

John Wood born in Bath, the son of a builder

The Shadow of Doubt

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In order to decide how best to tackle the task of finding answers to the many questions surrounding the elder John Wood's family background, it seems relevant to look more closely at all the existing theories about his likely origins; to discover how and when these first became established; to sift proven facts from groundless speculation; and to explain why, after years of serious and scholarly research, the doubts still exist and the hunt continues for any proof that might offer a conclusive version of John Wood's childhood and upbringing.

At the same time, a review of evidence already discovered and theories previously put forward presents the opportunity to acknowledge the dedication and invaluable input of former established authorities on the subject of the elder John Wood. Many highly respected historians and writers, for a great many years, have directed their research skills and knowledge towards solving the mystery of his birthplace and family roots. The following paragraphs will reveal not only the energy of the debate and the diversity of ideas, but show that, hampered by the lack of easily accessible resources, some long established theories may not have been founded on reliable evidence.

Although there are several accredited historians and biographers who now seem to accept that John Wood was born in Bath, there are still those who claim that he could well have come from Yorkshire or London. There are a number of very convincing reasons to explain this uncertainty, but it cannot be denied that Wood himself also contributed to the mystery. Throughout his *Essay* and letters he made no obvious comments about his own childhood and upbringing. It was as if he had every intention of hiding his identity behind a veil of secrecy. This in itself has naturally aroused suspicion.

John Wood's apparent determination to avoid any references to his birth and beginnings is always going to be difficult to rationalise. Perhaps he simply wanted to be judged on his own merits, regardless of any hereditary connections or possibly, as a young boy, he had fallen out with his family. There have even been suggestions that he might have been born illegitimately.

Until the early 1950s, it was widely accepted that John Wood, architect of Bath, had been born in the North of England. An early edition of the Dictionary of National Biography, recorded that the architect John Wood of Bath '*was probably a Yorkshireman and, though he visited Bath occasionally between 1719 and 1727, did not settle there till the latter date.*'¹ The dictionary entry suggested that he had probably been born in about 1705, but had definitely died in Bath in 1754. This biographical information was most likely based on the opinion of the Bath historian R.E.M Peach, who was researching and writing about the city and its people in the late 19th century.

Another early researcher, Mowbray A. Green, writing in 1904, informed his readers that it was necessary

*... to mention here that little is known of the early life of John Wood the architect. He was born in about 1704 and it is probable that he was introduced to Bath by Ralph Allen, who may have met him while in Yorkshire, of which county Wood was almost certainly a native, and thither, as we have seen, a plan of the city was sent to him. He was then at that time but one and twenty years of age. While in Yorkshire he seems to have been employed as a surveyor of roads, but his early education must have been received in the Renaissance school of architecture.*²

J.P.E. Falconer, writing about *The Family of John Wood of Bath* in *Notes and Queries* in September 1948, reported that neither the parentage nor the birthplace of John Wood had yet

been revealed, though it was generally believed that he *'hailed from Yorkshire'*. Falconer attributed this theory to Peach, confirming that

R.E.M. Peach, the Bath historian, thought that Wood was a self-made north-country man, and that this was borne out by a few peculiar expressions in his diction—apparently contained in his famous Essay

Unfortunately, Falconer offered no further references to identify exactly what these peculiar expressions of diction might have been, but it is clear that by the time his article appeared in 1948, the early conclusion arrived at by both Peach and Mowbray Green (that John Wood was probably from Yorkshire) had been widely accepted without question for a considerable time. And when doubts were eventually raised about his origins, they were not about his birthplace, but the year in which he had been born. In 1948, in a paper read to *The Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire*, historian Stanley A. Harris confirmed that considerable doubts had been imparted to him by two highly respected antiquaries regarding the year of John Wood's birth: ⁴

