

John Britton

Death of Mr. John Britton, F. S. A.

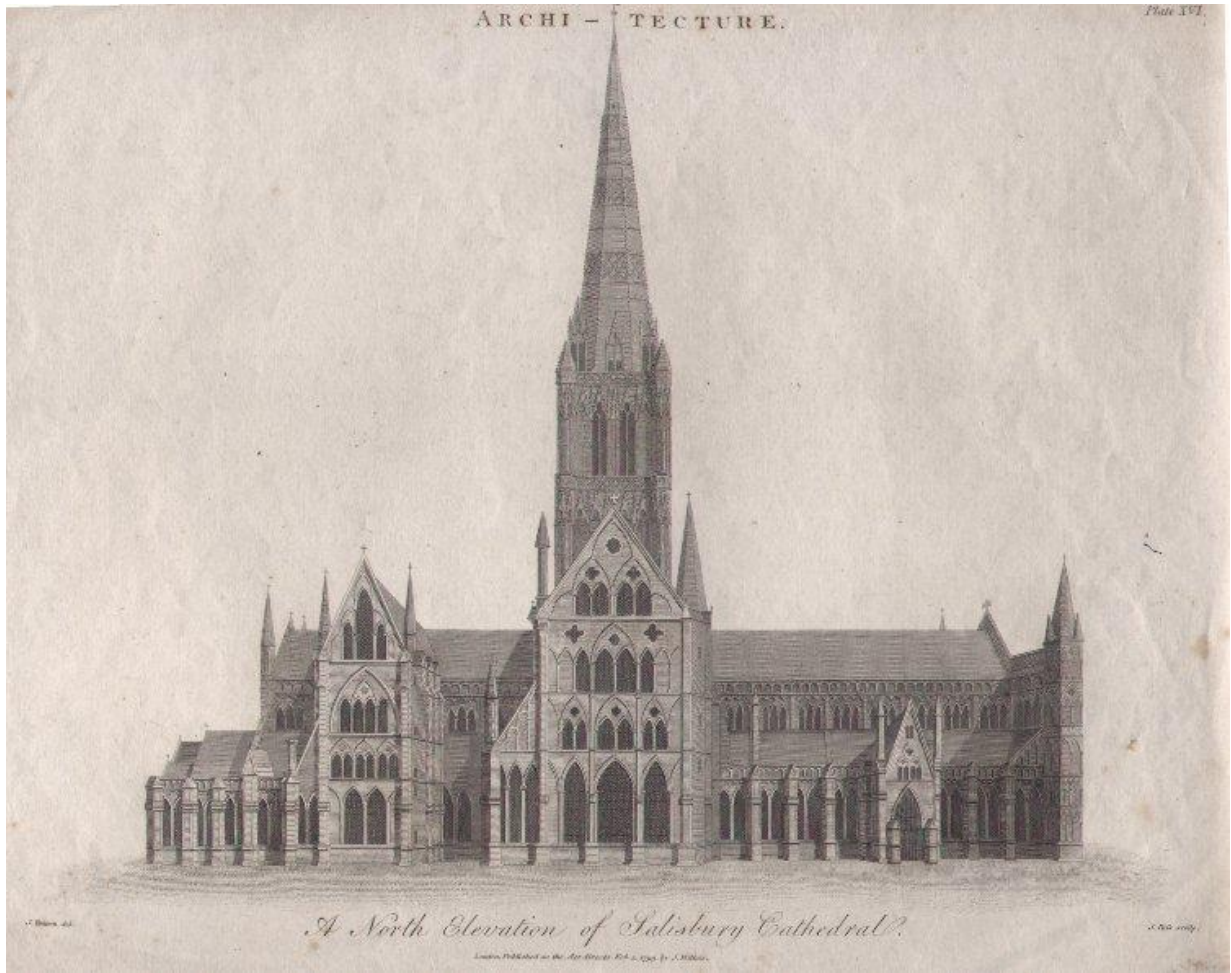
We regret to have to record the demise of Mr. John Britton, which took place on Thursday morning, at 10 o'clock, at his residence, Barton Street, Burton Crescent. He had attained the advanced age of 86. His autobiography is still unfinished. It is singular that during his last illness he expressed a wish that he might live till New Year's Day, in order that he might be enabled to complete that work.

