

SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM

NEWSLETTER NO.17

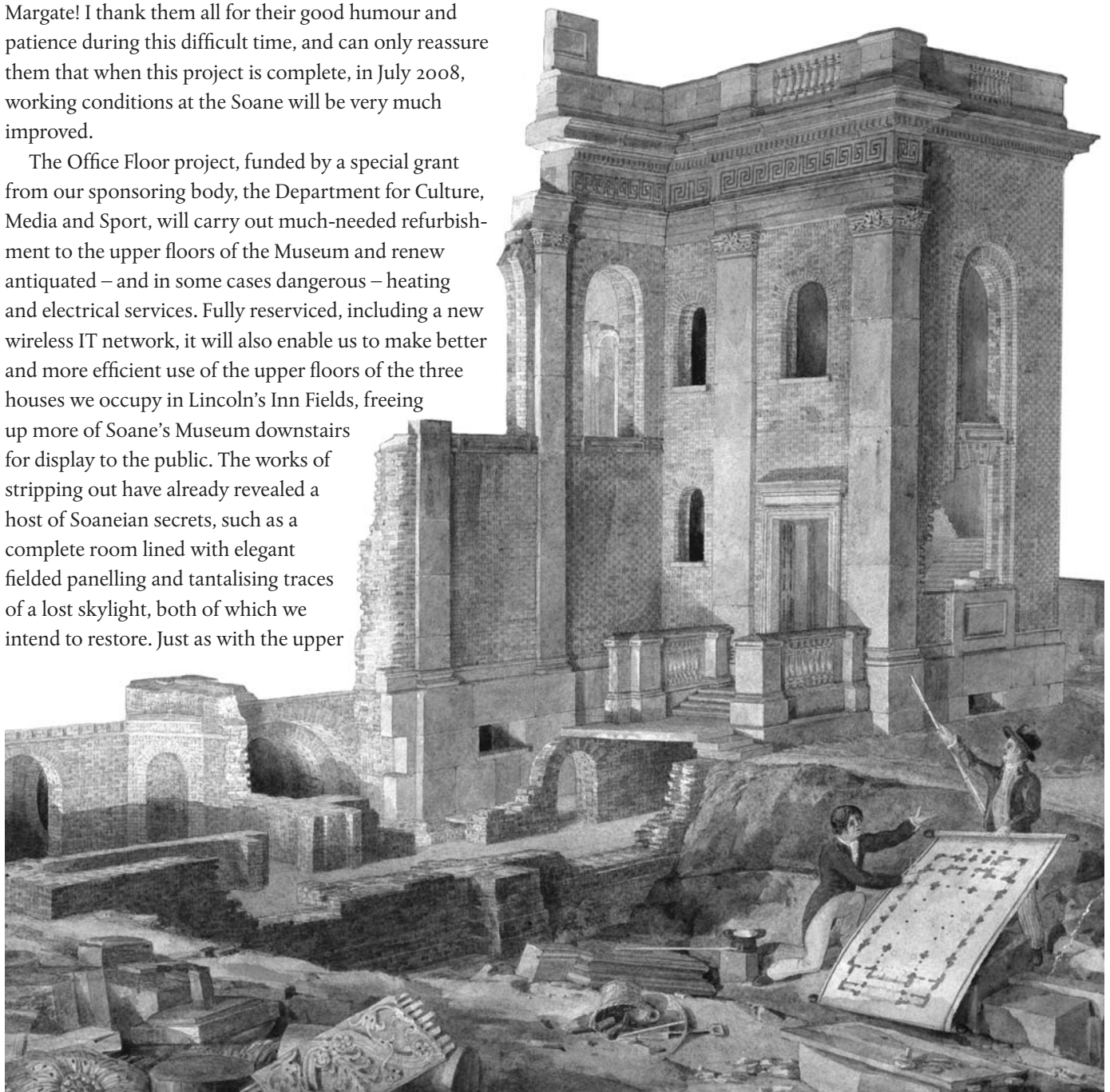
SPRING 2008

Letter from the Director

It is known that Mrs Soane used to tire of having builders constantly in the house carrying out John Soane's endless schemes for its improvement. Indeed, to escape the incessant noise and dirt, she used periodically to escape to Margate in Kent, then a fashionable seaside resort, accompanied by her pet terrier, Fanny, and sometimes Mrs Flaxman.

