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JAMES AND DECIMUS BURTON'S REGENCY NEW TOWN, 1827–37¹

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During the 250th anniversary year of the birth of James Burton (1761–1837) we can re-assess his work, not only as the leading master builder of late Georgian and Regency London but also as the creator of an entire new resort town on the Sussex coast, west of Hastings. The focus of this article will be on Burton's role as planner of the remarkable townscape and landscape of St Leonards-on-Sea. How and why did he build it and what role did his son, the acclaimed architect Decimus Burton, play in its creation?

James Burton, the great builder and developer of late Georgian London, is best known for his work in the Bedford and Foundling estates, and for the crucial part he played in the building of Regent Street and the Regent's Park terraces. But, despite living in the most 'chaste' of classical villas in Regent's Park,² by the 1820s he was encircled by fast-increasing urban development: 'we in the park will be soon surrounded by a ring of smoke', commented his son Henry in 1821.³ Sea bathing was approaching the zenith of its popularity, and Burton's diary from 1787 to 1811 mentions visits to Brighton, Margate, and Bognor, though not – despite the presence of a Hastings Street in his 1807 Skinner estate development in Bloomsbury – to Hastings.⁴ And in 1827 he entered into negotiations for the purchase of a tract of agricultural land in the long-since deserted parishes of St Leonards and St Mary Magdalene to the west of Hastings. Here he laid out St Leonards and, almost certainly with the help of his son Decimus, built 'one of the first and most daring' of the fashionable seaside resorts of the nineteenth century.⁵

The land, which was part of the 430-acre Gensing Farm, was put up for sale by the trustees of the late Charles Eversfield following the passing of a private Act of Parliament which allowed them to grant building leases.⁶ It included a favourite tourist site – a valley with stream cutting through the cliff called Old Woman's Tap. (Fig. 1) At the bottom stood a large flat stone, locally named The Conqueror's Table, said to have been where King William I had dined on the way to the Battle of Hastings.⁷ This valley was soon to become the central feature of the new town. The Conqueror's table, however, was to be unceremoniously removed and replaced by James Burton's grand central St Leonards Hotel.

The Act proposed a spacious, dignified housing estate with 'detached villas and other houses' disposed on plots of land no larger than fifteen acres each, 'very conveniently and eligibly situated for building ground'.⁸ Purchasers were allowed to 'allot parts thereof for squares, lawns, streets or roads, and to make drains, sewers and water courses, and to dig brick earth for the purpose aforesaid.'⁹ A traditional Georgian grid of streets was envisaged, with crescents and squares, but there was also a suggestion of the Victorian garden suburb, allowing for 'detached villas and other houses', much like the earliest plans for St John's Wood whose villas were, however, often semi-detached.⁹ The Act 'permitted the Trustees to impose such restrictions as they wished', though it 'did not require that any particular restriction be imposed.'¹⁰ This vagueness was probably the source of problems encountered by James Burton later on.



Fig. 1. The site of Old Woman's Tap, or Tapshaw, on the coast west of Hastings, where James Burton built his new town in 1828. This is an engraving made from a painting by J. M. W. Turner, looking towards Bexhill and the Martello Towers in 1817. In the 1820s, at least two of the towers remained on the western St Leonards coastline; one was washed away by the sea and the other blown up in the 1870s, according to local newspaper reports. *By kind permission of Hastings Public Library.*

During the 1820s 'new would-be fashionable resorts were springing up all along the south coast'.¹¹ Most, however, were grafted on to original fishing villages, like Brighton, and it seemed that Hastings was soon to catch up. A London paper in 1811 claimed: 'This fashionable summer retreat bids fair soon to rival Brighton'.¹² By 1825, in the words of one visitor, 'the Fashion of the company' was 'considerably improved', and by 1824 members of the Woodgate family were reporting that the town was 'full'.¹³ The buildings were improving as well. Among these was Pelham Crescent, whose shopping arcade was completed in 1825.¹⁴ By 1828 the whole complex was finished, with its raised, split crescent of elegant houses embracing the classical, temple-like Church of St Mary in the Castle.¹⁵ A remarkable and original creation, it was designed by the architect Joseph Kay (1775–1847), surveyor since 1808 of the Foundling Estate in Bloomsbury, Burton's earliest large-scale development in Bloomsbury.¹⁶ At the same time, in

Brighton, Thomas Reid Kemp's Kemp Town, 'the first example of formal Georgian town planning applied to the seaside' was begun by 1824 on his own inherited land just to the east of Brighton.¹⁷ Its rival, Brunswick Town, by one of Kemp's architects, Charles Busby, followed a year later to the west.¹⁸ Both featured terraces of houses, with no detached residences, and Kemp Town took years to complete.¹⁹ Both Kemp and the architect/developer Busby were ruined financially; Kemp had to flee his creditors to France, dying there in 1844,²⁰ and Busby became bankrupt a year before his death in 1834.

James Burton must have heard of Busby being 'bankrupted by his own buildings',²¹ and in 1828 – the year in which he laid the foundation stone for St Leonards – Kemp Town was described as being 'almost as desolate as Pompeii'.²² By contrast, in 1828 St Leonards was populated by a small army of labourers, engaged in focused, supervised building activity. Burton avoided the major reasons for the

ORIGINAL LAND PURCHASES
AND EARLY PLANS

The original 25 acres of freehold land for which James Burton negotiated during 1827 cut across fields (Fig. 3). Some of their names echoed the ancient settlement of the abandoned parish, such as Kiln Plot, Old House Meadow, and Chapel Field. The Burton land was in the form of an inverted letter T, the horizontal element running along the seashore 1100 yards and the vertical running inland, approximately 200–300 yards, to include an agriculturally impossible valley. Set precisely between the parishes of St Leonards and St Mary Magdalen, the stream or ‘tap’ was to serve the new town and create two ponds.

Burton’s estate at St Leonards was acquired, freehold, in two parts, the first 25 acres in 1828 costing £7,800 and a further thirteen acres in 1834 for £2,000.³² The first Agreement to sell the freehold of land in and around Old Woman’s Tap was drawn up by the trustees of the Eversfield Estate on 7 December 1827. This consisted of fields above, sloping into the valley and a strip of flat land below the cliff edge. A deposit of £1,500 was paid by Burton on 10 December 1827. The purchase was completed and paid for on 27 February 1828, just a day or two before the laying of the foundation stone of the first villa on 1 March.³³ The original agreement included a requirement that

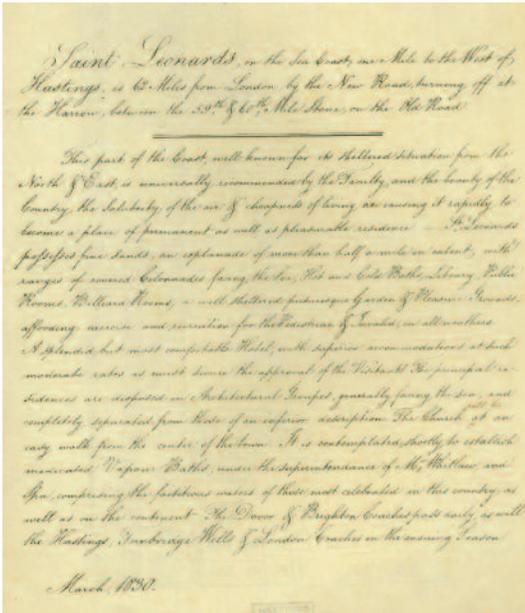


Fig. 2. Description of the new town almost certainly written by James Burton, dated 1830. By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

