Notes on a Leicester Architect

JOHN JOHNSON (1732-1814)

by

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In the past two hundred and fifty years Leicester has produced a surprising number of interesting architects. There is the obscure figure of Sir William Wilson (1641-1710), who designed the new nave, transepts, and tower of St. Mary's church at Warwick when they were rebuilt after the fire of 1694: he is said to have been the son of a Leicester baker.¹ There are the Wings, father and son: the father, who rebuilt the nave and tower of Galby church in 1741; the son, who was the architect of the beautiful church of King's Norton in 1770.² Moving on a century, we come to Mr. F. W. Ordish and Mr. Perkins Pick: both of them—we should be pleased to recall it—active members of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society.³

But there is another Leicester architect whose work is perhaps more familiar to most of us: John Johnson, who designed the County Rooms that have graced Hotel Street in Leicester since 1800. In this paper I wish to gather up what I have been able to find out about his life and works. I am not competent to deal with them from a technical point of view: my prime purpose is biographical, not critical.

Johnson was born on 22 April 1732 and baptised in St. Martin's church on the following 23 July.⁴ His father was John Johnson (1707?-1780), and his mother's name was Frances. I have been able to recover nothing certain about either of them. The name “John Johnson” is, of course, a common one, and it occurs many times in the Freeman's Register; but of the eighteenth-century John Johnsons who are recorded there none can easily be identified with the architect's father, and I am inclined to think he was never a freeman of the borough.

¹Publications of the Wren Society, vols. x and xi.
²J. Throsby, Supplementary Volume to the Leicestershire Views (1790), 137-8; Transactions of the Leics. Archaeological Society, xxii, 179-80, 193.
³Mr. Ordish's death is referred to in the Transactions, vi, 173. An obituary notice of Mr. Pick, by Professor A. Hamilton Thompson, appears in the Transactions, xi, 401-5.
⁴St. Martin's parish register.
John was born in Southgate Street.\textsuperscript{5} We know nothing of his early career—unless he was the John Johnson, eldest son of John, joiner, who was admitted a freeman on 22 April 1754.\textsuperscript{6} At the time of his death it was stated that "he left this town... in early life possessing little more than strong natural abilities, which soon found their way in the Metropolis".\textsuperscript{7} With that unsatisfying statement we must be content. It would be most interesting to know how he gained his instruction and experience as an architect: for he emerges quite suddenly, with a wide practice, at the age of fifty. None of the buildings he is known to have designed can, so far as I am aware, be dated earlier than 1782.

In the spring of that year he was appointed Surveyor to the County of Essex.\textsuperscript{8} His residence was then given as Berners Street in the parish of St. Marylebone, and he continued to live in that parish until shortly before his death. His predecessor, William Hillyer, had just died in office, and it is possible that Johnson had been acting in some way as his assistant, since one account is signed by him of the year 1781.\textsuperscript{9}

The office to which he was appointed was officially designated "Surveyor of the Gaol, Houses of Correction, Bridges, and other Buildings in and belonging to this County".\textsuperscript{10} That compendiously describes the main part of the Surveyor's official work: he combined what we should now call the posts of County Surveyor and County Architect. He seems to have been paid chiefly by fees for the preparation of plans and a commission of 5% on the cost of all works that he supervised.\textsuperscript{11} No doubt he also received some retaining fee, but I have not been able to discover its amount. The Surveyor is to be regarded rather as a standing consultant than as a full-time servant of the county. Johnson continued to live in London and went down to Essex when it was necessary. I cannot find any evidence that he had a house in Chelmsford: his name does not appear, for example, among those of the ratepayers of the parish who were assessed for the rebuilding of the church from 1800 onwards.\textsuperscript{12} Throughout the time of his service as the Essex Surveyor he maintained a substantial private practice as an architect, in the county itself, in London and Leicester, and as far afield as Glamorgan and Devon. That was usual in

\textsuperscript{5}Nichols, *History of Leicestershire*, i. 528.
\textsuperscript{6}H. Hartopp (ed.), *Register of the Freemen of Leicester* (1927), i. 315.
\textsuperscript{7}Obituary notice: *Leicester Journal*, 16 September 1814.
\textsuperscript{8}His appointment was made at the Epiphany Quarter Sessions: Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 13, page 263.
\textsuperscript{9}Essex Record Office, Q/FAC. 5/1.
\textsuperscript{10}Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 13, page 263.
\textsuperscript{11}e.g. for his work on the House of Correction at Halstead: Essex Record Office, Q/FAC. 5/1.
\textsuperscript{12}Chelmsford churchwardens' accounts.
Johnson's time, and for long afterwards. To take a somewhat later example from Leicester: William Parsons designed the new gaol in Welford Road (which was completed in 1828), as part of his official duties as County Surveyor; but he was also the architect of St. George's church. It is convenient to examine Johnson's work under two headings: first his official work in Essex and second his private commissions elsewhere.

