

John Britton - 17 Burton Street, London (1820–1857)

John Britton (1771 - 1857), antiquary and topographer, lived at 17 Burton Street (also known as Burton Cottage), a detached house set within enclosed gardens at the south end of the street, between 1820 and 1857.

"There is scarcely a thoroughfare in our monster city which has not memorable events, or personages, associated with its name."

– John Britton (resident of Burton Street) 1850

N^o. XVII. BURTON STREET.



In The autobiography and miscellanea of John Britton, he helpfully provides a 'jocular account' of his house in extensive detail as well as descriptions of Burton Street and his various neighbours. He mentions a small stone circle in his garden, which can be seen surrounding the large tree on the right in the illustration above.

Notice of Sale by Auction, Morning Chronicle, 21 February 1820

Burton Cottage, Burton Crescent.—Unique Town Residence
—By TOPLIS and WHEELER, at the Mart, Bartholomew-lane, THIS DAY, at twelve,

A Most desirable detached RESIDENCE, called BURTON COTTAGE, held for a term, whereof 87 years are unexpired, at a ground rent of 26l. per annum. The house is seated in a large garden and shrubbery, fully planted with evergreens and shrubs, inclosed with iron railing in front, situate at the south end of Burton-street, Burton Crescent, and contains three best bed rooms, two dressing rooms, elegant drawing room and dining parlour, boudoir, handsome entrance, and light staircase, water closet, good kitchen, servant's sleeping room, and other domestic offices.—May be viewed, and particulars had on the premises; at the Mart; and of Toplis and Wheeler, 22, St. Paul's Church-yard.



John Britton was born in Wiltshire [*Kington St Michael*] and was apprenticed at 16 to a London wine merchant who ran the Jerusalem Tavern at Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell. According to *Old and New London* (1878):

"The house No. 1, at the north-west corner of Red Lion Street, was once the "Jerusalem" Tavern, a great house for sales and parochial meetings. It was

here that industrious compiler, Mr. John Britton, was bound apprentice to Mr. Mendham, a wine-merchant, an occupation which nearly killed the young student. In snatches of time stolen from the fuming cellar, Britton used to visit Mr. Essex, a literary dial-painter, who kindly lent him useful books, and introduced him to his future partner in letters, Mr. Edward Brayley, and to Dr. Trusler and Dr. Towers, the literary celebrities of Clerkenwell” xxv

The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes John Britton’s experiences after his apprenticeship:

“Prevented by ill-health from serving his full term, he found himself adrift in the world, without money or friends. In his fight with poverty he was put to strange shifts, becoming cellarman at a tavern and clerk to a lawyer, reciting and singing at a small theatre, and compiling a collection of common songs.” xxvi

His literary career began when he became acquainted with a publisher producing a work on the topography of Wiltshire and was commissioned to complete it with his friend and colleague Edward Wedlake Brayley (1773 – 1854), with the pair going on to compile similar works on other counties of England. While working on this series, Britton had gathered extensive notes on architecture, which he applied to his next work, the *Architectural Antiquities of England* (1805 - 1814). This was followed by another major work, *Cathedral Antiquities of England* (1814 - 35).

A testimonial for Britton was organised in 1845 to which over 300 people subscribed (including Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Cubitt brothers, Decimus Burton, Charles Mackay and John Edward Gray), raising over £1,000 for Britton. Britton spent the next few years writing his autobiography. In 1852 Benjamin Disraeli, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, granted Britton a civil list pension. After his first wife died in 1848, John Britton married his late wife’s nurse and housekeeper.

John Britton’s works were influential to the Gothic Revival movement and Red Lion Street was renamed Britton Street in tribute to his contributions to the study of London's topography. xxvii

In her 1898 memoir, Emily Heraud wrote of ‘Major Britten (sic), a notable person in his time, who was frequently to be seen on horseback galloping down the street in full uniform’. John Britton must have made an impression in the neighbourhood, though he did not have a military career. Although predating the Herauds’ time in Burton Street, the description would seem to better suit the previous occupant of 17 Burton Street. According to the Survey of London, Colonel John Gurwood (1790–1845) lived there in 1819. John Gurwood likely held the rank of major at the time, and was later the Duke of Wellington’s private secretary.

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