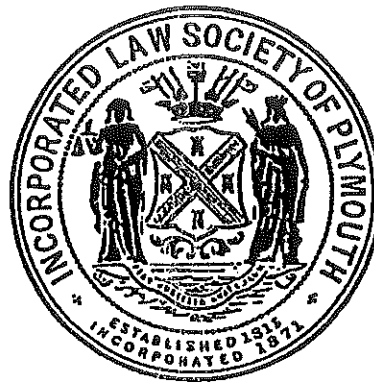


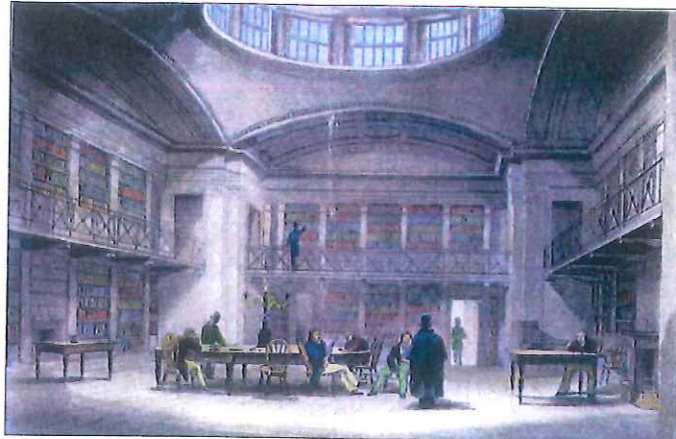
PLYMOUTH LAW SOCIETY



1815 - 2015

— Chris Robinson —

PLYMOUTH LAW SOCIETY

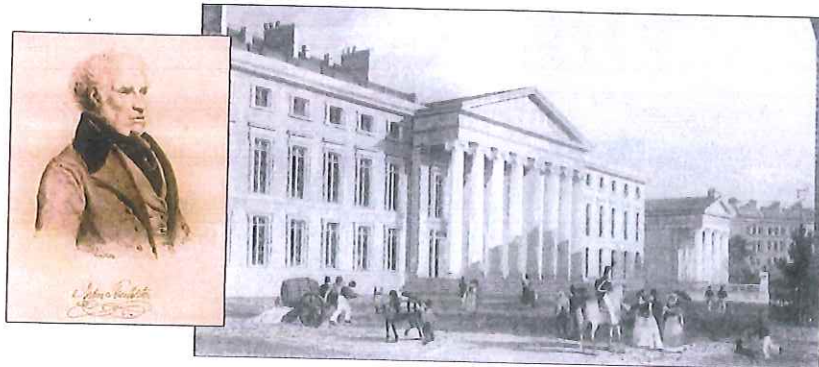


Inside the Public Library

On Tuesday 13 June 1815 a group of men who practised the Law in Plymouth were seated around a table in Plymouth's Public Library. The meeting had been convened by 48-year-old Henry Woollcombe who the previous year had served the town as Mayor – not altogether willingly. At that time there was, according to Whitfeld who was writing at the other end of that century: *'much difficulty in persuading gentlemen to serve on account of the expense and the "infinite disquietude, embarrassment and perplexity in which the chief magistrate is thrown by means of dissensions unhappily prevailing".'*

Curiously enough, there was quite a kerfuffle this year, 1815, as a local solicitor named Hunt, *'whose position had been materially improved by an appointment procured through the interest of one of the members of the borough'*, was approached but he declared the office *'distasteful'* and refused the nomination. Despite this the freemen of the town were still ready to elect him, without his consent. However, it was pointed out that the gentleman in question had abstained from taking the Sacrament in the previous twelve months and, furthermore, refused to do anything about it. The council considered forcing his hand on the issue but in the end William Lockyer accepted the position.

The son of a local solicitor and a member of a very wealthy family locally, William's cousin, Edmund, had, a few years earlier, been instrumental in bringing the architect, John Foulston, to Plymouth and in securing the construction of Plymouth's first purpose-built theatre – the Theatre Royal. Lockyer had felt it was time to capitalise on the new wealth in the town that had come in on the back of the Napoleonic Wars.



John Foulston (left) and his Theatre Royal.

