

# JOHN FLOWER 1793-1861

by

J. D. BENNETT

John Flower was born in Leicester, son of John and Mary Flower, he was baptised at the church of St. Mary-de-Castro on 14 October 1793.<sup>1</sup> For many years the Flower family had been owners of the old Castle Mill, though John Flower senior, a Freeman of Leicester,<sup>2</sup> was a wool-comber by trade, and the son of a wool-comber.

The death of his father when he was still a boy left him to make his own way in the world. He was apprenticed in 1806 to a framework-knitter called Benjamin Withers. His interest in drawing, and his eye for colour attracted the attention of Dr. Alexander of Danet's Hall, who, seeing his ability, so encouraged him that he had begun to give lessons as a drawing master before he was twenty. About this time he began to be patronised by Miss Mary Linwood, and through her influence was sent to London, probably in 1815,<sup>3</sup> where he spent about a year working under the supervision of the painter, Peter de Wint, who gave his services free of charge.<sup>4</sup> On his return John Flower was able to establish himself in the town as a landscape artist and teacher of drawing, as the following advertisement in the *Leicester Journal* for 24 January 1817, illustrates:

## D R A W I N G

*J. Flower respectfully informs his Patrons and Friends, that his attendance on his Pupils commences next week; he will open his usual Drawing School on the Evenings of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, in each week, at his house in Marble street, near Newark street, Leicester.*

## T E R M S

*Pupils attended at home, twice a week*

*£1-1-0*

*Ditto attending at J. Flower's House  
three Evenings in each week*

*£1-1-0*

*Specimens of J. Flower's Drawings may be seen  
at his own house.*

Flower's name first appears in local directories in 1827, when his address is given as Southgate Street. There is no mention of him in the rate books for Southgate Street for this period, so we can only assume that he was then renting a house where he was still living in 1841. Mary Kirby recalls how, in 1850, "we came up the Oxford Street, and were passing the door of Mr. Flowers who, on account of his talent with pencil and brush, was called 'The Leicester Artist' ".<sup>5</sup> Her sister, Sarah, took her artist friend, Thomas Uwins<sup>6</sup> in, and introduced him to Flower. "He stayed some little time, looking at the pictures on the walls, and one large one upon an easel, painted in oils by Miss Wheatley; but he liked best a portrait of Mr. Flower's little daughter,

in walking dress, with the bonnet framing her pretty face, and her spencer thrown open in front".<sup>7</sup> Sarah Kirby married Thomas Uwins shortly after this meeting. Flower had moved to New Walk in 1843, and he was still here in 1850 though he probably kept a studio in Southgate Street. The following year he was able to move into his newly-built house, 86 Upper Regent Street (now 100 Regent Road). Designed by Flower himself and Henry Goddard,<sup>8</sup> it is a substantial, two-storey, double-fronted pseudo-Jacobean brick house. The date 1851 and John Flower's initials appear on the front. Here he remained until his death.

John Flower had married Frances Clark at St. Mary-de-Castro on 16 December 1813. A daughter, Elizabeth, was born on 10 November 1816, the first of three children, but the only one to survive infancy. Elizabeth seems to have inherited something of her father's gift for drawing; the Leicester Museum possesses a wash drawing by her, "An Old House in the Market Place", done in 1839. She married twice: first, on 18 May 1839, to William Bayes Marshall, a clerk at Paget's Bank; and secondly, on 5 July 1853 to William Kempson.<sup>9</sup> Both marriages took place at Great Meeting where Flower was a member of the congregation.

Sometime in early manhood he had become a Unitarian; he was certainly one by 1819, when one of his children was baptized at Great Meeting. His two grandsons were both baptized there and he remained a member of Great Meeting for the rest of his life. He died on 29 November 1861. Though he was buried from St. Mary-de-Castro, the officiating minister was his life-long friend, the Reverend Charles Berry of Great Meeting, and he was buried in unconsecrated ground in the Welford Road Cemetery. His widow, Frances Flower, died in his house at 86 Upper Regent Street on 16 February 1874, at the age of 77. His daughter continued to live there. Her second husband, William Kempson, died there on 11 October 1893, at the age of 88. She died there on 11 March 1902, in her eighty-sixth year. Of their two sons, the elder, John Flower Kempson, emigrated to Australia, and died there in 1928, aged 74; the younger, Charles Kempson, F.R.I.B.A., died in Leicester in 1933 at the age of 77. Three years before he died he presented twenty-four of his grandfather's pictures to the Museum.