Nothing changes at the Soane and we still have the builders constantly about the house! This time the works are being carried out on the upper floors of Nos 12 and 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, converting what were the Academic and House Manager's flats into pleasant, well-equipped staff offices. This has meant a huge amount of disruption, with staff – and their furniture and files, not to mention the entire Soane Archive – being temporarily relocated all over the building. The temporary office conditions are far from ideal and at any moment I expect to receive a deputation of disgruntled staff demanding a holiday in Margate! I thank them all for their good humour and patience during this difficult time, and can only reassure them that when this project is complete, in July 2008, working conditions at the Soane will be very much improved.

The Office Floor project, funded by a special grant from our sponsoring body, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, will carry out much-needed refurbishment to the upper floors of the Museum and renew antiquated – and in some cases dangerous – heating and electrical services. Fully reserviced, including a new wireless IT network, it will also enable us to make better and more efficient use of the upper floors of the three houses we occupy in Lincoln's Inn Fields, freeing up more of Soane's Museum downstairs for display to the public. The works of stripping out have already revealed a host of Soaneian secrets, such as a complete room lined with elegant fielded panelling and tantalising traces of a lost skylight, both of which we intend to restore. Just as with the upper



Detail from a cutaway perspective of Soane's design for Holy Trinity, Marylebone, 1824, one of the drawings featured in the current exhibition, In Pursuit of Antiquity

floors of our new building at No. 14, the new offices will retain their distinctive historic atmosphere – so no fitted carpets, intrusive services and fittings permitted here!

Meanwhile, the final works are now being carried out in No. 14, such as the decoration of the staircase and the scrubbing and sealing of the floors. The Staircase is a particular revelation, painted to resemble sandstone – exactly the colour of arrowroot biscuits (actually surprisingly attractive), offset by the sharp green of the ironwork – while the mahogany balustrade, which snakes up from the ground to the 3rd floor, is an astonishing feat of veneering. After annoying delays, the joinery of the special fire-resistant fire doors, which connect No. 14 with the Museum on three different levels, finally arrived. They are being installed as I write. Moving in will begin in mid-April, with the Research Library reopening in May, followed by a series of small receptions and events for our supporters so that they can see the newly refurbished building in use.

May is also Museums and Galleries Month 2008, and the Museum will be celebrating with its traditional free trail. This year's theme 'Ideas and Innovation' has encouraged us to explore Soane's own use of new inventions and materials in his house-museum. From his pioneering (and temperamental) under-floor heating system, to his experiments with using plate glass and hollow bricks in the construction and decoration of his buildings, Soane was very much a man of his times and loved experimenting with what were then novel techniques and materials.

SARCOPHAGUS SPRING CLEAN

Later this spring, the Museum's great Sarcophagus will undergo a spring clean. The opportunity gently to clean and consolidate this mighty monolith of Egyptian alabaster comes because we need to carry out urgent repairs to the venerable glass case which protects it. Supplied in the 1860s, cracks have appeared in the old plate glass and the case itself lets in dust. Moreover, the old glass is greenish in colour and seriously distorts visibility of the amazing coffin it enshrines. The works to be carried in May 2008 will involve the opening of the case, which is immensely heavy and cumbersome – it rolls back on wheels in two sections. The old glass will be carefully removed and replaced with toughened, non-reflective, panes of clear white glass, reputted to eliminate the ingress of dust and dirt. The bottom of the case, currently open, will be sealed with a breathable membrane to deter dust getting in from below. Meanwhile, the Sarcophagus itself will be gently treated by conservators Tracy Sweek and Jane Bush, who will first carry out tests to see what method achieves the best and most sympathetic result. The Soane Museum has sought advice from the British Museum and Janet Ambers and Giovanni Verri of the Department

of Conservation, Science and Documentation there will take the opportunity to examine the coffin and analyse remaining traces of the blue-green composition inlay which is said to have once filled the incised hieroglyphs that cover its exterior and interior. Any remaining pigment will then be consolidated.