Mr. Britton was born on the 7th of July, 1771, at Kington St Michael, in Wiltshire, where his father once enjoyed a fair share of patronage as baker, maltster, shopkeeper, and small farmer. A change, however came o'er the scene; the business failed, and the family was involved in circumstances of difficulty, under which the parents of the late John Britton were unable to afford him much of a school education. In his auto-biography Mr. Britton thus speaks of his birthplace: "Without a regular clergyman to advise and admonish, or a magistrate, or private gentleman residing in the village, the inhabitants were undisciplined, illiterate, and deprived of all good example;" and again he observes, "I do not think there was a newspaper or magazine purchased by one of the inhabitants before the year 1780, when the London riots were talked about, and wondered at." He was first consigned to the care of a schoolmistress, and was subsequently placed under four consecutive masters, not one of whom seems to have been able to administer a large amount of knowledge. On the twenty-fifth of October, 1787, he quitted the home of his childhood, and accompanied an uncle to seek his fortune in the great metropolis. He was then apprenticed as cellar-man to Mr. Mendham, of the Jerusalem Tavern, Clerkenwell Green, where he was initiated into the mysteries of "forcing or fining wines, bottling, corking, and binning the same." He was wont to steal as much time as he could to visit old book stalls, and make small purchases; but, we are told, "All the reading I could indulge in, during my time of legal slavery, was by candle light, in the cellar, and at occasional intervals only, not of leisure, but of time abstracted from systematic duties." The vicissitudes, privations, and hardships which he experienced during the next seven years could not be related without exciting sympathy. In obscure lodgings at eighteen pence per week, he still indulged study, and often read in bed during the winter evenings, being unable to afford a fire. When in his 22nd year, and with a purse containing about six pounds, he walked home to Wiltshire, and found his native

village much altered – his mother had died broken-hearted, his father had become idiotic and was no longer in the land of the living, and his brothers and sisters were scattered abroad. His old home being thus destroyed, and having endeavoured in vain to procure employment in the West of England, he returned to London almost penniless, shoeless, and shirtless. Soon afterwards he was engaged as cellar man at the London Tavern, and next as “clerk to a widow in Smithfield.” We then find him in the service of an attorney in Gray’s Inn. In 1799 he was engaged by a Mr. Chapman to write, recite, and sing, “ at a theatre in Panton Street, Haymarket, at three guineas per week. From that date his literary career may be said to have commenced. His first production of any importance was a volume on “the Life and adventures of Pizarro,” suggested by the then popularity of Kotzebue’s favourite German drama. His next work, on “The Beauties of Wiltshire,” was eminently successful. This was followed by “The Beauties of England and Wales,” a very voluminous work, which was succeeded by the “Architectural Antiquities of great Britain,” and other works on architecture and the fine arts. In 1814, Mr. Britton commenced his “Cathedral Antiquities,” by publishing an account of the “History and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of Salisbury,” which was followed by descriptions of many other of our English Cathedrals. His next work was a “Chronological History of Architecture,” being the fifth volume of the “Architectural Antiquities.” In 1823, Mr. Britton published a work entitled “Graphic and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey,” and in 1825 an “Historical and Descriptive Account of Bath Abbey Church.” The same year he commenced a work on the “Architectural Antiquities of Normandy,” and in 1828 he published a volume on the “Public Buildings of London,” and another containing “Views of English Cities.” We have neither time nor space to give a full catalogue of the rest of Mr. Britton’s works; but amongst those most known may be mentioned “Memoirs of the Tower of London,” “A Dictionary of the Architecture and Archaeology of the Middle Ages,” “History and Description of the Ancient Palace of Westminster,” “Memoir of John Aubrey, F.R. S.,” “The Authorship of the Letters of Junius Elucidated,” and “The Autobiography of John Britton.” Altogether Mr. Britton was one of the most voluminous of English writers. We will conclude this brief and imperfect notice of Mr. Britton’s life and works with the following remarks from the “Gentleman’s Magazine” of 1846:

“To be born to honours is a happy accident; to achieve them is a noble distinction. Mr Britton’s honorable career is all his own; he has gained his station in life by diligent exertion, by the possession of useful and elegant acquirements, by eminence in his own particular line of study, by general intelligence in other branches of science and art, by a love of literature, and by a general and liberal assistance to those employed in pursuits congenial to his own. To his labours the architecture – and particularly the ecclesiastical and domestic architecture – of the country is deeply indebted for the restoration of what was decayed, and the improvement of what was defective; and in his beautiful sketches of masterly engravings, extending through many volumes, he has given us a treasure-house of antiquarian art, and made the pencil and the graver not only preserve and perpetuate much that has long been mouldering into shapeless ruin, but has also supplied many a new model of improved beauty, suggested by his own genius, and carried into execution by his own zeal and perseverance. There are, however, still higher qualities belonging to our nature than those of mere intellectual excellence, and greater endowments than those of scientific acquirement. Mr. Britton is justly endeared to his friends by the virtue of his heart, as well as valued by them for the cultivation of his mind. Whoever is acquainted with him must be pleasingly impressed with the simplicity of his manners, the kindness of his address, and the open, candid, and generous expression of his feelings.”

Salisbury and Winchester Journal, Saturday, 3 January 1857



An engraving of Salisbury Cathedral made by John Britton in 1799.