Curiously enough, there is no known portrait of John Flower. In his will, Charles Kempson left a number of books and pictures to a nephew in Australia, and among these was an album of family photographs and it is possible that this contained a portrait of him. The bequest also included Flower's portrait of his daughter, the one mentioned by Mary Kirby, and six water colours, mostly of Welsh scenes.

Flower's early professional life was spent in Leicester and Leicestershire, but later he went further afield, making periodical sketching tours in neighbouring counties. About 1832 he produced some drawings for a proposed *History of Staffordshire*, by J. M. Mathew, F.S.A., that was never published. Some of these drawings have been preserved and are now in the William Salt Library at Stafford.<sup>10</sup> He was fond of sketching in North Wales, and in the earlier years of their marriage, he and his wife would drive to this region in a cab chartered in Leicester. Their excursions usually lasted about

six weeks. His volume of lithographs, *Views of Ancient Buildings in the Town and County of Leicester*, consisting of twenty-five engravings, was published, as far as can be ascertained, in the year 1826 and contains some of his best-known work. In 1837 he was offered the post of drawing-master at the newly-built Proprietary School in New Walk, but this he declined, and it went instead to another artist, J. F. Lee.<sup>11</sup> Flower did teach drawing at Ratcliffe College and at a school at Ullesthorpe.

John Flower's work may be divided into three categories: his topographical pictures; his portraits; and what one might term his "bread-and-butter" pictures—hack-work of a rather dreary kind, consisting for the most part of copies of masterpieces, and pictures with titles like "Dog's Head", "Rabbit", and "Birds choosing a King". He did not paint many portraits—he was after all primarily a landscape artist—and the only one of interest to us now, apart from pictures of his own family, is his "Portrait of the late Reverend Robert Hall", mentioned by William Gardiner in *Music and Friends*. It was on display at an exhibition at the New Hall, Wellington Street, in 1840.<sup>12</sup> His output as a topographical artist was considerable, and although the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery possess a number of his pictures, these must represent but a small portion of his total output. Many of his pictures are in private hands, and this fact alone, apart from the number, makes it extremely difficult to compile anything like an exhaustive catalogue of his work.

He was highly thought of in his native town. William Gardiner referred to him as that "self-taught genius, Mr. John Flower, of Leicester", and described him as "an instance of what ardour, diligence and good sense can achieve, under circumstances by no means propitious". He went on to say that "his portrait of Mr. Hall and his drawings of King Richard's house and the picturesque scenery in this county, do credit to his genius, and will hand down his name to posterity".<sup>13</sup> "United with his accomplishments as an artist", said the obituary notice in the *Leicester Chronicle* on 7 December 1861, "there was a love of gothic architecture, and of antiquarian study, and a taste for collecting objects of vertu . . . His extensive reading had rendered him conversant with many topics of intellectual inquiry. In private life, Mr. Flower was ever amiable, hospitable and upright; and his natural refinement of character was always visible in his conversation and his pursuits. In his own circle he was esteemed and loved."

John Flower's topographical pictures have considerable charm, and some are delightful, but his real importance lies in the record he has left us of the appearance of Leicester and Leicestershire during the first half of the nineteenth century. He must take his place—and that an important one—with artists like G. M. Henton, John Fulleylove and Miss E. S. Paget, as a recorder of a vanished world.

## NOTES

1. On his gravestone and death certificate his age was given as sixty-six years. Hence his birth is usually placed in 1795. The baptismal entry shows that he was at least sixty-eight years old when he died in 1861.
2. H. Hartopp, *Register of the Freeman of Leicester*, vol. 2 (1933), 30, 338, 533. John Flower himself was not admitted to the Register of Freeman until 1846.
3. There seems to be doubt about the date. Thieme-Becker's *Kuenstlerlexikon* gives 1815; the obituary notice in the *Leicester Chronicle* 1816. He seems to have spent about a year in London, but was probably back in Leicester for the birth of his first child in November 1816.
4. Mary Linwood had known Mrs. de Wint before her marriage.
5. He was also, according to his grandson, known as "John Flower, the limner".
6. Thomas Uwins, R.A. (1782-1857). The Leicester Museum has a drawing by him of "St. Mary's Church and the Castle Mount, 1850".
7. Kirby, *Leaflets from my Life* (1887), 77.
8. The Leicester architect who rebuilt Countesthorpe church in 1842. Flower's house is still in good condition, and is used as offices.
9. Kempson was a Nottinghamshire man who came to Leicester at an early age. Taking up the manufacture of boots and shoes he prospered, becoming an alderman, justice of the peace and, twice, mayor of Leicester. His name may be seen on the memorial stone on the front of the Town Hall, a building begun during his first mayoralty.
10. *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, vol. 3 (1955), 234.
11. C. J. Billson, *Leicester Memoirs* (1924), 90.
12. This is the portrait now on loan to Leicester Museums for the Trustees of the Belvoir Street Chapel.
13. W. Gardiner, *Music and Friends* (1838), vol. 2, 748-9.