Once this is complete the Sarcophagus will be photographed and the case – which is almost a museum piece in its own right – will be put back. Only then can the challenge of improving the lighting of this Ozymandian mass of Nilotic antiquity be reviewed and embarked upon. This conservation project would not have been possible without the help of the Soane Supporters' Circle, whose valued support is crucial to the preservation of the Museum's collection and its interiors.

RODERICK SMITH

Roderick Smith, the Finance Director of Sir John Soane's Museum, has announced that he will retire at the end of this financial year.

Roderick joined the Soane Museum in 1997, succeeding the first full-time Finance Officer, Ian Batten (who came to the Museum for two years on special secondment from the Department of Trade and Industry). Previous to coming to the Museum Roderick had worked for more than twenty-five years with the Inland Revenue, and, more recently, for five years with the Treasury Solicitor. If it is hard today to imagine the Museum without a dedicated senior member of staff to manage the finances, it is testament to Roderick's hard work and tremendous dedication keeping the finances of the Soane Museum in order. Roderick's tact, eye for detail, and 'can do' attitude has certainly made working with him a great pleasure.

Roderick is a much loved and key member of the Soane Museum team and his absence will be keenly felt. I know all of us – staff, Trustees and Society Directors – will join with me to wish him every success with his plans for the future.

The new Finance Director of the Soane Museum is Clive McCulloch, whose career includes working for the Royal Brompton and Harefield, and the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital charities, so he has a good understanding and experience of organizing the financial affairs of charitable institutions. We look forward to welcoming Clive to the Soane in early April.

TIM KNOX
Director
March 2008

Exhibition News

The past three months have been a very exciting and stimulating introduction to the Soane. The major event for me was the 'In Pursuit of Antiquity' opening – my first at the Museum since taking the reins from Will Palin at the start of November last year.

Working with Jeremy Musson, the Guest Curator, has proved a great pleasure. I am sure you will agree that the drawings he has chosen, some familiar to us, some perhaps less so, are amongst the real gems of the Museum's collection. Objects of great beauty, that amply demonstrate the draughtsman's skill and sure eye, as much as they illuminate the impact of antiquity upon our Northern shores. I hope our visitors have as much pleasure looking at the works as we gained from planning the show!

However, the Soane has been engaged on other projects at the same time. 'Vaulting Ambition', proved to be a very successful show and received extremely favourable press

coverage including *Time Out*, being named second in their top five London exhibitions after the First Emperor! I am happy to report that, following its closure here, arrangements for its tour to Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery from 19 April to 24 May are in their final stages. In addition to the material shown at the Soane, some extra exhibits from the Adam drawings have been selected to illustrate the development of spa-town architecture in the West Country. The success of 'Vaulting Ambition' follows on from 'Amateur Architects', which opened at Fairfax House, York on 1 March where it will be on display until June. We hope that these touring exhibitions will allow us to develop long-term relationships with institutions outside London and will bring the Museum's rich holdings to a much wider audience – such an important element of the Museum's role as an 'academy' for the study of architecture and its history.

Looking ahead towards the summer months, and coinciding with the London Architecture Festival, we have been working closely with the London and Berlin offices of Stirling Prize winner David Chipperfield Architects in order to bring about an exhibition devoted to his restoration of the Neues Museum in Berlin.

Built in 1841/43–1859 by Friedrich August Stüler, the Museum was severely damaged during the Second World War and is only now undergoing restoration and partial reconstruction. This is a truly ground-breaking project in the ethos that has been adopted by David in order to deal with the sensitive historical importance of the site and the need to create functional gallery interiors for a twenty-first century museum. David considers it to be his most important undertaking.

