

A FORGOTTEN ANTIQUARIAN - WILLIAM TUCKER STRATTON (1825-1899)

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Abstract: William Stratton was an architect and historian of the Isle of Wight. He produced the first guide to Carisbrooke Castle.

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At the time of his death in 1899, William Tucker Stratton was regarded as the foremost Island local historian. The Isle of Wight County Press (4th November 1899) stated

"...Eminent as a historian, a man of wide reading, and high intellectual attainments, the late Mr Stratton attained great distinction as an archaeologist and antiquarian...He was a valued contributor to our columns...The deceased gentleman was an antiquarian of rare acumen, accomplished in the reading of Norman-French and Latin."

The County Press bemoaned his death. He was engaged in a great desire to publish a History of the Isle of Wight, *"but unfortunately for the Island, he died before realising his ambition."* Up to his death he was engaged in deciphering ancient records *"...from which he gained a priceless store of information as to the history of the Island, much of which it is feared will now remain a sealed book"*. The County Press concluded *"His death is indeed a loss to the Island..."*

Today, Stratton is completely forgotten, eclipsed by his younger contemporary, Percy Goddard Stone (1856-1934) and incidentally by the Rev. Edward Boucher James (1816-1892) (Matthews, 2022).

Stratton was born on 27th July 1825, the eldest son of William Stratton Senior (1794-1867) and his wife Jane, née Tucker (1800-1880). For some reason, he was not baptised until 24th October 1827, with his brother Robert, born that year. A much younger brother was Frederic Stratton (1840-1916), solicitor and botanist (Matthews, 2024). William Stratton Senior was a builder and stonemason in Newport and Carisbrooke, whose lasting building is St John's Church Newport (1836-1837). His firm was substantial and carried on by his son Robert after his death until the 1880s. He was also a Borough Councillor in the 1850s.

Little is known of William Stratton's early life. His brother Frederic was privately educated, so it is likely that William and Robert were as well. The education would have been basic – reading, writing, arithmetic and scripture. He would have been largely self-educated as far as Latin and Norman-French were concerned. He was noted as a wide reader – typical of his period. Early on, he developed a lifelong habit of long walks on the Island, exploring its medieval churches, and as a very young man was already knowledgeable about the Island's history.

His father probably took the view that his eldest son was too studious to follow him in his building business – that was left to his second son, Robert. He must have determined for him that an

appropriate calling would be architecture, and he would have been articled as a pupil to a local architect. There is no record of his master, but a likely candidate is Richard Hall Moorey, a business associate of William Stratton Snr and engaged as surveyor in the construction of St John's Church Newport. Stratton called himself "Architect" by 1845 when he was only 20 years of age.

The profession of architect was very fluid at this period. The governing body, eventually called the Royal Institute of British Architects, was only constituted in 1834. Prior to this, architects tended to be from the nobility or gentry, studying and practising architecture as an activity rather than as a living. There was a crossover with surveyors and engineers. Even on Stratton's death in 1899, his firm was described by the County Press as "architects, engineers and surveyors".

Stratton's first years in practice, between 1845 and 1850, seem to have been engaged in surveying and engineering for large railway lines on the mainland – the period of "railway mania". When railways arrived on the Island a generation later, he was engaged in surveying work by the Isle of Wight Central Railway.

Stratton started to practice in the Island about 1850 and the 1852 Post Office Directory shows him practising as Architect and Surveyor at 54, High Street, Newport. He then formed a partnership with Frederick Mew under the style of Stratton and Mew in 1858, operating from Lugley Street, Newport. The partnership seems to have been relatively short-lived, as from 1859 Stratton is shown in practice alone in Lugley Street. (Frederick Mew designed Newport Methodist Church 1879-1880.)