*In November 1947, I sent an account of my investigations to Mr T. Sturge Cotterell, a Bath antiquary who is one of the principal authorities on John Wood. I did not raise the point of Wood's age in my letter, but Mr Sturge Cotterell refers to it as follows in his reply: "The date of Wood's birth is unknown, but is generally accepted as 1705. But I have always had my doubts about it. I think it reasonable to believe that he was born nearer 1695. He was buried at Swainswick Church in 1754 and I am certain that he was then more than 50 years old... I believe that a mistake has been made with his age on the tombstone."*⁵

And also:

*In a letter to me dated 24 January 1948, Mr John Summerson, the Curator of Sir John Soane's Museum, writes: "I wish some Yorkshire antiquary would make a search for Wood's birthdate in church registers. The accepted date is, for several reasons, improbable and depends entirely on one obituary notice."*⁶

But in 1954, the year of the bi-centenary of John Wood's death, opinions about his birthplace and the year of his birth were set to change—and the person to bring this about was Mr John Summerson, who six years earlier had expressed the wish for some local antiquary to search for John Wood's birthdate in the Yorkshire church registers.

Mr. Summerson, an international authority on architecture, reported during a lecture at Bath's Guildhall to mark the bi-centenary of John Wood's death that he had been sent a book of transcripts of 18th century letters written by a Cornish clergyman, the Reverend John Penrose, to his family. The letters described in detail a visit to Bath in 1766/67. One letter mentioned a Sunday service in the Abbey, in aid of *'the Charity Schools'* (Penrose definitely used the plural). It becomes clear in the next sentence, however, that he must have been thinking only of the Bluecoat School, for he continues with the information that the sermon included *'a very genteel compliment to the Memory of Mr Nelson, who was principally concerned in using a Subscription towards funding these Schools.'* The Reverend Penrose possibly considered that, even though they were all pupils at the same educational establishment, the fifty boys and twenty girls he saw at the Abbey, and described so vividly, belonged to two separate 'schools', in the sense that the curriculum for each group was different and boys and girls would have been educated quite separately. But the significant information included in the letter was that the preacher *'observed in his Sermon that the late Mr Wood, Architect of great Skill and Judgement had his Education at these schools.'*⁷

On reading the Reverend Penrose's letter, it occurred to Mr Summerson *'that if he [John Wood] was educated in Bath, it was rather unlikely that he was born in Yorkshire.'*⁸

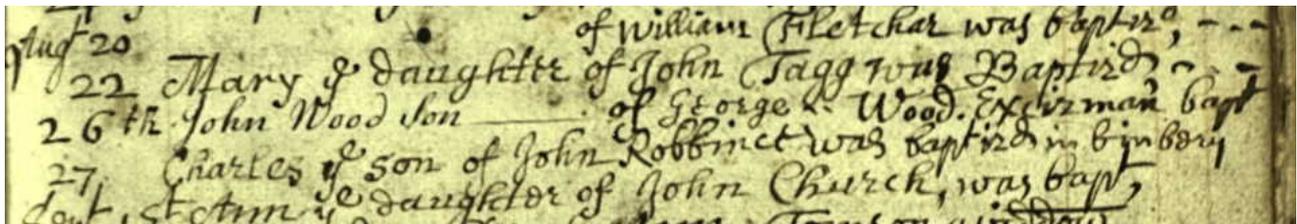
News of this discovery was passed on to Mr Walter Ison, who had recently published his book *The Georgian Buildings of Bath*. It was Ison who then found that a John Wood, son of George, had been baptised at the church of Bath St James on the 26th August 1704. However, one important detail, relating to the occupation of George Wood, seems to have been initially overlooked. Although Mr Summerson himself particularly referred in his lecture to the fact that John Wood was the son of a poor Bath mason,⁹ the original baptism entry recorded in the St James' parish register confirmed that he was the son of George Wood Exciseman. If Summerson and Ison had known this at the time they would have been aware that, although the newspaper report claimed that the baptism record was 'conclusive' proof that John Wood had been born in Bath, this significant discrepancy could mean that it was not conclusive at all. A likely explanation for their unreserved confidence might well be that Ison found John Wood's baptism, not in the parish register, but listed in the Reverend Shickle's typewritten transcriptions, which did not include the detail that George Wood was an exciseman.