Brighton failures. Being economically and politically astute,²³ he eschewed Busby’s radicalism and Kemp’s un-businesslike high-mindedness,²⁴ and he embraced that *sine qua non* for Regency seaside success: royal patronage. Thanks to his son Decimus’s contacts in Tunbridge Wells,²⁵ the major coup was to attract, by 1834, the Duchess of Kent, and her daughter Princess Victoria, the future Queen of England, for a winter stay.²⁶ Even though James Burton’s financial losses also were said to be great,²⁷ he was not bankrupted by the town, his wealth at death in 1837 being £60,000.²⁸ And despite serious problems with weather, sea incursion,²⁹ and even his own ill-health,³⁰ Burton completed the nucleus of his St Leonards development. Within eighteen months of its foundation a grand opening dinner was held at the St Leonards Hotel in October 1829, and exactly two years later, by March 1830, he had drafted a public announcement describing the attractions and buildings of St Leonards as already complete.³¹ (Fig. 2)

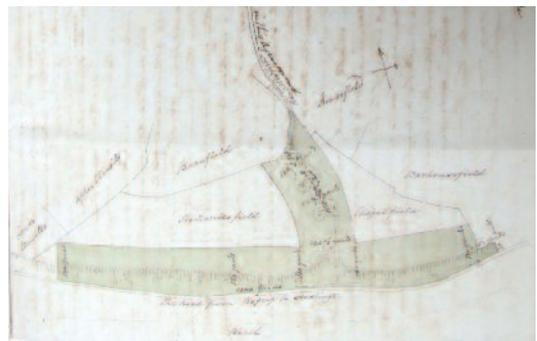


Fig. 3. Drawing from conveyance of freehold land to James Burton by the Eversfield Estate trustees, dated 1828. By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

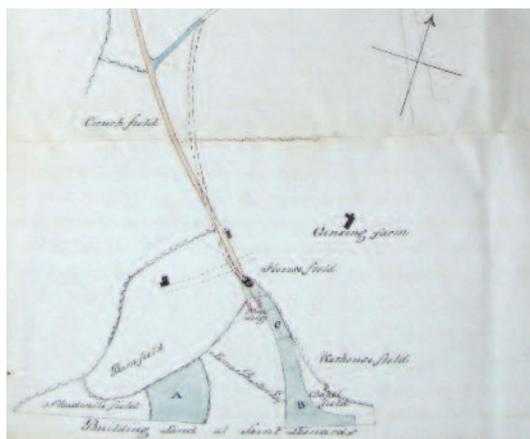


Fig. 4. Drawing from the second conveyance of land to James Burton dated 1834. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

Burton should build a new road across fields to shorten the route between London and St Leonards; the second agreement of 1834 included an undertaking by the Eversfield Estate to build the road themselves and to allow for payment of £2,000 over a period of five years. (Fig. 4) Study of the legal documents reveals that problems must have arisen over road-building, toll gates, the charging of tolls, animals roaming the streets and Burton's infringement onto

adjoining Eversfield land. The resulting Conveyance of 1834 was a 'mutual tidying-up',³⁴ with the Eversfield Estate agreeing to take over the building of the new road in return for Burton closing his tollgate and buying extra land. As for the animals, Burton was to be responsible for fencing off his own land – and facing up to a problem already encountered by the Eyre Estate's 'galloping cows'.³⁵

Burton had indeed overstepped his boundaries. To the north, he built the east side of his North Lodge – a substantial dwelling – on Eversfield land, later acquiring an extra strip which allowed for the building of Decimus Burton's Italianate Baston Lodge, in the 1850s. To the west, he encroached upon Eversfield land for his Archery Ground, the St Leonards Archers having been formed in 1833.³⁶ Finally more property was acquired just north of Mercatoria, the designated service area.³⁷

Even before the Eversfield Act had received Royal Assent in June 1827, early drawings in the Hastings Museum, dated March the same year, show that Burton had already been planning the new town.³⁸ What is astonishing is the nature of these plans. At this time there was little suggestion of 'Regent's Park by the sea'. Instead there were rows of jam-packed orthogonal groups of terraces stretching

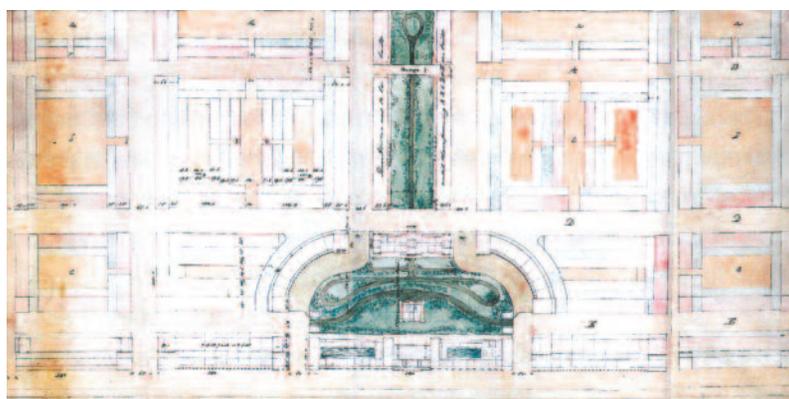


Fig. 5. The first sketch plan of St Leonards dated March 1827, showing James Burton's attempt to impose the rectangular rigour of the grid onto a picturesque valley. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

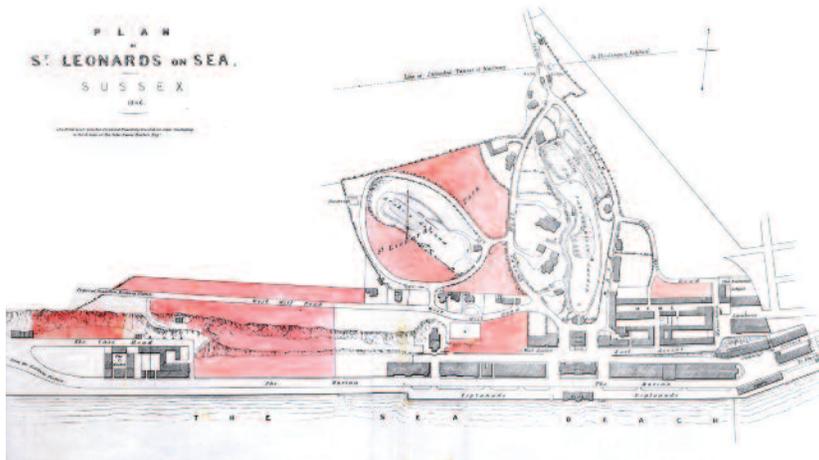


Fig. 6. An 1846 map of St Leonards, showing additional land acquired by the Burton Estate, some of it (coloured pink) put up for sale. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

