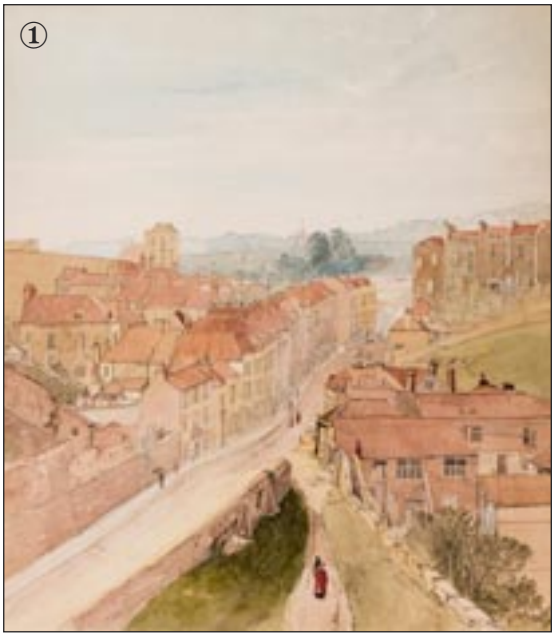
A new acquisition



▲ *James Johnson,* Lower Berkeley Place from Bellevue, Clifton, *c.1828, watercolour; purchased by Bristol Culture, funded by the Friends, 2020.*

The Friends have provided the funding for the museum to made a fascinating purchase. James Johnson's watercolour of about 1828, *Lower Berkeley Place from Bellevue, Clifton* (**1**) adds significantly to our knowledge of a previously unrecorded corner of Bristol. Bristol may already be the best visually documented city in the country, but collections should build upon their strengths and this acquisition does just that. It also adds to our understanding of a very fine and most important Bristol artist.

It is worth a little patience with the unravelling of the topography. In the distance is the green and open parkland of Tyndall's Park, today dominated by Bristol University. Just visible, immediately below and to the right of the large trees, is the brand new elevated road, later to be called Queen's Road. It was almost a viaduct running along the north side of a triangular nursery, which was soon to be developed and which we now know as The Triangle. Further to the right is the back of Upper Berkeley Place climbing Brandon Hill. Today, that terrace is immediately opposite the multi-storey car park, which was built on the remnants of the buildings depicted to the left of the road. From Ashmead's map of 1828, we know that there were some 80 small houses, here, built around dark courts. This dense 18th-century development backed onto the active Honeypen Hill quarry, which rose high above it. It was also bounded by the new Strangers' Burial Ground, whose entrance wall can be seen in the near foreground on the left.

This is an aspect of Clifton that is otherwise unrecorded. We are much more familiar with the merchants' mansions and the fine terraces. Here, rising above these houses and breaking the sky-line is the end-of-terrace house of Park Place, still incomplete in 1829. The road in the foreground (now Lower Clifton Hill) was still the main route up to the grand houses surrounding Clifton's original parish church at the top of the hill behind us. The church had been rebuilt in 1822 and was to be damaged and later demolished in World War II. Jacob's Wells Road, running down the hill, is actually out of sight. It is obscured by the houses on the right and was little more than a lane at this time. The future Queen's Road, glimpsed by the darker trees, connected only with Whiteladies Road and Gallows Acre Lane (later Pembroke Road), not just yet directly with Clifton.

Go to https://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp/?edition=
Click on and drag the modern map to find where Jacobs Wells Road joins Lower Berkeley place. Drag the central white square to the right to reveal the streets as they were in 1828.

Because this is such an unfamiliar view, Sue Thurlow (while taking her permitted exercise wearing suitable protective clothing and observing social distancing) took photograph (2) to give us a modern take on Johnson's painting.

The view is similar to Johnson's, although he seems to have had a higher vantage point - perhaps sitting at an upper floor window or even on the roof of a house – and maybe standing slightly to the right of Sue's position. The Y-shaped junction in the foreground is where Lower Clifton Hill (on the left) meets Bellevue Terrace (coming in from the right). When Johnson painted his view, Lower Clifton Hill was the main route to Clifton and the neat terrace of houses on Bellevue Terrace had not yet been built. Jacob's Wells Road is out of sight well below our viewpoint on the right, but we can visualise it running in front of QEH hidden behind the houses. Note the railings and gate of the Strangers' Burial Ground on the left just by the three parked cars. The stepped terrace of houses on Upper Berkeley Place so prominent in the painting can be seen in the photo peeping out from behind QEH.