At the time of his appointment in 1781 a new county gaol had lately been finished at Chelmsford, to Hillyer's designs. It stood on the south bank of the river immediately beyond Moulsham Bridge, on the right-hand side of the road. John Howard had visited it in 1779, and had given it his general approval; but it was already in need of alteration and extension, and Johnson carried out a good deal of work there between 1782 and 1794. He was also concerned in the building of three Houses of Correction in Essex. That at Halstead had been begun by Hillyer, and Johnson completed it. The Barking House of Correction was in progress, under Johnson's supervision, in 1791. His last work was the House at Chelmsford, which stood in the middle of the High Street, opposite to Springfield Lane. It was begun in 1802 and finished in 1807.

The building at Chelmsford was not without its critics. One member of the House of Correction Committee went so far as to take the opinions of another architect and of a mason upon it, and he brought their comments before the Committee. They alleged that the House of Correction was, as we should now say, "jerry-built," and that the walls were so thin that it would be an easy matter for a prisoner to unloosen the bricks and so escape. Johnson made a detailed reply to these charges, which entirely satisfied the Committee and the Court of Quarter Sessions.

This was not the only criticism that was passed upon his work. He does not seem to have been entirely successful as a builder of bridges. In 1787 he rebuilt Moulsham Bridge at Chelmsford, replacing the medieval structure, which had three arches, by the single-arched bridge that still spans the river. The new bridge was shorter than the old, the river being artificially narrowed.

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13 J. Curtis, Topographical History of the County of Leicester (1831), III.
14 The State of the Prisons (ed. 3, 1784), 259-60.
16 Essex Record Office, Q/FAC. 5/1; Q/SO. 13, page 264.
17 Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 15, page 30.
18 Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 18, page 374; Q/SO. 19, pages 71, 335, 603.
Plate 1. MOULSHAM BRIDGE, CHELMSFORD

Plate 2. ROOF DETAIL, CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. MARY CHELMSFORD
through the tipping of bricks and other rubbish down its banks, under Johnson's instructions. It was alleged that this increased flooding in winter, and criticism was so strong that after Johnson's death the great engineer Telford was asked to examine the bridge and report upon it. He did so in 1824, but the text of his report seems to have disappeared. Whatever he may have said, the bridge still stands unaltered. From an aesthetic point of view we may be thankful, for it is a most graceful structure; and happily it is now scheduled as an ancient monument. 20 (See Plate 1.)

Another bridge undertaken by Johnson at the same time was the very important one at the foot of Gun Hill in the parish of Dedham, carrying the main road from London to Ipswich over the Stour, out of Essex into Suffolk. At this point the river runs very close to the steep southern side of its valley, and in a wet winter it is liable to overflow its banks. Johnson rebuilt the bridge about 1787; 21 but on 10 February 1795 it was blown up by the pressure of water in a great flood. In his official report on the disaster, dated 14 April 1795, Johnson put the blame on the county magistrates of Suffolk. He pointed out that in 1785, when the rebuilding of the bridge had been under discussion, the magistrates of Essex and Suffolk had met, and it had then been agreed that the whole cost of the bridge should be borne by Essex, but that Suffolk should pay for the building of an arch under the causeway that led up to the bridge from the north. By this means it was thought that the pressure on the bridge would be relieved in time of flood. In spite of this undertaking, the arch was not built.