too far inland for the limited site running along the flat shoreline, with the charming irregular valley forced into a rectangular shape, the stream running neatly in a straight line through the middle of it. (Fig. 5) It was as if it belonged to an earlier, eighteenth century tradition, the ‘perfect regularity and uniformity’ advocated by Lord Kames in the 1760s.³⁹ Nevertheless, the plans included a crescent, that requirement for a fashionable resort. This crescent, facing the sea, was to be about 600 feet across and to consist of two arms of curved terraced houses with a hotel in the centre. The whole crescent encircled a sea-facing villa in gardens, on the same axis. A further undated drawing shows the crescent in greater detail complete with colonnade along the seafront, with shops and baths.⁴⁰ A drawing labelled ‘Harold Plan’, dated a month later on 27 April, abandons the idea of the large crescent and proposes rectangular gardens, with a triple villa – a house divided into three – in the middle, fronted by baths along the sea and many seafront terraces.⁴¹ Inland, further terraces form a series of squares where the central garden area seems to be shared, in the manner later adopted in 1840s Kensington.⁴²

These early sketch plans suggest that James

Burton aimed to re-create his Bloomsbury success, with terraced housing laid out on a grid pattern of inland streets. Perhaps he also wished to challenge his younger rival architect, Joseph Kay, and create a spectacular Pelham Crescent of his own. But it is one thing to have ideas about a yet un-surveyed piece of land sixty miles away and another to be on the spot, realising the true nature of the site. The dimensions of James Burton’s earliest plans made in London suggest he was working on a long shoreline strip of land somewhat wider than the actual plot he eventually bought in 1828, which ranged from 110 to 120 yards wide. In the early months of 1827 he must have been working from his own visual memory rather than from a detailed survey. The plan that eventually emerged was different, making better use of the topography of the site and thereby better expressing the spirit of the place. (Fig. 6)

One element which endured from Regent’s Park – the Neo-classical terraces along the seafront – was a feature which occasioned delight and praise at the time.⁴³ ‘None but the unrivalled crescents of Bath and Bristol is superior to the Marina of St Leonards’ enthused the influential Dr A B Granville, who nevertheless criticised other aspects of Burton’s

plan.⁴⁴ Generally painted the traditional Bath stone cream, this stuccoed range, later to be extended in varying degrees of success all along the seafront to Hastings, remains its most outstanding feature today. Another Regent's Park feature was the residential or 'villa park',⁴⁵ the semi-private subscription gardens in the valley. Here Burton broke away from the Georgian rectangular rigour of rectilinear streets and created a grouping of loosely scattered villas and cottages suggesting the garden suburbs of the future.

Even today – despite parked cars and other insensitive twentieth-century intrusions – St Leonards is best appreciated as a whole. No individual building, as it stands now, can claim to be masterpiece in its own right. It is the setting and the landscape-led architecture of the hinterland which form its principal interest.

THE BUILDINGS OF EARLY ST LEONARDS

The architecture of the Burtons' St Leonards has been discussed elsewhere,⁴⁶ and I will concentrate on what appear to be the most original and unacknowledged elements of the design, focusing on the early years up to James Burton's death in 1837. First, the buildings will be described according to different social groups, starting with the artisans' and service sector. Built on the hill rising from the central

Neoclassical shorefront there is a terraced grid of streets, originally a specially-designed area for artisans, shopkeepers and laundresses. Elevated by Latin names – 'Mercatoria' and 'Lavatoria' – it remains today a high-density, village-like place. Here, fronting the former Mews, James Burton demonstrated something relatively new: a concern for the 'lower orders'. He knew that no community could exist without its essential services, and these needed decent accommodation.

Perhaps Burton also wished to redeem his reputation from the Bloomsbury Foundling Estate work where, as was customary in the 1790s, he had built third- and fourth-rate houses immediately behind those of the gentry, or along the edges of the estate. They were often 'unauthorised', quickly became slums, and were much criticised by some members of the Foundling Estate building committee.⁴⁷ Much like some of the early nineteenth century houses of old Hastings around The Bourne,⁴⁸ this was a form of squalor James Burton obviously wished to avoid with his own new town. By 1831 he had published and posted his *Cottage Regulations recommended for the Preservation of Health*.⁴⁹ This contained exhortations about the cleanliness of the person, as well as of the house, and advice about avoiding 'raw vegetables' and liquor and keeping 'moral habits, industry, and order'.

Burton's concern for cleanliness in built form resulted in what is probably the only known small

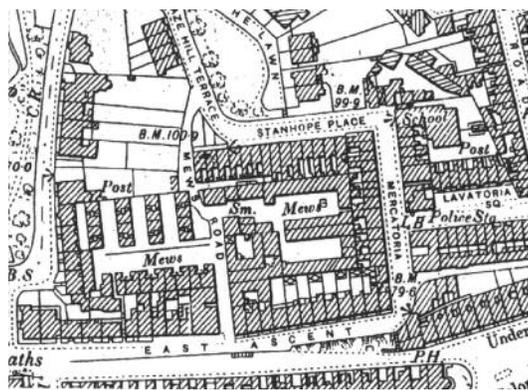


Fig. 7. The service area of St Leonards, showing the large, centrally located Mews tucked behind both the commercial grid planned streets of Mercatoria and Lavatoria Square, with East Ascent running up to it and Maze Hill and the gardens to the left. The Lawn is one of the later 'architectural groups' designed under the supervision of Decimus Burton. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

square specially designed for laundresses. Called Lavatoria, it led out of Mercatoria, whose centrally placed pub, the Horse and Groom, was one of the first buildings of the town. The remains of Lavatoria today, with its delicate ornament detail applied to simple small terraced houses, speaks volumes for the interest Burton had for the 'lower orders' – even though he assured his potential wealthy visitors that 'inferior' residences were separated from the 'principal residences' in 'Architectural Groups'.⁵⁰ The shape of the square is now lost, replaced by front gardens and road, forming the top end of what is now Norman Road. (Fig. 7)

East Ascent, leading down steeply from Mercatoria behind the original seafront Marina (now replaced by the enormous 1930s Marine Court), was a mixture of houses often combining offices and shops in a variety of simple stripped-down classical structures with one keynote building which has an elegant, porticoed entrance. A public house was originally tucked away behind these houses, backing onto the large mews behind. Fronting the mews area to the west was the lower part of Maze Hill. Here was a row of unusual stuccoed houses with Gothic details which were probably intended for the less affluent visitors.⁵¹ They have no gardens at the back or front, yet at the same time they benefit from a view across St Leonards Gardens and maintain the eighteenth-century tradition of a *piano nobile* drawing room on the first floor.⁵² (Fig. 8).