Also practising in Lugley Street in 1855 was Richard Hall Moorey; he had ceased to practice by 1859, and it is highly likely that Stratton took over Moorey's practice. By 1871, Stratton was living at, and practising from, 69, High Street Newport as Architect and Civil Engineer. He had a resident housekeeper, Ann Dore. In 1878, he is shown in partnership with Robert Braxton Perress under the style of Stratton & Perress, still at 69, High Street. By 1886, the partnership had terminated with Stratton practising on his own at 31, Holyrood Street and Perress at 64, Lugley Street.

Until 1873, Stratton had been a life-long bachelor, with a resident housekeeper but no other servants, but in this year, at the age of 48, he married Julia Anne Morton, aged 23, at Chelsea. She may have been a housekeeper but very little is known about her except she was born in Bedford. Stratton's obituary notice in the Isle of Wight County Press refers to her as heading the mourners but only

styles her "the widow" without any name, which might suggest that she had lower social status than her husband. Julia continued to live on the Island until her death in 1938, at the age of 86.

In 1876, Stratton acquired Bury House (today Berry House) in Carisbrooke High Street, a somewhat rambling early 19th-century building. He designed a porch which is entirely in keeping with the building. In a rather squashed area at the top of the porch doors is inscribed in ornate metalwork "W. T. and J. A. Stratton AD MDCCCLXXVI" (1876) in a style approaching Arts and Crafts.

Stratton's last articulated pupil was John Curtis Millgate (1867-1956). On completion of his articles, Millgate set up on his own but then entered into partnership with his former master under the style of Stratton & Millgate. In 1894 and 1895, the firm is shown practising at 69, High Street, Newport but by 1897 had moved to 21, Quay Street, Newport. By this time, Stratton although the senior partner had been in poor health for some time, and the prime force in the firm was Millgate. The firm continued under its original name from the same premises long after Stratton's death until 1956 when it was then acquired by N.H. Smith. The offices continued to be used by the successor firm until the early 1980s. Millgate himself was a distinguished antiquary, and we owe to him the preservation of both God's Providence House and the Roman Villa in Newport.

Stratton established a busy and widely varied practice. Railway work engaged him on the Island between 1860 and 1880. Many of his commissions were for the Anglican Church such as Freshwater National School (1850), Binstead National School (1853) and an extension to Calbourne National School (1863). He entered competitions for a Winchester Chapel (1851) a chapel at Worth Matravers (1866) a new church at Sandford, Cheltenham in the 1860s, a possible new church at Whippingham (1855) and St James Street Congregational Church, Newport (1865).

There was also the Workhouse (1868 and 1880), a new road at Whiteley Bank (1871), the Isle of Wight Cricket Ground at Skew Bridge, Shanklin (1890), the Dissenters' Chapel at Northwood Cemetery (1855), West Cowes Gas Works (1857) the foreshore and approach to Cowes Ferry (1860), and the water supply to Cowes Reservoir (1863-1864). A valuable client, the brewing company Mew Langton provided him with much work connected with public houses on the Island and in the New Forest throughout the 1880s.

As a church architect, Stratton first achieved significance with his work at St Mary's Brighthelm in 1852. He re-modelled the chancel in an almost-convincing Early English style and altered windows on the south side from Perpendicular to Neo - decorated, in the words of Lloyd & Pevsner

"confusing the already complicated history of an otherwise Norman to 17th Century building".

(Lloyd & Pevsner, 2006. p52)

In fairness to Stratton, his brief was very restricted, and his designs were dictated by the demands of the then Rector, the Rev. Edward McAll. He restored an arch at All Saints', Calbourne in 1873.

Stratton's work at All Saints', Freshwater (1875-1876) also met criticism. Here the present chancel is largely Stratton's work, giving a misleading impression that the aisles were restored medieval. Pevsner states

"the Church looks largely 19th Century outside due to a restoration by W. T. Stratton".

