

MARCHMONT

ASSOCIATION

Background information to a proposal by the Marchmont Association to install a commemorative 'blue' plaque to James Burton – “the first captain of the building industry” (Roy Porter, London: A Social History, 1994) at 92 Guilford Street, on the corner of Lansdowne Terrace, WC1.



James Burton (1761–1837)

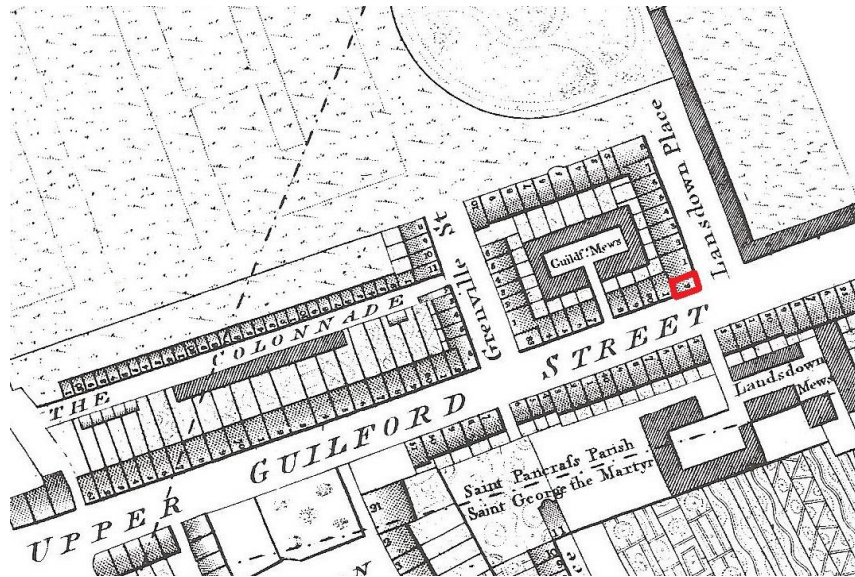
92 Upper Guilford Street, on the “*South corner of Lansdowne Place (now Lansdowne Terrace) and Guilford*”, was James Burton’s first Bloomsbury home, which he moved into with his family on 21st June 1794, according to Burton’s personal ‘note-book’ held at Hastings Museum. He recorded that their eighth son, Septimus, was christened at this house on 3rd September 1794, and although Septimus was born on 27th July 1794, this significant event was not specifically noted by Burton, so we cannot be certain that Septimus was born there. However, Burton records that Mrs Burton (Elizabeth) gave birth to their daughter, Octavia, at this house on 20th May 1796.



Elizabeth Burton

Tavistock House, which Burton refers to in his notes as the “*North House*”, was under construction in 1795: “*1795 Began to lay bricks for my intended residence called the North House on Southampton Terrace sold under the D. of B. (Bedford) with 10 acres*

of the field in front". He later added an alarming reference to the upper walls of North House being "blown down and off" in a storm. Burton finally records his departure from Guilford Street in 1796: *"removed Aug 10th to the North House"*.



92 Upper Guilford Street is boxed in red on Richard Horwood's map of 1992-99

James Burton was born on 29 July 1761, probably in London, the son of William Haliburton, a Southwark-based builder of Scottish descent. He was articled to a surveyor named James Dalton in 1776, and subsequently became his partner. Burton (he preferred this version of his surname from an early age) began his career as a speculative builder in 1785, with the construction of four houses in Southwark. He went on to become the most successful developer in late Georgian London, responsible for some of its most characteristic architecture. Burton received some architectural training, but few buildings are known to have been designed by him. One was the Southwark Institution (formerly the Leverian Museum), in Blackfriars Road, built in 1786 but later demolished; another was the earliest part of the Royal Veterinary College in Camden Town, of 1792–3. He later designed and built the Russell Institution in Great Coram Street (site of present day Witley Court), frequented by Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, among others. Burton's energies went into building, and as early as 1790 he was approaching the Foundling Hospital estate with a request to undertake single-handedly the development of their Bloomsbury lands. This was refused, but it did not take long for the dynamic Burton to become the most important builder on the hospital's estate: 586 houses were built under his supervision between 1792 and 1802, and over £400,000 was expended during a period otherwise difficult for speculative building. Owners of the adjacent estates, including the Duke of Bedford and the Skinners' Company, engaged him to continue the development of Bloomsbury, with his drawing of the south side of Russell Square being exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1800.