One of the first three buildings put up in 1828 was South Colonnade (now demolished), a row of shops with dwellings above, built immediately on the seafront. It was here, in April 1829, that a daughter of a grocer became the first newly-born inhabitant of the town – an event duly celebrated by a gift from the Burtons of a silver tea service.⁵³ Also completed in 1828 was the archway entrance gate, East Lodge, trumpeting the traveller's arrival at the new town on the main road from Hastings. And finally there was Burton's own West Villa, or simply No. 57 Marina, later called Crown House (see below).



Fig. 8. The Maze Hill houses: stuccoed Gothic terraces, similar to some of the images of original buildings designed for the Eyre Estate in St. John's Wood.
Elizabeth Nathaniels.

We now come to the main groups of intended visitors and residents: wealthy invalids and large families. 'The buildings we understand are not intended for lodging houses, but as commodious residences for large, respectable families,'⁵⁴ stated the *Sussex Advertiser* as early as 25 February 1828. This certainly accords with James Burton's intentions, as was the fashion of the time, so well satirized by Jane Austen in her unfinished 1817 novel *Sanditon*.⁵⁵ Large respectable families could have chosen from the



Fig. 9. Crown House today, facing the sea across busy traffic and a parking space. It almost miraculously survived bombing, which destroyed buildings on either side and behind it. *Elizabeth Nathaniels*.

seafront Neoclassical terraces. Facing south over sun and sea, with the central ranges offering first floor balconies above the stout Greek Doric colonnades, they would seem ideal. However, ‘invalids’ – an important long-stay tourist group – were cautioned by the influential Dr Granville to avoid the seafront as being ‘particularly obnoxious’ for the delicate invalid,⁵⁶ ‘placing him on the margin of a too frequently agitated ocean.’ Avoiding the awesomely Burkean ‘sublimity’ of the seafront,⁵⁷ Granville therefore proposed the more appropriate and sheltered ‘beauty’ of the villas and Gothic cottages, which he described as ‘that little paradise to invalids’ in St Leonards Gardens. By the mid to late 1830s Granville was able to report that these were ‘much sought after by the wealthy invalids and *always occupied*’ (my italics).⁵⁸

The interest and presence of aristocracy was welcome, but royalty was the ultimate mark of approval. Weymouth had blossomed under

George III, Sidmouth with the Duke of Kent, and Brighton with the Prince Regent. The first royal to arrive in St Leonards was Princess Sophia of Gloucester, in 1831. She stayed in the formidable ‘Castellated Villa’ a large, brooding Tudoresque residence near the North Lodge entrance to the town, overlooking its own gardens and pond, as well as the main gardens beyond. This was quickly renamed Gloucester Lodge and so it remains today.

Even more excitement was caused by the arrival of Princess Victoria with her mother the Duchess of Kent for a winter stay in 1834–5.⁵⁹ They were housed at West Villa (No. 57 Marina, now Crown House), the first building of the new town, built for James Burton himself. This is surely the most interesting building along the seafront. (Fig. 9) Built from pre-fabricated elements sent down from London by sea,⁶⁰ it is quite different from the average English Regency villa and may have had a French inspiration,



Fig. 10a. The surviving one of two double villas on either side of the Assembly Rooms. One entrance is from the side and another from the front – not as originally intended, as can be seen from the idealised contemporary perspective print. The general impression is of a single villa. *Burtons' St Leonards Society.*



Fig. 10b. The original double villa, not taking into account a setting which quickly became urban, crowding out the space for leafy grand entrances from both sides, nudged out by the early buildings of East Ascent to the right.
By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

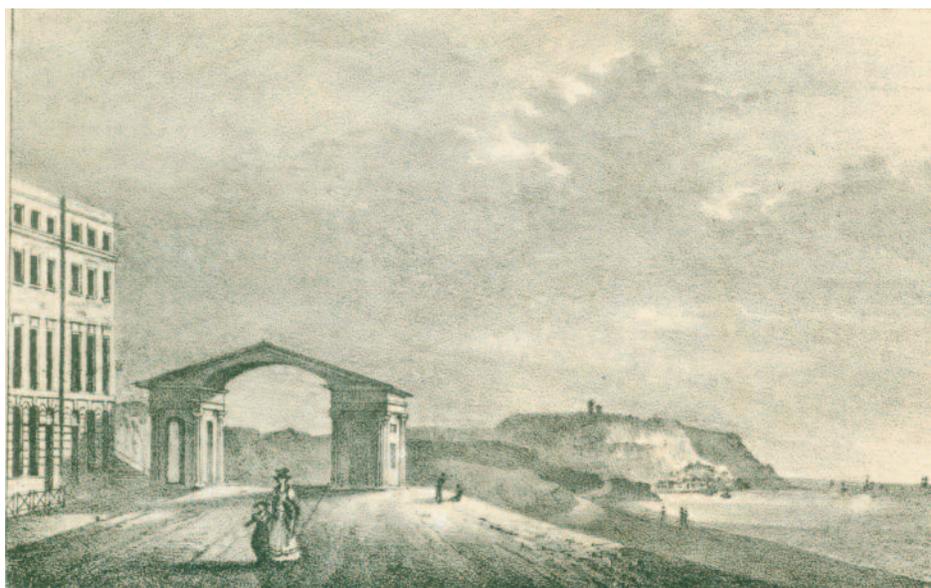


Fig. 11. East Lodge as first built. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

reminiscent of the 'vertical combinations' of J.N.L. Durand (1760–1834).⁶¹ The interior has been gutted, but the exterior is graceful and, in addition to the French influence it has a quality of 'chaste' English Palladianism.⁶² The upper storey has four pairs of Ionic columns fronting a balcony and framing three large, recessed windows, while, below, on the ground floor, the doors and windows were originally discreetly recessed. These have since been filled in. The coupled columns are reminiscent of the portico of Decimus Burton's Athenaeum, which he was completing at the same time. These in their turn could have been inspired by Nash's use of coupled columns in Park Crescent. In short, a close examination of Crown House reveals it to be the result of a studious and talented architectural mind. Could this have been the work of James Burton?

We now come to the early development of the semi-detached house, named by the Burtons as the 'double villa'. From an eighteenth-century terrace trying to look like a single palace, the Burtons had now moved to an early nineteenth century idea: a

double or triple villa masquerading as a single detached house. On either side of the Assembly Rooms, there were originally two very handsome stuccoed detached 'double villas', one of which has survived. (Fig. 10) Subtly planned and elegantly built in the stripped-down classic taste, there is a plan and elevation in the Hastings Museum of not merely a double villa but of an ingeniously planned triple villa, for No.8 Regent Street.⁶³ By 1828, both Burtons had become masters of the semi-detached house.⁶⁴ The town was later to become almost surrounded by the many more 'double villas' in 'Architectural Groups'⁶⁵ under Decimus Burton's aegis, in the 1840s and 1850s, often replacing stucco with stone. This prevalence of the semi-detached villa form suggests the close contact James Burton had experienced with the Eyre Estate, where he worked as builder-developer from 1817 to 1823.⁶⁶ Here the original Georgian-inspired layout of streets, crescents and circuses was also abandoned for a plan incorporating a looser, less formal arrangement of numerous semi-detached houses.⁶⁷



Fig. 12. The view which greeted visitors from London entering through the North Lodge in 1835.
By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

While none the three main lodges of early St Leonards may have been exactly a ‘trumpet at a distant gate’,⁶⁸ they nevertheless played important roles in heralding the new development. The East Lodge (Fig. 11), straddling the road from Hastings in the form of an archway, made it clear that the visitor was entering a different town: not a part of Hastings and certainly not its suburb. An odd lop-sided building with arch cut into a pediment, its final removal in 1895 was a material expression of a legal reality which had existed since 1885 when St Leonards became merely a part of the Borough of Hastings.⁶⁹ From the north, the main entrance to the town in the early years was through North Lodge, which acted originally as a tollgate, as well as providing substantial dwellings on either side. Crenellated and asymmetrical, it is very much in the style of the lodge at Blaise Castle near Bristol, possibly designed by John Nash.

