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## Genius of Sir John Soane

ARCHITECT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT



THE NEWLY-RESTORED ENTRANCE HALL AT MOGGERHANGER, COMPLETED THIS APRIL. MUCH OF THE ORIGINAL TROMPE L'OEIL WOODGRAINING HAD SURVIVED UNDER LAYERS OF LATER PAINT. FACING PAGE: A SELECTION OF DETAILS FROM THE HOUSE—A RECESSED FLOWER IN THE EATING ROOM; A VEINED MARBLE CHIMNEY PIECE IN THE LIBRARY, CARVED BY CORIN JOHNSON BASED ON SOANE'S DRAWINGS; AN ARTICULATED CEILING IN THE EATING ROOM; AND AN EXTERNAL ENTABLATURE—AND A PORTRAIT OF SIR JOHN SOANE BY THOMAS LAWRENCE, 1828.

It is ironic in this age of quick fixes that many are seeking solace in the intense, imaginative world of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century architect Sir John Soane, whose stripped-down classicism, loved for so long by purists, has witnessed an extraordinary revival in recent years. Of course this would have delighted the man himself. He rose meteorically on the wings of his talent, cutting through the social fabric of Georgian England—beginning as the son of a bricklayer, knighted by the King in 1831, and awarded the gold medal for architecture in 1835. He established the Sir John Soane Museum at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields by private act of parliament in 1833, precisely to keep his name in the history books but also to pass on to future generations his ideas about perspective, proportion, ornament, light, and beauty.

“The idea was that we all learn from our mistakes so that in the end, over the years, we get perfection of architecture,” says Stephen Astley, curator of Soane’s drawing collection. “This is very much a didactic museum, here to educate the wider public. The house works on so many levels. It doesn’t only showcase his remarkable collection, but it also marketed his architecture. It was a test bed for his ideas, it



# THE GENIUS OF Sir John Soane

**RESTORING THE WORK OF ONE OF ENGLAND’S MOST-BELOVED ARCHITECTS**

by CAROLINE MCGHIE

showed people how to draw, it was his office, it was a family home.” So, although Soane might not have achieved all he wanted in his lifetime, he made sure he cast his shadow forwards. “He won in the long term,” says Astley. “Around the world, architects name Soane as an influence.”

The resurgence of interest in Soane was stimulated partly by an exhibition at the Royal Academy in London in 1999 called *Sir John Soane, Master of Space and Light*, which toured Canada, France, Spain, and other parts of the world for two years. But there has also been a flowering of books, including Gillian Darley’s biography, *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic*, and Ptolomy Dean’s *Sir John Soane and the Country Estate*, both of which appeared in 1999. A new biography of his tragic but brilliant perspective painter *Joseph Gandy: An Architectural Visionary in Georgian England* by Brian Lukacher has just been released to accompany an exhibition, *Soane’s Magician*, on view at the Soane Museum through August 12.

But it is the completeness of his museum house, containing all his thoughts, his collections, his lists, his correspondence, that makes it such a potent time capsule. Soane’s was a colorful age, and he operated close to the center of it, associating with the flamboyant and often dissolute celebrities of his day—politicians and prominent members of the aristocracy—against the backdrop of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the end of the American War of Independence, the rise of Britain’s youngest ever prime minister, William Pitt, and the reigns of George III and IV. This, quite apart from the essence of his ideas, makes his life a point of fascination.

Though we stand in awe of him, his life was punctuated by tragedy and failure. By



PHOTO BY RICHARD HOLLITT/ART COURTESY SIR JOHN SOANE’S MUSEUM, LONDON



PHOTO BY RICHARD HOLLTUM PORTRAIT COURTESY SIR JOHN SOANES MUSEUM, LONDON

**THE NEWLY RESTORED NORTH FACADE OF MOGGERHANGED, ABOVE, AND THE EATING ROOM, BELOW, AS IT APPEARED BEFORE AND AFTER WORK WAS COMPLETED THIS SPRING.**



the end he had become almost estranged from his surviving sons who had bitterly disappointed him. His relationship with his wife was under strain and he wrote that he appeared to have “raised a nest of wasps about him sufficient to sting the strongest man to death.” Many of his architectural dreams were never fulfilled—a Senate House, a Thames bridge, a processional route through Westminster—and he would have loved to have designed the new Houses of Parliament.

In Soane’s museum to himself with its oddly named parts, we see the extraordinary mind at work—obsessive, imaginative, perfectionist, breaking new ground. One walks through Monument Court, taking in the gallery of ancient architectural fragments—Italian marble vases, Egyptian alabaster, and Chinese porcelain. His tiny study is adorned with pieces of the Roman Empire. The Corridor is crowded with statues and fragments, a sarcophagus, casts of Roman and Greek temples; the Picture Room has extra walls created by hinged panels to soak up a collection that includes J.M.W. Turner, William Hogarth, and Giovanni Antonio Canaletto. The Monk’s Cell is just that, imported with ruined cloister and tomb; in the Sepulchral Chamber in the crypt is the sarcophagus of Seti I with more fragments, statues, vases, and friezes. The house is extraordinary—an entire Grand Tour in miniature.