James Johnson, Granby Hill, Bristol, *c.1828, watercolour; collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund*

There was another route, steeper still, up to Clifton by Granby Hill and James Johnson drew that too (**3**). The Yale Center for British Art's watercolour is similarly incidental and informal in the choice of view point. More important to me - that view point is almost from the doorstep of a house I used to live in. It is good to see the outline of Dundry broken only by the church tower, not also by four or five communication masts. More important to us all - the water meadows at the centre of the view still survive today. But beware, for one of our mayor's options for his Western Harbour development drives a dual carriageway across them. A knowledge of any location's visual history should not only enhance our pleasure in that place, it should also add to the care we take of it.

Both these watercolours are unfinished and neither is formally composed, unlike the *View across the Floating Harbour* (**4**) in the Art Gallery's Braikenridge Collection. Here, the foreground is carefully enlivened by the children in the rowing boat, a group that is lifted directly from W. H. Pyne's *Microcosm*. This was a series of picture-books of figure groups pursuing every possible trade and activity that was specifically published for the use of landscape artists. I suspect the foreground still-life of the anchor, ropes and the rather unlikely lobster pot may also come from the same source. Note also the activities on the far bank below the ship-building, the reflections in the river and especially the gilded prow bringing movement into the scene from the left. Johnson is consciously composing a picture, breaking up the strong horizontals of the scene and bringing life to the viewpoint, which is just to the left of M Shed. It is one of the masterpieces of the Braikenridge Collection. But perhaps it lacks the striking immediacy and freshness of the views from Granby Hill and Bellevue Place.

James Johnson was an outstanding architectural draughtsman and his group of interiors of St Mary Redcliffe executed in 1828 are of wonderful quality. His view of the *Interior of the North Porch* (**5**) confidently describes a most unusual sequence of very different spaces and the subtlest variations of

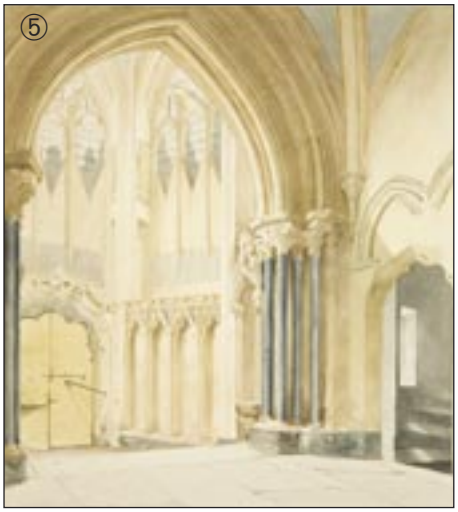
James Johnson, View across the Floating Harbour to Bristol Cathedral, *1823, watercolour; Braikenridge Collection*

light. There is an almost obsessive control of the architectural detail, notably the extraordinarily complex fluting of the Gothic arch. On the right, he deliberately includes the staircase up to the Muniment Room. These are the steps up which Thomas Chatterton would have climbed to look at the medieval manuscripts stored there. This year, it is 250 years since Chatterton's death, now believed to have been accidental and not the suicide, of which James Johnson would have been well aware. The controversy over the poet's forgeries was still raging in the 1820s.

There was a fragility to Johnson's genius. He was the son of a publican at Downend and he suffered intermittently from a severe mental illness. He was to die aged 31, after throwing himself from the window of an asylum in Bath. When his friend, Francis Danby, heard of his death, he wrote: 'Of all the young men I ever knew, he had the most honour, love and feeling'.

Johnson was strongly influenced by Francis Danby, even following him briefly and unsuccessfully to London. That influence is most clearly seen in Johnson's oils and best of all in his painting of *The Entrance to Nightingale Valley* (**6**). This small, delightful work has recently been privately offered for sale to the Museum and Art gallery. I very much hope that the Friends will support its acquisition, which has been inevitably delayed by the pandemic. It is a painting that underlines the social and artistic coherence of the Bristol School of Artists. Paintings, drawings and sketches of Leigh Woods and Nightingale Valley by Danby and Samuel Jackson and many other Bristol professionals and amateurs emphasise the enclosed, detached nature of the woods, which were often a springboard for imaginary landscapes. Johnson's large, ambitious and Romantic oil painting in the Tate Gallery, *The Tranquil Lake*, *Sunset seen through a Ruined Abbey*, takes its inspiration from the Avon Gorge and Leigh Woods. *The Entrance to Nightingale Valley*, however, is an emphatically contemporary scene. In the far distance, Bridge Valley Road, completed in 1822, can just be seen curling up the gorge to the treeless Downs. Beyond the ladies and their scattered sketchbooks, stool, and bonnet are the slack sails of a vessel resting on the mud at low tide. Today, you can carry the calming intimacy of this scene to the very same spot; just beware of the 'cycles on the towpath.

Francis Greenacre



▲ *James Johnson,* Interior of the North Porch of St Mary Redcliffe, *1828, watercolour; Braikenridge Collection*
© Bristol Culture

▼ *James Johnson,* The entrance to Nightingale Valley, *1825, oil;*
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