(Lloyd & Pevsner, 2006. pps 138-140)

Conversely a new work by Stratton – St Swithin's new church in Thorley (1871) met with approval from Lloyd & Pevsner (p. 281) *"A work of originality from an Island architect"*. Notable features of this building included an unusual bell-turret and internally, a lively linear decoration. The sanctuary especially had wall tiles in strident colours of red, brown and blue.



Fig. 1: St Swithin's church showing the bell tower.

In 1845, there appeared the first volume of a book with the grandiloquent title

'Architectural and Picturesque Illustrations of the Ancient Parish Churches of the Isle of Wight with concise historical descriptive and critical remarks by William Tucker Stratton, Architect, and William Jacobs'.

The book was printed by W. W. Yelf, Holyrood Street, Newport, Isle of Wight. The copy in the County Records Office is inscribed "Fred Stratton", Stratton's younger brother, and there is a pencil note, probably in Frederic's hand, *"the illustrations were drawn on lithographic stones by W.T.S."* William Jacobs was a cousin of Stratton on his mother's side. There is no indication of what part he played in the production of the book.

There is an introduction to the Island and its divisions into East and West Medine. The information from the History of the Wight by Sir Richard Worsley (1781) is acknowledged. There is then a *"General History of Ancient Ecclesiastical Establishments of the Island"*. The book was concerned only with medieval structures.

"Within the last few years a considerable addition has been made to the list of sacred edifices in the Island by the erection of chapels of ease to various

localities to meet the wants of the greatly increased population; these although many of them exceed in architectural beauty the venerable remains of an earlier age, it forms no part of our plan to illustrate. We confine ourselves strictly to the ancient parochial churches which must be... objects of interest to all, not only for their intrinsic beauty and merit...but also on account of the associations attached to them - as connected to our ancestors." (Stratton & Jupe, 1845. p.4)

Stratton had strong romantic feelings for the Island's medieval Churches.

"As places unchanged while a complete revolution has occurred in our national religion, habits and feelings - as places within whose walls have at different periods assembled the steel-clad warriors of a fierce and barbarous age, and the peaceful worshippers of a later more-favoured time to adore the beneficent Creator of the universe. An ancient building of any sort is generally an object of picturesque beauty but an old church more particularly so...the imagination carries us far back to the dim and distant days of antiquity peopling the scene with the forms of those who have long been numbered with the dead and whose ashes are covered by the green sward at our feet".

He continues on the effects of a vision of a medieval church:

"Viewed in the sunny brightness of a summer morning what a holy quietude seems to shed in the surrounding scenery ... seen amid storm or tempest or in the sole solitude of night it ever stands forth...and seems to bid defiance to the efforts of time and the elements..."

Stratton (Stratton & Jupe, 1845) stated that there was no place where the demolition of ecclesiastical relics was more zealously carried out than in the Isle of Wight. Those that have escaped

"have been generally shrouded in thick coats of plaster overlaid with that composition long used for beautifying churches known as whitewash"

Stratton loathed whitewash!

Stratton lists over 30 medieval Churches, including Old St Thomas in Newport and St Nicholas-in-Castro, a Parish Church in its own right. He then begins with a detailed account of each Church with a plan, and drawings of exterior, interior (not unlike Brannon) and other features.

In the first volume, Arreton, Calbourne and Shalfleet are featured with a footnote on Newtown (not a Parish Church but a chapel of ease to Calbourne). Noting at St George's Arreton, the columns and caps supporting the aisle wall are of Purbeck marble and singularly graceful in their proportions, he thunders:

"... but by the ignorance of former officials and the apathy of the present they are condemned to remain in the bondage vile of a thick coat of whitewash which the judicious expenditure of a trifling sum would restore to their pristine beauty."
(Stratton & Jupe, 1845. p.5)

At All Saints Calbourne, he records that

"the whole edifice has been recently restored in a manner reflecting the highest credit on the good taste and liberality of Sir Richard Godin Simeon

(the local Squire). The font relieved from whitewash proved to be a very curious example of Norman workmanship formed of Purbeck marble".