Despite the discovery of the Bath baptism record, no consensus of opinion has yet been reached about when and where John Wood was born. There are a number of very understandable reasons to account for the persistent doubts and deliberations about who he was and where he came from—and also what his father's occupation might have been. These are explained and discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

In the Swainswick parish register there is an entry confirming that a John Wood was buried there on the 26th May 1754. An announcement of the death of John Wood, architect, in the *Bath Journal* on the following day (a Monday) reported that he had died before his fiftieth birthday:

*Last Thursday Morning about three o'clock, died after a long and tedious illness, in the fiftieth Year of his Age, John Wood, Esq, one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the County of Somerset; celebrated for his Designs, Plans and Skill in architecture;*¹⁰

There can be no question that the age at death confirmed in this report was exactly right for a John Wood baptised in Bath at the end of August 1704. Doubts arose, however, about the authenticity of the original entry recording the baptism of a John Wood in Bath in 1704.¹¹



Attention was drawn to the fact that *John Wood Son* _____ had obviously been added on a separate occasion to fill in a space left by the parish clerk when he first wrote up the register; that in comparison with other entries on the same page, there was a noticeable difference in the wording and also in the handwriting of the insertion.¹² Possibly significant here could be the similarity between the writing of the name John Wood added to the baptism record and the signature on the marriage bond of John Wood at the time of his marriage to Jenny Withers.¹³ However, more difficult to explain so far is the fact that the child's father, George Wood, was recorded as an exciseman. This simply did not tally with other clues discovered about the occupation of the father of John Wood the architect.

As has already been mentioned, in the course of his lecture delivered at Bath's Guildhall in 1954, John Summerson maintained without question the existing theory that John Wood was the son of a mason. This has continued to be the firm belief of several subsequent researchers and writers.

One book in particular appeared to contain evidence to substantiate this idea. *Ralph Allen: Builder of Bath* by Diana Winsor—described by the publisher as an intimate portrait of the man and his life,

as defined by his diary and letters,¹⁴ —includes a letter dated 1726, supposedly sent by Ralph Allen to his wife's brother, in which Allen, referring to John Wood, wrote, '*Tho' born in Bath, I believe the son of a local builder, he has worked at Bramham Park ...*'¹⁵

At first glance this could well be seen as convincing proof that this whole theory was justified. A letter from Ralph Allen, a highly respected gentleman, who would have heard about John Wood and was likely to have made enquiries at that time about his background, was surely a reliable source. However, Diana Winsor readily acknowledges that she is a novelist and not a serious historical researcher. It seems that, although her book was based on facts already widely believed to be accurate, Allen had never kept a diary, nor sent this particular letter to his brother-in-law; the author's well-intentioned aim had been to write a very readable book to 'celebrate' Ralph Allen, whose personable character, notable achievements and significant contributions to Bath's history have possibly been overshadowed by the fame of other notable men of his day.

It has been difficult to find any convincing proof that John Wood's father was a builder. The only evidence thought to support this idea can be found in a letter sent to Bath by the Duke of Chandos in April 1727. The Duke, who had employed Wood as architect and builder for his housing development on the site of St John's Hospital, tried to pacify the troublesome landlady, Mrs. Anne Phillips, with the following assurance:

*I have both your Letters of the 1st and 3rd instant and have talked with Mr. Wood concerning the Particulars mentioned therein. He has promised to take care to send down Directions to his father by this Post to alter the kitchen chimneys.*¹⁶

The wording of this message from the Duke of Chandos has been highlighted by researchers as a persuasive clue, yet it is perhaps debatable whether it provides conclusive proof that John Wood's father was a builder. Certainly, the Duke's message to Mrs Phillips could well be taken to mean that John Wood was intending to send directions to Bath so that his father could quickly carry out the required building alterations himself. However, John Wood confirmed in his *Essay* that after signing a contract in January 1726/7 to build a Court of Houses for the Duke of Chandos, he had '*provided Masons in Yorkshire, Carpenters, Joiners, and Plaisterers in London and other Places, and from time to time sent such as were necessary down to Bath to carry on the Buildings I had undertaken.*'¹⁷

This, perhaps, makes it questionable that he would have asked his father to carry out the actual work needed to alter chimneys and, on further consideration, the promise from John Wood, passed on in the Duke's letter, might well be open to other interpretations. Unfortunately, no additional evidence has been found so far to confirm the truth of what was meant, either one way or another, and, that being the case, it seems unwise, based on this evidence alone, to accept the fact that John Wood's father was a builder.