Burton was largely responsible for the original development of the Foundling Estate from 1790. He then went on to develop large tracts of the Bedford Estate from 1800, before continuing his prolific building work on the Skinners' Estate from 1807.

Although he had his critics, with some of his early developments being characterized by a *“uniformity and austerity of elevation”*, he was also praised for his *“spacious formal layouts consisting of terraces, squares, and crescents”*, as well as his ability to carry out so much development during the course of the Napoleonic Wars. There is certainly no doubt about his energy and financial acumen. Between 1785 and 1823 he was responsible for the erection of 2366 houses in London, with an estimated value of some £1,848,900. Numerous other developments were constructed under his supervision.

Burton was master of the Tylers' and Brickmakers' Company in 1801–2, and in 1804 he raised a company of volunteers, the Loyal British Artificers, at his own expense, and recruited from the large body of artificers that were in his employ. Burton was colonel of the unit. He bought Mabledon Park, outside Tonbridge, in the same year, and in 1810 served as sheriff of Kent. His other activities in that county included some development at Tunbridge Wells in 1805–7, and his considerable investment in the Ramhurst (later Tonbridge) powder mills from 1811 onwards. Sir Humphry Davy was also involved in this gunpowder-manufacturing enterprise, which subsequently passed wholly into the ownership of the Burton family.

Burton went on to play a vital part in the major London building projects of John Nash, including Regent's Street, which he substantially financed. In 1815 Burton began to build part of Waterloo Place, and in 1816 he allied himself firmly with Nash by taking many of the leases for the proposed terraces around Regent's Park, and for a number of the villas within it. One such villa, The Holme, was designed by his youngest son, Decimus Burton, for Burton's own occupation in 1818. The alliance was further cemented in 1817, when he took on the leases of five of the largest blocks on Regent Street. The crown estate was reluctant to advance moneys to speculative developers but Burton's considerable financial involvement effectively guaranteed the success of the project. His alliance with Nash was continued in the construction of the grand terraces built around Regent's Park in 1823–6. The last of these, Chester Terrace, was completed in 1825.

Burton's final major development was the creation of the coastal resort of St Leonards. He purchased an estate in 1828, and proceeded to lay out a town on the twin principles of classical formality and picturesque irregularity. Much of the building was complete by 1830. Described in 1833 as *“a conceited Italian town”* (Clarke, 42), St Leonards was a development of considerable ambition, conceived and designed as a rival to Brighton.

Burton was married in 1783 to Elizabeth Westley (1761–1837). Ten children survived infancy: Eliza, James Haliburton, Henry, Jane, William Ford, Alfred, Septimus, Octavia, Jessy, and Decimus. He was a direct, shrewd, and energetic man. Following his death on 31 March 1837 he was buried in the churchyard of St Leonards under a pyramidal memorial. A monument to his memory was also erected in the town.

Sources:

Roger Bowdler, 'Burton , James (1761–1837)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2009

P. A. Clarke, 'James and Decimus Burton', RIBA thesis, 1949 · P. Miller, *Decimus Burton, 1800–1881* (1981)

Olsen, *Town planning in London: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*, 2nd edn (1982).

Saunders, *Regent's Park: a study of the development of the area from 1086 to the present day* (1969) · E. Melling, ed., *Kentish Sources III* (1961) · Sussex, Pevsner (1965)

Roy Porter, *London: A Social History*, 1994