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John Plaw, John Kent and John Taylor: three late-18<sup>th</sup>/early-19<sup>th</sup> century Southampton architects

The following short biographical sketches were written for the forthcoming online *A-Z of Southampton's History* and were intended to be stand-alone articles (editor).

### **John Plaw**

John Plaw is one of the most original and frustratingly elusive architects of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. He practised as an architect in Southampton between *c.* 1795 and 1807. John Plaw was baptized at St Mary's, Putney on 8 January 1745. Apprenticed to the Tylers' and Bricklayers' Company in London at the age of thirteen, he was by 1763 - when only eighteen years old - described as an "architect and master builder in Westminster" (*Oxford dictionary of national biography*). Little of his architectural work survives - the most famous being the idiosyncratic house on Belle Island in Lake Windermere designed for Thomas English in 1774-5 and the church of St Mary, Paddington, built 1788-91 in the form of a Greek cross. It is for a series of three pattern books that he is chiefly remembered: *Rural architecture* (1785), *Ferme ornee, or rural improvements* (1795) and *Sketches for country houses, villas, and rural dwellings, calculated for persons of moderate income, and for comfortable retirement* (1800). Each went through many editions. These were pioneering works, and did much to popularize both the growing taste for the picturesque and the use of rustic and vernacular building materials.

John Plaw and his wife Mary (*nee* Burrough who he had married in 1768) left London to settle in Southampton in about 1795. He was then fifty years of age, a well-known name in architectural circles and with connections in the county. *Ferme ornee* (published 1795) includes illustrations and descriptions of designs for entrance gates, fishing lodge, keeper's dwelling and domed bath-house (complete with shower bath fed by warm water from a nearby brew house in the garden) for John Morant of Brockenhurst House. This probably relates to the redesign of the estate by William Eames and John Webb commissioned in 1793 and abandoned on Morant's death in March 1794 (Gill Hedley and Adrian Rance, *Pleasure grounds: the gardens and landscapes of Hampshire*, 1987). The authors of *Hampshire: Winchester and the north* (the Buildings of England series) published in 2010 suggest that Houghton Lodge, an exquisite Gothick *cottage ornee* overlooking the River Test near Stockbridge and dated to *c.* 1786-90, might be by John Plaw. The attribution is also made by Geoffrey Tyack in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*.

Plaw became involved in two major building speculations almost immediately on his arrival in Southampton: the development of Albion Place and of Brunswick Place. Three lots of land on the west side of the High Street, opposite the new All Saints Church completed two years earlier, had been sold at auction on 30 August 1794. These were the former gardens of the Reverend John Hoadly, rector of St Mary's and chancellor of the diocese of Winchester, and had come on the market following the death of his widow - Elizabeth Hoadly - and the settlement of a subsequent case in Chancery involving her nephew the Reverend Robert Ashe, vicar of Eling (*Ashe v Keate*). Plaw's designs for the newly-named Albion Place - "a perfect *rus in urbe*" - are described in detail in *The Universal British directory* (volume 4, compiled 1795/6). The principal street, forty feet wide and with paved footways, was to be a mixture of eight houses of Grecian

character on the north side and ten houses in the Venetian style on the south side. A further ten houses were to be built on the approaches. The views over Southampton Water towards the New Forest were expected to be “truly picturesque”. The extremity of the principal street was reserved as a public terrace and “a bastion [?Catchcold Tower] with a pleasure-seat for the use of the inhabitants and their friends, each inhabitant to be furnished with a key” (for which, according to an 1807 auction catalogue, the tenants paid 2s 6d annually). The catalogue relates to a sale of four properties in Albion Place on 8 April. Lot 1 was a recently-built house “leading in to Albion Place now in Plaw’s possession”: an occupation confirmed by All Saints rate books. The house contained “6 rooms, 2 rooms on each floor, the 2 best rooms about 15 feet square, and neatly finished, a dry cellar, the house fit for the immediate reception of a small genteel family” (*Salisbury Journal*, 23 March 1807). It is possible that Plaw’s work in Albion Place melds into the development of the castle and its precincts by the Marquis of Lansdowne. An indenture of 21 June 1805 (Southampton City Archives D/MH 2/46/1), by which Lansdowne acquired four messuages and land on the east side of Castle Lane, named Plaw as a trustee appointed by the