The note on Newtown states that the Church had been in ruins but recently rebuilt in the Early English style (Stratton & Jupe, 1845. p10).

His usual complaint at the Church (not then dedicated, but in modern times St Michael's) at Shalfleet had *"Pillars unfortunately covered with thick paint."* He noted the chancel was ruinous but partly re-built. Shalfleet's distinctive tower had its North wall taken down and rebuilt, which had disfigured the Church (Stratton & Jupe, 1845. p. 11).

Volume 2 of the book looks at the Churches at Godshill, Freshwater and Yarmouth. There were no particular notes on All Saints, Godshill. At All Saints, Freshwater, a church he would later be professionally concerned with, he noted that it had been much disfigured with galleries which had now been removed (Stratton & Jupe, 1845, p19).

St James, Yarmouth, arguably should not have appeared in the book as it was built in the early 17th century and is therefore not a medieval Church. Stratton probably included it as it had medieval predecessors on the same site. It is the one Church where he does not provide an exterior drawing. In the chancel of the Church was a polygonal ceiling of oak with Tudor roses at the intersections of the compartments.

"a very tolerable specimen of the style of that period but the whole has unfortunately been painted a stone colour". Large galleries had been constructed but *"have not increased the architectural effect"* (Stratton & Jupe, 1845. p.19).

It seems likely that Stratton envisaged several more volumes dealing with the other medieval churches he had listed. It can only be a matter of conjecture as to why the project was abandoned at a relatively early stage. From the listing of the churches at the beginning of Volume 1 and the general introduction, it seems plain that he intended a full survey of them all. It may be that his leaving the Island between 1845 and 1850 to carry out surveying work for railways on the mainland completely disrupted his original intention. On his return to the Island, he does not seem to have taken up the project again. It is a matter of great regret that his work, which would have given us a complete picture of the medieval churches before most of them experienced extensive restoration, was never completed. It would have been fascinating to have seen his views on Old St Thomas, Newport.

A rather more successful work was *"A Guide to Carisbrooke Castle Isle of Wight by William Tucker Stratton, Architect"*, which proved popular and went into five editions, the last one being in 1887. Published by the late Major John McGrotty and printed by G.A. Brannon, County Press Offices, Newport, it had 24 pages and was priced 6d. John Baldwin McGrotty (1826-1887) was Custodian of the Castle 1878-1887.

Stratton held the view that the Castle walls and keep were constructed by the Saxons in the 6th Century on an earthen bank formed by "Ancient Britons". His theory was that the word "Carisbrooke" was an

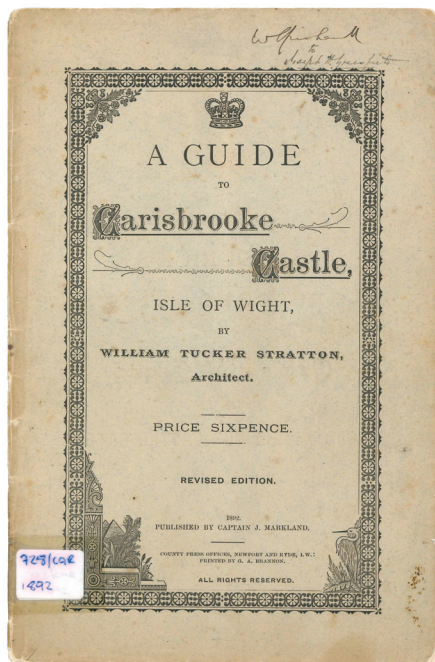


Fig.2: Front cover of Stratton's Guide to Carisbrooke Castle

incorporation of "Caer in the Ancient British tongue" meaning a wall fort or city and "Burr or Burgh" being an embankment of earth. He stated there was no Roman presence in the Castle.

