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**13 Portland Street, Cheltenham: an example of the architecture of
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13 Portland Street, Cheltenham: an example of the architecture of Masonic preferment

By OLIVER BRADBURY

The little-known Regency architect George Allen Underwood¹ was a pupil of Sir John Soane between September 1807 and May 1815.² On 5 May of that year, the day after he left Soane, he wrote to his former master from Hart Street, London, ‘apologising for leaving early and obsequiously hoping for minor commissions to be put his way’.³ In 1812, whilst still a pupil, Underwood had made a ‘Design for assembly and concert room’, which he exhibited at the Royal Academy in that year.⁴ According to Gell and Bradshaw’s *Gloucestershire Directory*, Underwood and his brother Charles were living in Cheltenham by 1820. George had ‘invited his brother to Cheltenham and it was thought advantageous to him to become a joint contractor’.⁵ Underwood is listed as an ‘architect’ in the Gell and Bradshaw directory, and was residing at ‘Grafton’. In 1822, according to Pigot’s *London & Provincial Directory*, he was residing at a cottage called ‘Grottens’ in Cheltenham. As an address, ‘Grottens’ is elusive, but there was a field named ‘Lower Grotten’ on the south side of the present Suffolk Square.⁶ Underwood’s residence in Cheltenham would indicate that he was enjoying enough local commissions to make a move from London worthwhile. He was still living in London in 1817.⁷ With Cheltenham rapidly expanding as a fashionable spa resort at this period, Underwood was clearly in the right place at the right time. He would become the leading architect working in the town in the half a dozen years prior to J.B. Papworth’s arrival in 1824.⁸ He would be engaged on a number of important Cheltenham buildings as well as a Post Office map of the town in 1820. In addition he became surveyor to the counties of Somerset and Dorset and to the dean and chapter of Wells in the 1820s. Nevertheless, Underwood’s practice appears to have dwindled by the mid 1820s and dried up by the end of the decade. He died unmarried, aged thirty-six, in Bath on 1 November 1829.⁹ His former master, Sir John Soane, outlived him by eight years.¹⁰

1. Little has been written on Underwood. I have attributed to him the plunge pool c.1823 at Ston Easton Park, Somerset: O. Bradbury, ‘A Neo-Classical Plunge at Ston Easton Park, Somerset’, *The Follies Journal* 2 (2002).
2. Soane Museum (Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London) Day Book.
3. Soane Museum, Cupboard 2, Div XV A 14, item 1.
4. A. Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts Exhibitors: Dictionary of Contributors, 1769–1904* (1970 reprint), 877.
5. Soane Museum, Cupboard 2, Div XV A 14, item 7.
6. As shown on an 1809 map of Cheltenham.
7. *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 7 Aug. 1817.
8. H. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* (1995), 733.
9. *Ibid.* 1000.
10. *Ibid.* 904.

The purpose of this paper is to argue the case for the attribution of a Cheltenham town house to Underwood. This particular building was originally known as 13 (later 25) Portland Street.¹¹ In documentary terms its history is well recorded but the identity of its architect is not stated. No. 13 Portland Street was built as a private residence in 1818. In the 1820s it was also known as Seymour Hall and by 1891 it was known as Handel Hall,¹² having undergone a conversion as a place of worship in the late 19th century. In 1898 it became the Portland Tabernacle and during the 20th century was known as the Portland Street Church of Christ.¹³ According to an 1898 schedule of deeds and documents the site of the house was the subject of a conveyance dated 7 October 1817 and a document dated 28 March 1818 indicates that Robert Hughes acquired the site from a Mr. W. Patridge.¹⁴ An abstract of Hughes's title dated 26 November 1824 (paper is watermarked 1823), states that on 8 March 1819 'the said Dwelling house and premises here in before described was and now stands insured in the sum of £1000 – from loss or damage by fire, – [...] As this house stands detached from any other house and is occupied by R. Hughes himself – There is little probability of any fire so that he has not insured to half the value – The furniture. Silver plate. linen. pictures Books &c in that house are insured by a separate policy'.¹⁵ Bearing in mind the custom of building in the summer, as opposed to the comparatively inclement winter, it is likely that 13 Portland Street was built in 1818 and certainly complete by March 1819.

