To me, the most precious thing about Sir John Soane’s Museum is that it is kept almost exactly as Sir John Soane left it. As such, it is a miraculous and unique survival – the intact house and collections of a great architect of the Regency era. One can almost see inside the mind of the great man by contemplating his unique domestic and decorative arrangements, maintained just as they were on his death in January 1837.

Soane himself ensured the survival of his displays by specifically stating, in the 1833 Act of Parliament with which he founded the Museum that ‘The Trustees and their successors shall not (except in Case of absolute Necessity) suffer the arrangement in which the said Museum . . . shall be left . . . to be altered.’ Over the last one hundred and eighty years of course there have been occasions when Soane’s sacrosanct arrangements have been interfered with. Pictures were rehung so as to put them in better light, and Soane’s arrangements on the upper floors were dismantled to provide staff accommodation and a research library. There was also a great deal of well-meaning tidying up – Soane’s Library was reshelved to separate the architectural books from the general volumes, stained glass was arranged in chronological order, and corridors were cleared of casts and marble fragments so as to make more room for be-crinolined Victorian lady visitors.
Perhaps the worst offender was my predecessor, James Wild, Curator between 1878 and 1892. An energetic architect, Wild instigated all sorts of well-meaning interventions – new skylights, glass and cast-iron floors – as well as erecting the New Picture Room, the first stage of an ambitious proposal to rebuild the entire back of the Museum as a series of sensible purpose-built galleries for the display of Soane’s collection. Luckily, Wild died before he could carry out his horrible scheme and it was abandoned.

Since the Second World War, Curators have reversed many of the changes. Sir John Summerson put back all the stained glass in the old order, while Peter Thornton reinstated many of Soane’s original textiles and colours, notably in the first-floor Drawing Rooms, which caused an uproar at the time (the then Chairman of the Trustees, the Duke of Grafton, exclaiming, when confronted with the sulphurous yellow room, ‘It looks like Trust House Forte!’). Margaret Richardson concentrated on the Crypt and Courtyards, resurrecting Soane’s preposterous totem pole of architectural salvage, the Pasticcio in the Monument Court, which had been dismantled in 1896. Thanks to their hard work and careful researches, the Museum is almost as it should be – but not quite. There are still a few areas that require careful restoration and reinstatement so as to recapture their lost Soaneian glory.

Such restorations are not to be entered into lightly. Research has to be carried out and it is vital to consider the structural and practical consequences of any change. Luckily, we have in-house two expert sleuths in the form of Helen Dorey, Deputy Director, and Sue Palmer, Archivist, who can find out almost anything in Soane’s voluminous archive. Our sagacious architect, Julian Harrap, advises on practical matters relating to the building. But the Museum has to be kept open to the public and this means that we can only carry out works in small, carefully planned, stages. In fact, changes are carried out so gradually that our visitors hardly notice them – which is probably just as it should be. Another challenge is money – these interventions are often expensive to carry out. If you are interested in supporting the Museum’s restoration projects, contact Mike Nicholson in the Soane Development Office on 020 7440 4241 or mnicholson@soane.org.uk who can tell you all about our plans and how you can help us.

So, over the last two years, busts and sculptures have begun creeping back to their old places – especially in the Crypt and the Museum Corridor, modern labels have been removed and lights taken away or replaced with more appropriate, historic, fittings. Stern Do Not Sit Down Here notices and fishing wire have disappeared from chairs all over the Museum, being replaced by a far more persuasive deterrent, a prickly teasel. (we get more comments about these than anything else in the Museum!). Occasionally people complain that the Museum is too dark or ask for more labelling, but they usually understand when we explain why the Museum is shown in this way and begin to enjoy the contrasts between light and shade, and hopefully look more carefully at the building and collections.

Of course we are committed to explaining the Museum; we have just updated our guidebook, A New Description, and our famous Warders are now better informed than ever. Elsewhere in this Newsletter you can read about our new podcast tours, which enable you to take a personal guided audio tour via your iPod or MP3 player. More interpretation and information is planned, but it has to be discreet, stylish and to the point, and must not compete with the unique atmosphere of Soane’s house-museum.