## APPENDIX ONE

*Views of Ancient Buildings in the Town and County of Leicester*, Drawn on stone by John Flower, printed Leicester, 1826. The copy in the Leicester Museum is inscribed "October 11th, 1850. Presented to the Leicester Museum by the Artist". Contents: (the order naturally varies in different copies. This list follows the order in the Museum copy).

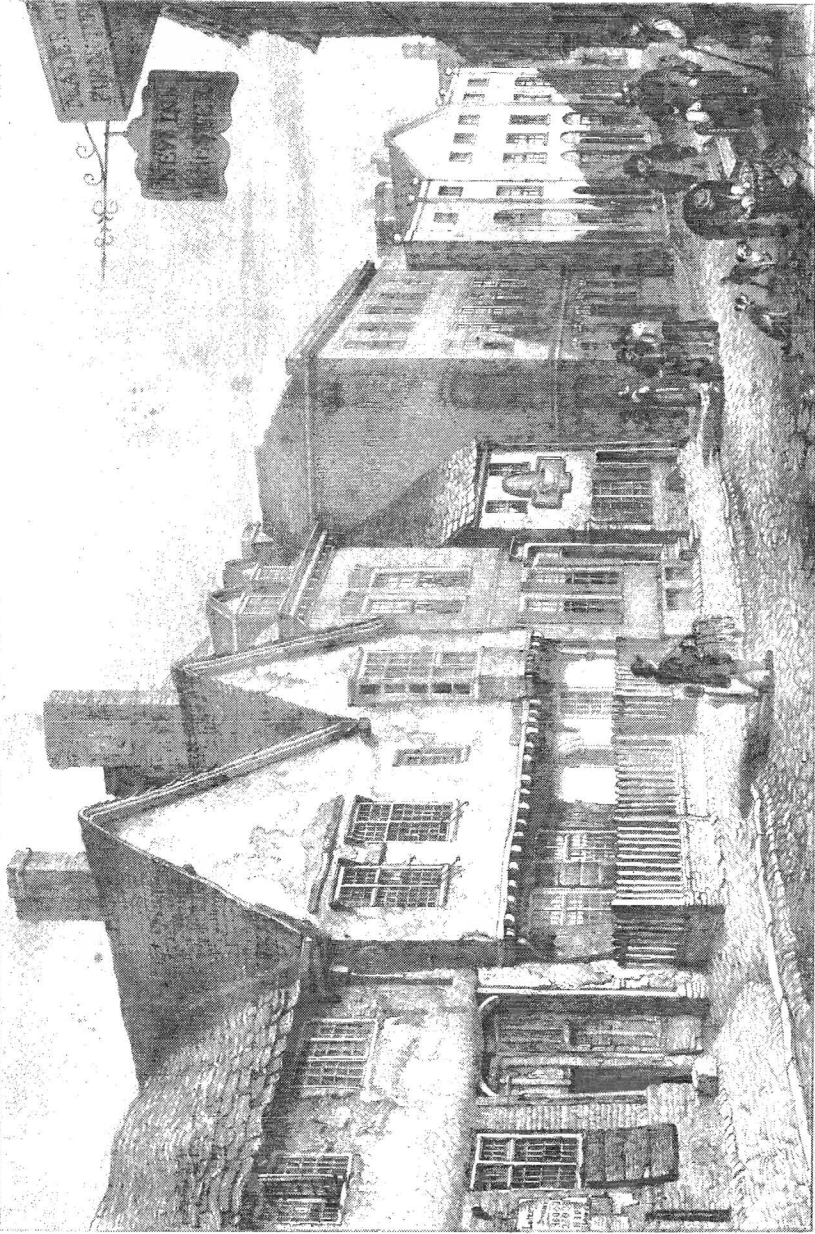
Title Page: Entrance to John of Gaunt's cellar under the Castle.  
 Old Blue Boar Inn (Plate V).  
 Gateway in the Newarks.  
 Turret gateway Entrance to the Newarks.  
 West Bridge, Leicester (Plate VI).  
 Old Buildings on the West Bridge, Leicester.  
 Entrance to Leicester from the West Bridge.  
 Mitre and Keys Inn, Leicester.  
 Shambles Lane (Plate VII).  
 Roman Remains called the Jewry Wall, and part of St. Nicholas Church.  
 Southgate St., Leicester with the Confrater's House (Plate IV).  
 Highcross Street, Leicester.  
 The Town Hall, Leicester.  
 Roman Mile Stone, Belgrave Gate.  
 Leicester Abbey in 1826.  
 An Old Hall at Belgrave.  
 An Old House at Thurcaston.  
 Remains of Groby Castle, Leicestershire.  
 Kirby Castle near Glenfield.  
 Ruins in Bradgate Park.  
 Ulverscroft Priory in Charnwood Forest, Leicestershire.  
 Gracedieu Nunnery.  
 Ashby-de-la-Zouch Castle. (two views).  
 Belvoir Castle.