Stephen Astley, a curator at the Soane Museum, London has suggested that 13 Portland Street must have been built for someone of some local 'importance'. Certainly, it was no run of the mill Regency town house and it was quite an unusual design for Cheltenham in 1818.¹⁶ Robert Hughes was the scion of a prominent Cheltenham family.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that his father, Thomas Hughes, after 'the expiration of his articles in 1754...visited Mr. Horner of Mells Park, Somersetshire'.¹⁸ This connection is difficult to substantiate further; however, Michael McGarvie, former editor of the *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, writes that 'The only Mr. Horner about then was Thomas who would have been 17 years old. The Hughes family does not feature in any Horner correspondence but Thomas Horner did visit Cheltenham from time to time to take the waters'.¹⁹ Thomas Horner's son Colonel Thomas Strangways Horner was a client of Soane between 1810 and 1824²⁰ and this would perhaps explain, albeit indirectly, why Underwood designed a lodge for Colonel Horner at Mells in April 1824.²¹ McGarvie also writes that: 'However, it seems more likely that Col. T.S. Horner would have come across Underwood

11. O. Bradbury, 'The Portland Tabernacle about 1965', *Cheltenham Local History Society Journal* **14** (1998), 32. This short account features a photograph of 13 Portland Street c.1965. Another photograph (taken from an undated slide), with an extended written account of the building, is reproduced in idem, *Cheltenham's Lost Heritage* (Stroud, 2004), 112–13.
12. *Cheltenham & District Post Office Guide* (1891–2), 259, which includes the earliest known pictorial depiction of the building in the form of a black and white vignette.
13. Bradbury, 'The Portland Tabernacle', 32.
14. Gloucestershire Archives (GA), D 3906/1/1.
15. Ibid. D 245/IV/6, p. 19.
16. Dialogue with author on 27 and 28 Feb. 1998.
17. Bryan Little, *Cheltenham* (London, 1952), 36.
18. Leslie W. Bayley, *Robert Hughes 1771–1827* (inaugural address to the Gloucestershire Masonic Society 1952), 4.
19. Letter dated 26 Mar. 1999.
20. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary*, 910.
21. 'Design for a Cottage, to be erected at Finger Gate. G. A. U. Archt. Bath 13th April 24': plans in the collections of the earl of Oxford and Asquith, Mells Manor Muniments, Archive Office, Mells, Somerset.

in Frome as the architect of Christ Church and Frome Bridge'.²² T.S. Horner inherited Mells Park, near Frome, in 1804 from his father Thomas Horner. The latter, although only 17 years old in 1754, was probably the Mr. Horner visited by Thomas Hughes in that year.²³

Robert Hughes was a Whig, an attorney, and a local landowner responsible for founding the Cheltenham Masonic lodge in 1818.²⁴ In 1952, in his inaugural address to the Gloucestershire Masonic Society as its president, Leslie W. Bayley stated 'Once again Bro. Hughes commenced building operations and he erected a large residence then known as "Seymour Hall," Portland Street...now converted into the Portland Tabernacle. It is reputed that Mr. Underwood was the Architect and it is not amiss to assume that he owed his introduction to the Craft and his commission to build the Masonic Hall to Bro. Hughes'.²⁵ Underwood designed and built the Cheltenham Masonic Hall between 1818 and 1823.²⁶

Underwood was a Mason,²⁷ as was Soane, though, somewhat ironically, Soane's contribution to Masonic architecture did not materialize until 1828 with his atmospheric Freemason's Hall at Great Queen Street, London. It was unfortunately demolished as early as 1864.²⁸ The 1952 address sheds some light on Underwood's Masonic membership: 'On the 12th September, 1818, a Lodge of Emergency was held for the purpose of balloting for Mr. George Allen Underwood and he was afterwards initiated'.²⁹ Underwood's Masonic involvement is by its very nature an enigmatic aspect of his career, but it suggests that he perhaps enjoyed unconventional, or secretive, means of patronage. Prior to his fall from grace, in 1823, the Cheltenham Masonic lodge perhaps helped him with local commissions, including the Masonic Hall itself in 1818, when 'In November the designs were produced and the Estimates amounting to Two thousand two hundred pounds, both of which were accepted'.³⁰ The construction of Holy Trinity church between 1819 and 1823 involved an acrimonious dispute between George and Charles Underwood and the materials supplier, which 'as a concluding injury they [the Underwoods] view that silent state to Mr G. Underwood's professional reputation which is the chief subject of this communication'.³¹ It can now be stated that there was Masonic involvement in Holy Trinity's construction. The viewing of G.A. Underwood's designs for the benefit of potential building tenders for the church was advertised in *The Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Advertiser* on 7 August 1817 to be at Newmarch and Harris, Cheltenham. Messrs. Newmarch and Harris were Cheltenham Masons.³²

No. 13 Portland Street is an exemplary example of Sir John Soane's influence on provincial Regency architecture (Fig. 1). Characteristically Soanean is the absence of any classical orders on the façade – where they might be expected. The panels substituted for giant pilasters have been pared down to three sections. The ground storey is utterly bare; the first storey has an incised honeysuckle pattern; and the second storey features sunken panels. St Margaret's Terrace,

22. Letter dated 26 Mar. 1999.

23. *Burke's Landed Gentry* (1898), I, 753–4.