Two current reinstatement projects deserve a mention. Veteran visitors to the Soane Museum will remember the West Chamber, a dingy annexe to the Crypt with displays of cork models, casts and the fragments of the lid of the Sarcophagus. A later addition to the Museum (by James Wild!), it had nothing to do with Soane and all the objects in it will gradually be displayed in their original settings elsewhere in the Museum. Conservators Jane Bush and Kate Edmondson are currently planning its conversion as a properly equipped conservation storeroom for the Museum, so that artefacts in drawers and storerooms all over the building can be brought together and stored in accessible and optimum conditions. During this process many long unseen objects will be put back on display and we are particularly excited by the possibility of reinstating Soane’s original arrangements on the west wall by the Sarcophagus – a colossal bronze bust of Jupiter (or is he Pluto, King of the Underworld?), flanked by Roman candelabra and other fragments. The only item we are missing is a cast of the Head of Nephis (see feature in this Newsletter) and we hope to track that down soon.

Visitors who look up the Staircase beyond the famous rope of bells on the first floor of the Museum will see, on the window sill, a foretaste of the strange objects and arrangements with which Soane surrounded himself in his private apartments on the second floor. A curious plaster cast, long in store, of an ancient Roman sculpture in the Vatican, depicting a Heron devouring a Snake, has been happily reunited with its original wooden stand. Beneath its original arrangements on the west wall by the Sarcophagus – a colossal bronze bust of Jupiter (or is he Pluto, King of the Underworld?), flanked by Roman candelabra and other fragments. The only item we are missing is a cast of the Head of Nephis (see feature in this Newsletter) and we hope to track that down soon.

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Visitato...
Works to prepare No.14 Lincoln's Inn Fields for its opening in December 2007 continue apace. The successful testing of the fire and security alarms at last enabled our builders to make the three breakthroughs that will connect No.14 with the Museum – one giving access via the Monk's Yard to the basement, and two off the landings on the 2nd and 3rd floors. These will connect the Research Library with the rest of the Museum, and provide access to and from staff offices. The works had to be carried out carefully, not only to minimise the amount of disturbance, noise and dust, but also to safeguard the structural strength of the cantilevered staircase. Specially designed jib doors will ensure the openings are as unobtrusive as possible.

The lower floors of No.14 are now in the hands of our decorators – Dean and Tony – who at the time of writing are preparing the joinery in the front ground-floor room for the paint specialists, Joy Huning and Saskia Paterson, to begin their work of graining. The graining in the Pompeian red Seminar Room will resemble golden oak, while the main Research Library upstairs (painted a vaguely medicinal shell pink) will have skirtings in faux walnut. All the colours have been established by paint analysis carried out by Dr Ian Bristow. Specialists from Taylor Pearce Ltd have cleaned and repaired the marble chimney-pieces and hearths, notably a series of charming simple stone and wood surrounds on the upper floors. Perhaps their most dramatic discovery was in the Director's Office, where a dramatically veined black marble chimney-piece was uncovered from beneath layers of paint. There are, inevitably, a host of additional works to be done, from changing electrical sockets to cleaning and waxing the floorboards. Carpets are being purchased and negotiations are in train for the acquisition of a pair of chandeliers for the grand first-floor rooms. All these things take time – and money – but we hope most of the important works will be complete in time for our openings in early December. I say openings because we will have to hold several, due to the fact that, although large, there are limits to the capacity of No.14 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Tim Knox

No.14 Lincoln’s Inn Fields – A Progress Report

Where is Nepthis?

In the Letter from the Director, mention is made of how we are trying to track down the so-called Head of Nepthis, an impressive Egyptian red granite head that once formed part of the collection of the Regency connoisseur and man of letters Samuel Rogers (1763–1855). It was sold for £6 4s 1d at Rogers’ sale in London in 1856, where it is described as lot 79: ‘A COLOSSAL HEAD OF NEPTHIS, in red granite, inscribed with many hieroglyphics. It formed part of the lid of a sarcophagus, and was found in the Thebiad, and brought to Rome by Mr Basseggio. On the back is a line of hieroglyphics in honour of the goddess Nepthis. It is mounted on a massive square pedestal of black marble. 4 ft. 11 in. high.’

Sir John Soane knew Rogers and somehow obtained a cast of his famous Egyptian head, which he displayed in a place of honour at the western end of the Crypt, overlooking the famous Sarcophagus of Seti I. It can be seen in old engraved views of the Sepulchral Chamber, but, right at the end of Soane’s life, he moved it to the northern wall, between two obelisks. Soane’s cast no longer exists, sadly it was moved outside at some point and – being plaster of Paris – fell to pieces by the 1960s. In order to recreate Soane’s arrangements in the Crypt, we need to obtain another cast of the head – which is why we are trying to locate the original.