The Essex magistrates accepted Johnson's explanation, put the chief blame on their brethren of Suffolk, and proceeded to demand that they should now carry out their bargain as a necessary condition of the rebuilding of the bridge. The matter was urgent, because the Postmaster-General was threatening to indict the county of Essex at the assizes for its failure to maintain the bridge in repair. He was willing to suspend action, however, if the matter was settled quickly. 22

That was all one to the magistrates of Suffolk. On 28 May they met and refused to do anything, and they maintained this

20 Criticism of the bridge will be found in a bundle of papers, mostly dating from 1818 to 1824, in the Essex Record Office: D/Do p. — Telford's report was read at the Court of Quarter Sessions on 22 September 1824: Q/SO. 28, page 608.
21 The rebuilding was in progress in 1787, and Johnson reported on 10 February 1795 that it had been finished seven or eight years: Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 14, page 135. Q/SO. 16, page 19.
22 Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 16, pages 19-23.
attitude for three months more. They gave way, however, on 22
August, agreeing to build a bridge on the Suffolk side of the cause-
way and instructing their surveyor, Mr. John Doughty, to meet
Johnson and examine the details on the spot. But it was not
until 13 July 1796 that Johnson was able to report that "Dedham
Bridge is completed in a neat and substantial manner".23 This
bridge was replaced by an iron one about 1845, and by the existing
concrete structure in 1928. The present Surveyor to the County
of Essex tells me that he does not believe the arch under the cause-
way was ever, in fact, built; and he considers that the breaking of
Johnson's first bridge was probably due to a defect in its con-
struction.24

One other work undertaken by Johnson in his official capacity
as Surveyor to the County of Essex remains to be considered, and
it is the most important of them all. At the time of his appoint-
ment the business of the county was transacted in a little old Shire
House, which was quite inadequate for the purpose, and in 1788
the county magistrates could endure it no longer. At the Michael-
mas Court of Quarter Sessions they resolved "that the present
Shire House is not in a fit condition for transacting the public
business of the county; that it is expedient and necessary to
repair the Shire House or to build a new one and to provide a
grand jury room, a room for witnesses, and a place for depositing
the county records". A committee of magistrates was set up to
consider the means of carrying out this resolution, and the County
Surveyor was ordered to examine the building and make a report
to the Committee at its first meeting, to be held on 10 November
1788.25 Johnson's first report was that the building could be
"put into such condition as to last some years at an expense not
exceeding £200";26 but the Committee told the magistrates at the
Epiphany Sessions in 1789 that the old House could not be satis-
factorily repaired and that Johnson had produced plans for a new
one, estimated to cost not more than £8,918. It was then deter-
mined to accept this decision and to build the new Shire Hall to
Johnson's design. On 10 July 1789 a contract was made for the
work with Messrs. John Johnson, junior (the architect's son),
Joseph Andrews, and William Horsfall.27

23Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 16, pages 51, 104-5, 254.
24Plans of two other bridges, designed by Johnson, are preserved in the
Essex Record Office: one at Widford of 1803 (Q/AB b 3), and one at
Akingford of 1806 (Q/AB b 4). Johnson reported on 13 January
1807 that the Akingford bridge was finished (S/SO. 19, page 602).
26Essex Record Office, Q/AS. 2/4.
27Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 14, pages 260, 324.
Plate 3. THE SHIRE HALL, CHELMSFORD, 1795
(From an engraving by J. Walker after Reinagle)

Photo. by National Buildings Record
Plate 4. THE SHIRE HALL BALLROOM, CHELMSFORD
The Shire Hall was completed in 1791, to the great satisfaction of the Essex magistrates. When the Committee made their final report to the Court of Quarter Sessions at Epiphany 1792, they stated that the work had been "completed in the most perfect and elegant manner, with a saving of near £2,000 under the original estimate", and it was decided to present Johnson with a piece of plate of the value of 100 guineas to mark the county's appreciation of his services.\(^{28}\)

Johnson seems to have considered the Shire Hall at Chelmsford his most important work, for he published a thin folio volume of Plans, Sections, and Perspective Elevation of the building.\(^{29}\) Its exterior (Plate 3) has not been much altered. It is is built of white brick, faced with Portland stone, its square severe lines relieved by panels of sculpture designed by John Bacon, R.A., and executed in Coade's artificial stone. Inside, the ground floor has been completely re-arranged and re-furnished, but the great room upstairs remains in its original state. Here the most beautiful feature is the rich and elaborate ceiling (Plate 4). The marble fireplaces at each end are ornamented with tablets by J. C. F. Rossi (1762-1839).\(^{30}\)