## APPENDIX TWO

*A representative list of John Flower's topographical pictures.*

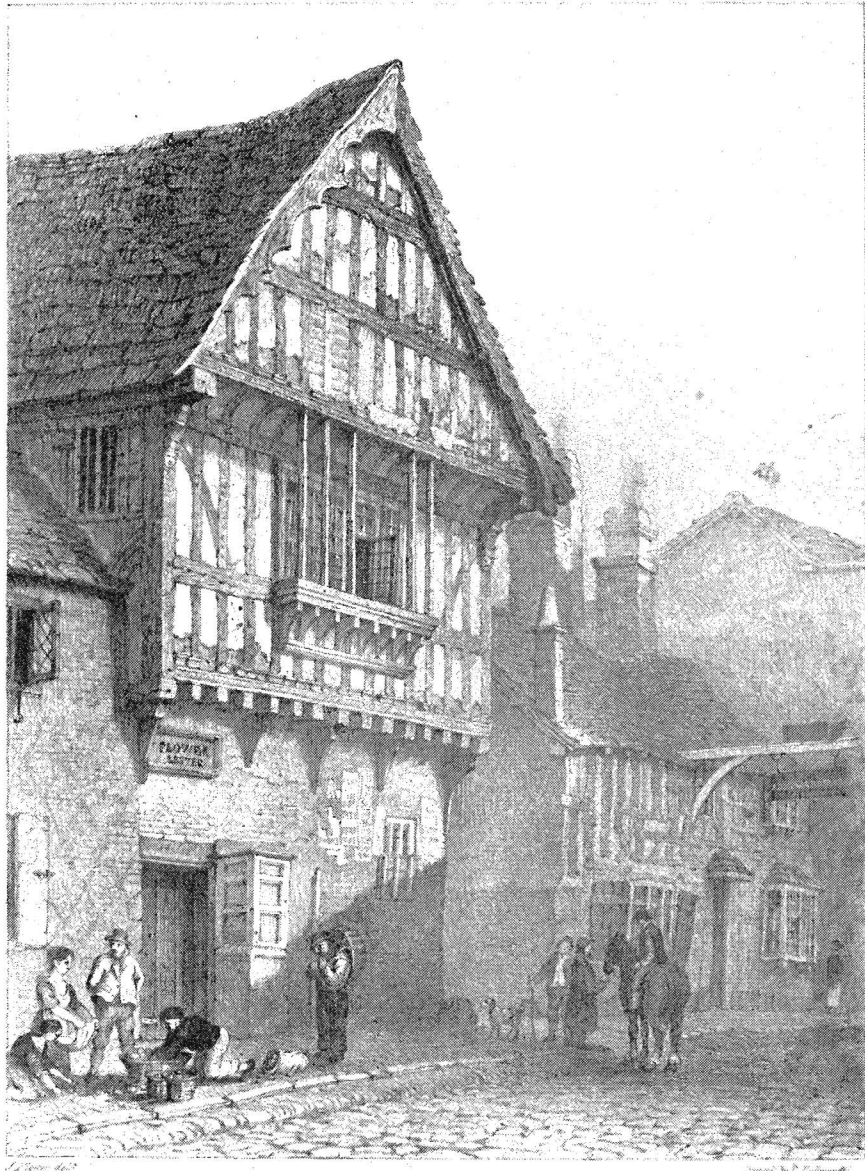
- Tudor farmhouse at Knighton. Drawing made 1835. Leicester City Libraries. (Reproduced in W. G. Hoskins, *Leicestershire*, 59).
- Yeoman's house at Glenfield. Drawing made 1835. Leicester City Libraries. (Reproduced in W. G. Hoskins, *Leicestershire*, 60).
- Porch, Nag's Head Inn, Leicester. Wash drawing. Leicester Museum and Art Gallery (abbrev. L.M.A.G.). (Reproduced in T. Fielding Johnson, *Glimpses of Ancient Leicester* (1891), 243).
- Sketch, Braunstone. Watercolour, showing thatched farm buildings. L.M.A.G.
- The Canal, Leicester. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Barrow Bridge, 2 May 1845. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- View of the Old Green Dragon Inn, Leicester Market Place, taken down 1850. Wash drawing. (Exhibited at Leicestershire Fine Arts Society Exhibition 1849). In the possession of executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.
- View in the yard of the Old Green Dragon Inn, Leicester Market Place, taken down in 1850. Wash drawing. (Exhibited at Leicestershire Fine Arts Society Exhibition 1849). In the possession of executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.
- All Saints' church, Leicester. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- All Saints' church before the alterations, c.1860-70. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- St. Mary's church and Leicester Castle from the river. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Old houses attached to St. Mary's church in the Castle Yard, Leicester. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Upper floor of the Blue Boar Inn. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Old well near Aylestone. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Aylestone Bridge. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- A Yeoman's house, Belgrave. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- The Parsonage house at Belgrave. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Billesdon Mill. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- St. Mary-de-Castro church. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- The old West Bridge. Wash drawing. In the possession of the executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.
- The Royal Oak. Wash drawing. In the possession of the executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.
- View of Leicester from the canal, showing St. Mary's and St. Martin's. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Danet's Hall from the Sand Pit Close. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Westcotes, near Leicester. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Church and cottages at Knighton. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- An old farmhouse at Shearsby, 27 July 1853. Watercolour drawing. L.M.A.G.
- At Belgrave. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Gateway of Kirby Muxloe Castle. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Bradgate Park, view from Old John. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Knighton church. Formerly in the possession of William Kempson (on display at the Museum, New Walk, in 1876). Present whereabouts not known.
- Kirby Muxloe church. (On display at Leicestershire Fine Arts Society Exhibition 1849). Present whereabouts not known.
- In the Newarke, Leicester: Mr. Henry Donisthorpe's house, Henry VII's time. Wash drawing. In the possession of executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.
- Trinity Hospital chapel. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- View of Leicester. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Groby. Wash drawing. L.M.A.G.
- Kirby Muxloe Castle, Leicestershire. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.
- Ruins, Bradgate, Leicestershire. Pencil and wash. L.M.A.G.
- An old house in Leicester Market Place. Drawing and wash. L.M.A.G.

