

George Dickinson

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Today Victoria Crescent is an attractive Georgian terrace of eleven three-storey terraced houses which are situated on the High Street in Dover, only a hundred yards or so from the historic Maison Dieu built in 1200 A.D. now being used as the Town hall, and at the time of writing, undergoing a major renovation project.

The exterior of these houses has hardly changed at all throughout their lifetime, but the Crescent itself has seen many changes in its 188-year existence. Many of the houses through the decades have had a dual role of commercial and domestic use. The ground floors being used for all types of businesses ranging from dressmakers, saddle makers, butchers, boot makers, undertakers, law firms, lodging houses and even a chiropodist.

In December 1973, the Crescent houses were given a Grade II listing as they were deemed to have special architectural significance and unique characteristics. The listing would protect this lovely historic terrace. Although two of the houses were demolished in the street widening scheme of 1903, numbers 1 and 13.

Facing the Crescent on the other side of the High Street is the former Royal Victoria Hospital, which was formally opened in 1851, closed in 1987 and finally turned into apartments in the 1990s. The original hospital building has a Grade II listing.

But what are the Crescent's origins? Who had the grand vision of building a sweeping arc of thirteen houses? The developer and builder of the Crescent was George Dickinson (sometimes spelt Dickenson) 1793-1843. George was born in Greenwich,

London to Captain Thomas Dickinson R.N. 1754-1828 and his wife Frances De Brissac 1760-1854. Thomas had succeeded his father John as Superintendent of the Ordnance Transports at Woolwich, with quarters in the Tower of London. Frances De Brissac was a woman of pure Huguenot descent, her father being one of the French silk weavers of Spitalfields, London. Thomas and Frances married on the 30th of June 1781 at Christ Church, Spitalfields, London. Theirs was an extremely successful marriage and they produced ten children. George was their ninth child and their youngest son.

Their eldest child John 1782-1869 was at fifteen years old apprenticed for seven years in the stationery trade to Thomas Harrison of Leadenhall Street in London. By 1804 he was trading as a stationer in London on his own account and was already on his way to becoming very successful. In 1806 John was supplying the East India Company with paper on a large scale but was so far only selling papers made by other firms.

The craft of papermaking in England was traditionally in the hands of the descendants of the Huguenot refugees, but as conditions in France improved some of them returned there. The making of paper had been a laborious process made by hand, and the output was low. John Dickinson had been experimenting for years on making an advanced paper-making machine than that already existed and in 1807 and 1809 he devised and patented a machine which enabled paper to be made in continuous rolls. Looking for a suitable site in which he could install his new machinery, in 1809 he bought his first mill

in Hemel Hempstead called Apsley Mill. In 1810 John Dickinson married Ann Grove, daughter of banker Harry Grove. In 1810/1811 he bought his second mill Nash Mill, another former corn mill from the medieval period.

Now back to George Dickinson. In 1818 Frances Dickinson advanced her eldest son John a substantial loan in exchange for him to take his youngest brother 25-year-old George into his mills and teach him the business. This arrangement was clearly not a success. George was an awkward, difficult, loutish youth according to John's wife Ann who despised his lazy disposition. By 1822 John had managed to secure a loan from other sources so that he could be released from the contract on his brother's account. In August John went to see his mother to discuss his brother George renting the Buckland Mills, near Dover.

In December 1822, twenty-nine-year-old George Dickinson full of eagerness and enthusiasm departed Hertfordshire for Kent and his Buckland Paper Mills, buying some new machinery prior to his departure. In 1825 he bought land at Charlton, on the High Street and built himself a fine mansion he named Brook House.

By 1826 he occupied Bushey Ruff Mill and in 1833-1834 he built himself a steam

paper-mill at Charlton called the Spring Garden Mill. The name came from the chalybeate spring which yielded iron rich spring water, very favourable for the making of paper. This mill was situated off Peter Street (near the present-day Charlton Centre Car Park) and not far from his house.

Now George Dickinson had grand designs on relieving the monotony of the straight street by building a graceful crescent of thirteen houses facing his mansion Brook House on the Charlton High Street. The proposed site was land that fronted onto the Dover to Barham Turnpike Road and was already occupied by seven cottages and leased to a Mr John Emptage a cabinetmaker who had a workshop at the rear. In an agreement for the sale and purchase of the leasehold land dated 31st October 1833 this is clearly the beginning of the Crescent being built.

In December 1835, the houses have been built as Mr John Emptage is now living in his new home at number 10 Charlton Crescent (it's original name) and his newly built workshop is at the rear. The seven cottages have been demolished and the empty site, fronting what is now the High Street, has been fashioned into an ornamental garden for the pleasure of the residents.



Victoria Crescent Old



Victoria Crescent New

On the 23rd of September 1837, forty-two-year-old George and twenty-year-old Susan Hall were married in Charlton, Dover. Susan was the daughter of Charles Hall a fellow paper maker. Their happiness was short lived, George was declared bankrupt in December 1837. In 1838 his mill at Buckland was advertised for let "as most eligible and desirable" and famed for the quality of its papers. It was by now making white paper as well as the usual brown and blue. Despite several disastrous fires in its history, the mill very much enlarged successfully produced paper until 2000. The Buckland Mill site has now been converted into extremely desirable waterside properties.

Bushey Ruff Mill was occupied by William Knocker in 1838 and it seems to have ceased production by 1850.

The Spring Gardens Paper Mill was taken over by James Brock. In 1856 it was advertised as desirable freehold premises lately used as a Paper Mill, together with four cottages, store house, stable, in the parish of Charlton. William Crundall became the new owner of the mill which was used as a sawmill and timber yard for more than one hundred years. The Charlton Shopping Centre and the car park now occupy the site.

George Dickinson's paper making business in Dover had lasted for only fifteen years. He had clearly been progressive by introducing white paper-making to Buckland Mill and also patenting a couple of new machines. His downfall was probably due to the failure of the Spring Mill venture. In March of 1839, an Assignment of the Leasehold for the Crescent was signed between George Dickinson and his assignees and banker John Minet Fector esquire.

George and his wife returned to London after his bankruptcy. His fine house on the High Street was eventually offered for sale by auction. It was acquired at a cost of £1,336 with the ambition of converting it into the Dover Hospital and Dispensary by way of Thanksgiving after the town had escaped the epidemic of cholera which had scourged England. The people of Dover had raised a sum of £1,760 and after alterations, the hospital was formally opened on the 1st of May 1851.

In the 1841 Census, George and Susan were living by independent means in Dalby Terrace in Islington in a fine Georgian terrace built in 1803 by a manufacturer a Mr Dalby.

On the 1st of July 1843 George Dickinson of Spencer Street died in Clerkenwell, Middlesex aged 48. He was buried on the 5th of July at St James Churchyard in Clerkenwell.

On the 12th of October 1847, his widow Susan Dickinson married William Catley a chemist in the Parish Church of St Marylebone, Westminster.

John Dickinson died on the 11th of January 1869. His company went on to become John Dickinson Stationery, one of the largest manufacturers in the world, owning the well-known brands of Basildon Bond and Lion Brand.

As for his young brother George who came to Dover to make his fortune, marrying a local girl, it wasn't all about failure. He left behind a gift his fine house can still be clearly seen behind the new facade which was added in the Victoria Hospital alterations. Today nearly two hundred years after its conception, Victoria Crescent is still a part of Dover's rich history, George Dickinson's lasting legacy to our town.