One other undertaking of Johnson's in Chelmsford must be mentioned, though it was not a part of his official work. On 17 January 1800 the greater part of the nave and the south aisle of Chelmsford church collapsed. It was a sudden disaster, due to some workmen who were opening a vault and undermined the inadequate foundations of the south arcade. A private Act of Parliament was secured to enable a special rate to be levied for the rebuilding of the church, and Johnson was invited to draw up the plans. Between 20 June 1802 and 14 February 1806 sums totalling £3,110:17:0 were paid to him—not, of course, solely

\(^{28}\)Nichols i, 528 note, quoting Chelmsford Chronicle, 13 January 1792. There is some mystery about the cost of the building. Johnson's original estimate, as we have seen, was £8,928. But the total cost was given on 19 July 1793 as £13,789:14:9 (Essex Record Office, Q/AS, 2/4). I do not know how this discrepancy is to be explained.

\(^{29}\)The publisher was John Nichols, the Leicestershire historian. No date is printed on the title-page of the book. The Dictionary of National Biography (under Johnson) asserts that it appeared in 1808, but this short article is so inaccurate that its statements have to be taken with caution: it says, for instance, that Johnson was born in 1754 (instead of 1732), that he was Surveyor to the county of Essex for 26 years (instead of 30), and that he built the Conspicuous fifty after he returned to Leicester, whereas its foundation in fact dates from 1792, twenty years before he retired from London.

\(^{30}\)Rossi received £20 for the work: Essex Record Office, Q/AS, 2/4. Perhaps I may add that he was the son of an Italian, who practised as a doctor at Mountsorrel and married a Leicester woman.
as professional fees: no doubt he acted also as paymaster for some or all of the workmen, in a way that then was very common.\textsuperscript{31} In rebuilding the church Johnson added galleries at the west end and over the aisles; and he put a new roof on to the nave, which still remains, a unique and lovely monument of the early Gothic Revival (Plate 2). It is interesting to note that the design has been generally approved even by antiquaries who usually dislike the work of that period.\textsuperscript{32}

Johnson did not retire from his office until he had reached the age of eighty, in 1812. The county’s formal farewell of him may be given in the words of the Order Book of Quarter Sessions: “This Court having received and read a letter from John Johnson Esquire, Surveyor of the County Works, announcing his intention to resign that office at the next Michaelmas Quarter Sessions on account of his late illness and great age, do unanimously resolve that the thanks of this Court be given to the said John Johnson Esquire for his long, active, faithful, and meritorious services to this county during the space of more than thirty years, and doth order that such resolution be entered into the records of this county and that a copy thereof, signed by the Clerk of the Peace, be transmitted to Mr. Johnson and inserted three times in the Chelmsford Chronicle and the Essex Herald and also in the County Chronicle”\textsuperscript{33}

Throughout the years of his service as County Surveyor in Essex, Johnson maintained a private practice as an architect. A list of his works is given in Nichols’ History of Leicestershire. It was probably supplied by Johnson himself.\textsuperscript{34} I give the list below, arranged alphabetically under counties, with a few additions (shown in italics) and some comments:

\textsuperscript{31}Chelmsford churchwardens’ accounts.
\textsuperscript{32}See, for example, J. C. Cox, Essex (“Little Guide”: ed. 3, 1913), 113; and G. Worley, Essex: a Dictionary of the County mainly Ecclesiological (1913), 23. For pictures of the church as it appeared after the crash of 1800, see W. Chancellor, A Short History of the Cathedral Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Chelmsford (1938), 14, 16. Another, showing the interior in 1850, much as it had been when Johnson finished his work, appears on page 27.
\textsuperscript{33}Essex Record Office, Q/SO. 21, page 588.
\textsuperscript{34}Nichols, i, 528. My reasons for thinking that Johnson supplied the list are its minuteness and his known connexion with Nichols. Nichols published his Plans of the Chelmsford Shire Hall, and Johnson presented one of the plates to Nichols’ History (Vol. i, No. xxxv).
Buildings Designed by John Johnson

DEVON

Killerton House: parish of Broad Clyst. "It was built as a temporary residence by Sir Thomas Acland, who died in 1788, and has been enlarged and improved by his grandson, the present baronet." 35 "Next saw on our right Sir Thomas Acland’s at Columb-John, a very neat white mansion, beautifully situated under a wood-crowned knoll." 36

DORSET

Sadborough House, parish of Thorncombe (transferred from Devon in 1842), for William Bragg. 37

ESSEX

Bradwell-juxta-mare: an extension of the old rectory, made to the orders of the Rev. Henry Bate-Dudley (1745-1824), who bought the advowson of the living in 1781 and presented himself to it in 1797. 38

Broomfield: house for John Judd, apparently built on an estate in this parish called Gutterys. 39

Hatfield Peverel: house for Colonel Tyrell.

