

Robert Cruickshank

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Robert Cruickshank (1787-1853) was undoubtedly one of the most remarkable characters in the history of Gosport in the 19th century. Tough, energetic, and possibly none too scrupulous, he possessed nevertheless a vision which was far in advance of his time and he gave to the town a dynamism it was not to recapture for more than 100 years. Of his energy there is little doubt. He once travelled to Scotland by coach, with wooden wheels and iron rims, over rough roads, and was back in Gosport within ten days. Of his vision there remains what is perhaps the Borough's finest heritage - The Crescent, Alverstoke.

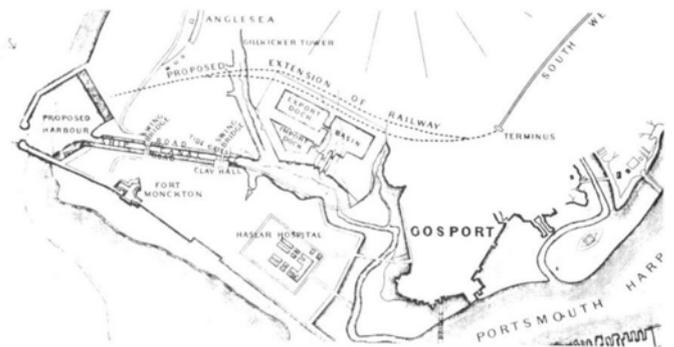


Cruickshank's parents were sugar planters in the West Indies, but young Robert was put to study law, and after spending some time in Montreal in Canada he arrived in Gosport in 1806 at the age of nineteen. Here he joined a firm of attorneys in Clarence Square, then the more aristocratic part of the small fortified town confined inside the ramparts. Even at that age he must have shewn initiative for within six years he had become secretary of a Company formed to pull down the old Market Hall which obstructed the middle of High Street near the present Co-operative Stores, and erect a new building facing The Hard which was to last until the 'blitz' in 1940.

Encouraged by the new fangled habit of sea bathing made fashionable by George III's visits to Weymouth and the Prince Regent's activities in Brighton, he determined to create a new watering place and spa at the eastern end of Alverstoke. He purchased Danner's Farm consisting of land known as Camp Field and Mongers and, at his own expense, laid down the roads now known as The Crescent and St. Mark's Road (originally North Terrace). A Company was formed to erect Regency style terraced houses on either side of the road junction but the eastern half was never built and was developed

privately. Plots were sold off and desirable villas began to appear in St. Mark's Road'. The western side of the road junction which is The Crescent as we know it today, together with the detached houses at the end, was originally intended to be called Fleming Terrace, after the Member of Parliament for South Hants. Opposite The Crescent, Cruickshank planted gardens and facing the road junction with St. Mark's Road he built a reading room and bath house. A pump house at the lower end of St. Mark's Road conveyed water which was alleged to have special health giving properties, from Alverstoke Creek.

Like all good Company promoters, Cruickshank wanted a title on the board, and being nothing if not bold, he approached Sir William Champion de Crespigny, Bart to lay the first stone of his columned edifice "in due form and solemn prayer" but getting a somewhat lukewarm reply - "I would you had not applied to me", he went after bigger game. He invited the Marquess of Anglesey, hero of Waterloo, to perform the ceremony. He had met the Peer in Haslar Hospital where the latter was a visitor after having lost a leg in the battle. The Marquess was pleased to accept. Probably he thought it a good place to park the children for holidays by the sea as he is reputed to have had eight by his first wife and ten by his second. Cruickshank was delighted and promised to call the new Village 'Angleseyville I le', but he was a little cross when called upon to pay six guineas for a silver trowel and plate after having stipulated that £5 was to be the limit. In the event the Marquess was taken ill and the stone was laid by his eldest son, the Earl of Uxbridge, the first house being named Uxbridge House, now Wakefield House and part of the National Children's Home. For many years it was assumed that the Marquess had laid the stone in person and it was not until 104 years later that a letter of apology for absence was found in an old writing desk belonging to the Cruickshank family.



All was now set to go ahead and Cruickshank wanted an Hotel but in a letter dated 6th October 1826 his partners sound a note of caution. 'A building of this sort is at present quite unnecessary.' As usual Cruickshank got his way and the Anglesey Arms Hotel was opened on the 18th May 1830. Some time later we find Lord Hillsborough writing optimistically 'Thank you for your

Churchmen of his time, and it is a measure of Cruickshank's popularity and power that he won the day. St Mark's Church was built at a cost of £2,630 and consecrated as a chapel-of-ease to St. Mary's in 1844.

Robert Cruickshank's last ambition was to plan a branch railway line to a pier at Stokes Bay as the quickest way to the Isle of Wight, but he died in 1853 and the line was not opened until ten years later. By then it was too late and the route through Portsmouth was to prove the more popular. All this is part of railway history but it is fascinating to dwell on what may have happened had Cruickshank's plans for the docks and railway matured at the time he wanted.

It is sad to recount the slow decline of his projects after his death. The Bathing Machines disappeared. The Race Course fell into disuse and became overgrown. The Crescent lost its early gaiety and became a rather pleasant backwater occupied mainly by Naval and Military Officers. A decade later many of the houses were turned into Flats. In 1883 the villagers petitioned to free the Toll Bridge but this was not achieved until the last war and the bridge is yet to be rebuilt. In 1888 there was a resolution before the local authority to confer with the owners of properties in Anglesey to halt the decay and neglect. In 1911 St. Mark's Church became

unsafe and had to be pulled down. The site and graveyard where Cruickshank was buried can still be seen in St. Mark's Road. The Stokes Bay Railway was closed down in 1914 and taken over by the Admiralty and later by the Borough Council. Newer residents have difficulty in tracing the route today. The Gosport Pier has long since gone and the Floating Bridge went out of business shortly after the last war. In 1950 the sum of 30/- was quite insufficient to pay for the upkeep of the gardens which had become a wilderness. After a long wrangle the Council took over and demolished the Bath House and Reading Room.

Only the Crescent remains. Recently through a partnership between the owners and the Local Authorities it has been outwardly restored and it is possible to catch a glimpse of how it must have appeared in its full glory. As one studies those gracious lines, curved to trap the sun, and facing south, one has the feeling that modern planners and developers could still learn something from Robert Cruickshank, speculator and visionary.

Sources

Documents and letters belonging to the Cruickshank family.
St. Mary's Church Magazine.
The Hampshire Chronicle.