It is hard now to appreciate the scale of riches that floated into Plymouth around that time but as William Burt, the first Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, established in 1813, had observed a year or two earlier: 'the first decade or so of the wars with France alone saw around 1,000 captured ships brought into Port' and we 'now have over 100 registered prize stores around Sutton Harbour.'

These prize stores varied in size but some of the larger examples, like the 1803 purpose-built Palace Vaults, in New Street, are still with us today. The amount of new money this brought into port was staggering and among those who did very well out of the resulting business was the Solicitor to the Admiralty, George Eastlake.

This lucrative post had been in Eastlake's family for several generations and at least two of his sons, George and William, followed him into the profession, while a third, Charles, was at the time just starting to forge a very successful career as an artist.

George Eastlake and Henry Woollcombe were longstanding acquaintances and major movers and shakers in Plymouth. Eastlake had convened a meeting at the new Guildhall in Whimple Street (a building Woollcombe described as 'an unsightly pile, partaking largely of the ridiculous') five years earlier to discuss the establishment of a public library. The Guildhall building, incidentally, was where the Magistrates' Court was then based.



Plymouth's Georgian Guildhall of 1802.

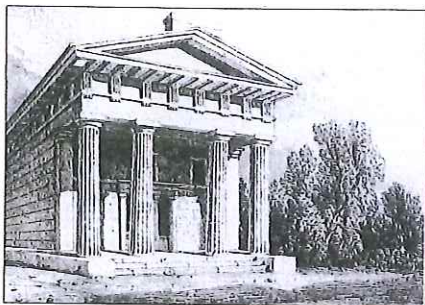
Castlake and his son, William, agreed to buy into the project as did Henry and William Woolcombe and Edmund Lockyer, senior and junior, along with Lord Boringdon, Sir William Elford and a handful of others. Thirty guineas was the minimum subscription, a sum that ruled out the average man for whom that was almost a year's salary. The Library building, in Cornwall Street, designed by Foulson, was opened in 1813.

There was a suggestion, however, that the subscriptions didn't quite cover the cost of construction (£4,000) and perhaps that was why Woolcombe, who had become the Library's first President, was looking to increase revenue by creating a society for promoting and maintaining a Law Library. Potential members all had to hold a share in the general library before they could join the Law Library.

Twelve members attended the first meeting in October 1815 and the assembled group of wealthy solicitors 'agreed a set of laws and regulations for the maintenance of such a library' – every member was to give £5 or its equivalent in books and to pay an annual subscription of £1. No attempt was made to regulate professional conduct, but they did agree to hold an annual dinner ... on the first day of the Michaelmas term, at four o'clock, at a venue to be decided by the President.

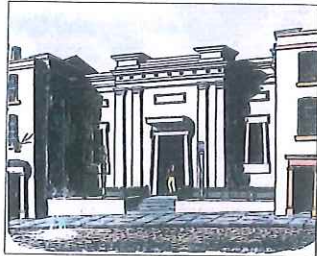
It was by no means the first society that Woolcombe had set up. In 1810 he'd instigated a series of meetings to talk about social problems and as the number of interested parties grew he proposed, on 4 October 1812, that they set up the Plymouth Institute. Meetings subsequently took place in the Plymouth Dispensary, which had been founded by two local medical men, Charles Yonge and William Woolcombe, in 1798, and which, in 1809, had moved into purpose-built premises in Catherine Street – the building is still there today.

The architect John Foulston was a founder member of the Plymouth Institute, along with Henry Woolcombe and, in 1818, the society moved into another new building designed by Foulston alongside his newly erected Theatre Royal. The Society was renamed the Athenaeum in 1961 and the modern building stands on the site of the original. Woolcombe was its President for many years and in time produced the first serious attempt at a History of Plymouth.



The Plymouth Institute. Right: Inside the building.





The Public Library

From all of the above it is evident that Plymouth experienced a major cultural lift in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, much of it made possible by the extra wealth that had come into the town during the Napoleon Wars, wars which it was thought had ended with the signing of the treaty of 'Perpetual Peace' in Paris on 30 May 1814.