He is on much safer ground with the known historical features of the Castle (Stratton, 1887. pps. 4-6). He gives trenchant criticism of unfortunate restoration work carried out in 1856. St Nicholas-in Castro, still a Parish Church, had its roof "wilfully dismantled in 1856", "the sacred edifice has been unroofed and made into an artificial ruin" (The Chapel had been rebuilt in 1738). (Stratton, 1887. p. 8).

Referring to work carried out to the 14th Century Great Hall:

"The original features of this interesting portion of the building had been almost entirely concealed in paint destroyed by successive alterations, but it remained for the present generation to witness their complete effacement at public cost under the guise of (so-called) 'restoration'. At that time (1856) the present windows all were alike to a pattern for whom, there was no good authority and regardless of the different dates of the building - were inserted, the fine arched stone fireplace in the day chamber after being exposed for a time was again built up and plastered over and one large window in the west gable constructed in place of the two with a central pier of the original edifice. This reckless treatment of a national historical building is the more to be regretted because the considerable sums then expended in doing irreparable damage, would if properly applied have gone far to rescue the most important archaeological features of the castle from the state of decay brought about by many years of careless and ignorant neglect and have preserved them for the instruction and pleasure of all who feel an interest in such relics of the past."

(Stratton, 1887. pps.16-17)

Referring to original barracks being converted to Militia quarters he states:

"until a very few years (it) contained two handsome arched and panelled fireplaces with

projecting chimneys, but these were ruthlessly destroyed. It is much to be regretted by all who have the slightest reverence for antiquity that a national historical place like Carisbrooke Castle should be degraded to such uses and still more that the works rendered necessary thereby should have been carried out with such utter disregard of the ancient features that the latter were entirely obliterated." (Stratton, 1887. p.18)

Stratton's Guide is the first popular Guide to the Castle. An amusing quote to us today is the short explanation of the donkeys working the wheel.

"...the water is raised by means of a donkey walking within a large tread-wheel in the same means as roasting spits were formerly worked by dogs." (Stratton, 1887, pps. 6-7)

In the Introduction to the 5th Edition of the Guide, Stratton refers to "Notes made for a more extended History of the Castle now in course of preparation by the author". Sadly again, the promised History never materialised.

Stratton's last foray into writing occurred in 1884/1885 when George Brannon asked for contributions for his new newspaper, the Isle of Wight County Press. In the first issue of 29th November 1884, under a column headed Historical and Archaeological (p.3), appeared "Notes for a History of the Isle of Wight by Wm Tucker Stratton". Stratton wanted to promote both an Isle of Wight Historical and Archaeological Society and a new book on Island History - the first since that of Worsley in 1781.

The first article was headed "The Borough of Newport". Explaining that Newport began as a piece of land forming part of the Manor of Shide in 1086 to become a Borough in 1184, Stratton set out the original Charter in Latin with an English translation to follow. He showed that the three witnesses were principal landowners in the area - William, son of Stur and William and Gozelin, sons of Azor. The descendants of Azor formed the family of De Insula and then the family of White Popham in direct descent. He described the descent of the other witnesses and their eventual landholdings.

The second article appeared in the issue of the following week, 6th December 1884. (p.3) Stratton stated that the infant Borough had no Church at least until 1172 and it was dedicated to the recently murdered and canonised Thomas A Becket. Remembering his knowledge of medieval Churches, he said

"The original pillars and arches of the Nave with small pointed cieppe-storey windows above the centre points of the arches remained until the year 1856."

The extent of the Borough carried out in 1262 by Baldwin de Redvers was lost from public records. He referred to an undated Charter of Liberties by Isabella de Fortibus with references to Castlehold forming part of the Parish of St Nicholas and only brought into Borough jurisdiction

"when its freedom from their control made it a little Alsatia and an intolerable nuisance to law-abiding people".

Interestingly the Charter of Isabella existed in the

19th century but it had disappeared after production in a trial at Winchester Assizes. Fortunately, a copy existed in Worsley's History. He noted the witnesses to Isabella's Charter (between 1262 and 1290) were descended from the witnesses to the Charter of Richard de Redvers in 1184.