Figure 1. Section of the 1845/46 Town Map showing Albion Place

Marquis (see Jean Watts, ‘The Marquis of Lansdowne and his castle in Southampton’ in *Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum*, no.16, Winter 2010). A plan of Albion Place in 1845/6 is shown as figure 1. The land on which Brunswick Place was later built – bordering on the

southern edge of the gardens of Bellevue House at the upper end of the Marlands - had been leased for potential development in 1792 by a local auctioneer, John Simpkins. Eighteen houses were planned which, when completed, were expected to form "a very desirable, healthy, and pleasant situation, and a great acquisition to the visitants of Southampton" (*Universal British directory*, 1795/6). Building lots were leased by Simpkins in 1801, the lessees including John Plaw (Southampton City Archives D/MW/64/1/3), but development was slow. Nothing had been built by 1804 (Thomas Baker, *Southampton guide*). The terrace shown as figure 2 is among the earliest building on the site. Plaw was simultaneously engaged on a government contract to build a cavalry barracks near Belle Vue, on a healthy gravelly site of about two acres. A "neat plain building", the barracks were for "the accommodation of a troop of horse, officers house, guard-room, farriery, foraging-shed, and suttlng-house [canteen], with a spacious yard inclosed by a wall" (*Universal British directory*, 1795/6). The barracks were later demolished and the site became headquarters of the Ordnance Survey on its transference from London.



Figure 2. The central section of Brunswick Place, photograph 1941

A E Richardson, an authority on English domestic classicism and soon to be professor of architecture at University College, London, gives two further attributions within the town: houses in Cumberland Place (figure 3) and Bugle House on Bugle Street (A E R, 'The architecture of Southampton' in *Architectural Review*, February 1919, pages 32 and 35). The later – now 53 Bugle Street and home to the Southampton and Fareham Chamber of Commerce – he describes as "built to accommodate a retired sea dog". Records of Plaw's other architectural work whilst at Southampton are sporadic and often equally enigmatic. Designs for a house at Warrens for George Eyre on his Bramshaw estate are held in Hampshire Archives and Local Studies (COPY/745/57: letter of 6 April 1799, with two elevations and two floor plans). An

advertisement for the sale of a house “on the side of a hill near the church at West Cowes”, naming Plaw as architect, appears in the *Salisbury Journal*, 15 July 1799. His *Sketches for country houses*, published in May 1800, add as putative or completed works a small farm house in the New Forest, a building lately erected near Lymington, a situation near the Bursledon [Hamble] river, a summer retreat on an elevated spot at East Cowes, a situation near Titchfield, “a small house I have lately built for a gentleman in the New Forest” and a design in contemplation on the banks of Southampton Water.



Figure 3. Cumberland Place. Photograph from the *Architectural Review*, February 1919

John Plaw and his wife lived for over a decade at Spring Place, in the settlement of Hill, just over the western border of Southampton in the parish of Millbrook. He was appointed second lieutenant in the Loyal Southampton Volunteer Infantry on 31 March 1799, a corps that comprised the social elite of the town. Major William Tinling, Captain Frederick Breton and First Lieutenants William Lintott and John Keele were fellow officers. He was gazetted first lieutenant on Lintott's promotion to captain on 14 January 1800. The "many services he [Plaw] had rendered the Corps" were marked on the unit's disbandment in May 1802 by the unanimous request that he "favor them with his portrait". It was to be executed, *gratis*, by an artist member of the volunteers and was to be deposited in the Long Room of the Blue Boar Inn kept by Sergeant Major Cotterell (*Salisbury Journal*, 31 May 1802). Plaw did not rejoin the corps on its revival the following year.