24. Bayley, *Robert Hughes*, 12.

25. *Ibid.* 10.

26. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1000.

27. Bayley, *Robert Hughes*, 19.

28. J.N. Summerson, D. Watkins and G.-Tilman Mellinghoff, *John Soane* (Architectural Monographs 8: Academy Editions, 1983), 113.

29. Bayley, *Robert Hughes*, 19.

30. P.M. Dyke, *The History of Foundation Lodge No. 82* (Cheltenham, 1986), 178.

31. Letter written by S. Howell, accountant, 26 June 1823: Soane Museum, Cupboard 2, Div XV A 14, item 6.

32. Dyke, *History of Foundation Lodge*, 177.



Fig. 1. No. 13 Portland Street in 1943 (reproduced by permission of English Heritage.NMR).

Cheltenham (Fig. 2), possibly can be attributed to Underwood. This attribution is based partly on the architect's deployment of a double-incision motif, acting as a reductionist variant on the primitive Doric order, above the giant pilaster (Fig. 3).³³ Like 13 Portland Street's balcony (to be discussed), it is arguable that only a pupil of Soane such as Underwood could have had such intimate knowledge of such idiosyncratic architectural vocabulary. The slits recall the parapet slits above the Doric columns, *in antis*, at Soane's lodge of 1792–7 at Tyringham Hall, Buckinghamshire. The architect of St Margaret's Terrace placed a blank sunken panel above the second-floor window on the North Place return elevation – a device repeated three times on the façade of 13 Portland Street.³⁴ The Portland Street façade is a good example of the astylar classicism Soane and others were pursuing in an attempt to invent a new classical language. At no. 13 the repetitive use of the arched window, and the negative or sunken linear decoration, is especially Soanean, in particular

33. See D. Watkin, *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures* (1996), 4–5.

34. Alan Brooks describes the St. Margaret's Terrace elevation as 'the rather Soanean E return elevation': D. Verey and A. Brooks, *Gloucestershire 2: The Vale and The Forest of Dean* (The Buildings of England, 2002), 267.



Fig. 2. North Place elevation of St Margaret's Terrace (1819–25), St Margaret's Road, Cheltenham (photograph taken in 1996 by the author).

the first-storey panel pattern, and the sunken incision following the second-storey windows. The arrangement of the first-storey windows to balcony has considerable finesse and perhaps renders the rest of the façade a little clumsy. Moreover, the projecting mouldings around these windows relate directly to the arched mouldings around the niches and doors on the Masonic Hall façade (Fig. 4), therefore perhaps strengthening Underwood's authorship of 13 Portland Street.³⁵ If the house was indeed by Underwood, it is perhaps opportune to quote a perceptive contemporary observer of the architect: '[it was] Mr Soane from whom he [Underwood] has invariably avowed that he has derived all the aesthetical knowledge in his possession'.³⁶

Perhaps the most conclusive indicator of Underwood's hand is the design of the delicate balcony. It is a virtual facsimile of the first storey balcony at nos. 12 and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which flank Soane's London home (Fig. 5). Nos. 12 and 14 were designed by Soane in 1792 and 1824.³⁷

35. Dr Steven Blake (email 26 Jan. 2006) informs me that 'The anonymous and undated view of the Masonic Hall is on p. 15 of a sketchbook (inscribed on the cover as 'Cheltenham 1825'), containing a total of 36 drawings and watercolours, many (but not all) of which appear to be the original drawings from which prints were later produced to illustrate the 1825 and 1838 editions of Griffiths' "History of Cheltenham". The volume was purchased for the Art Gallery & Museum in 1925 and its Accession Number is 1925.72.'

36. Anonymous author, 1823, Soane Museum, item 7.

37. Summerson *et al.*, *John Soane*, 25.



Fig. 3. Detail of North Place elevation of St Margaret's Terrace (photograph taken in 1996 by the author).