However, at the end of February 1815, Napoleon escaped from his island prison on Elba and as Woollcombe and his solicitor friends were sitting around a table in a side room of the new Public Library, Napoleon was preparing to do battle with Wellington at Waterloo. It seems strange that just three days later the encounter that the Duke of Wellington would describe as *'the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life,'* would finally determine the outcome of over 20 years of fighting in Europe and that the man who had been the cause of so much of the trouble would become a public spectacle just a few weeks later in Plymouth Sound.



Eastlake's portrait of Napoleon.

Furthermore, while a captive on board the *Bellerophon*, Napoleon would be painted by the son of Plymouth Law Society's third President, George Eastlake, and the work would become one of the most celebrated images ever associated with the City.

Although the term Plymouth Law Society wasn't officially adopted until 1837 (it had been the Plymouth Law Library until then), the body can none the less claim to be one of the oldest in the country. The Law Society – the Law Society of England and Wales – was actually formed in London in 1825, although Bristol was founded in 1770 and one or two others, like Yorkshire in 1786 and Leeds in 1805, appeared a few years before Plymouth.

In 1824, incidentally, Samuel Kelly, who founded the practice today known as Wolferstans, served as Plymouth President, his son, John, following in his footsteps a generation later. Both Harold and Thomas Wolferstan held the title too, as have a handful more Woollcombes and a great many other familiar names in local law circles.



John Kelly.

On 22 October 1849, PLS held their annual dinner in Foulston's Royal Hotel, a report in the *Western Times* noted that 'around 30 members of the profession attended'.

There wasn't a great deal of business done at meetings in those early years; however, at the General Annual Meeting (*sic*) of the Society in 1840 it was resolved that: '*the Annual Dinner of the Society is of very great importance to its welfare, and that each member should consider himself pledged to promote its effectiveness by every means in his power.*'

It would appear that not everyone heeded the call though and the following year another resolution was passed directing that: '*the dinner bill be divided between the members at large ... including all absentees!*'

Six years later, at a special meeting of the Society, in June 1847 there was a proposal that members should wear official gowns at County Courts, Assizes, Quarter Sessions and sitting of Magistrates. The motion was lost on a show of hands.

However, the following year there appeared to be unanimity in the Society's '*Cordial approval of the recently established Law Students' Society.*'

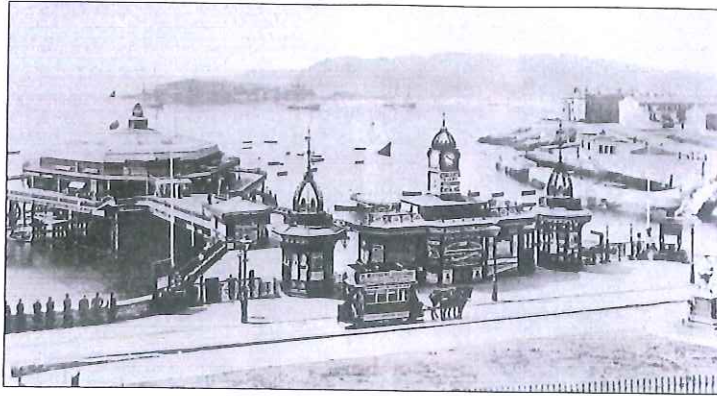
Charlatans were apparently a problem in 1849 and the Society found it necessary to '*protect its members against illegal competition*'. Evidently '*certain unprofessional persons*' had '*infringed upon the profits of practitioners in Plymouth by preparing legal documents*' and the Secretary was directed to: '*get the editors of the local newspapers to insert a caution to unqualified persons against preparing legal documents.*'

In 1871 the Plymouth organisation was incorporated; fresh rules were adopted and the name of the Society changed from Plymouth Law Society to that of the Incorporated Law Society of Plymouth. By that stage there were 40 members, paying an annual subscription of a guinea, plus seven honorary members.



In February 1884 a deputation from Plymouth, including the local MPs, the Mayors of Plymouth and Devonport and a representative of the PLS, petitioned the Lord Chancellor in his room at the Palace of Westminster, to promote Plymouth as an Assize Town, under the expected new arrangements for England and Wales.

Incidentally, it would appear that by this time the longstanding connection between the Law Society and the Proprietary Library was becoming somewhat strained and, in 1887, the arrangement, which '*had been found inconvenient by both parties for several years*', was completely severed.



Plymouth's Promenade Pier c.1891.