Furthermore, one reason to quash any suggestion that the aforementioned 'evidence' found in the Chandos letter could have been the basis of the original theory that John Wood's father was a builder, is that Summerson, during the very speech in which he had identified John Wood as the son of a poor Bath mason, then went on to regret the fact that, as yet, he was without the advantage of knowing what was written in the Chandos letters. Referring to the existence of these all-important letters at the Huntington Library in California, Summerson felt sure that careful examination of them '*would throw considerable light on the life of John Wood*' and expressed the wish that

*... some Western University in this year of the John Wood bi-centenary would send some brilliant scholar out to California to study these letters and bring back Photostats.*¹⁸

It seems unlikely, therefore, that Summerson's belief that John Wood's father was a mason could have been founded on any information included in the Chandos letters, since at that time these letters were in California and had not been thoroughly researched.

George Wood's occupation is clearly an important fact to establish beyond all doubt, because the belief that he was a builder is the very reason that the words *George Wood Exciseman*, discovered in the 1704 baptism record, have been pointed out as a significant discrepancy and sown seeds of doubt in the minds of many careful and conscientious researchers. They rightly point out that if the father of John Wood was a builder, then the John Wood baptised in Bath in 1704, son of an exciseman, could not have been the one who grew up to be a famous architect.

Also founded on the belief that his father had been a builder, yet another argument could be added to the debate: in the context of his subsequent abilities, knowledge and achievements, the idea that John Wood the architect was the son of a local builder of Bath didn't seem altogether plausible. Questions have been asked as to whether a builder's son was likely to have received much in the way of an academic upbringing and education as a young boy. John Wood the architect had clearly acquired a thirst for knowledge and an insatiable appetite for reading. He wrote in a neat, flowing and legible hand, set out orderly letters, was able to express himself in writing clearly and correctly, measured and drew with great precision, kept reasonably efficient accounts. These were basic skills normally accomplished at a relatively early age.

Serious doubts have also emerged about the convincing evidence discovered by John Summerson in the transcribed letters of the Rev. John Penrose. Writing in 1988, Tim Mowl believed this to be valid—his explanation being that John Wood's family would have been alive in 1766 and apparently did not refute the claim that he had been educated at a Bath school.¹⁹ Even so, it has become a difficult fact to prove beyond all doubt.

The reason for suspicion is that John Penrose's letter, dated Sunday May 4th 1766, described in some detail the sermon preached that morning at the Abbey and seemed to provide indisputable evidence that John Wood attended the Bluecoat School in Bath, founded in 1711,²⁰ yet the minute book for the Bluecoat School, which is still in existence and lists pupils who attended from the year 1711, does not include the name John Wood.²¹

As well as uncertainty about his early schooling, there is also the important question of when and how a John Wood of Bath could have come to the attention of Robert Benson, Lord Bingley. In a letter to Mr James Theobald, merchant and a Fellow of the Royal Society, dated the 4th of April 1728, the Duke of Chandos, referring to John Wood's apparent overspending on the building scheme in Bath, wrote that he could not '*imagine it possible for One so long versed in such sort of business and bred up, if I may say so, under such a Master as My Lord Bingley should yet be so unthinking as to make a Bargain detrimental to him.*'²²

This particular comment, as well as evidence that a payment to a John Wood is recorded in Lord Bingley's bank account as early as November 1719,²³ would seem to prove that the young architect could well have been a protégé of Lord Bingley at Bramham Park, near York, for many years before he surveyed and drew up a plan of the gardens at Bramham in 1725/26: plenty of time, researchers have claimed, for John Wood to have amassed his undoubted knowledge of all things historical, classical, astronomical, mythical and mystical, to have been drawn towards freemasonry and to have developed his talent as a surveyor and his vision as an architect and town-planner.