Samuel Rogers’ treasures are now scattered all over the world, but so far enquiries with the British Museum and other important Egyptian collections here and in Europe have proved fruitless. Can you help us – does anyone know where this once famous Egyptian relic is now?

Tim Knox

View of the Belzoni Sarcophagus, plate XXII from Soane’s 1835 Description of his Museum, in which the Head of Nepthis can be seen to the left of the Sarcophagus
Soane’s ‘squeezes’!

As part of the Museum’s preparatory work towards the launch of the online catalogue of Soane’s collection of antiquities next March, the Museum has been translating some of the Latin inscriptions found on Soane’s collection of Roman cinerary urns and vases dating from the 1st or 2nd century AD.

However, in order to translate these ancient inscriptions correctly, an impression of each one must first be made using a process referred to as, ‘making a squeeze’. We know the
term ‘squeeze’ was used by Soane’s assistants in the 1820s to describe the moulds taken in Westminster Abbey for the making of casts of medieval ornament that now hang in the Monk’s Parlour. Today, the term is still used to describe the method employed by epigraphers to produce an accurate copy of an inscription for further study.

The process involves moistening the filter paper and the stone inscription itself with distilled water, and placing the paper over the inscription. A densely-packed natural fibre brush is then used to press the paper into the inscription using a method not unlike the movement that a drummer makes with the drumstick: a short tap, allowing the brush to come straight back up again, so that the paper is pressed successfully into the indentations without the brush making more contact with the wet paper than is necessary. Once the air bubbles are dispersed and the squeeze-maker is happy that the most accurate possible impression has been taken, the squeeze is left to dry, and can then be removed from the stone.

Epigraphers making squeezes both in the field and in museums are often asked why they are taking these impressions. There are two main reasons why a squeeze might be made: firstly, inscriptions frequently contain one or two letters that are disputable, and a squeeze can often help to confirm the presence of parts of the letter that cannot be seen on the stone. Those who study letter-forms, for instance, are much better able to do so using squeezes, as they are able to see every contour of the letter, and can make readings and measurements using the reverse of the squeeze (which is in fact the side that epigraphers usually read to make the most accurate transcription of the text — we have to get used to reading backwards!). Secondly, squeezes can be used to take copies of stones that are threatened in some way, either by weathering or more imminent damage. Paper squeezes are surprisingly durable: many of those taken in the nineteenth century still survive in good condition, allowing the texts to be read of stones that no longer exist.

Making squeezes of the Museum’s collection of inscribed cinerary urns has allowed more accurate readings of the inscriptions to be made: for instance, one of the urns that appears to commemorate an infant is in fact the memorial of an individual aged fifty: whilst only the upright I can be read on the stone, the squeeze shows clearly that there is a horizontal cut extending from the base of the upright, thus forming an L. Other squeezes also show very clearly the guidelines drawn by the letter-cutter when he was preparing the surface of the stone to receive an inscription. The squeezes made of Soane’s collection are now stored at the Museum, and as well as assisting the process of making new readings and translations for the catalogue, they can be used for study by scholars in the future.

Dr Charlotte Tupman

Dr Charlotte Tupman is a scholar of epigraphy (the study of inscriptions). Her particular interests include the funerary practices of the Greek and Roman world and the archaeology and epigraphy of Roman Spain and Portugal. She is currently undertaking postdoctoral research at King’s College London on the Inscriptions of Roman Cyrenaica project.

Library and Archive News

From next Spring the Research Library, currently occupying the increasingly cramped Front Drawing Room in No.12 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, will be housed on two floors in the newly-restored No.14 Lincoln’s Inn Fields – the first floor with its magnificent Soane starfish-vault ceiling, and the second floor with the splendid cabinets specially designed by Senior and Carmichael to house Soane’s large collection of drawings by the Adam brothers.

We will be able to accommodate more readers per day in these enhanced facilities, and for the first time will be able to run teaching sessions in parallel with opening the Library to other researchers, all of which will result in a more flexible booking system for appointments and, we hope, happy readers.

However, to achieve this we have to close the Research Library for a period of several months. This is not just for the physical move itself but for the preparation needed to ensure that the move of the books and drawings goes smoothly. Some of the drawings need to be rehoused in new folders and some of the more vulnerable books boxed. The antique bookcases and drawings cabinets need to be thoroughly overhauled, and in some cases taken apart by a specialist conservation firm before the move next door, and all this has to be done in situ.