The year after they celebrated their 75th Anniversary, the Plymouth Society hosted the 18th Annual Provincial Meeting of the Incorporated Law Society and on the first night of their visit, Tuesday, 25 August 1891, Plymouth President, John Shelly, 'entertained the visitors at a conversazione in the pavilion of the Promenade Pier'.

By 1915, the year the Society celebrated its centenary, the number of members had grown considerably, to 99, although that was in fact six fewer than the previous year, something perhaps to do with the onset of war once more.

Certainly the war put paid to the Provincial Meeting of the National Society being staged in Plymouth that year although, in October 1923, Plymouth were accorded the honour of hosting the four-day event. Sir William Munday produced an outline sketch of the Plymouth body especially for the occasion – it was published, almost entirely, in the *Western Morning News* that September.

In 1936, sensing a potential merger of Devon and Cornwall into one Assize, the PLS once again were pushing Plymouth's case: 'every unbiased logical reason must fix Plymouth as the seat of that Assize', said John Woolland, later to be a PLS President. The Law was, of course, very much a male preserve in those days, indeed it wasn't until 1922 that women were admitted into the British legal profession. Plymouth was slow on the uptake and, in 1937, at the PLS Annual Dinner, held once more in the Royal Hotel, guest speaker and Barrister-at-Law, J Lhind Pratt, decried the fact that Plymouth only sported one female lawyer: 'This is very disgraceful,' he said, adding somewhat questionably, 'and a reflection on the girls of Plymouth.'

Mary Conday was, at that time, the lone representative of her sex in the profession, she had an office in Princess Square, where a good many of Plymouth's solicitors were then based.



1923 congregating for the Law Society Annual Conference: l-r front: Mr Scriven (Leeds), RW Dibdin (President), Sir Arthur Peake, Sir William Bull, MP, JA Pearce (Plymouth President). Back: KE Peck and BH Whiteford (both of PLS).

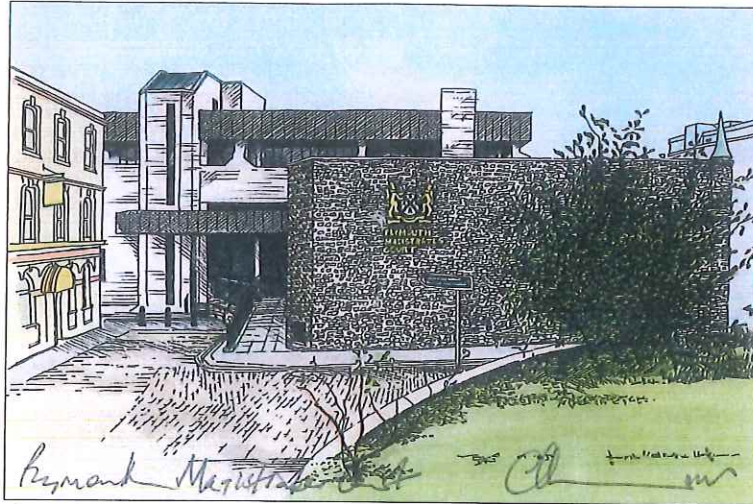
Indeed it was largely because of that fact, that in the post-war replanning of the City it was announced, in 1950, that Plymouth was looking at creating a Law Precinct to the North side of Notte Street and east of Princess Square. Although John Elliott, the PLS secretary - who mentioned in passing that the City then had around 100 solicitors, employing perhaps another 400 staff - was quoted in the press as saying that the idea 'was still only a dream' and that 'cost may well defeat the plan'.

As it transpired the dream was realised and it was in 1963 that Lord Denning, the Right Honourable Master of the Rolls, officiated at the opening of the new Crown Court and Police Station complex that opened on that site.

Meanwhile, as Britain's love/hate relationship with litigation drove inexorably onwards so the membership of the PLS continued to grow and on the occasion of the Society's 150th Anniversary, a Dinner and Dance was held in Plymouth Guildhall. Over 250 members and guests attended including Sir Denys Hicks, a Bristol solicitor and a former President of the National Law Society and later President of the IBA.

From the very beginning the law court complex on Armada Way was deemed woefully inadequate and nine years later, when the Crown Courts came to Plymouth, the Magistrates' Courts were relocated to the former officers' mess at Plumer Barracks, Crownhill. The move was deeply unpopular and before the year had drawn to a close there was a pledge to bring the courts back into the City Centre.