Langford Grove: parish of Langford, 2½ miles north of Maldon. Built for N. Westcombe and at present (July 1949) unoccupied.

Terling Place: parish of Terling. Built for John Strutt, who purchased the estate from Sir Matthew Featherstonehaugh in 1761. 40 The centre portion is said to have been erected by John Strutt soon after he bought the property: the wings were added by his son. 41

Stroud Green House: parish of Rochford. Now called "The Lawn." Johnson here built on additional rooms to an earlier house, under the direction of the owner, Major G. D. Carr, of the Essex Militia. 42

Torrile's Hall: parish of East Thurrock, for John Crabb.


38*Essex Review*, vi, 208; and for Bate-Dudley’s fascinating career see the *Dictionary of National Biography*.
39T. Wright, *History and Topography of the County of Essex* (1836), i, 188.
41J. A. Rush, *Seats in Essex* [1897], 173.
GLAMORGAN

Classmount: house near Morriston, for John Morris.\textsuperscript{43}
Gnoll Castle, near Neath: for Sir Herbert Mackworth.\textsuperscript{44}

LEICESTERSHIRE

\textit{Knighton Hall, Leicester}: the front part of the house, added on to an existing building. (The work is attributed to Johnson by Professor A. E. Richardson, R.A.)
Leicester Consanguinitarium, County Rooms, \textit{Theatre} (1800-1836), Town Gaol. These buildings are discussed below.
Whatton Hall: parish of Long Whatton, for Edward Dawson.\textsuperscript{45}

LONDON AND MIDDLESEX

Houses in Cavendish Street, Portland Place, for the Earl of Hardwicke and William Udny.
Houses in Harley Street for the Bishop of Ossory and John Pybus.
House in Pall Mall for Sir Hugh Palliser.
Houses in Portman Square for the Hon. Charles Greville and Lord Middleton.
House in St. James’s Square for the Earl of Galloway.
House at Mill Hill, Middlesex, for Sir John Anderson.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

East Carlton Hall: for Sir John Palmer.
Kingsthorpe Hall: for James Fremeaux.\textsuperscript{46} Now the property of the Borough of Northampton.
Pitsford Hall: for Colonel Money.

SUFFOLK

Benhall Lodge: for Sir William Rush of Wimbledon, Surrey, who succeeded his uncle, Samuel Rush, in 1781. The house is said to have cost him £15,000. It was sold to Admiral Sir Hyde Parker (1739-1807). The manor was bought in 1810 by Edward Holland, who pulled Johnson’s house down and replaced it by another.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43}Beauties of South Wales (1815), 720.
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 711; C. B. Andrews (ed.), \textit{The Torrington Diaries} (1934-8), i, 298.
\textsuperscript{45}See the view in Nichols, iii, 1105.
\textsuperscript{46}V.C.H. Northants., iv, 83.
\textsuperscript{47}W. A. Copinger, \textit{The Manors of Suffolk} (1905-11), v, 104. I owe this reference to Mr. Norman Scarfe.
Newmarket: Noblemen’s and Gentlemen’s Club Rooms.

Woolverstone Hall: for William Berners. This fine house now belongs to the L.C.C. and is used as the London Nautical School. It retains much of its original decoration: the ceilings are particularly notable.

SURREY

Wimbledon church: rebuilt by Johnson in 1787.48

SUSSEX

Seat of Charles Beauclerk. I have not been able to identify this house.