PLATE IV



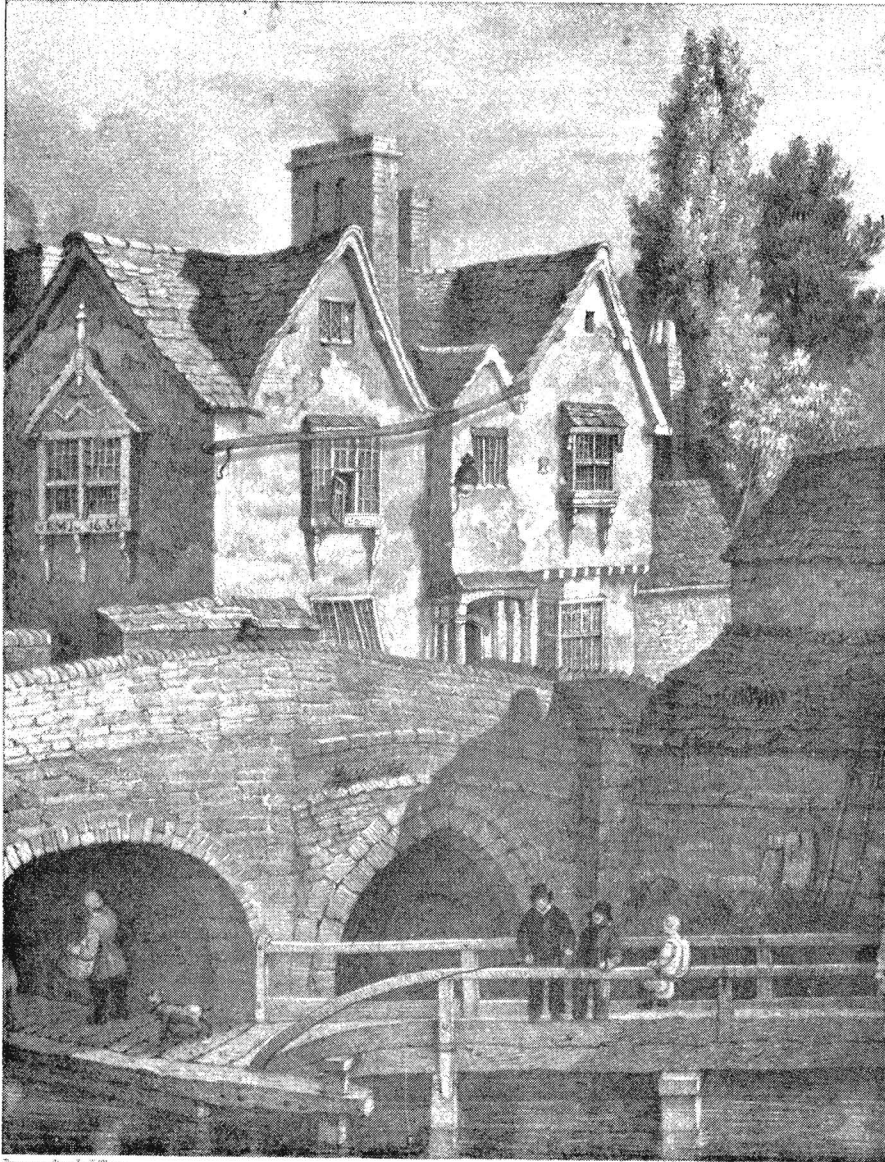
SOUTH SIDE, STREET, BUILT WITH THE CONCRETE HOUSE.

PLATE V



OLD BLUE BOAR INN, BRIGHTHELM.  
Where King Richard the 3<sup>rd</sup> slept on his way to Bosworth Field.