The exhibition will explore both the technical aspect of the renovation work but also this philosophical element. It will also be innovative as this is the first time that a British national museum has devoted an exhibition to his work. It is more than fitting that this important British architect's work is shown at Sir John Soane's Museum, the home of an architect who, with his work at Dulwich Picture Gallery, 'invented' the form of the Modern Museum that we know today.

DR JERZY J KIERKUC-BIELINSKI
Exhibitions Curator



Model for the reconstruction of the stairhall, Neues Museum, Berlin

Education at the Soane

The launch of the Soane Young Architects Club has been very successful. Its 16 enthusiastic members, aged seven to thirteen, are exploring the simplest structures through games, challenges and model-making and they will be revealing the results of their research on the first Saturday in July at an event for family and friends.

We have continued to run our free monthly drop-in sessions on the third Saturday of the month. These give Museum visitors of all ages the chance to explore an aspect of the collections in more detail. For example, in February more than one hundred visitors plotted the finer details of 'A Rake's Progress' in the Old Kitchen.

Soane's 'Academy for Architecture' came to life in November when 17 London sixth-form students took part in a Portfolio Day designed to help them apply for architecture courses. After an introduction to Soane, they sketched in the Museum, explored a professional portfolio with the Museum's architect, Lyall Thow of Julian Harrap Architects, and quizzed a group of visiting architecture students from Strathclyde University over tea. Both sixth-formers and teachers responded so enthusiastically that the next Portfolio Day is being planned for October 2008.

Two five-day workshops, funded by the MLA's 'Skills for Life' Innovations Fund, were run in November and January for adults from the community of St John's, Bethnal Green. The project was titled 'Soane on the Central Line' and participants visited Sir John Soane's Museum, St John's Parish Church, Bethnal Green, and Soane's country home, Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing. Over the five days, participants made hand-bound sketchbooks, marbled paper, sketched Soane's designs and displays, created maps and improved their digital photography skills. The comments from the

participants at the end of the workshops were very positive and confirmed our confidence in the value of running such courses: 'The tutors were so very encouraging and helpful . . . I am so very pleased to be allowed greater access and to gain a deeper understanding of Soane's work.' 'Excellent course – well organised and led. I would certainly recommend it to others and attend again if possible.' 'Educational and fun in equal measure!'

Generous funding from the MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council) also allowed the Museum to purchase materials and equipment that can be used for future workshops.

Our day-long adult art workshops have continued to grow in popularity and the new programme is being designed for April–July. Leaflets about these workshops will soon be available (please email bkingston@soane.org.uk to be added to our mailing list for these). Details will also be listed on the Soane website.

On 21 April, the Soane Museum is joining forces with the Wallace Collection to hold a Study Day on the Art of Collecting and Display, at which Helen Dorey will be speaking. For more information or to book, please call Hayley Kruger at the Wallace Collection on 020 7563 9551.

Additional team members are currently being trained to deliver the schools programme in anticipation of completion of the new education facilities in No.14. Fundraising continues for equipment and resources to make it a 'Centre of Excellence' for budding architects and artists of all ages.

BETHANY KINGSTON

Education Manager

JANEY MONAHAN

Schools and Families Education Officer



From left: Portfolio Day – Lyall Thow reveals what architects actually do; Young Architects Club – building a primitive hut; Young Architects Club – learning about 'Architecture'.

Curatorial/Conservation News

THE CATALOGUE OF FURNITURE – SOME INTRIGUING DISCOVERIES

In the course of working on the catalogue of the furniture in the Museum, to be published in the *Journal of the Furniture History Society* in memory of Peter Thornton, many discoveries are being made. In particular, the process of drawing up the detailed catalogue descriptions is enabling many items listed in the 'Fittings and Fixtures' Inventory prepared at the end of Soane's life to be identified for the first time. This tells us where the pieces were displayed at the time of Soane's death – an essential tool in ensuring that they are occupying the correct positions today (after nearly two hundred years of being moved around!).