Johnson’s work in Leicester demands closer attention. His earliest undertaking seems to have been the Town Gaol. It replaced an earlier building, on which Howard had commented unfavourably.49 Architecturally, it was suitably severe and economical. It stood in High Cross Street and was demolished after the completion of the new gaol in Welford Road in 1828.50

Johnson’s next work was a very curious group of buildings. It comprised first a block of four handsome houses, which he put up “in Southgate Street, near the Water-house pump... on the spot where he was born”; and behind, partly screened by this block, the Consanguinitarium. This was a charitable foundation for the benefit of his relatives. It was a battlemented stone building, with Gothic windows, containing five small houses.51

The Consanguinitarium was endowed by means of an indenture of bargain and sale of 24 January 1795. Under this instrument Johnson granted to a group of his relatives, who were to act as trustees, the building itself and an estate at Lubbenham yielding a rent of £70 a year, which was to maintain the institution. The relatives named were the architect’s son John, described as “of Berners Street, architect”; the Rev. Charles Johnson of South Stoke, Somerset; Joseph Johnson of Upper Belgrave Place, bachelor of physic; William Johnson of Leicester, nurseryman; and Joseph

48See the view of the church, dated 1809, reproduced in V.C.H. Surrey, iv, 124. It was again rebuilt in 1833-4: E. W. Brayley, Topographical History of Surrey (n.d.), iii, 504.
49Nichols, i, 531; Howard, State of the Prisons (ed. 3, 1784), 373.
50There is a view of Johnson’s gaol in Plate XXVIII of the first volume of Nichols’ History, opposite page 326.
51Nichols, i, 528. Engravings showing both blocks of building appear in Plate XXXV of the first volume.
Springthorpe of Leicester, corn chandler. (I do not know if Springthorpe was a member of Johnson's family: he may have been a relative by marriage.)

The trustees were to be responsible for running the Consanguinitarium and for nominating its five occupants, who were all to be related to Johnson. The institution was governed by strict rules, laid down by the founder himself. Each inmate was to receive 4s. 6d. a week, together with a ton of coal a year. Rules III and IV must be quoted: “III. No inhabitant to keep either dog, cat, fowls, or rabbits, nor any other animal that may be a nuisance; nor to carry on any business in his or her dwelling that may render the same unseemly. IV. No inhabitant to be allowed to keep any inmate, or any visitor to sleep with him or her, on pain of dismissal.” None of them was to be out, or to have visitors, later than 10 o’clock in summer, or 9 o’clock in winter, on pain of a sixpenny fine. The utmost care was taken to ensure neighbourly co-operation. When one of the inhabitants died, all the other inhabitants were to pay for his or her burial: the females were to attend on each other, and on the males, in case of sickness, or be dismissed”. Even the washing days were prescribed in the rules: House no. 1 was to do its washing on Monday, House no. 2 on Tuesday, and so on up to the fifth house on Friday. From such a founder, we need not be surprised at Rule VIII—“No child or children to be admitted into the lawn, on any account”—or at the final Rule (XII), with its precepts of majestic morality: “It is presumed that every kind of good order and decorum among the inhabitants of the Consanguinitarium will exist; that they will be neat and clean in their apartments and dress; vie with each other in acts of friendly assistance to their resident relatives; that they will also duly attend public worship, at such place as is most congenial to their conscience, and give praise to the Great Author of the Universe, for enabling and permitting the Founder of these dwellings to have the pleasure of giving the comforts they afford to them. But should any be so lost to themselves as to sow strife and discord, or by abusive words or actions render the meek-minded unhappy, they will be removed for ever from their places of residence”.

By his will, dated 12 January 1811 and proved in 1815, Johnson devised the four houses that stood in front of the Consanguinitarium to his brother William, to a niece, a nephew, and a great-nephew, charging annual sums of £4 or £6 upon them, which were to go to the further endowment of the Consanguinitarium.52

52Report of the Commissioners to inquire into Charities: Leicester (1838), 100-102. The Consanguinitarium has now been removed to Earl Howe Street.
We now come to Johnson's most important work in Leicester, the County Rooms. They have an interesting history. They were originally undertaken as an hotel, but the proprietor found his resources inadequate to its completion, and his holding was taken over by a group of private gentlemen in 1799 or 1800. In August 1800 it was stated that £3,300 was still required to finish the hotel and assembly rooms, with the outlying buildings, tap, stables, etc., and that if this sum was not raised within a month the property would have to be sold.\(^{53}\) A subscription list was opened for furnishing the public rooms so that they could be opened in time for the races on 17 September. Presumably the money was found somehow, for the assembly room was used for the first time on that day.\(^{54}\)

The best contemporary description of the building when it was new is that given in Nichols' History of Leicestershire:

"The front of the hotel, which name it bears, having been originally designed for that purpose, may, from the grandeur of its windows, its statues, basso relievo, and other decorations, be justly considered as the first modern architectural adornment of the town.

