

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



Norman E. Butcher, 'James Hutton's House at St John's Hill, Edinburgh',
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series 4 (1997), pp. 107–112.

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This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club**, **The Journal for  
Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

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JAMES HUTTON'S HOUSE AT ST JOHN'S HILL, EDINBURGH

NORMAN E. BUTCHER

FOR THE LAST TWO HUNDRED YEARS, scholars of the life and work of James Hutton (1726–1797), 'Founder of Modern Geology', have relied on the *Biographical Account of the Late Dr James Hutton* published in 1805 by his friend Professor John Playfair (1748–1819).<sup>1</sup> Playfair stated that Hutton returned to Edinburgh from farming in Berwickshire 'about the year 1768' to live with his three sisters. It has long been known that Hutton's house was 'at St John's Hill looking up to Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat, an inspiring view for any geologist and especially for Hutton'.<sup>2</sup> Since Hutton's first publication was a small pamphlet in 1777 and most of his writings were published in the 1780s and 1790s, near the end of his life, it seems clear that, holding no university post, Hutton's house at St John's Hill was where the extraordinary range of his writings was produced.

Jean Jones quotes from a letter Hutton wrote to the naturalist John Strange in 1770: 'Having no home I am obliged to make one chamber serve me for laboratory, library and repository for self and minerals, of which I have grown so avaricious, my friends allege that I shall soon gather as many stones as will build me a house; the truth is build I must or be separated from my studies'.<sup>3</sup> She adds that 'in 1770 Hutton bought a plot of land on St John's Hill, Edinburgh, looking directly onto the Salisbury Crags, and there built the house in which he lived with his three sisters for the rest of his life'. The precise location of Hutton's house at St John's Hill has not previously been identified. Hutton scholars have apparently overlooked a published description of Hutton's house and garden by Sir James Crichton-

Browne (fig. 1), which is here quoted in full:<sup>4</sup>

ST JOHN'S HILL

I was born on the 29th November, 1840, at 3, St. John's Hill, the house of my grandfather, Mr Andrew Balfour, who, having graduated in medicine and held a commission in the Army, was then a printer and publisher in Edinburgh. St. John's Hill was a picturesque corner of Old Edinburgh. It stood on a ridge about 120 feet above the south back of the Canongate, and was a cul de sac, approached from St. Leonards by a narrow pathway and a curious old arched passage, and from the south back of the Canongate by a long flight of broad but much dilapidated steps. There were only seven or eight houses in St. John's Hill, each detached and standing in its own bit of ground, and shadowed by its own trees.

My grandfather's house was a rather quaint and grim specimen of Scottish domestic architecture of the conventional type of the middle of the eighteenth century. He had inherited it from a grand-uncle, a really great man, a vigorous and versatile genius, James Hutton, who may be styled the Father of modern Geology. It was at St. John's Hill, where he resided from 1768, when he abandoned farming in Norfolk, till his death in 1797, that he wrote the 'Theory of the Earth', that geological classic, and many other dissertations, communicated to the Edinburgh Royal Society, including one on 'An Investigation of the Principle of Knowledge and of the Progress of Reason from Sense to Science



Fig. 1. Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938). (From Crichton-Browne, *The Doctor Remembers*, 1938.)

and Philosophy', works which may to-day be studied with advantage, and which contain pregnant suggestions on the physical and philosophical problems which are being at present so earnestly discussed.

The house at St. John's Hill, standing back from the road, and overshadowed by trees, was approached by a gateway and a short walk, and was very much like the houses of the well-to-do in Edinburgh in these days. On the right, on entering, was a long dining-room, rarely used; to the left, a small parlour that was the family rendezvous, and upstairs there was a long fusty drawing-room, only opened on state occasions, and a number of bedrooms, all stiffly furnished, and with four-poster beds. At the back of the house was a green on which we putted, and a garden affording a magnificent view of Salisbury Crags, with the Radical Road winding round it, and the windy-gowl down below it, and, at its turning point, that unmistakable profile of a man, forehead, eyebrows, nose, mouth and chin, which was supposed, in those days, to be a striking likeness of Lord Brougham. The back of the house was literally mantled by the most luxuriant and prolific Jargonelle pear tree I have ever seen. In August it was possible to reach out of one of the bedroom windows and pluck a ripe pear, warm with morning sunshine. I have no doubt that it was an experience of that kind that has impressed on me to this day what is, perhaps, a unique predilection – for a ripe Jargonelle as the most delicious of pears.