Entering St Leonards by coach from London presented an attractive picture of the gardens immediately below which, in the early years,

included a full prospect of the sea. (Fig. 12) Finally, as part of the axially designed Hotel and Assembly Rooms, the southern entrance to the St Leonards Gardens is by South Lodge. This provides a charming visual introduction to the sloping landscape seen through the arch. The lodge consists of two simple stripped-down classical houses, their first floors spanning the arched entrance to the gardens, similar in form, if not in style, to North Lodge.

The original detached houses in the park were seemingly scattered artlessly around the edges and actually in the gardens. In fact these villas were not casually disposed, but carefully sited on the contours of the land and taking full advantage of the views. They followed the ideas of Humphry Repton, who had worked at James Burton’s own country house, Mabledon in Kent, and on other schemes.⁷⁰ The landscape-led architecture of its residential park is one of the most outstanding features of Burton’s St Leonards.⁷¹ Its dramatic, undulating, multi-level qualities have been summed up by landscape architect Philip Masters as ‘a distinctive landscape in

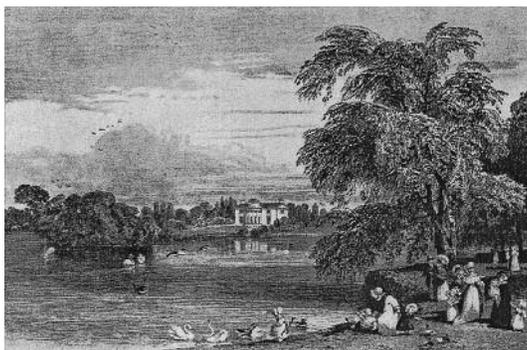


Fig. 13. The Holme, seen from across the lake in Regent's Park, in 1827. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

which enclosure and intimacy contrast abruptly with long views to the sea'.⁷² The setting itself is an adaptation of a Georgian landscaped park, complete with 'follies' in the form of villas – notably the Clock House which looks like a church – a lake, winding walks, entrance lodges and carefully designed semi-private gardens, so that each occupant could look out of his own villa over the gardens as if they were his own, as at Regent's Park, where 'Each terrace of houses appears to be a palace; each villa, a country seat.'⁷³

Both Burtons were steeped in the traditions of the eighteenth century, where considerations of landscape often came first.⁷⁴ It was not uncommon for landscape gardeners, from Lancelot 'Capability' Brown to Humphry Repton, to suggest the type or style of house best suited a particular site. In the early nineteenth century, there was a strong suggestion that both professions could be combined, as they were at St Leonards. Sir John Soane, whose lectures Decimus Burton attended, proposed that it should become 'a necessary part of an architect's education that he should be well acquainted with the principles of modern decorative landscape gardening.'⁷⁵ So here we have the happy conjunction of the two professions producing a late Georgian version of a gentleman's estate for the middle classes, shared by several different dwellings, rather than for a single aristocrat. St Leonards is a material expression of

Sir John Summerson's post-Waterloo society when 'an aristocratic society with bourgeois leanings had become a bourgeois society with aristocratic yearnings.'⁷⁶

WHO DESIGNED THE BURTONS' ST LEONARDS?

There is considerable uncertainty about the authorship of the buildings of St Leonards.⁷⁷ Many of the original documents are missing, and to attempt an answer we must consider the different character, motivation, education and social context of James Burton and his son. By 1828, father and son were at opposite ends of the building spectrum. The father, who trained as a surveyor, built for profit. The son, educated as an architect,⁷⁸ designed for clients. His buildings amply fulfilled the triple Vitruvian principles of *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas* – firmness, commodity and delight. His father, on the other hand, was an astute, ambitious, honest – but pushy – builder-developer who was capable of jettisoning both firmness and delight for profit.⁷⁹ He designed some buildings, such as the Russell Assembly Rooms (later Russell Institution) in 1804,⁸⁰ which were criticized both for their aesthetics and their flimsy construction.⁸¹ The son, on the other hand, was reticent,⁸² and was considered a perfect gentleman who, although aided by the fortune and powerful contacts of his father, earned commissions on the basis of architectural merit.⁸³ Not only this, but he used the latest of techniques with cast and wrought iron to ensure *firmitas*.⁸⁴ We can be reasonably sure that, unlike some of those of his father, none of Decimus Burton's buildings fell down.⁸⁵

From an early age, Decimus Burton showed himself to be a master of the Neo-classical style and an architect of grace and distinction. Aged seventeen, he had already designed the family's Regent's Park house, The Holme (Fig. 13) and its setting,⁸⁶ which still exists (though altered) today. It has been



Fig. 14. James Burton in later years. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*



Fig. 15. Decimus Burton, portrait dated 1832. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

described as ‘One of the most romantic set-pieces in London’,⁸⁷ despite being incorrectly identified as earning the disapproval of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests.⁸⁸ By 1823 he had ‘given the designs’ for the first two terraces in Regent’s Park – Cornwall Terrace, which ‘set the pattern for much of the future development’,⁸⁹ and Clarence Terrace. He was also involved in most of the early villas of the park.⁹⁰ Having left his father’s office in 1823,⁹¹ he went on to create some of the most familiar buildings of George IV’s ‘metropolitan improvements’, from Hyde Park Corner to the Athenaeum.⁹²

As a founder member of the Institute of Architects (later the RIBA) in 1834,⁹³ Decimus Burton represented a future Victorian generation which would place great value on *firmitas*, would deride stucco and flimsiness of construction and would firmly separate the practice of architecture from the business of building. His letters to a client in Kent from 1828 to 1832, complete with specification, demonstrate that he was practising much in the same way as a twentieth-century architect.⁹⁴ So, by 1828,

an intellectual and professional gulf – a virtual emotional chasm – must have existed between father and son. (Figs. 14 & 15) It is hardly surprising that the younger Burton, whose reputation had by now so far outstripped that of his father, reportedly took no interest in the paternal seaside venture.⁹⁵ But the story is not as simple as that. In 1828, Decimus Burton was based in London in his recently completed office at No.6 Spring Gardens.⁹⁶ While it has been claimed he disappeared to Tunbridge Wells to design Calverley New Town as soon as his father went to St Leonards, in 1828,⁹⁷ recently discovered documents show that he was not fully involved in designing the Calverley New Town and the park at Tunbridge Wells until the following year, 1829.⁹⁸ Indeed, he maintained an office in London until his retirement in 1868.⁹⁹