As a result we will be able to make many improvements to the presentation of the furniture over the next two to three years. In particular, we are discovering that we do, in fact, have much of the upstairs furniture (it has often been assumed that most of it was disposed of after Soane's death), which makes the prospect of restoring the second floor 'private apartments' even more alluring.

One particularly pleasing discovery was that the curious table shown in Figure 1 is the single piece of furniture which was displayed in Soane's intriguing second floor 'Oratory'. This was a small and narrow space with three elaborate stained glass windows, hung with more than twenty small-



Fig. 2

scale engravings, many of religious subjects. Most of these are in frames of the 1790s and may well have been items chosen by Mrs Soane – whose own 'Morning Room' we know contained many similar subjects. In Soane's day, the table served as a display stand for a vase (Figure 2) which, although



Fig. 1

slightly unprepossessing, is one of the real hidden treasures of the Museum. It seems to be of bisque or unglazed ceramic; of the type which was sold, undecorated, from the Wedgwood factory for amateurs to decorate as a pastime. This one was almost certainly decorated with its dried flowers by Eliza Soane. Soane's Oratory was perhaps, at least in part, a shrine to his beloved wife. The vase would have been displayed directly beneath a large stained glass image of a hermit (Figure 3) – with all its resonances with Soane's own vision of himself as the solitary hermit of the Monk's Parlour, 'Padre Giovanni', and his references to Lincoln's Inn Fields as his solitary 'cell' after the death of his wife.



Fig. 3

A FURTHER DISCOVERY

In trying to marry up the entries in the Fittings and Fixtures Inventory with the furniture in the Library and Dining Room on the ground floor I came across an intriguing entry for '2 Small Circular Convex Mirrors 8" diameter hung to wall' and, in the draft copy of the Inventory, the additional note that these were 'in spandrels of arches'. Annotations showed that these had been removed soon after Soane's death. I recalled having seen some small circular frames in the drawers in the Upper Drawing Office which I thought must once have contained convex mirrors and sure enough, these are of the right dimensions (Figure 4).



Fig. 4

Examination of the engraved view of the Library and Dining Room published in the 1835 *Description* (Figure 5) shows two of these mirrors hanging, just as described, in the spandrels of the arches across the centre of the room. We intend to restore the two frames, fit them with two convex mirrors, and replace them in these positions – restoring this

missing element in Soane's 'effects' in these splendid rooms. Sadly, we have no record of where the third mirror hung.

HELEN DOREY
Deputy Director



Fig. 5

Library News

One of the jewels in the crown of Soane's library is, of course, his copy of the legendary Shakespeare First Folio of 1623, bought on Soane's behalf by his friend John Britton at James Boswell the younger's sale at Sotheby's in 1825, with its distinguished provenance from the celebrated actor John Philip Kemble.

Last October the fascination of this first collected edition of the Bard's plays took second place for once to its binding, when five descendants of the nineteenth-century bookbinder John Mackinlay (1745–1821), accompanied by two spouses, converged on London from three continents to view their ancestor's handiwork.

It is an especially fine binding in olive green morocco with gilt and blind-stamped panels and an architectural fan ornament in gilt in each corner of the covers. Our visitors drew our attention to Mackinlay's signature motif of a thistle, blind-stamped on the grey paper pastedown of the inside covers.

Cathy Murray, who arranged the party's visit to the Soane Museum, writes: 'On behalf of our group, three 4th-great-grandchildren and two 5th-great-grandchildren of the crusty old bookbinder, plus two spouses, I would like to thank the staff of Sir John Soane's Museum for making it possible for us to view the First Folio and the details of the