Opposite my grandfather's house on St. John's Hill stood a tall, gaunt old building, with thick walls and narrow passages, that had been converted into tenements, but that had once been the Edinburgh mansion of Archbishop Spottiswoode, who played so prominent though devious a part in the ecclesiastical history of Scotland in the first half of the seventeenth century, who crowned Charles I at Holyrood, and who is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Just opposite the flight of steps leading to St. John's Hill from the south back of the Canongate, and at right angles to that thorough-fare, runs St. John's Street, which, before the creation of the New Town, was a favourite place of abode of the better class of Edinburgh Society, especially the intellectual and literary portion of it, who aspired to something better than the Cowgate or the foetid closes and wynds of the High Street and Canongate. There noblemen, lairds, judges, advocates had in turn their residence, and there at suppers of collops, boiled fowls and claret assembled the literati of the period – men like Adam Fergusson, Dr. Blacklock, David Hume, Henry Erskine, Lord Braxfield, Lord Monboddo and Dr. Adam Smith from Kirkcaldy.

But the glory of St. John's Hill has departed. The last time I made a pilgrimage there, I found on the site of my grandfather's house a big Board School.

Sir James Crichton-Browne, Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy from 1875, was the eldest son of Dr William Alexander Francis Browne and Magdalene Howden Balfour.<sup>5</sup> His parents named him after Dr James Crichton, who left the bequest out of which the Crichton Royal Institution at Dumfries was founded.<sup>6</sup> He was born at his mother's former home at 3 St John's Hill in Edinburgh in 1840 because the house for his father, newly appointed Superintendent for the recently opened Dumfries Institution, had not yet been built.

As described by Crichton-Browne, St John's Hill was a cul-de-sac immediately to the east of the Pleasance and thus just outside the ancient City Wall. It was a new development when Hutton bought his site in 1770, reached from the South Back of the Canongate (today Holyrood Road) nearly opposite the end of St John's Street.<sup>7</sup> It can readily be seen on Kirkwood's plan of Edinburgh in 1817 (fig. 2). Hutton's house and garden, as described by Crichton-Browne, is clearly shown on the southern side of the cul-de-sac, at its eastern end, labelled 'Miss Balfour'. Not only was Crichton-Browne's mother a Balfour, his grandfather, as mentioned in the extract quoted above, was Andrew Balfour (1781–1863). James Hutton's mother was also a Balfour, Sarah Balfour. After Hutton's death at St John's Hill on 26 March 1797, the one surviving sister, Isabella Balfour, lived there until her death in 1818; thereafter the house passed to Andrew Balfour, who, incidentally, had been born in South Carolina.

Immediately west of Hutton's house and garden on Kirkwood's 1817 map is a similar property labelled 'Mrs Ferrier', whilst the name 'Mr Waterston' appears in the narrow plot beyond that. *The Bi-centenary History* of the well-known firm of Edinburgh stationers George Waterston & Sons, founded in 1752, records that the first George Waterston (1778–1850), son of the founder William Waterston (1729–1780), was 10 years old when his