"A room, whose spacious dimensions (being 75 feet by 33 and 30 feet high) and elegant decorations adapt it in a distinguished manner for scenes of numerous and polished society, is appropriated to the use of the public balls. [See Plate 5.] The entrance is in the centre of the side wall, over which is a spacious orchestra, projecting a small way into the room. It is of a semi-circular plan, domed, and carried back over the landing of the stairs: the access to it is by a back staircase. The ceiling of the room is arched and formed into compartments; three of which are large circles, decorated with the allegorical paintings of Aurora, Urania, and Luna. At each end is a chimney, over which is a painting, in a compartment, of an aerial figure in a dazzling attitude: there are also two others, in compartments, on a side wall. On each side the chimneys are niches, in which are beautiful figures, from the models of Bacon. Mr. Johnson employed Mr. Ramsey Reinagle\(^{55}\) to execute the paintings, who has done great justice to his appointment; but they have suffered much from the damp, for want of fire. Beside the eight beautiful lustres, branches of lights are held by four statues from the designs of Bacon. Mr. Rossi, R.A., was employed (partly on account of his mother being a native of Leicester, but

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\(^{53}\) Leicester Journal, 8 August, 1800.

\(^{54}\) ibid., 19 September, 1800.

much more so from his superior merit as an artist) to execute the two figures in the front of the building (Comic and Lyric Muses) and the bas reliefs between the windows.

"'Uniting under the same roof every convenience for the gratification of taste and the amusement of the mind, a coffee-room handsomely furnished, and supplied with all the London papers, affords the gentlemen of the town and country, as well as the stranger, to whom its door is open, an agreeable and commodious resort.'"\textsuperscript{56}

It is interesting to note that Johnson, Bacon, and Rossi worked together here as at the Shire Hall in Chelmsford.

A view of the building appeared in 1800, engraved by J. Walker. It was from this engraving that the print in Nichols' \textit{History} was taken (reproduced here as Plate 6). The \textit{façade} has not been much altered since it was finished, except in one unfortunate respect: the original small panes have been taken out of the windows and large, ugly sheets of plate glass substituted.

It does not seem that the Rooms prospered under their original management, and in 1817 they were sold to the county. At the Lent assizes of that year the grand jury "represented to the Justices of the Peace of this county the inconvenience of the Judges' lodgings during their attendance at the assizes and... recommended the purchasing a house or building with suitable accommodation for the purpose".\textsuperscript{57} The Assembly Rooms were at hand, and the transaction went through very speedily. A private Act of Parliament had to be secured to enable the money to be raised from the county rates. It is interesting to note that the petition put up to Parliament for this purpose stated that the county was in need not only of Judges' Lodgings but of a "place of deposit and safe custody of public records". It is to be supposed that the Rooms were used for this purpose until the Castle was bought by the County in 1888. I have not been able to discover what price the county paid, but at the Quarter Sessions of Easter 1818 it was agreed that a sum not exceeding £1,500 should be spent on repairs and alterations, and a similar sum on furniture for the use of the Judges.

The work of adaptation began in the summer of 1817—well before the Act of Parliament had been secured. The builder who was in charge of the work, Joshua Harrison, at first maintained that the ceiling of the ballroom was unsafe and would have to be

\textsuperscript{56}Nichols, i, 533-4.

\textsuperscript{57}County Record Office, Leicester: Quarter Sessions Minute Book, 1809-1818. (Under 15 July 1817.)
Plate 5. THE ASSEMBLY ROOM, COUNTY ROOMS, LEICESTER
taken down, but he afterwards agreed that it could be repaired—and it still survives. If Harrison’s estimates are to be trusted, however, a startling amount of work had to be done to put the building in order, even though it had been completed less than twenty years. The window-frames were “so damaged by the admission of wet that they must be partially renewed”, “new ceilings are needed in almost all the rooms”, and so on. It looks as if the Rooms had been suffering severely from neglect.