In the issue for 13th December, (p.3) there is no article by Stratton, but there is for the first time in the column an unsolicited letter from the Rev. Edward Boucher James, Vicar of Carisbrooke.

A correspondent expressed

"the thanks of all who are interested in our local archaeology and history are due to Mr Stratton for the extremely valuable information he is giving us in your columns."

From that time on there is a regular letter from James in the column.

Stratton returned to the column on 20th December with his article *"The King's Town of Brading"* and gives entries in Domesday Book both in Latin and English. By chance, James sent in a letter on the Oglander family. The editor stated

"Our readers will, we are sure, join us in the wish that the Vicar of Carisbrooke will continue his extremely interesting contributions".

Stratton sent in a further article on Brading for the issue of the 3rd January 1885. This time he produced medieval records again in Latin and English. In the issue of 19th January 1885, W.H. Long, a local historian in his own right and the author of *Isle of Wight Dialect*, stated in a letter to the Editor

"As a native of the Isle of Wight and one much interested in its history and antiquities, I read with great interest every week the notes of Mr Stratton and the Rev. E.B. James."

But there were to be no further contributions from Stratton, and James took over the column completely. One would imagine that the Editor felt some relief. James' letters varied in topics each week. He could write on the entire spectrum of Island history – from Celtic and Roman times to the Island in 1850. His style, although not easy for a modern reader, was much more readable and interesting than Stratton's. Stratton was a scholar who delighted in abstruse matters. He was primarily a medieval scholar. His articles in the *Isle of Wight County Press* are for scholars rather than interested readers.

Stratton, although highly significant in the Island during his lifetime, is forgotten today because of a fatal inability to complete the grand and worthy projects he started. Thus, his early work on medieval Churches simply stopped after an examination of only six of them. He failed to produce his promised extensive work on Carisbrooke Castle. His attempts to produce a comprehensive history of the Island failed after a few instalments. He failed to set up the *Isle of Wight Historical and Archaeological Society*. Finally, his efforts at translating medieval records also came to nothing.

The reason for all this is undoubtedly the fact that he had a very busy and varied architectural practice. In his last years, ill health must have also played a part. But it was compounded also by a tendency, often found in self-educated scholars, to get bogged down in minutiae and detail, and failure to maintain

general principles firmly in mind. ("Not seeing the wood for the trees" is a common expression.) This is demonstrated clearly in the *County Press* articles.

By the late 1880s, no doubt overcome by over-work and declining health, Stratton must have realised that he would never complete a comprehensive *History of the Isle of Wight*. He bears an uncanny resemblance in this respect to his younger brother Frederic who produced a little book on *Isle of Wight botany* in 1900 and promised a comprehensive book on *Isle of Wight plants*. He did so, but only as a section of the magisterial *A Guide to the Natural History of the Isle of Wight* edited by Frank Morey in 1909. Unfortunately, W. T. Stratton had no editorial figure in the same way. The appearance of the monumental work entitled *The Architectural Antiquities of the Isle of Wight from the XIth to the XVIIth Centuries inclusive* by Percy Goddard Stone in 1891 would have brought to an end any remaining thoughts of a history as far as Stratton was concerned. He was generous enough to give Stone his notes and there is a graceful acknowledgment to that effect by the younger man.

"... I cannot in justice conclude....my indebtedness to Mr. W.T. Stratton of Carisbrooke for his kindly assistance in the way of notes and local knowledge which has largely contributed to make my work what it professes to be - a reliable publication".
(Stone, 1891. p.4)

Stratton was a modest man, well-liked by those who knew him. He does not deserve the oblivion into which he has fallen. He was probably the first person to recognise the importance of the Island's medieval period and its buildings. He was also remarkably prescient about the damage that was being caused by so many Victorian restorers to medieval Churches – who in their desire to improve, were destroying what they were endeavouring to preserve.

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