Plaw left Southampton in 1807 "discouraged and disappointed in his art ... which he loved and laboured to promote" (*Repository of Arts*, new series, 14, 1822, quoted by Geoffrey Tyack in *Oxford dictionary of national biography*). His household furniture and other effects were sold at auction on 9 April (the day after the sale of the Albion Place properties) consequent on his "going abroad". He emigrated, with his wife, sister and nephew, to Canada, setting up as an architect in Prince Edward Island. There he died on 24 May 1820. He has an entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian national biography online*. Plaw left behind a string of creditors. He was declared bankrupt in 1809 (*London Gazette*, 18 November 1809). The fact that Plaw's final examination (30 December) followed so closely on the date (4 December) that he was required to surrender himself suggests that the proceedings was conducted *in absentia*. His interests were represented by Charles Pitt, a surveyor and architect who in August 1809 had opened a house and estate agency in Above Bar. It was Pitt to whom creditors had to report in September 1809 and to whom bills drawn on Plaw were submitted (eg an unpaid Prince Edward Island bill for £87.18s dated 19 December 1808: *Southampton notarial protest books 1756-1810*, ed Geoffrey Hampson, 1973). It was Pitt, as Plaw's attorney, who witnessed a parish apprenticeship indenture dated 11 August 1809 whereby Henry Chissell, aged 11 years and a poor child of Lymington parish, became apprentice to "John Plaw of Charlotte Town, Prince Edward Island, North America, artisan" (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 42M75/PO1/135): a transaction both intriguing and inexplicable. The two architects had been neighbours in Spring Place (Pitt is recorded there in June 1803) and both had diversified into the house agency business, Plaw acting for clients wishing to purchase property in Titchfield (October 1804) and in the neighbourhood of Southampton (June 1805). It was a business he resurrected in Canada. An advertisement in the London-based *Morning Chronicle*, 26 July 1809, from Plaw as "Assistant Surveyor-General, Prince Edward Island", offers his services to those wishing to buy land in the province. Charles Pitt (now described as statuary and surveyor) followed Plaw into bankruptcy in January 1811 and later that year was involved in a series of court cases following a land deal that went bad. The opposition barrister thought "the whole business was as pure a piece of rascality as ever disgraced, by discussion, a Court of justice. It was all a trick, a fraud, an endeavour to put his right hand into the pocket of his employers [the vendors], and his left into the pocket of his unfortunate dupe [the putative buyer]" (*The Times* 7 September 1811).

### **John Kent**

John Kent, builder, architect and surveyor, is first recorded in Southampton in a directory of 1783/4. He is mainly known for three important domestic commissions: Chessel House, Leigh House and Poultons. None of these houses now survives. Chessel House (figure 4) was built for David Lance in 1796 on the east bank of the River Itchen. It is described in a sales notice of July 1840 as "based upon the Grecian order of architecture ... happily adapted from a Roman villa" (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 18 July 1840). Leigh House, in Havant parish, was rebuilt for William Garrett in 1802. The attribution of Chessel House to Kent comes largely from *Notices of the Leigh Park Estate, near Havant*, written in 1836 by its then owner, Sir George Thomas Staunton: Leigh House "was considerably enlarged, and indeed almost completely rebuilt under the direction of Mr Kent, an architect of Southampton, who built Chessel House, and some other residences in the neighbourhood" (quoted in Derek Gladwyn, *Leigh Park: a 19<sup>th</sup> century pleasure ground*, 1992). An 1819 sales catalogue (also quoted by Gladwyn) describes the elaborate internal arrangements: a "very handsome" central entrance hall 21 feet in diameter with niches for sculptures; six main rooms off the hall - including an oval-shaped "noble reception

room" - entered through elliptical arches; and a "geometrical staircase handsomely stuccoed with fluted doric columns" leading to eight principal and eight servant's bedrooms. The front elevations of both Chessel House and Leigh Houses show a remarkable similarity. The condition of Leigh House, in particular the pervasiveness of dry rot, was questioned in a three-day trial in the Vice-Chancellor's Court in February/March 1819. It followed complaints about the condition of the house by its new purchaser John Julius Angerstein. In evidence, John Kent "admitted a decay to exist in the cellars, which he called a sap-rot, occasioned more by air being excluded from the cellars, and the house being built on a quick sand". He estimated that the defects could be repaired for £500 (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 8 March 1819). Paultons, near Ower, was remodelled for Hans Sloane between 1805 and 1807 (contracts for the work are in Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 46M48/352-354). Arthur Oswald (*Country Life*, 17 September 1938) refers to a circular top lit hall as a rotunda off which the principal rooms open [a version of the lofty dome which was a feature of Leigh House] and talks of "his [John Kent's] fondness for the fret ornament he shared consciously or unconsciously with his early Georgian namesake [William Kent]".