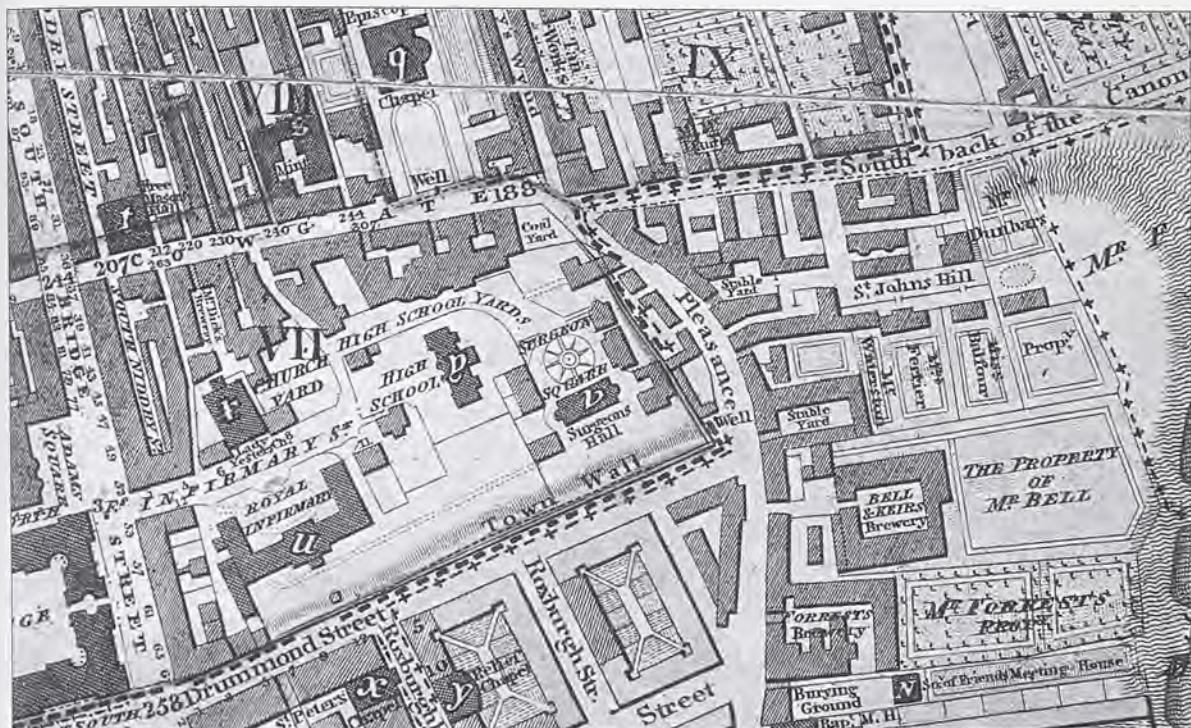


Fig. 2. Part of Robert Kirkwood's Plan of the City of Edinburgh, 1817. (Courtesy of Edinburgh City Libraries.)

mother, remarried in 1786, moved into this house at St John's Hill.<sup>8</sup> Robert Ferrier, George's new stepfather, died some years later though Mrs Ferrier lived until 1831. The house was the home of five generations of the Waterston family until it was vacated in 1885; the Waterstons' famous sealing wax factory developed on the plot to the west.

The *Bi-centenary History* contains a photograph (fig. 3) taken c. 1860, possibly by John James Waterston (1811–1883), showing the back of the Waterston family house from the garden, together with an undated sketch of the northern view of the house with the sealing wax factory on the west (fig. 4). Although no photograph of Hutton's house



Fig. 3. Photograph of the southern aspect of the Waterston family home at St John's Hill, c. 1860. (From *George Waterston & Sons, Bi-centenary History, 1752-1952.*)

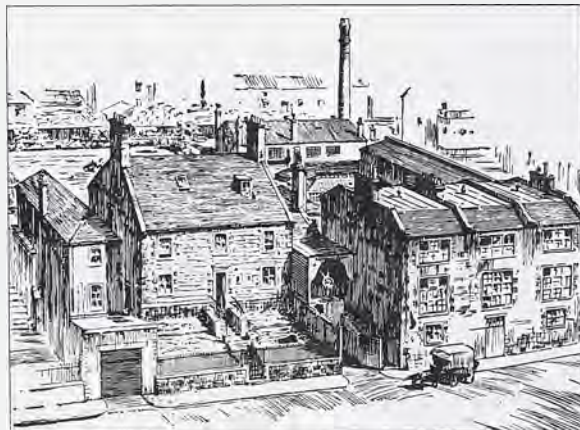


Fig. 4. Sketch of the northern aspect of the Waterston house and sealing wax factory, St John's Hill. (From *George Waterston & Sons, Bi-centenary History, 1752-1952.*)