By the early twentieth-century, Decimus Burton’s reputation had eclipsed his father’s. The first attempt at a biography, in 1905, states that ‘in 1839 *he began* the laying out of St Leonards-on-Sea’ (my italics), though the author went on to mention,

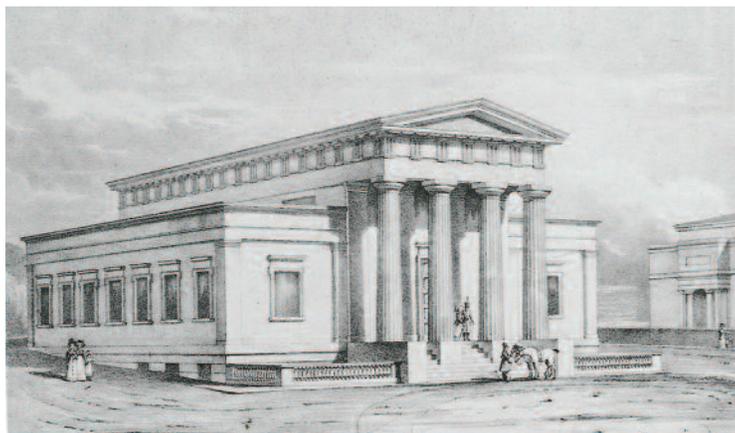


Fig. 16. The Assembly Rooms, engraving after James Burton's watercolour. *By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*

en passant, that this was 'one of his father's latest building enterprises.¹⁰⁰ An attempt was made in the 1940s to rescue James Burton from oblivion with a thesis and an article by Peter Clarke.¹⁰¹ In the 1950s J. Manwaring Baines, the Curator of Hastings Museum, collected information from civic records and local newspaper reports to produce the only reliable publication from sources then available. After commenting that 'For some strange reason little has appeared in print about James Burton', he flatly stated that he 'single-handedly founded the little town of St Leonards in 1828,¹⁰² and tended to attribute both the layout and the buildings to him. However, subsequent research into contextual

historic and legal sources shows that, although James Burton was without doubt the original driving force and the creator, the project gradually became a family affair. As for the work of Decimus Burton, the quality of some of the early designs, such as those for Crown House and the Assembly Rooms, suggests his authorship. Their direct, simple, yet original Neo-classicism echoes his earlier London works, from his temple-like entrance lodges to Hyde Park to the elegant portico of the Athenaeum.

However, the seven watercolours of St Leonards in the collection of Hastings Museum are, with three exceptions, signed by the initials JB (James Burton).¹⁰³ Of the three paintings without initials, however, one is of the Assembly Rooms (Fig. 16), another of South Lodge and a third of 'The West Terraces'. The first has been described as a 'prostyle tetrastyle Doric temple with flanking one storey wings' whose outstanding characteristic is that of 'two masses interpenetrating transversely', and has been compared to some of Decimus Burton's Hyde Park Lodges.¹⁰⁴ The bold interpenetrating geometric shapes of the original design also have something of the quality of Ledoux's 'naked geometry'.¹⁰⁵ In South Lodge (Fig. 17) there are echoes of Decimus Burton's The Holme.¹⁰⁶ As for the West Terrace, which was not built exactly to plan, there are hints of Decimus Burton's Regent's Park terraces.



Fig. 17. The South Lodge, with Maze Hill Gothic terraces beyond. *Burton's St Leonards Society.*



Fig. 18. Engraving after James Burton's watercolour described as 'The West Villa and adjoining houses on the Marina'. This first all-important villa, later known as Crown House, (Fig. 9) is pushed to one side. It later housed the young Princess Victoria, and was almost certainly designed by Decimus Burton. It is interesting that, whereas the villa was built exactly as depicted, the large terraces were considerably reduced in scale and simplified.

By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

Another view which includes Crown House (West Villa) is indeed initialed JB, but it makes the house into an ancillary feature, pushing it to one side and almost off the page.¹⁰⁷ (Fig. 18) The later engraved versions of the watercolours all contained the initials JB. Why should a father put himself forward as the creator of his son's work?

Conflict, however obscured and concealed behind family loyalty, may have existed between father and son ever since the elder Burton compromised his son's work in Regent's Park. Also, could there have been filial embarrassment at Nash's complaints of the elder Burton's poor taste?¹⁰⁸ Despite this, it is highly likely that Decimus Burton loyally supervised the design and shipment of pre-fabricated sections for Crown House and sent down drawings from London:

'My father is full of his new Speculation', he commented in a letter to George Bellas Greenough a few days before the laying of the foundation stone of St Leonards, 'which we all regret, on his account ... because it must, notwithstanding his asserting that it shall not, it must be the cause of anxiety and trouble to him ... & he forgets that his spirit (which thank God is excellent) outruns his strength.'¹⁰⁹

Whatever the feelings of James Burton's six sons and four daughters, St Leonards became a family affair right from the beginning, Decimus almost certainly sending down plans from London, Septimus undertaking all the legal work in Lincoln's Inn, and Alfred studying architecture in his brother's office, later becoming an associate of the then Institute of British Architects,¹¹⁰ and moving to St Leonards by



Fig. 19. Bird's eye view from the south, c.1835. By kind permission of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

1833.¹¹¹ After his father's death, Alfred managed the Burton estate *in situ*, even becoming Mayor of Hastings in 1848.¹¹² By the 1850s, St Leonards had become the main home for several members of the family. Apart from Alfred there were the Woods¹¹³ in North Lodge, the eldest son, William, in South Lodge and the eldest daughter, Eliza, in a cottage on West Hill. Later, there was Decimus himself who, after his father's death, built himself a weekend cottage. Friends of the family also bought and leased out houses.¹¹⁴ In the 1850s Decimus Burton was acting for his own family estate, much as John Nash had done for the Commissioners of Woods and Forests in Regent Street and Regent's Park.¹¹⁵ Like Nash, he almost certainly had the final say over designs, many of which may have been done by others.

Despite the problems of uncertain attribution, there is no doubt that in the nine years between 1828 and 1837, the elderly Burton was the creator, the

moving spirit behind a complete little new town. (Fig. 19) He ensured its swift building by instituting a kind of competition between contractors as to who could complete first and by supervising on the spot.¹¹⁶ He ensured its fashionable appeal on the basis of charm and cleanliness and above all, with the assistance of his son, Decimus, he achieved the ultimate Royal benediction by the visit of the future Queen Victoria, three years before his death, which occurred in the same year as her accession in 1837. For once, James Burton had built, not for profit, but for delight. This master builder of late Georgian London poured the family fortune and the skills of forty years of experience in town and landscape development into his final venture, which was later added to by his family, under the aegis of his more famous son. It endures today as a place of considerable charm and a lesson in superb landscape-led architecture.