Figure 4. Chessel House. Photograph c.1915

References have been found to two domestic commissions closer to Southampton. The RIBA drawings collection contains a plan of a house with hollow walls built by Kent "in or near Southampton", with a note that "it did not answer" (Howard Colvin, *A biographical dictionary of British architects 1600-1840*, 4th edition, 2008). A sketch of a portico to an unidentified house in Southampton, built by John Kent in 1806, is reproduced in A E Richardson and H Donaldson Eberlein, *The smaller English house of the later Renaissance 1660-1830*, published 1925 (figure 5). It is used to illustrate the architectural device of concentrating interesting forms at one point: "the semi-circular portico, the so-called Palladian window above it, and the elliptical light just beneath the eaves constitute a decorative panel, so to speak, for the front of the porch projection, while the plain walls at the sides act as foils".

These are dwarfed by the influence that John Kent had on the early development of the west bank of the River Itchen in Southampton. In September 1802 he took out a 40-year Corporation lease on 370 yards of the west bank between Chapel and Northam. It lay immediately to the

south of Robert Adams's shipyard (Southampton City Archives SC4/3/1076). Kent had already begun to develop the property which - by the time he was forced to relinquish the lease in September 1813 - comprised a wharf (occupied in 1812 by Edward Knapp), a blockmaker's shop (occupied in 1812 by William King and \_ Woodford), a corn store (built for the cornfactor Edward Westlake of Chapel Quay), deal yard and windmill. The project was a financial disaster. Kent was hounded through the courts in both Winchester and London by the Southampton ropemaker John Major in pursuit of a long-standing debt. An arrest warrant was issued in October 1807 against Kent "who is a builder & resides here [Southampton] but has now been some time at Gosport & I learn is building a house for Mr Jukes the banker there. There has been a writ against him in this town for some time past & he keeps out of the way" (Southampton City Archives D/PM Box 68/3: Thomas Ridding to John Handley, sheriff's officer at Gosport, 29 October 1807). Following a spell in the debtor's gaol in the Marshalsea, Kent was brought before the King's Bench at Westminster in 1808 charged with "contriving and fraudulently intending craftily to deceive and defraud the said John Major". An unconnected court case in 1808 - Chaplin and others v Kent - also involved the partial seizure of goods and chattels (Southampton City Archives D/PM Box 69/14/1). A draft indenture of 27 June 1809 (Southampton City Archives D/PM Box 44/171) suggests a willingness by Kent to explore unconventional means to extricate himself from his "ticklish situation". The sale of all the building materials ("except the fixtures and shelving of cupboards and closets there") of Grove Cottage near St Mary's Church raised £300. This money was used to pay off a debt to the Southampton ironmonger Edward Toomer. The recycled material, purchased by the Southampton bookseller Thomas Baker, was used to build a cottage on land owned by Baker on Shirley Common. Kent was engaged in "the whole of the taking down, removing and putting up again with all the alterations specified [by Baker]".