The Bramham Park evidence, together with numerous reports of his involvement in the Harley-Cavendish development in London in the early 1720s, stirred up further scepticism about the idea that he been born in Bath: it was difficult to understand how the son of a Somerset builder had caught the attention of a wealthy Yorkshire aristocrat and the patronage of so many influential people by the time he arrived in Bath in 1727.

There has also existed an undercurrent of more personal grumbles and grievances, mostly voiced in Bath: he could not possibly have been born locally because he was so arrogant and critical of the town itself and so scathing about those who lived there; had he belonged to a Bath family, the Aldermen and Council would surely not have felt such hostility towards him and opposed so many

of his ambitious architectural plans, dismissing them as ‘chimerical’; and why, when he embarked on the Chandos development, had he tactlessly employed masons brought down from Yorkshire and joiners from London rather than Somerset builders and carpenters? This was surely not the action of a loyal Bathonian. In fact, history has repeatedly shown that it is by no means unusual for town Councils to be at loggerheads with their architects; and John Wood’s reasons for introducing workmen from outside Somerset were practical and labour-saving. The local workforce may not have liked it, but Wood’s motives were understandable. In his *Essay*, he explained that he had soon realised that his building schemes depended ‘*in Great Measure upon a Collection of Experienced Workmen such as by their Facility would make Building come upon the most reasonable Terms.*’²⁴

For the Chandos building development, he had therefore brought in workmen from Yorkshire, London and other places, and

*... it was then, and not till then, that the Lever, the pulley, and the Windlass, were introduced among the Artificers in the upper Part of Somersetshire; before which time the Masons made use of no other Method to hoist up their heart Stones, than that of dragging them up, with small Ropes, against the Sides of a Ladder.*²⁵

Apart from the more specific complaints, it is also understandable that many of the deep-rooted citizens of Bath would not have appreciated, or accepted as one of their own, a young architect who wanted to turn their then relatively humble city of narrow streets, passages, ‘corridors’ and courtyards, closely clustered around their magnificent Abbey, into a showpiece of squares, crescents, parades—and even a Royal Circus—all designed to attract and house the rich and famous. This feeling of wanting to cling on to the old and familiar and opposing change is one that has existed throughout history and is still continuing today.

Furthermore, it is only fair to point out that evidence can also be found that seems to argue against this local feeling that John Wood was not originally from Bath. Contrary to the belief that his own attitude towards the town and its people, and also the Council’s attitude towards him, ruled out any possibility of him being a Bathonian, Kirsten Elliott has drawn attention to several examples in Wood’s written works which hint that he might, after all, have been a man of Somerset:²⁶

Here and there, when speaking of the local accent, he says “we, in Somerset”. He speaks of “My countryman Tom Coryat of Odcombe.”

Elliott also makes the point that the following comment in Wood’s *Essay Towards a Description of Bath*, might sound ‘*convincingly like a Bathonian voice.*’

*However, to be a Town’s Born Child of the Place, descended from a Parent whose Origin in the City is beyond any Memorial, is still reckoned by some, as the greatest honour an Inhabitant can enjoy.*²⁷

But she then qualifies that idea with the suggestion that, depending on how it was said, it might also be interpreted as a ‘*veiled attack on parochialism.*’

Elliott’s more recent observations are markedly different from those noted long ago by the 19th century local historian, R.E.M. Peach, whose opinion about John Wood’s birthplace had apparently been influenced by the belief that a few expressions found in his *Essay* were typical of a north country dialect.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it cannot be denied that much of the antagonism in Bath was very likely caused by John Wood himself. If he had been more tactful and amenable and less arrogant, stubborn and self-willed, it might have been easier, if indeed he had been born in Bath, for the townspeople to accept him as one of their own.