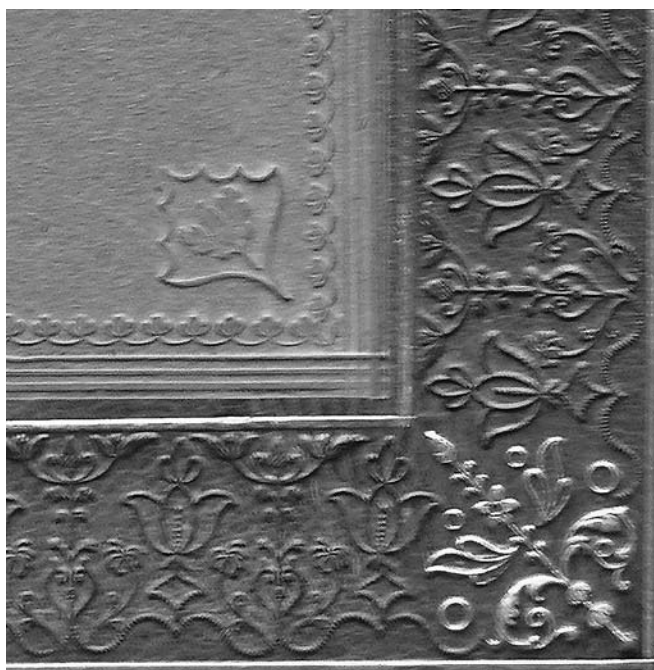


*John Mackinlay's signature on his marriage licence
City of London, Guildhall Library, Manuscripts Section*

binding. Seeing the book was a way of reaching back into the past of our family – a wonderful experience. I do especially want to thank you for making allowance for the fact that we were more interested in the binding than in the First Folio, the real treasure in your collection. May I add too my appreciation for your online catalogue which led us to your Museum.'

Work on publishing the catalogue of Soane's books continues, with nearly a thousand bibliographic records available online at the time of writing. Discoveries are still being made, such as the presence in Soane's library of two books from the library of the Bath architect and town planner John Wood. The growing number of records can be explored on the Museum's website at <http://www.soane.org.uk/library/>.

STEPHANIE COANE
Librarian



Detail of the Mackinlay binding of Soane's First Folio Shakespeare

Development Update

OPENING UP THE SOANE – AN APPEAL TO RAISE £6M

We reported in the last *Newsletter* that the Museum was preparing a major application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in support of its new project, Opening up the Soane. This Stage 1 application has involved a considerable amount of extra work for all staff at the Museum, assisted by outside experts who have written specialist reports. The resulting application supports our bid to the HLF for £3M – approximately 50% of the total costs of £6M.

The application is now safely lodged with the HLF and we hope to have news of their decision by September. A successful outcome would mean the Museum is then invited to prepare a Stage 2 Application, which would need to be ready early in 2009. If our application is turned down, the Museum would have to set about raising all the required £6M funds from private sources (Trusts and Foundations etc.) and the project would probably take a good deal longer to complete.

Opening up the Soane has several goals. We want to:

- increase public access to unseen parts of the house and collections
- improve visitor circulation and facilities
- create better access for people with disabilities
- increase the potential for income generation
- improve the long term care of the Museum's building and collections.

We are confident that the application which has been submitted is the strongest possible we could have made and we hope that our plans will find support amongst the Trustees of the HLF.

In the meantime, we are planning our fundraising appeal in order to find the matching funds of £3M that will be required. We have prepared some fully illustrated Appeal literature which gives full details of the project: timescale, costs etc. We would be happy to share this information with any of you who would like to know more about Opening up the Soane.

In particular, we would like to hear from any of you who have contacts within charitable trusts and foundations, City livery companies, corporate charities or perhaps you know of individuals who might be interested in helping the Museum through their own contacts. Not all of us are in a position to help but we often know individuals who can.

Please look out for further Opening up the Soane information in forthcoming editions of the *Newsletter*. If you would like further information, please contact:

Mike Nicholson, Development Director (020 7440 4241, mnicholson@soane.org.uk).

MIKE NICHOLSON
Development Director



*The Morning Room, one of the many new rooms that will be restored and opened to the public as part of the Opening up the Soane appeal. This room, illustrated here in the *Graphic Magazine* 1884, is currently used as an office on the second floor of No.13*