At that point in time, May 1972, sites were limited. Charles Street had been earmarked for a new district Police Station, while Mayflower Street would have involved a change of current planning and the vacant site alongside the Berni Grand was scheduled for residential use.



Plymouth Magistrates' Court by Chris Robinson

In the event, the somewhat unfortunate decision was taken to close off one of the main and most historic routes from the City Centre to the sea front and build across St Andrew Street. Clerk to the Magistrates, Cliff Moiser, was largely responsible for the internal design and layout and Tony Irish was the project architect. The building was opened by Prince Charles in 1979.

Fifteen years later, Plymouth Law Society registered a remarkable first as Jane Lister became its first female President, an admirable break with tradition that has subsequently been matched by Jane Ward, Jill Hill, Helen Davies, Nikki Duncan and Tracey Baker.

Plymouth's first President of the National Law Society, incidentally, was Anthony Holland. Knighted in 2003 for his Northern Ireland Parade Commission work, Sir Anthony was formerly senior partner at at Foot and Bowden (now Foot Anstey). Like many firms, Foot Anstey have provided a number of Plymouth Presidents over the years including, unsurprisingly, the Right Honourable Isaac Foot, who set up Foot & Bowden in 1903, and Lord Foot, Isaac's third son, who became senior partner of the family firm on the death of his father in 1960 and then President of the Plymouth Society eight years later.

