

Architect of Obsession: John Wood and the Creation of Georgian Bath

Timothy Mowl & Brian Earnshaw with Cathryn Spence

Enhanced Edition

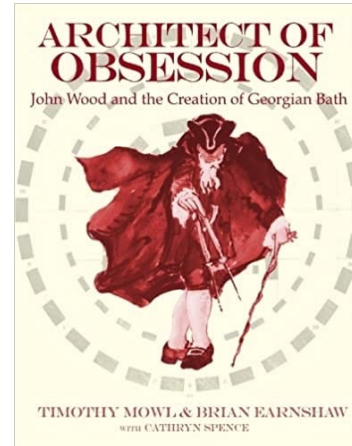
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It would be fair to say that John Wood the Elder, architect of Bath, has never received, either during his life or since, the wholehearted acclaim he deserves. He would perhaps have fared better had he simply designed more buildings and written less about his fanciful ideas and antiquarian beliefs; if he had been less self-willed and more amenable. Yet these were the very concepts and qualities that inspired the creation of the unique Georgian city of Bath.

Wood could not have a better person to champion his cause than Professor Timothy Mowl, who has recently published an enhanced version of the book he co-researched and wrote with the late Brian Earnshaw more than thirty years ago. The initial inspiration for the original biography may well have been a challenge set by Howard Colvin in his *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, when he suggested that ‘*what connection there might be between Wood’s antiquarian research and his architectural projects is a subject that deserves investigation.*’ The priority in the first edition, entitled *John Wood, Architect of Obsession* and published by Millstream Books in 1988, was clearly to explore and explain how the elder John Wood’s eccentric beliefs and enigmatic personality, while undoubtedly contributing to his downfall, were the very qualities that underpinned his creation of the Georgian City of Bath.

Queen Square, the Circus and the Royal Crescent, all built well within walking distance of one another on the north-western fringes of what was then a small city of narrow streets and crowded alleyways or ‘corridors’ – albeit surrounding a glorious Abbey – were not merely the work of someone with a gift for designing grand individual buildings in the Palladian style. They were founded on the ambitious schemes and dreams of an extraordinary man, obsessed with the Druids and Bladud (founder of Bath); inspired by the symbolism of freemasonry, the meaning and measurements of stone circles and the mystical signs of the sun, moon and planets; under the spell of gods and temples and his own unique and often misguided interpretation of ancient history.

The more compliant and practical younger Wood may have carried through his father’s plans, and there were many talented architects who followed in their footsteps, but there is little doubt that it was John Wood the Elder who was the visionary town planner and the genius behind the creation of Georgian Bath.

So comprehensive was the first edition of *Architect of Obsession* that it has justifiably become the standard published work on the elder John Wood and no further full-scale biography of this unique Bath architect has appeared since. Why the need, therefore, to publish a new version – particularly as Mowl has readily pointed out that, apart from a few tweaks and updates, the text is virtually the same as before?

One answer could well be found by linking the final few paragraphs of the first edition with the eye-catching image on the front cover of the updated version. It has long been Mowl’s wish to see a

statue in memory of John Wood the Elder somewhere within the central area of the Circus – ‘*not a symbolic twist of contorted bronze, but the man himself, larger than life, gesticulating grandly on a plinth.*’ What he clearly envisaged was the striking figure dominating the cover of his new book – a digitally enhanced portrayal of an original drawing of John Wood ‘in action’, by the late Gerald Laing (sculptor). Replacing the more predictable photograph of a curved section of identical houses in the Circus displayed on the dust-jacket of the original edition, the new front cover may not be to everyone’s taste, but symbolises a particular message and was designed perhaps to attract the attention of modern readers.

There is much to recommend the 2022 version. Whereas the first edition was large and slim, with a dust-jacket either to remove or keep under control when reading – more suitable perhaps to be displayed on a coffee table – this is a chunkier book with no dust-jacket. Though heavy, it opens easily to rest comfortably on a lap and is a joy to look at. While the 1988 edition contained 170 black and white illustrations, now considered by Mowl to be ‘grey and grainy’, the enhanced version, printed by TJ Books Ltd., Padstow and published by Stephen Morris, Bradford on Avon, includes well over 200 coloured illustrations, beautifully reproduced and presented. Some are photographs taken by Stephen Morris, some are images of archival material. There are portraits, watercolours, drawings and engravings, maps and plans. Particularly welcome is a full-length image of John Wood himself, from the painting “The Four Worthies” – the only possible likeness known to exist – ‘*rather snappily dressed though bowing obsequiously.*’

This is a not the kind of phrase normally found in architectural histories, but the original text was written in a similarly free and refreshing style. Now, as before, Wood is succinctly summed up as the Chatterton and the Mozart of architects, but also described at one point as behaving in his usual indomitable Toad of Toad Hall manner. Mowl’s tutor, Howard Colvin, once told him that his writing style was ‘a little too florid, it should be lapidary’. It may not be a style appreciated by everyone, but for others it transforms a work of immense scholarship into a very enjoyable read.

Recent research has raised doubts about some of the facts and theories included in the first edition, but Wood was mysteriously secretive about his family, upbringing and education. This has unfortunately invited speculation and mistaken assumptions. It took historians two hundred years finally to agree (more or less) that he was born in Bath and not transported from Yorkshire by Ralph Allen. In 1988, *Architect of Obsession* reflected the findings and opinions of excellent researchers at the time. Historians and authors such as Baker, C.H.C. and Baker, M.I. (1949) or R.S. Neale (1981); architectural experts John Summerson and Walter Ison; Charles E. Brownell, (*John Wood the Elder and John Wood the Younger: Architects of Bath* (Ph.D. Thesis, Columbia University 1976) – and many more.

Although he has acknowledged interest in the latest research findings, Mowl chose not to address them in his new book, which is dedicated to the late Brian Earnshaw, ‘*a true friend and mentor.*’ Understandably, perhaps, he preferred to stay faithful to the text of the 1988 version they had worked on together and focus instead on creating a beautifully illustrated book of high quality. Hopefully, as the recognised authority on Bath’s enigmatic architect, he may yet be persuaded to give serious consideration to the importance and validity of new evidence about John Wood and his family, discovered within the past five years. There is good reason to honour the creator of Georgian Bath with a statue, but there is also a responsibility for historians to make sure that details about his origins and early life are up-to-date and accurate.

Penny Gay
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