PLATE VI

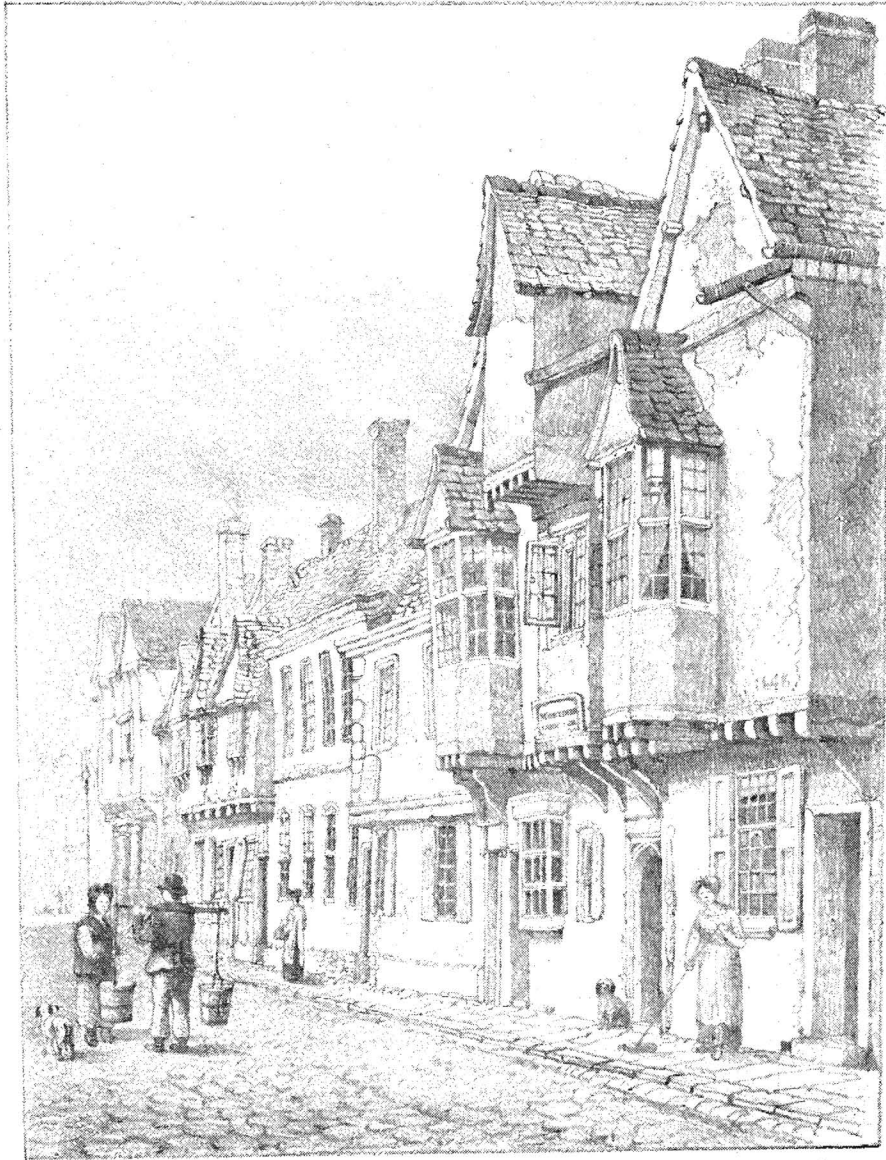


Drawn on Stone by J. H. Green

Printed by C. Miller, and Co.

OLD BUILDINGS ON THE WEST BRIDGE, LEICESTER.

PLATE VII



*L. Flower del.*

*Printed by Rowing & Fother.*

SHAMBLES LANE, LEICESTER.

- Leicester Abbey. Wash. L.M.A.G.  
 The Blue Boar Inn, Leicester. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.  
 Bradgate. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.  
 Ashby ruins. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 An ancient house at Kirby Muxloe. Sepia wash. L.M.A.G.  
 Cadeby Hall, taken down in 1828. Watercolour. L.M.A.G.  
 In the Newark, Leicester. Shows 16th-century gable, small, cobbled yard, water butts. Wash drawing. In the possession of executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.  
 Old houses in Bonners Yard, Oxford Street, about 1850; now pulled down. (a) shows external staircase leading to lofts. (b) shows the Yard itself with projecting, gabled gallery. Wash drawings. In the possession of executors of Mrs. J. Broughton, The Wilderness, Barkby Thorpe.  
 Cottages at Glenfield. (Exhibited at Leicestershire Fine Arts Society Exhibition 1849). Present whereabouts not known.  
 St. John's Stone, as it appeared in 1815. Drawing, formerly in the possession of William Kelly (reproduced in his *Royal Progresses and Visits to Leicester*, 17). Present whereabouts not known.  
 Gateway of the Newark. (*i.e.* The Turret Gateway, before its partial destruction in 1832). Drawing (reproduced in J. S. Hardy, *Literary Remains*, xxiii). Present whereabouts not known.  
 Aylestone village. Watercolour. Present whereabouts not known.  
 Swithland from the East. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 Saxby house and church. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 A tower, Bradgate. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 Groby Old Hall. L.M.A.G.  
 Aylestone—fields in the vicinity. Watercolour. Present whereabouts not known.  
 Aylestone packhorse bridge. Watercolour. Present whereabouts not known.  
 A tower, Kirby Muxloe Castle. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 Yeoman's house, Thurcaston. Pencil and brown wash. L.M.A.G.  
 Pencil study for Yeoman's house, Thurcaston. L.M.A.G.  
 Kitchen tower, Ashby. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 View over Lowesby Hall. Pencil drawing. L.M.A.G.  
 Groby Road with Leicester in the distance. Present whereabouts not known.  
 Grammar School at Market Bosworth. Lithograph. Present whereabouts not known.  
 Beaumont Leys. Pencil and watercolour. L.M.A.G.  
 Cossington church and rectory, 1842. Pencil drawing. In the possession of Mrs. F. E. Skillington.