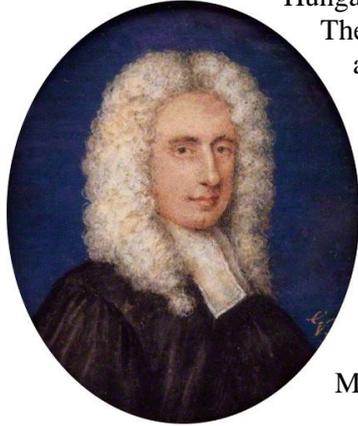


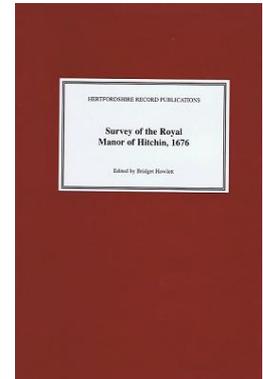
**WHAT WE WOULD HAVE SEEN.....if we had been able to visit the Spalding Gentlemen's Society on 24<sup>th</sup> June.**

In April we recorded that, by a historical quirk, Hitchin has a particularly strong role in the use and study of medicinal plants. This month we mark another local historical coincidence in that the town has surprisingly strong links with southern Lincolnshire. Prominent Hitchin individuals such as Shilcock, Hodgson and Johnson have family roots in this region. It is another of these links that would have taken us to the Spalding Gentlemen's Society (SGS) in June.

The Royal Manor of Hitchin was owned by the Crown before the Norman Conquest, although leased to successive holders, and the manorial court was for long the key element of local government in the town. In 1720 James Bogdani, a well known Hungarian-born artist, obtained the lease for his son William.



The Bogdanis appointed their kinsman, Maurice Johnson, as Steward of the Manor. Johnson was born and raised in Spalding, the key market town of the Lincolnshire Fens, and became a barrister specialising in drainage law. Johnson was remarkably active in the emerging 18<sup>th</sup> century spirit of intellectual enquiry; as such he became the key instigator in founding the SGS in 1710 which is the oldest provincial learned society in Britain and has the second oldest museum collection after the Ashmolean in Oxford.



**Survey of the Royal Manor of Hitchin 1676, (ed) B Howlett 2000 (HHS Collection)**

**Maurice Johnson, founder of the SGS (Wikimedia Commons)**

Maurice Johnson is today remembered here for a key contribution to Hitchin's local history through his investigation and preservation of the customs of the Manor by carefully recording 'Mr Draper's Survey' of 1676; he noted that 'the Tenants of this Mannor esteem and refer to & abide by this as an Unerring Authoritie'. In fulfilling his role as Steward we know that Johnson was a regular visitor to, and observer of, our town and the SGS still holds a selection of his relevant correspondence; interestingly, Hitchin's inhabitants were noted as often being a bit difficult (!).

Johnson also compiled a manuscript account entitled 'Law and History relating unto Hitchin Portman and Forreigne in the County of Hertford' which is part of the Hitchin Collection in our local museum.



**Ayscoughfee Hall, Johnson's home, now a museum (HHS Collection)**



**The present SGS building, built 1910 (HHS Collection)**

The SGS went from strength to strength: its membership came to include such luminaries as Sir Isaac Newton, Alexander Pope, Sir Joseph Banks and Lord Tennyson. As its membership grew so did its library, archive and museum collections which together add up to an amazingly diverse treasure trove across a wide range of subjects. Particularly important are key medieval and early modern manuscripts and significant 18<sup>th</sup> century material relevant to the study of the Enlightenment.

The SGS Librarian, Dr Dustin Frazier Wood, was due to talk to the HHS this May about Maurice Johnson and the SGS as a precursor to our planned visit in June. We hope very much to rearrange both Dustin's talk and the SGS visit for the Programme during 2021.