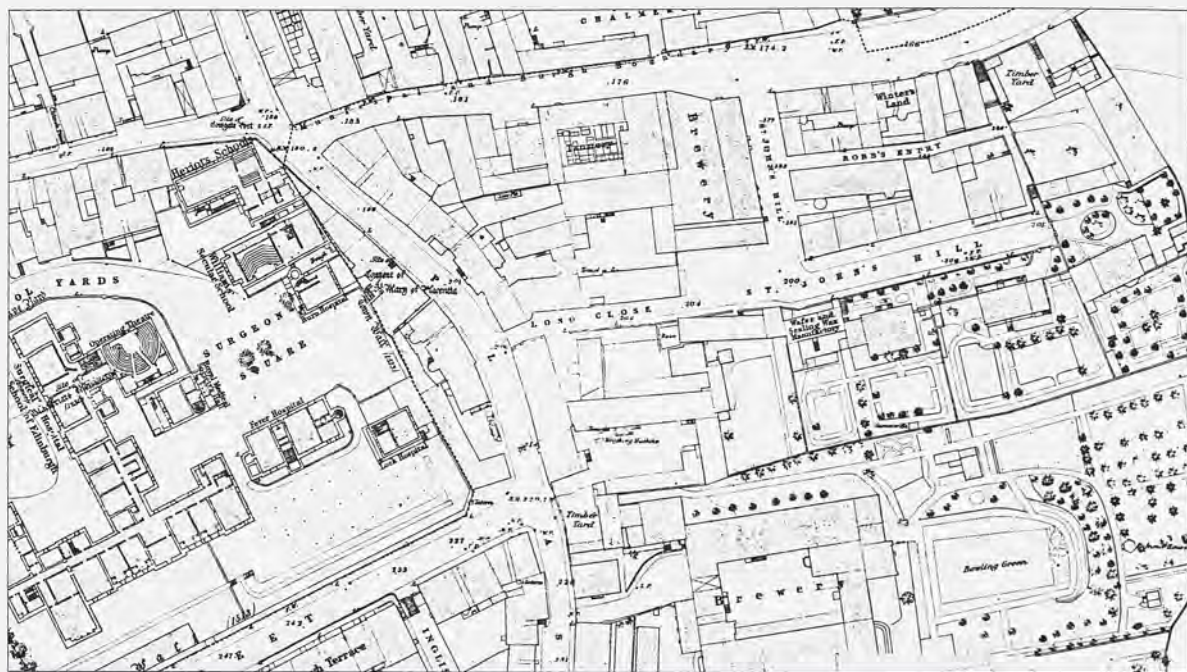


Fig. 5. Part of Ordnance Survey, Edinburgh and its Environs, sheet 36, scale 1:1056, 1852. (By permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

and garden next door has come to light, despite an extensive search, it is clear that the two properties were broadly similar (see fig. 5). The Waterston buildings stood, although latterly unoccupied, until the end of the 1960s, and were photographed in January 1966 by Professor Gordon Herries Davies (fig. 6). This photograph not only confirms the



Fig. 6. Photograph of the old Waterston buildings on the south side of St John's Hill, January 1966. (Courtesy of Professor Gordon L. Herries Davies, Trinity College, Dublin.)

accuracy of the sketch reproduced as fig. 4 but, on the extreme left of the photograph, shows the building which came to occupy the site of Hutton's house, the large Board School referred to by Crichton-Browne, St Patrick's Roman Catholic Primary School, built after the Act of 1918 which allowed Catholic education.

In a final twist to the intriguing story of what became of Hutton's house at St John's Hill, it is worth recording that Andrew Balfour's son, William, became Minister of the Free Church of Holyrood and so, through the second half of the nineteenth century until its vacation and demolition about the turn of the century, Hutton's house was the Manse of the Free Church of Holyrood (fig. 7).

St John's Hill is currently (1996–97) the subject of further development for construction of student residences (fig. 8). Now that the site of James Hutton's house and garden has been located immediately adjacent to this redevelopment on its eastern side, the intention is to unveil a plaque to