The architect at Cheltenham evidently copied Soane's design almost down to the last detail, as everything tallies: the moulding of the stone base; the ends of the balcony, which curves curving back towards the façade; and the shape of the sinuous railings linking the handrail to the stone base. According to Ptolemy Dean this pattern is known as 'strigillation'. Dean wrote, regarding its use by Soane at Moggerhanger House, Bedfordshire: 'The pattern of this ironwork is derived from strigillation, a favoured Soane motif of the 1790s. It can be seen on the vases for the book room at Wimpole'.³⁸ And regarding Wimpole Hall, Cambridgeshire, Dean writes: 'Book room:

38. P. Dean, *Sir John Soane and the Country Estate* (Aldershot, 1999), 131.

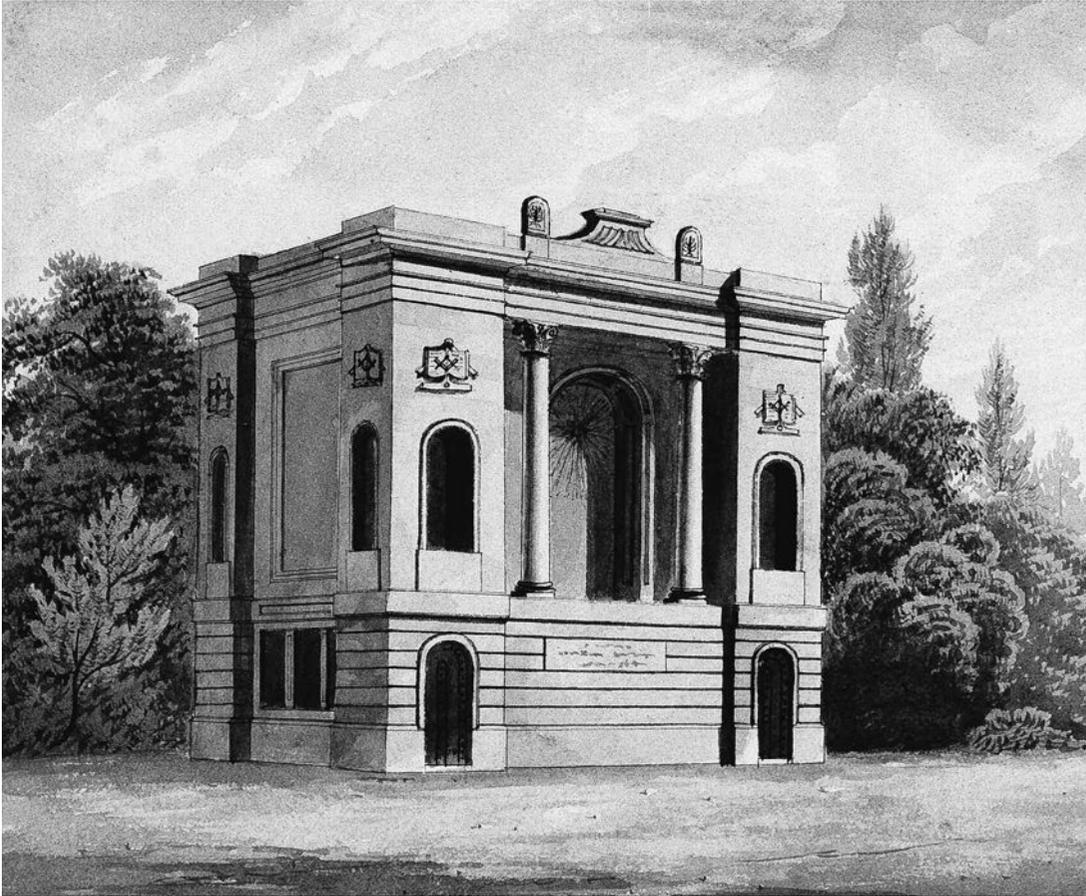


Fig. 4. Undated (c.1825) view of the Cheltenham Masonic Hall (1819–23), Portland Street, Cheltenham (reproduced by courtesy of Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum).

Soane's sketch design for the urns. They are decorated with strigillation, a typical Roman pattern'.³⁹ In fact, the window and balcony arrangement at 13 Portland Street can be viewed merely as a reversal of No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields' window/balcony composition. It is therefore arguable that only a pupil of Soane could have designed 13 Portland Street; for a local architect, or non-pupil, probably would not have had such familiarity with Soanean devices, such as the first-floor balcony.