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NOTES

- 1 The term Regency is used here in a loose art-historical sense; the actual Regency ended in 1820.
- 2 The Holme, designed by Burton's seventeen-year-old son Decimus in 1817. A Crown Estate London Lease Book (No. 9, pp. 391-411) records a building lease granted to James Burton for 99 years from 10 October 1817, the final Indenture being dated 16 February 1820.
- 3 University College Special Collections, Greenough papers, file 61.
- 4 Hastings Museum and Art Gallery (HASMG), Burton collection, FAM.30 (James Burton's Diary, henceforward referred to as 'Diary'). His insertions of notes date up to 1835, (p.12'. Page numbers cease after p. 18; the remainder is referenced by year.
- 5 S. Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (New Haven & London, 1982), p. 156.
- 6 HASMG, 2003.53.344(2).
- 7 G. Wooll, *Picture of Hastings* (Hastings 1826), p. 114.
- 8 7-8 Geo IV (1826-7), cap. 22, pp. 5-6.
- 9 M. Galinou, *Cottages and Villas: The Birth of the Garden Suburb* (New Haven and London, 2010), p. 63.
- 10 Verbal communication with Richard Bryant LLB.
- 11 D. Lloyd, *Buildings of Portsmouth and Its Environs*, (Portsmouth, 1974), p. 87.
- 12 R. Morrice, 'Palestrina in Hastings', *Georgian Group Journal*, 11 (2001), p. 93.
- 13 G. & G Woodgate, *A History of the Woodgates of Stonewall Park & of Summerhill in Kent* (Wisbech, 1910), p. 447.
- 14 R.Morrice, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 16 D.Olsen, *Town Planning in London* (New Haven & London, 1964) p. 89.
- 17 N. Antram & R. Morrice, *Brighton and Hove* (New Haven & London, 2008), p. 143.
- 18 S. Berry, 'Thomas Read Kemp and the Shaping of Regency Brighton c.1818-1845', *Georgian Group Journal*, 17 (2009), p. 135.
- 19 Antram & Morrice., *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- 20 Berry, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- 21 N. Bingham, *C.A. Busby: The Regency Architect of Brighton & Hove* (London: RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1991). p. 26.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 23 Diary, 1795. He had joined the Whig Club in London in 1795, the same year that he 'Engaged for

- ground' in Bloomsbury belonging to that leading Whig, the fifth Duke of Bedford.
- 24 Bingham, p. 25; Berry, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 130.
- 25 *The Tunbridge Wells Visitor* Vol.3 No.14, 4 October, 1834, 'The Victoria National School' title page.
- 26 HASMG, LTS 63 (Letter from Decimus Burton to 'James Burton, St Leonards, Hastings' from 11 Calverley Parade, Tunbridge Wells, 27 Sept. 1834.): 'Dear All. . . .the Duchess of Kent is pleased with the arrangements made yesterday.'
- 27 C.Monkhouse, 'Regent's Park by the Sea', *Country Life*, 21 February 1974, p. 384.
- 28 R.Bowdler, 'Burton, James', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2007.
- 29 T. Brett, *Brett's History of Hastings and St Leonards* (Hastings, 1892), p.3 (Henceforward 'Brett'): Hastings Reference Library, Brett Collection. Thomas Brandon Brett, 1816–1906 was a talented autodidact of humble origin who witnessed the building of St Leonards, later becoming publisher/ editor of *Brett's Gazette*.
- 30 Woodgate, *op. cit.*, p.128.
- 31 HASMG 2008.1.24.
- 32 HASMG, FAM 8.11, FAM 8.21.
- 33 UCL Special Collections, Greenough papers, Folder 63, letter from James Burton to G.B. Greenough, 22 February 1828, refers to 'that villa' at St Leonards, whose foundation stone was to be laid on 1 March 1828.
- 34 Richard Bryant, private communication.
- 35 Galinou., *op. cit.*, p.167.
- 36 Brett, I, p. 100.
- 37 Baines, p. 22. Apparently unaware of the 1834 purchase, Baines mentioned that the Horse and Groom pub in Mercatoria 'lay just outside the Burton boundary.
- 38 HASMG 903.2.1.
- 39 Kames, Lord [H.Home], *Elements of Criticism*, 3 vols (Edinburgh 1762), III, pp. 305–6, cited by R. Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, *The London Town Garden 1740–1840* (New Haven & London, 2001), p. 8.
- 40 HASMG 903.2.3.
- 41 HASMG 903.2.4.
- 42 Muthesius, *op. cit.*, p.156, plate 135.
- 43 T. Horsefield, *The History, Antiquities, and Topography of the County of Sussex* (Lewes, 1835), p. 458.
- 44 A. Granville, *The Spas of England and Principal Sea –Bathing Places :Southern Spas* (London, 1841), pp. 593–4.
- 45 M. Girouard, *Cities and People* (London, 1985), p. 280.
- 46 P. Clarke, Peter, 'James Burton', *Architectural Review*, 40 (1941), pp. 93–95; P. Clarke, 'James and Decimus Burton' (Dissertation, RIBA, 1941); J. Baines, *Burton's St Leonards* (Hastings, 1956); P. Bohan, 'James and Decimus Burton: Architectural Trends in England Exemplified by Their Work, 1790–1860' (PhD Dissertation, Yale, 1961); N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex*, (London, 1965), pp. 64–5; Richard Reid, 'St Leonards Invaded', *Architectural Review*, London, 1968; C. Monkhouse, 'Regent's Park by the Sea', *Country Life*, 21 February 1974, pp. 384–6 and 'Promoting Sussex by the Sea', *Country Life*, 28 February 1974; P. Miller, *Decimus Burton, 1800–1881* (Exhibition Catalogue, Building Centre Trust, London, 1981); B.Funnell, *Burton's St Leonards: The Contribution of Decimus Burton* (St Leonards, 1982); E. Nathaniels, 'Regent's Park by the Sea', *The Georgian*, Issue 2, (2010) pp. 10–14.
- 47 Olsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 86, 129, 138.
- 48 M.Whittick 'The Sanitary Battle of Hastings', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 125 (1987), p.179.
- 49 HASMG: 903.2.9, signed 'James Burton, St Leonards Dec. 1, 1831'.
- 50 HASMG 2008.1.24.
- 51 Muthesius, *op. cit.*, p. 170: 'rare examples of terraces with Gothic details'.
- 52 I am grateful to the occupants of 6 Maze Hill who have shown me their remarkable restoration.
- 53 Baines, *op. cit.*, p.21.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 55 Jane Austen, *Lady Susan; The Watsons; Sanditon. Edited with an Introduction by Margaret Drabble*, (London, 1974).
- 56 Granville, *op. cit.*, p. 593.
- 57 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757). This book was being published in different editions in the 1820s and 1830s.
- 58 A.Granville, *op. cit.*, p. 595. Although published in 1841, Granville's visit to St Leonards must have been before 1837 as he refers to James Burton in the present tense.
- 59 There are many notices of meetings to discuss the Royal visit in the Burton Collection at the Hastings Museum.

