

Andrew Greg's speech at unveiling of plaque to John Dobson, 17 March 2020



Thanks to Catherine Mackereth for the pictures. The current Pineapple is a later replacement for the Dobson family home, which one might guess was a simple farmhouse-type building.

Lady Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, I was very honoured to be invited to unveil this plaque to the great North-Eastern architect John Dobson. I spent nearly 25 years as a curator in Tyne and Wear Museums and have always had a special interest in the region's architecture, and in Dobson in particular.

John Dobson dominated architecture in Northumbria in the first half of the 19th century. His country houses are some of the most beautiful, elegant and refined of the period. He improved, modernised and restored numerous mansions and castles. He is probably most famous for being one of the talented architects who worked with Richard Grainger on the development of central Newcastle in the 1820s and 1830s, designing Eldon Square, the now demolished Royal Arcade, the Green and Grainger Markets, and part of Grey Street. Everyone will know his Newcastle Central Station.

Other public buildings of his included craggy and intimidating prisons for the counties of Newcastle and Northumberland, schools, town halls, cemeteries, waterworks, museums, art galleries and hospitals. For industrialists he designed docks, warehouses and railway stations; for developers shopping arcades, hotels and seaside terraces. In a period of religious revival and fervour he designed chapels and churches for the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Unitarians.

When Dobson was born here in 1787, High Chirton was little more than a crossroads among the rural villages around North Shields. This area was famous for its orchards and nurseries and Dobson's father was both the publican of the Pine Apple Inn and a market gardener. Mackenzie's 1825 History of Northumberland remarks: "The beautiful and extensive fruit gardens of Mr Dobson render Chirton a place of fashionable resort during the summer months [which I am sure it still is!] ... Mr D. has other gardens for the growth of vegetables, of which great quantities are consumed by the town and shipping of Shields."

His father wanted John to follow his own profession but John's evident artistic talents eventually led to an apprenticeship with David Stephenson, then the North East's leading architect, the designer of All Saints Church in Newcastle, and architect to the Duke of Northumberland.

It was the Duke of Northumberland who was responsible for Dobson's first known work. In 1810 our architect signed the drawing of the New Market Place and Quay, now restored as Collingwood Mansions, designed by Stephenson but presumably with his apprentice's help. In the same year Dobson left Stephenson and set up independently, working briefly from his father's pub.

John initially adopted the then fashionable Greek Revival style, which dominated his work for the next 15 years or so. And this produced perhaps his best buildings: Longhirst Hall, Nunnykirk Hall, and Meldon Park for example. For these houses Dobson has been placed “among the best architects of his generation in the whole of England”.

Dobson was also intensely practical. He was much in demand for his work on the adaptation and restoration of older houses and ecclesiastical buildings. He modernised many 18th century country houses in Northumberland, improving their convenience and comfort; he repaired and restored some of the north-east’s major church buildings, such as St Nicholas’s Cathedral in Newcastle and Hexham Abbey (work which was controversial at the time, as over-zealous and lacking in authenticity); the last years of his working life, until his stroke in 1862, were spent underpinning the great gothic pile of Lambton Castle in County Durham, which was subsiding into old mine workings 400 feet underground.

In the 19th century different architectural styles had different meanings and connotations: The classical Greek style evoked ideas of democracy, liberty, justice and learning; The Italian style of the Renaissance was seen as a sophisticated symbol of political power and of commercial wealth and integrity; the Tudor and Gothic styles referred back to our own, British history and architectural heritage.

Dobson worked in all these styles, as he or his clients preferred and according to the budget he was given – some were cheaper than others! Unlike some architects he seemed to have no personal allegiance to a particular style. In North Shields’s Howard Street and Northumberland Square alone there are within a few hundred yards chapels by Dobson in the Greek Revival, the Italian Renaissance and the neo-Norman styles, and on the corner of Howard Street and Saville Street his group of public buildings, originally comprised of town hall, mechanics institute, post office and bank, all in the picturesque Tudor-Gothic style.

Add to these his work on Stephenson’s New Quay, his nearby villas for local bigwigs, which have now all gone, and the magnificent Collingwood Monument overlooking the river at Tynemouth, and you might think Dobson deserves a plaque for his work in North Tyneside alone, never mind the wider region.

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In 1987 Tom Faulkner and I organised a major exhibition of John Dobson’s work on the occasion of the bicentenary of his birth. The book of the exhibition was the first thorough account of his career and was expanded in a revised edition in 2001. Very sadly Tom died in 2014. I know he would have wanted to join me in thanking and congratulating North Tyneside for publicly recognising our hero’s birthplace in this way.

I am delighted to unveil this plaque.