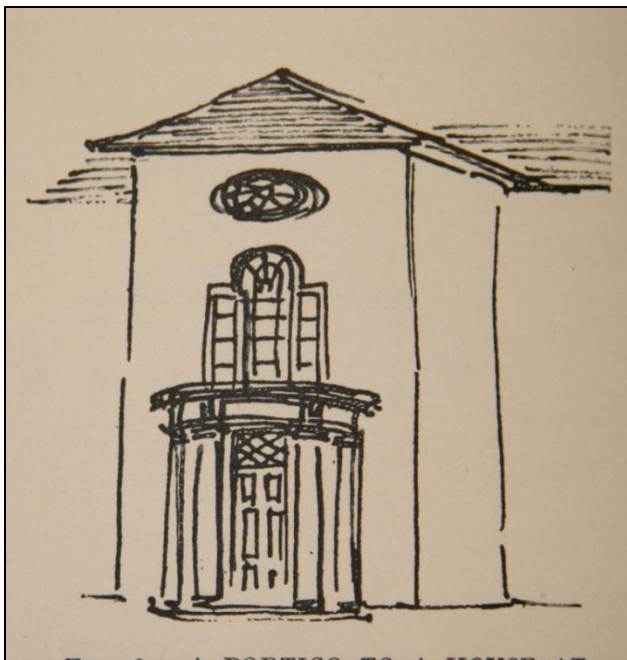


Figure 5. Sketch of a portico of unidentified house built by John Kent in Southampton in 1806

John Kent was declared bankrupt on 10 December 1810. His financial affairs began tortuously to unravel. His assignees (Henry Bloomfield Lankester and William Dell) proposed in April 1811 the sale of the two-thirds of a vessel belonging to Kent, two patents in his name and the recovery of title deeds in the hands of Edward Jukes, John Langley and George Morfs Jukes, bankers and merchants of Gosport, now bankrupt. This connects Kent with a complex of bankruptcy cases involving the Jukes which was still unresolved in 1832. Kent's household goods and stock in trade were sold at auction on 16 April 1811. These consisted of "goose-feather beds, bedsteads, tables, chairs, pier and other glasses; a quantity of building materials, timber, locks and keys,

sashes, marble slabs, register and Rumford stoves, ladders, patent lathe (mahogany) with circular wheel, a camera-obscura, and many other articles". A further assignees' auction on 27 April 1811 offered for sale a horse mill, with a pair of stones for grinding malt; a dressing machine; and a large brewing copper capable of boiling off five hogsheads. The remainder of Kent's estate and his interest in the properties fronting the River Itchen were auctioned on 28 February 1812. Lot 5 offered the material of the windmill on the shore at Northam "to be taken down and removed at the expense of the purchaser". The mill was taken down in 1814. The Corporation lease of the Mudlands - as we have seen - was surrendered in September 1813. Final release from bankruptcy came on 24 August 1815 with the payment of a final dividend.

Bankruptcy did not end Kent's career as an architect. Ryde Pier in the Isle of Wight – built of timber and 527 metres long - was designed and built by Kent between 1813 and 1814, when he was still subject to the commission of bankruptcy. The cost was £12,000. It is one of the earliest piers in the country and, although heavily altered, still stands. Similarly extant is St James church in Poole, rebuilt in collaboration with the Christchurch architect Joseph Hannaford between 1819 and 1821. It is in simplified Gothic, broadly Perpendicular. It replaced a medieval church and cost £11,740. Now Grade 2\*, it is described by English Heritage on the *British listed buildings* website as an "exceptionally complete and virtually unaltered late Georgian church of high architectural quality". Its builder, Thomas Benham, set up as an architect in Southampton a few years later. Benham's Southampton works include the development of Portland Street and Portland Terrace for Richard Evamy, the development of Grosvenor Square and the design of St Paul's proprietary chapel on London Road. John Kent is named as architect in advertisements in September 1820 and September 1821 for the sale of building lots on either side of a newly built street - now Bernard Street - between the High Street and Orchard Lane. Finally, reviving the recycling theme, Kent is the contact for the private sale in October 1818 of part of the frontage - including two bow windows, the intervening pair of sash doors and handsome entablature - of a property then standing "about the centre of the High Street".

Three patents are in John Kent's name. A patent of 3 July 1810 was for 'certain improvements in the method of making artificial stone'. The other two - of 5 January 1799 and 12 March 1810 - are in pursuit of the philosopher's dream of perpetual motion: the first "a new method of applying power to effect a rotatory motion, substituting weight or pressure for animal strength", the second "an improvement on the principle of a lever on a moving fulcrum". *The Monthly Magazine*, July 1799 reported of the first: "Mr Kent is very sanguine in respect to the practical effect of this oblique pressure on the peripheries of wheels. He concludes that a perpetual motion may be effected by it, and that wheel carriages, ships, etc may be moved forward by its varied application". Of the second, the patentee himself wrote "that by inspection any competent mechanic can apply my said invention to any machinery he may think proper", and that the invention, although specifically designed for raising weights, "yet is also applicable to mills, pumps, moving carriages on iron railways and to various other kinds of machinery" (*The Repository of Arts, Manufactures, and Agriculture*, January 1811). Could this dream be one cause of Kent's financial woes? To quote the *Gentleman's Monthly Miscellany*, 1 April 1803, the impossible quest for perpetual motion "is always expensive, and is sometimes the ruin of a family"?