So here were fragments of the puzzle that didn't seem to fit at all with the already questionable Bath baptism record dated 1704. And naturally, any suggestion that this could well be the baptism of the wrong John Wood was bound to give rise to yet more speculation. If Bath looked unlikely to have been his birthplace, then perhaps he really was a north-country man, as Peach had thought—or even a Londoner? It was only to be expected that alternative theories would be put forward.

Evidence has also been discovered that John Wood, a joiner of St Anne's, Westminster, tried to lease a plot of land in London in the autumn of 1721.²⁸ The fact that he was recorded as a joiner in that year probably meant that he had already completed his apprenticeship. Yet a John Wood born in 1704 would have been only sixteen or seventeen in 1721—surely too young to have completed an apprenticeship. Most London apprenticeships at that time began at the age of 15 and took seven years to complete.²⁹

Yet another telling remark found in one of the Chandos letters would seem to argue *against* any theories that John Wood had been born considerably earlier than 1704. A general indication of John Wood's age in 1727 can be found in the letter (already referred to) from the Duke of Chandos to Mr Theobald, dated April 4th 1728. In this letter, the Duke admitted that he had offered Wood his first building employment in Bath in early 1727, '*chiefly because I was willing to encourage a young Man just coming into the World.*'³⁰ The Duke's comment, which hinted at the youthful inexperience of the architect he had employed to carry out his building development in Bath, certainly casts doubt on Mr. Sturge Cotterell's suggestion that John Wood could have been born as early as 1695 or Mr. John Summerson's claim that the accepted date of John Wood's birth was improbable. It might even be seen as a challenge to the idea that, by 1721, he would have been old enough to have served an apprenticeship as a joiner, or sufficiently established in life to think about leasing a plot of land.

Considering the doubt regarding the authenticity of the baptism record for a John Wood of Bath, controversy about his year of birth, inconsistency and ambiguity relating to his father's occupation, the air of secrecy surrounding his early life and education (seemingly contrived by Wood himself), and local hostility towards him, it is hardly surprising that experienced historians have found it very difficult to accept the theory that the John Wood born in Bath in 1704 could also have been John Wood the architect. Instead, many have looked towards Yorkshire or London in the hope of discovering new evidence about his family origins and early upbringing.

It was difficult to decide where further research should begin in order to disentangle and make sense of some of this confusing information. It might be argued that, had the original entry in the Bath St James' register and apparently reliable references to John Wood being a builder's son not given rise to suspicion in the first place, there would have been no need to look for other explanations elsewhere; that it had partly been reservations about the Bath evidence that had prompted historians to pursue other ideas. However, it is also very clear that the puzzling influence of Lord Bingley of Bramham Park in the life of a young John Wood and the patronage he received from such men as the Duke of Chandos and Lord Harley, Earl of Oxford, meant that there were very justifiable reasons for researchers to shift their attention away from a John Wood born in Bath and focus instead on Yorkshire or London.

Yet finding evidence to prove any of the many wide-ranging alternative possibilities had already presented a huge challenge and would continue to do so. Therefore, initially it seemed that a better plan might be to look again at the historical records now available for Bath—a number of which have been digitised and are easily accessible on genealogical websites. With so many more images of original documents recently published online, it was possible that new information might yet be found. Now, at last, there was the opportunity to scrutinise the handwritten entries in parish registers or study copies of Wills. These readily available resources offered fresh hope of finding further information relating to exciseman-cum-builder George Wood and his family; or even a faint possibility of establishing whether or not the child baptised in Bath in August 1704 could have been the John Wood who grew up to become a talented surveyor and architect. However, should it

become clear that he was not, it would then be time to look elsewhere for a solution to the mystery of his origins.

The logical conclusion, therefore, was that, before following up theories and clues in Yorkshire and London, it could well prove worthwhile to take a further look at the Bath evidence; that, by focusing the research more closely on George Wood, exciseman, and his family, it might be possible to clarify—and possibly even put an end to—some of the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the true identity and destiny of the John Wood baptised in Bath in 1704.

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