A testimonial to the durability of that balcony is to be found in a wedding photograph outside 13 Portland Street published in the *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic* in 1906.⁴⁰ It shows the balcony accommodating seventeen guests and by no means full – this imparts a useful sense of scale, as all the other known photographs of the building are without people. The façade dimensions of 13 Portland Street included a width of thirty-four feet; the depth of the building

39. Ibid. 77.

40. 16 June 1906.



Fig. 5. Detail of first-floor balcony at 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields (1792–4), London (photograph taken in 1997 by the author).

was twenty-five feet.⁴¹ It was thus slightly wider and higher than its neighbours and therefore the most architecturally prominent elevation on the east side of Portland Street. No. 13 Portland Street's construction is partly indicated by a side alley to the south, which reveals the corner of the ashlar façade grafted on to a brick shell.

An 1824 advertisement in a Cheltenham newspaper describes the building merely as 'an elegant Residence situate in Portland Street'.⁴² Inventories taken on 19 July and 6 November of the same year allows us to form an impression of the interior. One lists 'The Pictures at Seymour Hall In the Drawing Room [...] Kneller, Sir Peter Lily [*sic*] [...] Antonio Waterloo [...] Over the Double folding doors Carlo Dolci In the small Drawing Room over the Fire place [...] Hoare of Bath [...] Jenniers, Vandervelt [...] Parlour, Abraham Hondius, Jervis'. Another, of the household goods and effects in Seymour Hall, lists five bedrooms, a drawing room, dressing room, china closet, kitchen and back kitchen, servants' hall, front hall and staircase, ground floor bedroom and cellar.⁴³ An 1827 inventory also includes a store room, upper office, housekeeper's room, scullery, Mr.

41. Measurements taken from 'Old Town Survey' of 1855–7 held at Cheltenham Municipal Offices, Promenade, Cheltenham.

42. Bayley, *Robert Hughes*, 18.

43. GA, D 245/1V/17.

Hughes's office, breakfast room, and butler's pantry.⁴⁴ In the absence of any photographs of the interior, which was converted for worship in the late 19th century,⁴⁵ these inventories are likely to be the closest we will ever get to knowing what 13 Portland Street appeared like inside.

In June 1824 Hughes was in financial difficulties and therefore placed 13 Portland Street on the market.⁴⁶ In 1827, just after his death, it was advertised by the *Cheltenham Journal* as 'A Very substantial Stone-built DWELLING-HOUSE, being No. 13, Portland Street [...] The whole of the elegant and genuine London furniture, made purposely for the house by *Wilkinson, Norris, and Collins*, may be taken to at the option of the purchaser'.⁴⁷ James Yorke of the furniture and woodwork department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, observes that: 'Looking through the *Dictionary of English Furniture* (Leeds, 1986) I have been unable to find a partnership by the name of Wilkinson, Norris and Collins. I suspect that three different and very fashionable upholsterers are being referred to. William Wilkinson, of Ludgate Hill, London, who among other things supplied furniture to the Duke of Rutland at Belvoir Castle in about 1811; William Collins, of Tothill Fields, London, who supplied gilt furniture to Northumberland House, London; and John Norris of 55 High Holborn, London, who specialised in upholstery and carpets. All very swanky metropolitan stuff, to help sell the house!'.⁴⁸ The fact that the furniture was made to be *in situ* indicates some serious pretensions to grandeur, as does Hughes's taste in Old Masters.

No. 13 Portland Street was demolished c.1979–80 to make way for Cheltenham's 'Northern Relief Road'.⁴⁹ Its deeds were deposited in the Gloucestershire Archives in 1979.⁵⁰ Let us end with David Verey's succinct 1970 description: 'a charming but ungrammatical neo-Greek panelled façade of three storeys and three bays, the upper windows round-headed. Good wrought-iron balcony on the first floor'.⁵¹

Acknowledgments

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44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.* D 3906. A written description (a letter to the author from Mrs D. Widdows, dated 9 April 1999) of the interior, describing how it appeared during the second half of the 20th century, appears to suggest that it was largely gutted for congregational purposes.

46. Bayley, *Robert Hughes*, 18.

47. 23 Apr. 1827, p. 1: GA, D 245/1V/18.

48. Email dated 12 Apr. 1999.

49. Bradbury, 'The Portland Tabernacle', 32. Jeremy Jefferies, however, has suggested (letter dated 2 Oct. 2004) that it was demolished at an earlier date.

50. Information from Dr Steven Blake (30 Oct. 1995).

51. *Gloucestershire 2: The Vale and The Forest of Dean* (The Buildings of England, 1970), 150.