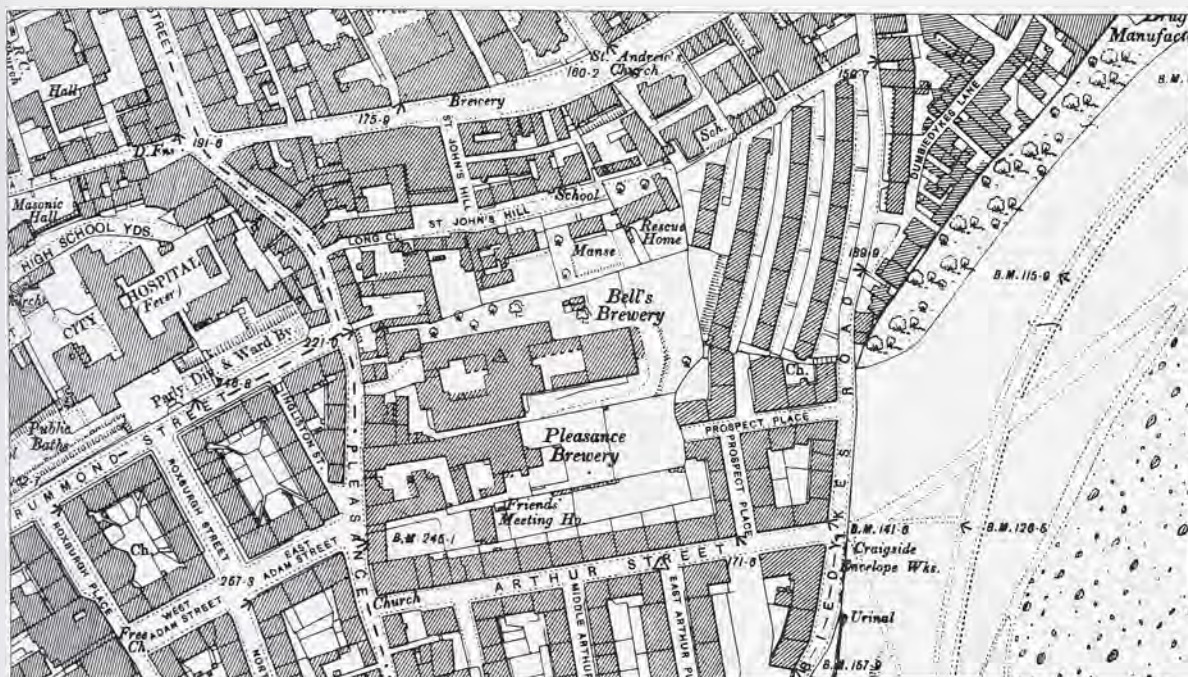


Fig. 7. Part of Ordnance Survey, Edinburgh, sheet 3.08, 1:2500, 1894. (From 1984 reprint, courtesy of Alan Godfrey.)

Hutton during the International Bicentennial Meeting in Edinburgh on 6 August 1997. In the longer term it

is hoped to create a James Hutton Memorial Garden on the site.



Fig. 8. Photograph taken on 24 May 1996 showing the site of Hutton's house and garden in the clump of trees behind the two cabins of Morrison Construction, Ltd, in Viewcraig Gardens, a late 1960s development. The deep excavation for a car park exposed a 17 metre thick succession of sandstones, siltstones and mudstones of the Cementstone Group. (Photograph by the author.)

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

In preparing this article I am indebted to Mr Ian Nelson of the Edinburgh Room of the Central Public Library, Dr Charles Waterston, Mrs Jean Jones, Professor Gordon Herries Davies, Dr Frank James and Professor Dennis Dean.

- 1 See Dennis R. Dean, *James Hutton and the History of Geology* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1992).
- 2 G. Y. Craig, D. B. McIntyre and C. D. Waterston, *James Hutton's Theory of the Earth: The Lost Drawings* (Edinburgh 1978), p. 2.
- 3 Jean Jones, 'The Geological Collection of James Hutton', *Annals of Science*, 41 (1984), pp. 228–229.
- 4 Sir James Crichton-Browne, *Victorian Jottings from an old commonplace Book* (London 1926), pp. 1–4. This extract was reprinted in 1938, the year of his death at his home Crindau near Dumfries: Sir James Crichton-Browne, *The Doctor Remembers* (London 1938), pp. 16–19.
- 5 Michael Neve and Trevor Turner, 'What the Doctor Thought and Did: Sir James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938)', *Medical History*, 39 (1995), pp. 399–432.
- 6 C. C. Easterbrook, Obituary of Sir James Crichton-Browne, MD, LLD, DSc, FRSE, FRS, *Edinburgh Medical Journal*, New Series (Fourth) 14 (1938), pp. 294–301.
- 7 There is no evidence that the name St John's Hill predates the building of the new houses, or of any link with the Knights of St John; 'Everything points to St John's Hill being a fancy name for this new residential area facing the older one of St John's Street across the valley' (Stuart Harris, *The Place Names of Edinburgh: Their Origins and History*, Edinburgh 1996, p. 544).
- 8 The house was bought by Ferrier from John Robison, Professor of Natural Philosophy, until then Hutton's neighbour at St John's Hill: see George Waterston & Sons Limited, *Bi-Centenary History, 1752–1952* (Waterston, Edinburgh), pp. 14–15.