The Research Library will therefore be closed from Monday 5 November 2007, reopening on Tuesday 6 May 2008. We will continue to answer postal and email enquiries during the whole of this period: The Library, Sir John Soane’s Museum, 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London WC2A 3BP; library@soane.org.uk; fax 020 7831 3957.

The Library team look forward to welcoming you to their new home in late Spring next year.

Sue Palmer
Archivist
Launch of Soane Podtours

It is very much in keeping with the forward-thinking spirit of Sir John Soane that his museum should be the first in London, and possibly Britain, to offer a complete tour of its rooms and treasures in the form of free podtours.

The two tours, one designed for adults and one for older children are now downloadable from the Museum's website www.soane.org and are suitable for iPods and MP3 players.

Stephen Fry, who gratifyingly describes the Soane as: 'My favourite museum in London' has recorded a warm, personal introductory section to both tours and Tim Knox and Eleanor Bron continue the adult and junior tours respectively. Both Stephen and Eleanor gave their time and talents freely to create the tours and the museum is very grateful to them.

The podtours were launched in October when Eleanor, whose genuine affection and affinity for the Soane developed through her late partner, the celebrated architect Cedric Price (1934–2003), was joined by a group of pupils from St Albans School, Camden. The children were the first to ‘road test’ Eleanor’s junior tour and we are delighted to report that their response was hugely enthusiastic.

The junior tour is particularly designed to evoke the unique atmosphere and energy of the museum when it was, at once, the Soane family home, private showcase and school of architecture. Along with guiding the younger visitor through the labyrinth of rooms, the sound of crackling fires, clinking champagne glasses, murmured conversation, music and the barking of a little dog combine to create an involving and textured impression of a building that is very much alive.

Meanwhile, Tim’s inspiring adult tour takes a classic and scholarly approach to the museum and its contents. He explains: ‘We felt it was vital to enhance people’s experience without compromising the integrity of their visit or the fabric and atmosphere of the building itself. The podtours provide an ingenious and practical solution to the physical restrictions of the space here, while allowing our visitors to discover the treasures hidden around every corner at their own pace.’

The museum plans to add more podtours in the near future. Along with tours in other languages the Soane is currently developing plans for tours designed for the partially sighted, as a resource for schools and as a means to involve and engage the diverse local community. The project was made possible by a grant from the BAND Trust.

Kate Griffin
Press Office

Education Update

The past few months have been very busy for the Education Department, with many exciting developments. The team has been working hard with schools visiting the Museum. Ian Owings, a teacher from Glenbrook School (Lambeth), is helping the department develop new resources and workshops as part of the Museums, Libraries and Archives London’s ‘Teacher Placement’ scheme. In addition to this, the new season of adult art workshops has started and the popularity of this programme is continuing to grow.

October saw ‘Big Draw’ month, for which the Museum offered four free adult art workshops, run by James Willis, Jane Bush and Regan O’Callaghan, which booked up in record time. Also as part of Big Draw month, Beth Kingston and I ran a free family drop-in day, during which participants recreated an Adam ceiling design, featured in the Vaulting Ambition exhibition, using collage materials. One couple claimed it was so enjoyable it was ‘almost worth having children for’! The Museum will be holding family drop-in days on the third Saturday of every month.

If you are interested in taking part in any of the art workshops at the Soane Museum further details can be found in our leaflet or by visiting www.soane.org. Alternatively please contact Beth Kingston (020 7440 4254, bkingston@soane.org.uk).

Janey Monahan
Schools and Families Education Officer

As part of Big Draw Month, participants in the free family drop-in day recreated an Adam ceiling design using collage materials

Eleanor Bron, the voice of our junior tour, joined by pupils from St Albans School, Camden, for the launch of the podtours in October
On 3 December Dame Liz Forgan will formally open No.14 Lincoln's Inn Fields. Full details of how the house has been restored can be seen in the leaflet *A Soane Townhouse Reborn.*

Built by Soane in 1823–24 the house never formed part of the original museum's legacy and was only finally acquired in 1996 with the help of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and other generous supporters.