We have four addresses for John Kent in Southampton: Rattler's Yard [not identified] in 1803; St George's Place, Houndwell in 1820-1, Brunswick Place in 1824 and 18 South Front, Kingsland from 1830. In politics he usually voted on the Liberal side. Little is known of his personal life. St Michael's parish register records his marriage, as a widower, on 25 September 1795 to Sarah Roper, a 30-year old spinster. She died, aged 65 years, at Brunswick Place on 6 August 1825. John died in the summer of 1837. He is probably related to John Kent of Gosport, builder, who went bankrupt in 1793 and to John Kent the younger of Southwick, builder, who went bankrupt in November 1806.

### **John Taylor**

John Taylor was an architect and builder in Southampton between the 1790s and the 1840s. He became a pupil - effectively a three-year apprenticeship - of John Plaw in 1797 or 1798. A later advertisement by Plaw for a pupil specified "a youth of genteel connections, liberal education, and who has a taste for drawing" (*Salisbury Journal*, 18 April 1803). John's immediate family were in the building trade. His grandfather, Joseph Taylor (died 1 February 1782), was a builder and carpenter. His father (also Joseph) was a house carpenter and builder, the business apparently being taken over by his mother (Elizabeth) when she became a widow. There were three uncles: Daniel, a bricklayer and ne'er-do-well who his father threatened to leave out of the distribution of the family's property "if he continued his indolent & wicked course of life" (will of 18 February 1779: Southampton City Archives 4/4/452/21); Richard, a stonemason; and James, a plumber. John Taylor showed – as an honorary exhibitor - five drawings at the Royal Academy between 1797 and 1800. These include All Saints church, Banister Court and Chessel House (all recently built) and, in 1799, a design for a bridge over the Itchen Ferry at Northam. His address is given between 1798 and 1800 as "at Mr Plaw's", suggesting he may have been living at his patron's house in Spring Place.



Figure 6. The new King Edward VI Grammar School

Most of John Taylor's architectural work was focused around the southern end of Bugle Street. He lived at 1 Bugle Street (on the west side near Bugle Hall) between 1811 at least and 1866. He succeeded to the family's traditional tenancy of 160 feet of prime Corporation-owned waterfront between the entrance to the pier and West Quay baths (the family had been Corporation lessees of a wharf and premises in Cuckoo Lane from the late-eighteenth century: Southampton City Archives SC 4/3/1611 and 1792). A boat house was added under John's tenancy. Eight allotments of building land - four in French Street and four in Bugle Street - were put up for auction in May 1820. John Taylor was named as builder. A major part of the development involved demolition of the medieval grammar school in what had been West Hall. The new grammar school was rebuilt between 1820 and 1821 to plans by John Taylor. A later photograph of the new school is given in C F Russell, *A history of King Edward VI School, Southampton*, 1920, opposite p 302 (figure 6). Only slightly away from this close assemblage of property and interests lay five messuages, with gardens, on the north side of Simnel Street, family property which passed to John Taylor in 1811 (Southampton City Archives SC 4/4/452/22).

Only one further work by John Taylor can be identified: "an elegant portico" added pre-1805 to Portswood House, originally built in 1776 by John Crunden (Howard Colvin (*An architectural dictionary of British architects 1600-1840*, 4th edition, 2008). Taylor seems to have been active as a builder up to the early 1840s. He is thereafter described (as in the 1851 census) as a retired builder. He did not marry, living until her death in August 1849 with his unmarried sister Mary. He died on 8 September 1866. He left his property to the six children of another sister, Elizabeth, and her husband William Mortimer, builder and timber merchant of Niton in the Isle of Wight. John Taylor is buried in Southampton cemetery.