired, was more formidable. The bath shareholders flexed what muscles they had. A petition was presented in April 1836 to the House of Commons committee considering the Southampton Docks Bill, praying for compensation of £8000. The committee chairman James

Barlow Hoy (a former Southampton MP) ruled that it was a matter for a jury rather than for the committee: a decision which may not have stood had the shareholders been able to afford counsel to argue their case. The shareholders later proposed that

each side appoint a surveyor to assess and agree the true value of the lease. The docks committee instead unilaterally appointed Mr Gover, who had recently reassessed the town's rateable value, as surveyor. The shareholders agreed to abide by his decision. His valuation of £5680, however, was more than the docks company were prepared to pay. The final payment for their leasehold interest, imposed by *force majeure* in mid 1838, was £4896.12s.1d. The price included purchase of the building. Joseph Leggins, chairman of the dock company, recorded with pleasure in August that the Gloucester Bath Company had come to a fair and amicable agreement without recourse being had to any legal proceedings. Many in Southampton were less sanguine. Daniel Brooks spoke of the "rapaciousness of the company" in a Town Council debate in April 1838: "In the commencement of the Dock Company the Bath Shareholders, in their conferences with the Dock Directors, had been assured by them that the Bath Shareholders would be treated with the utmost liberality, but the result had been of the very opposite character". The furniture and equipment of the baths was sold at auction in December 1838 for £226.11s. This included: large size Brussels carpet, mahogany loo and writing tables, capital office desk, sofas, mahogany and imitation rosewood chairs, japan dressing and wash tables and chairs, handsome four-burner lamp and octagonal lamp, dial clock, brass mounted fenders and sets fire irons, shower bath and mangle. The baths company was wound up in April 1840. A final dividend of £1.11s. per share was declared in December 1840: a significant loss on the original price of £10 per share. The final act was overseen by Joseph Clark junior, still managing director and by now also a sharebroker. The *Hampshire Independent* ironically talked of "fortunate adventurers".

Now reduced to a shell, the buildings had one last stay of execution. They were converted - at a cost of £71.5s.6d. for repairs and fittings - into a temporary dock house, used until a permanent dock house was built in 1849 to the east. It served as the office of the general superintendent and secretary of the docks, George Saintsbury: incidentally, based there when his second son George Edward Saintsbury - later to find fame as a literary scholar and historian - was born in October 1845. It also served as a police station (the 1841 census shows the domestic accommodation occupied by two docks policemen and their families), a temporary morgue, a church mission to workmen, dining rooms and a vantage point for dock ceremonies. Part of the building was leased to the Royal West Indies Mail Steam Packet Company in November 1841 for their Southampton office after the company had made the port their home station. The death knell of the former bath's building was sounded in October 1846 with the government announcement that a new customs house was to be built on the site. Demolition began almost immediately. A month later new foundations had been laid, with over fifty men employed on the work. A burst of activity clearly designed to pre-empt opposition to a move that threatened to divert trade from the Quay to a new economic hub centred on the docks and the railway terminus, both under London rather than Southampton control. The mayor, W J Le Feuvre and councillor for the ward of Holy Rood which stood to lose most by the move, led the insurgency: "He had been one of their [the Dock Company's] earliest shareholders and he should mark his sense of their conduct by getting out of the undertaking as soon as he could. They had committed an aggression upon the town which he could neither forget nor forgive" (March 1847). The core of their argument was that the original corporation lease forbade further building on the site, and that when the Bath Company let the land to the Dock Company they could not bestow any more rights than they had received. A prohibition that was reinforced by

the stipulation in the first Southampton Dock Act that the company could erect no buildings in the docks. The second dock act, for the completion of the graving dock, in 1845 however allowed for customs accommodation. Originally intended only for the business transacted at the docks, the government widened the interpretation to incorporate a customs house serving the whole port. It was a *fait accompli*. The new customs house was opened in June 1847. Occupied by the Customs for 44 years, the building later became Union Castle House and is now flats. J P M Pannell (*Old Southampton shores*, 1967) argued that some of the original stonework is still incorporated in the building.

The engraving of the baths as seen from Southampton Water, made by Robert Mimpriss, published in 1827 by Henry Buchan and reproduced below as figure 4, is a fitting tailpiece to this essay on the transience of glory. It both emphasises the impact the building had on the southern approaches to the town and encapsulates the spirit of the age. Robert Mimpriss was a drawing master recently established in New Road, set to become one of the most zealous and influential religious educators of the early/mid Victorian age and worthy of an entry in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Henry Buchan, decorator and painter, set up the County of Hants Picture Gallery in his High Street premises in July 1827, soon to become a centre for artistic talent. Mimpriss was one of the original subscribers. Engelmann, Graf, Coindet and Co of Dean Street, Soho, had set up the previous year as the London branch of one of the most influential continental firms of lithographers founded earlier in the century by Godefroy Engelmann. And the Baths themselves, a crowning glory but demolished within two decades, and functioning in their original purpose for no more than a quarter of that time.

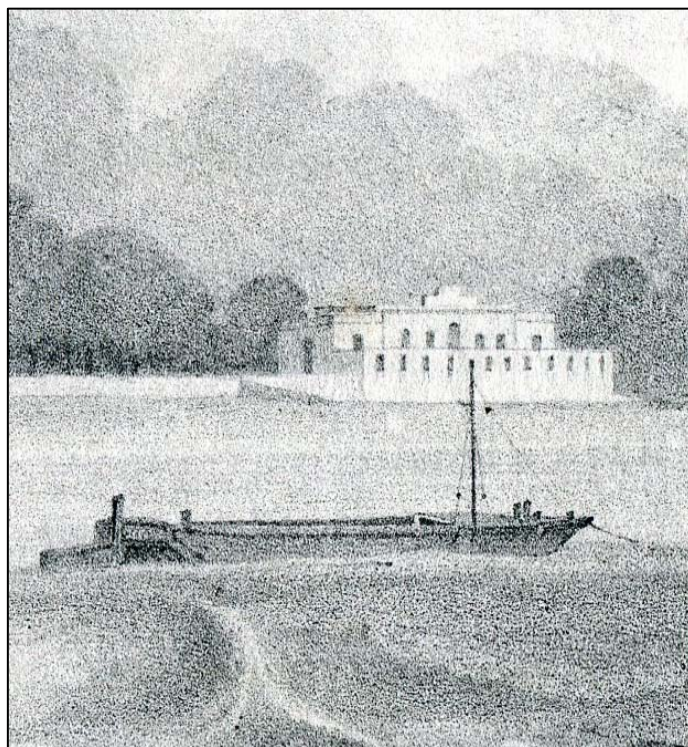


Figure 4. Enlargement from *A view of Southampton from the water*. Drawn on stone by Robert Mimpriss: printed by Engelmann, Graf, Coindet: published by H Buchan, 1827

Southampton Local History Forum

Sources of illustrations

Figure 1. Local Studies Library, Southampton Central Library: oversize illustrations collection, folder 6

Figure 2. Portcities Southampton, no.1737

Figure 3. Reproduced as the frontispiece to *The visitant's guide to Southampton and Netley Abbey*, 1837

Figure 4. Local Studies Library, Southampton Central Library: oversize illustrations collection, folder 6

This is a revised and extended version of the article “Royal Gloucester Subscription Baths” which first appeared in *The Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum*, no.8, Autumn 1999.