In May 2005 restoration by the specialist building company William Fuller & Sons began under the supervision of Julian Harrap Architects; the main works were completed in June this year. Since then, work has continued decorating, fitting out and creating three ‘breakthroughs’ into No.13 which will allow No.14 to function alongside Nos 13 and 12.

No.14 will contain two floors dedicated to education activities for all ages; two floors dedicated to research and library services and two floors of office accommodation, transferred from No.13 and No.12.

The opening will be attended by representatives from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Department for Culture Media and Sport and the 60 or so organisations and individuals who generously supported the original purchase and the subsequent restoration of this important house.

Further opportunities to visit the house will be organised and we hope that all those who wish to see the house will be able to do so.

The completion of No.14 is a great step forward in the history of the Soane Museum and will, in turn, enable us to embark on an even more ambitious project ‘Opening up the Soane’.

In September 2007 the Museum received news that its application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a Project Planning Grant had been successful. The award of £30,000 will enable the Museum to commission various feasibility studies that will support a major application to the Heritage Lottery Fund in early 2008. The project is called ‘Opening up the Soane’ and its two principal aims are to open up more of Soane’s house-museum to the public and to improve the facilities of the Museum, not only for the public, but also for those who work and study there.

‘Opening Up the Soane’ comprises several linked projects which will:

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

One of the principal elements within the project will be the restoration and opening to the public of the entire second floor of the Museum (Sir John Soane’s private apartments, unseen since his death in 1837), including the reinstatement of Soane’s Bathroom; Bedchamber; Oratory; Book Passage; Model Room and Mrs Soane’s Morning Room.

Staff at the Museum are busy working on the various details of the application, which we will be sharing with you over forthcoming Newsletters.

The project is likely to cost several millions of pounds and even if our bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund is successful, we will need to raise between £2M and £3M from our own efforts. If any of our Newsletter readers think that they may be able to help in due course, either directly or via contacts within trusts and foundations or other organisations, do please contact Development Director, Mike Nicholson (020 7440 4241, mnicholson@soane.org.uk). This will be the largest fundraising project the Museum has ever embarked upon and we will need your help if we are to be successful.

Mike Nicholson
Development Director
Soane Supporters’ Direct Debit Contributions

Those of you who kindly chose to support the Soane Museum by making either a monthly or annual contribution via Debit Debit will know already of the problems the Museum has encountered processing Direct Debit donations. Indeed it is only since October, that Nat West finally made it possible for us to do so.

When the Supporters’ Circle was launched at the end of 2005, the Museum was led to believe that we would be able to process Direct Debits in just a few weeks – rather than the two years we ended up having to wait for our request to be authorised!

However, the good news is that we have finally been able to process the first few months of monthly Direct Debit contributions and instructions for annual payments have also been successfully set up.

We were particularly grateful that so many of you were able to help us by sending the total sum of your uncollected donations accumulated over the past few months. This was a great relief – the Museum stood to lose just over £10,000 in uncollected pledges. We look forward to updating you on how we intend to use the money to support the Museum’s ongoing conservation programme.

Thank you for all your patience and support in this matter over the past few months. It is very much appreciated.

If you do have any further queries about your Direct Debit contributions, please don’t hesitate to contact me (020 7440 4240, ccelder@soane.org.uk).

Claudia Celder
Development Officer

New in the Soane Museum Shop

Back by popular request is a set of cards reproducing four of the bizarre engravings of architectural masquerade costumes from E-A Petitot’s Mascarade à la grecque, published in Parma in 1771. This time there is a choice of cards left blank for your own message for use all year round, or cards bearing a Christmas message. Packs of eight cards (four each of two designs) cost £7.95.

Also newly available, after a year’s absence, are the very popular Soane hand-marbled notebooks. Reproducing Soane’s own late eighteenth-century pocketbooks, they are hand marbled by Ann Muir Marbling, Somerset. They sell for £10.00 each and will make handsome and inexpensive Christmas presents for the young and old alike.

The macabre wake-up call on the cover of this Newsletter is a detail from Louis Schiavonetti’s engraving after William Blake’s 1808 frontispiece to Robert Blair’s poem The Grave. This striking image, taken from Soane’s own copy of the work, will be available as a stylish Soane Museum tea towel, hopefully in stock soon.

All the Soane merchandise is available from the Museum shop.

Detail of Plate 6, the wife, engraved by Benigno Bossi, from Ennemond-Alexandre Petitot’s book of designs for architectural masquerade costumes, Mascarade à la grecque, Parma 1771

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