Presidents of the Law Society 1815-2015

1815.....	Henry Woolcombe	1882.....	Charles T. Bewes	1949.....	The Rt Hon Isaac Foot
1816.....	Thomas Cleather	1883.....	Charles T. Bewes	1950.....	Thomas McCready
1817.....	Geo Eastlake, Snr	1884.....	Charles T. Bewes	1951.....	John Elliott
1818.....	John Subder	1885.....	Charles T. Bewes	1952.....	Edwin Broad
1819.....	Joseph Pridham	1886.....	Charles T. Bewes	1953.....	Ernest Vosper
1820.....	George Coryndon	1887.....	Charles T. Bewes	1954.....	David F. Nash
1821.....	Joseph Whiteford	1888.....	Francis Fitzroy	1955.....	Albert Eagle Stedman
1822.....	Joseph Whiteford	1889.....	Francis Fitzroy	1956.....	Kenneth C. Brian
1823.....	William Jacobson	1890.....	Francis Fitzroy	1957.....	Jack Stanbury Yeo
1824.....	Samuel Kelly	1891.....	John Shelly	1958.....	Herbert Rendle
1825.....	William Gregg	1892.....	John Shelly	1959.....	William Maddock
1826.....	William Eastlake	1893.....	John J E Venning	1960.....	John Barker
1827.....	John Moore	1894.....	John J E Venning	1961.....	Arthur Goldberg
1828.....	Samuel Williams	1895.....	H. Penrose Prance	1962.....	Alec Leest
1829.....	George Eastlake	1896.....	William J. Woolcombe	1963.....	Roger Serpell
1830.....	George S Baron	1897.....	Walter Radcliffe	1964.....	James Knape
1831.....	Edward Jago	1898.....	J.P. Goldsmith	1965.....	Geoffrey Woolcombe
1832.....	Jonathan Luxmoore	1899.....	Thomas Wolferstan	1966.....	Jack Bond Spear
1833.....	Richard J. Squire	1900.....	William Harrison	1967.....	Richard Sweet
1834.....	Herbert Mends Gibson	1901.....	John Shelly	1968.....	The Lord (John) Foot
1835.....	Edward Prior	1902.....	John Ellis	1969.....	Harold Harrison
1836.....	Robert W. Corydon	1903.....	Joseph Hellard	1970.....	Norman Sitters
1837.....	George Pridham	1904.....	Thomas Geake	1971.....	David Dobell
1838.....	Charles C. Whiteford	1905.....	John J E Venning	1972.....	Hillary Collings
1839.....	John Bennett	1906.....	Harold Wolferstan	1973.....	Geoffrey Willis
1840.....	John Edmonds	1907.....	Foster J. Bone	1974.....	Henry Peck
1841.....	John Bayly	1908.....	Coryndon Matthews	1975.....	Harry Hayden
1842.....	Benjamin Parham	1909.....	Richard B. Johns	1976.....	Ivor Thompson
1843.....	G.N. Oxenham	1910.....	James Y. Woolcombe	1977.....	Gordon Bellingham
1844.....	Francis F. Bulteel	1911.....	Kenrick E Peck	1978.....	Graham Cocks
1845.....	Nicholas Lockyer	1912.....	John Pearse Dobell	1979.....	Richard Jackson
1846.....	Robert E. Moore	1913.....	Cyrus Latimer Croft	1980.....	William Huddart
1847.....	Samuel Rowse	1914.....	H. Penrose Prance	1981.....	Frank Prout
1848.....	John Kelly	1915.....	John Shelly	1982.....	Michael Bartlett
1849.....	Henry Prideaux	1916.....	John Goldsmith	1983.....	David Brian
1850.....	J.B. Wilcocks	1917.....	Ellery Arthur Bennett	1984.....	David Bishop
1851.....	Jno. Faithful Fortescue	1918.....	R. Robinson Robb	1985.....	Michael Barton
1852.....	John Curgenvin	1919.....	Coryndon Matthews	1986.....	Anthony Holland
1853.....	Alfred Rooker	1920.....	William H.T. Dawe	1987.....	Tom Savery
1854.....	William Marshall	1921.....	Godfrey Nix Dickinson	1988.....	David Gabitass
1855.....	John Kelly	1922.....	Eric R. Ward	1989.....	Robin Midgley
1856.....	Nicholas Were	1923.....	James A Pearce	1990.....	William Davey
1857.....	William Holberton	1924.....	Kenrick Eylon Peck	1991.....	Jonathan Trafford
1858.....	Robert Stephens	1925.....	B Hamilton Whiteford	1992.....	Peter Stevens
1859.....	George T Shortland	1926.....	Osmund Wilcocks	1993.....	Neil Major
1860.....	George S. Eastlake	1927.....	William Munday	1994.....	Jane Lister
1861.....	William Hughes	1928.....	Alfred Gard	1995.....	Jeremy Bennett
1862.....	John Gard Edmonds	1929.....	F Edgar Bowden	1996.....	Nigel Theyer
1863.....	Robert Gard Edmonds	1930.....	S. Carlisle Davis	1997.....	Paul Woods
1864.....	Frederick Cleverton	1931.....	E Frank Anthony	1998.....	Alan Strowger
1865.....	Jonathan Luxmoore	1932.....	Percival Snell	1999.....	Greg Yates
1866.....	William Eastlake	1933.....	Percival Snell	2000.....	John Wyatt
1867.....	Samuel Carter	1934.....	H. Lawrence Spear	2001.....	D Jane Ward
1868.....	Gustavus Gidley	1935.....	Ernest Howard	2002.....	David Beadel
1869.....	Thomas Phillips, Jnr	1936.....	Edgar, Dobell	2003.....	Jill Hill
1870.....	Francis Fitzroy	1937.....	Sir William Munday	2004.....	Guy Walker
1871.....	Joshua Brooking Rowe	1938.....	Jone Bone	2005.....	Helen Davies
1872.....	John Matthews	1939.....	Humphrey Woolcombe	2006.....	Nigel Lyons
1873.....	John Shelly	1940.....	Reginald McDonald	2007.....	Nikki Duncan
1874.....	Glenn Pridham	1941.....	Duke Mohun Yonge	2008.....	Michael Hasler
1875.....	Hamilton Whiteford	1942.....	Charles Serpell	2009.....	Nicholas Roper
1876.....	Edward G. Bennett	1943.....	Henry Elliot Turner	2010.....	Tracey Baker
1877.....	Charles T. Bewes	1944.....	John Waolland	2011.....	Jonathan Madge
1878.....	George Holberton	1945.....	Alberf Gard	2012.....	Steve Hudson
1879.....	Hext Boger	1946.....	William Blakeny	2013.....	Phil Thorneycroft
1880.....	Henry Fox	1947.....	William Major	2014.....	Rob Howard
1881.....	Charles T. Bewes	1948.....	Charles Spencer	2015.....	Charles Parry