By the spring of 1819 the work was complete down to its details, to the knives and forks and linen that had been bought for the judges’ use. It may be added that the word “Hotel” was obliterated over the porch, and the stones on which “Assembly Rooms” were cut at the top were turned round: the words can still be seen from the inside of the parapet. 58

Adjoining the County Rooms on the south side stood another building by Johnson: the Theatre, which was opened a few months earlier, on 17 March 1800,59 and was replaced by the present Theatre Royal, on the same site, in 1836. It was very small, and though Nichols gallantly did his best for it by describing it as “neatly and commodiously fitted up, nearly on the plan of the London houses “, it was found inconvenient and nobody seems to have regretted its disappearance.60

One other project of Johnson’s connected with Leicester must be mentioned, even though it was not carried out. In 1792 he produced a plan of a Brunswick Square, which, says Nichols, “was intended to have been formed on the site of the Horse Fair (Johnson’s Garden), an extensive plot of ground, at that time the property of the corporation of Leicester. In the area of the Square was to have been St. Margaret’s chapel; on two of the sides beautiful streets, to be named George Street and Charlotte Street, after their present Majesties. A Royal Terrace would have filled the side looking towards the London Road; and a new Town Hall, opening into Millstone Lane, was to have filled the fourth side. Had this plan taken effect, it would have been creditable to the town; in which no place can be put in competition, either for public convenience, or a display of corporate magnificence and civic grandeur”.61 What an opportunity was missed here! It was

58 These details of the purchase and conversion of the Rooms are taken from miscellaneous papers at the County Record Office, Leicester.
59 Leicester Journal, 14 and 21 March 1800. A prologue was written for the opening night by Miss Susanna Watts (the author of A Walk through Leicester, 1804): it is printed in full in the Journal for 28 March 1800.
60 See the tart comment on it in Curtis, Topographical History, 113.
61 Nichols, i. 531.
a chance of giving the town a really fine and well-planned centre, and once gone it never returned.

Johnson retired, as we have seen, from his position as County Surveyor of Essex at Michaelmas 1812, and he died where he was born, in Southgate Street, two years later, on 17 August 1814. He was buried in St. Martin’s. In the south quire aisle there is a monument to Johnson’s parents, designed by himself and executed by Bacon: his own death is baldly commemorated in an inscription on its base. Two obituary notices of Johnson appeared in the press, discreet and impersonal.62

One other point in his career remains to be recorded. In his *Topographical History of the County of Leicester*, which was published in 1831, the Rev. J. Curtis refers to Johnson as “architect and banker”.63 I have not succeeded in tracing Johnson’s financial activities: the word “banker”, indeed, has a very vague significance at this date. But it brings us back to the most interesting problem of his life. How did he make his way in youth and early middle age? Above all, how did he acquire the competent fortune that enabled him to build and endow the Consanguinitarium in 1795?

Only one portrait of Johnson appears to exist: a rather uninformative drawing, now in the County Rooms. His personality remains almost completely hidden from us. Almost, but not quite: it is surely possible to detect some hint of the man himself from the strange tenacity of his feeling for his relations (which led him in the end to retire to Southgate Street to die among them) and from the fussy, meticulous rules he laid down for his Consanguinitarium. But if he himself remains a shadow, his career is of considerable interest: for it shows us something of the work of a forgotten class of public servants—the County Surveyors of the eighteenth century.64

62 *Leicester Journal*, 16 September 1814; *Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 84, part ii, page 296.

63 Curtis, 113.

64 I am most grateful for the assistance I have received from a number of people in this investigation of Johnson’s career: to Dr. C. H. Thompson, Archivist to the County of Leicester; the staff of the Essex Record Office, especially Mr. F. G. Emmison, the Archivist, and Miss H. E. P. Grieve, Senior Assistant; the Provost of Leicester; the Treasurer of Chelmsford cathedral; Commander W. F. G. Smithwick, R.N. (rtd.), of the Nautical School at Woolverstone; and Miss M. A. Riley, who furnished me with extracts from the *Leicester Journal*. The Essex Record Office kindly lent me the block of Plate 3; and Plates 1, 2, 4 and 5 are from photographs owned by the National Buildings Record, who generously gave me permission to reproduce them.
Plate 6. THE COUNTY ROOMS, LEICESTER
(From an engraving in Nichols' History of Leicestershire)