- 60 Brett, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 61 H. R. Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven and London, 1977), p. 48.
- 62 D. Arnold, 'The Architect and the Metropolis: The work of James and Decimus Burton in London and Dublin, c.1800–1840' (PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1997), pp. 289–299: sales details of a portion of Decimus Burton's library which lists many books on French and Italian architecture, including Percier and Fontaine, Baltard, Palladio and Piranesi.
- 63 HASMG: 903.1.1.
- 64 Many of Decimus Burton's own designs for Calverley Park in Tunbridge Wells are for double villas.
- 65 HASMG :903.2.9 This phrase comes from a handwritten prospectus by James Burton, see Fig. 2.
- 66 Galinou, *op. cit.*, p. 470, 136.
- 67 *Ibid.* Compare original plan on p.63 with what was actually built, p. 143.
- 68 Tim Mowl, *Trumpet at a Distant Gate: The Lodge as Prelude to the Country House* (London, 1985).
- 69 Baines, *op. cit.*, p. 37
- 70 Diary: 1809, 1810
- 71 Hitchcock, *op. cit.*, pp. 448–449
- 72 P. Masters, 'St Leonards Garden Conservation Plan' (Report to Hastings Borough Council, 2004)
- 73 J. M. Crook, 'Metropolitan Improvements: John Nash and the Picturesque', in *London, World City 1800–1840*, ed. Celina Fox (New Haven & London 1992), p. 86.
- 74 Decimus Burton is listed as much as a garden designer as an architect, for example, M. Hadfield, R. Harling, L. Highton, *British Gardeners: A Biographical Dictionary* (London, 1980); R. Desmond, *The Dictionary of British and Irish Botanists and Horticulturalists, including plant collectors, flower painters and garden designers* (London, 1994).
- 75 D. Watkin, *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 375, 624. See also G. Tyack, 'The Reptonian Revolution', *Country Life*, 14 September, 2006.
- 76 J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530 to 1830* (New Haven & London, 1993). p. 471.
- 77 H. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (London, 2008), p. 203.
- 78 James Burton's Diary merely says (p. 10) that Decimus '... left school Sept 1815 and became my assistant in the office – commenced his career as an architect in Carlton Chambers April 1823'. There is no mention of his gaining a place at the Royal Academy Schools in 1817, or of his tuition from the much-respected George Maddox, or of his Metropolitan Improvements. See *The Builder*, 24 December 1881.
- 79 A. Saunders, *Regent's Park: A Study of the Development of the Area from 1086 to the Present Day*, (Newton Abbot, 1969), p. 122–124, citing John Nash's accusations.
- 80 Diary: 1802, 1804.
- 81 J. Summerson, *Georgian London* (London, 1962), p. 171 describes it as combining 'Greek Doric columns and Roman arches in a peculiarly graceless fashion'. See also H. Hobhouse's comments in *Thomas Cubitt, Master Builder* (London, 1995), p. 343.
- 82 Decimus Burton's reported words in Parliamentary Reports and other official documents and personal letters demonstrate his reticence. (For example: Parliamentary Papers, 1828: *Report from the Select Committee on the Office of Works and Public Buildings*, 19 June 1828, pp. 130–134; RIBA, Croker Correspondence). J. Wilson Croker had to persuade him to write to the Duke of Devonshire when Paxton was claiming sole authorship of Burton's designs for the Chatsworth conservatory.
- 83 Saunders, *op. cit.*, p 116 cites Sir Charles Arbuthnot, Head of the Office of Woods and Forests who had recommended Decimus Burton because he preferred Burton's buildings 'above all others in the Park for their elegant correctness.' The 'gentlemanly' quality of Decimus Burton's relationship with clients and others is stressed in his obituaries, e.g. *The Builder*, 24 December 1881.
- 84 S. Brindle, 'The Wellington Arch and the Western Entrance to London', *Georgian Group Journal* 11 (2001), p. 74.
- 85 The collapse of buildings in St Leonards erected by different builders under James Burton's supervision was reported by Brett, *op. cit.*, p. 27 and Baines, p. 22.
- 86 HASMG: 903.2.31 is a sketch site plan of The Holme, including outline landscape details. There are other early sketch plans and elevations for The Holme in this archive.
- 87 J.M. Crook, 'The villas in Regent's Park', *Country Life*, 4 July 1968, p. 22.

- 88 D. Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 95; Crook, 'Villas in Regent's Park', p. 24; Saunders, *op. cit.* 1969, p. 113. All three report what must have been a case of mistaken identity. According to James Anderson ('Marylebone Park and the New Street...'), London PhD Dissertation 1998, p.175) the letter of complaint was written by James Pillar about a completed villa, dated 12 June 1816. The Holme was not started until 1817 and completed in 1820. (See footnote 4).
- 89 P. Miller, *op. cit.*, p.8.
- 90 A. Saunders, *op. cit.* and A.Saunders, *The Regent's Park Villas* (London, 1981).
- 91 Diary, p.10.
- 92 J. Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements, or London in the Nineteenth Century*, (London, 1827). Elmes expressed contemporary pride and enthusiasm and included eight of Decimus Burton's works.
- 93 RIBA biographical file.
- 94 Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone, Folder U1050 E55 Bundle 2.
- 95 Baines *op. cit.*, p.19.
- 96 UCL special collections. Greenough papers, Folder 60. A letter of 30 January 1828 from Decimus Burton to George Bellas Greenough mentions his house-warming party at 6 Spring Gardens on the 28th 'which went off well'.
- 97 Jones, Ronald P, 'The Life and Work of Decimus Burton. 1.', *Architectural Review*, 1905. p. 158: 'the beginning of his retirement from public work.'
- 98 P. Whitbourn, *Decimus Burton Esquire, Architect and Gentleman (1800-1881)* (Second edition, Tunbridge Wells, 2006), p. 60.
- 99 RIBA biographical file.
- 100 R. Jones, *op. cit.* part 2, p. 162.
- 101 P. Clarke, 'James and Decimus Burton', (RIBA Dissertation, August, 1949); P.Clarke, 'James Burton', *The Architectural Review*, 40, (September, 1941), pp. 93-95.
- 102 Baines, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- 103 HASMG; 946.40.1-6; 946.117.
- 104 Bohan, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
- 105 One of Sir John Summerson's felicitous expressions (see *The Classical Language of Architecture*, p. 115).
- 106 Bohan, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
- 107 HASMG:946.40.4.
- 108 Saunders, *op. cit.*, pp. 116, 122-124.
- 109 University College London Special Collections. Greenough papers, Folder 63. P.S. by Decimus Burton on a letter written by James Burton to George Bellas Greenough, February 22, 1828.
- 110 RIBA Library, biographical file (Alfred Burton 1802-77).
- 111 Baines, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- 112 *Ibid.*
- 113 Mrs Wood was James Burton's daughter Jane.
- 114 UCL Special collections, Greenough papers, contains an account for rents paid to G B Greenough in 1853 for 16 houses in Marina, 4 in Undercliff and 2 in 'Conqueror Square' for a grand total of £388 7 shillings and three pence for six months.
- 115 East Sussex Record Office: AMS 6417/6/12 typically says 'according to plans to be approved by Decimus Burton, Esq.'
- 116 Brett, *op. cit.*, p.5.