His other surviving work, much of which had been neglected and forgotten, is now cherished. Of the houses, Pell Well Hall in Shropshire has been saved; so have Tyringham in Buckinghamshire and Pitshanger in Ealing. Moggerhanger in Bedfordshire has undergone a restoration like no other before it. It became an exquisite labor of love, particularly for the architect Peter Inskip who masterminded the work.

Like so many other English country houses beached on social change in the twentieth century, Moggerhanger found itself being turned into a hospital, crusted with prefabs and ugly additions, then sold to a developer who wanted to turn it into apartments. Finally, still in a perilous condition, it was bought by a Christian organization which was persuaded by Soane enthusiasts to allow it to be restored while they continued to use it. The Moggerhanger Preservation Trust was formed for the purpose, the Heritage Lottery Fund stepped in with £3.5m, and many other trusts and foundations made large donations too, among them the World Monuments Fund, which has supported the restoration through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage. The vision expanded with the budget—at the latest tally the cost was fast approaching £7m.

Soane worked here in two phases. In 1791 he was invited to convert what had

A WATERCOLOR BY JOSEPH M GANDY, PAINTED IN 1825, SHOWS THE ANTIQUITY FILLED DOME AREA OF SIR JOHN'S HOME AT NO. 13 LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS.

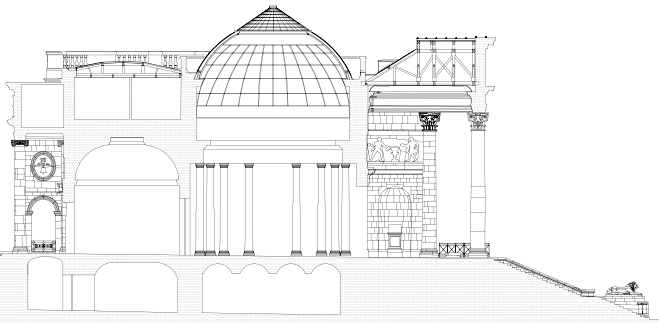
been a small farmhouse into a hunting lodge for Godfrey Thornton, later Governor of the Bank of England, which occupied one of Soane's greatest buildings in the City. Thornton's son Stephen invited Soane back in 1812 to transform Moggerhanger into a proper country house. "When we found it, the house had been written off as if it wasn't important," says Peter Inskip. "It is actually the most recorded house in all the Soane archives. In the records you could see a tremendous friendship develop between the architect and the client, for whom he worked on and off for 40 years, father and son together. This allowed Soane to experiment, so there are things here that tell us about aspects of some of the buildings that were lost. Through the depth of research and unpicking we have revealed a great work of art which has been ignored for 100 years. In my opinion Soane is up there with the great British architects—Inigo Jones, Sir Christopher Wren, and Nicholas Hawksmoor."

On the Preservation Trust were the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, Sir Sam Whitbread, and the Countess of Erroll, who had been aware of the house all her life and lives nearby at Woodbury Hall. Her grandfather-in-law was the Lord Erroll who famously formed a love triangle with Diana Broughton and Sir Jock Delves-Broughton in Kenya's Happy Valley. His murder by shooting in 1941 was the subject of the film *White Mischief*, starring Charles Dance. Through a cat's cradle of family connections involving the Astell and the Thornton families, Lady Erroll had direct ties to Moggerhanger, and has childhood memories of it being talked about in concerned tones.

She is now chair of the Trust's furniture committee, desperately trying to find suitable pieces to put into the house. "We keep finding new, wonderful things that cost money to restore," she says. "We have had to make sacrifices, which is why the car park hasn't been done yet, the Repton grounds haven't been restored, and we have no furniture. Unlike a house passed down through a family or held by the National Trust, this came without any contents at all. I am a perfectionist so I want to see it as it should be."



**MANY OF ENGLAND'S MOST FAMOUS ARCHITECTS WORKED AT STOWE, INCLUDING SIR JOHN VANBRUGH, JAMES GIBBS, WILLIAM KENT, ROBERT ADAM, THOMAS PITT, AND SIR JOHN SOANE. NORTH FRONT OF STOWE HOUSE FOLLOWING RESTORATION, BELOW.**



The restoration of a seminal Grade I listed house, so fragile, so hand-made, has been a long haul. The roof was leaking, dry rot raged, and pre-fabs had mushroomed in the grounds. As time went on, the original doorknobs were found beneath the floorboards; columns for the eating room, which had been put in an outbuilding by the hospital, were recovered; and false ceilings were peeled away to reveal a barrel-vaulted kitchen. Concealed within what was a matron's flat was among the most significant discoveries—an oculus embedded in the floor of the first-floor landing, which carried light from a lantern in the roof to the ground floor below. The first floor above the eating room, which had sagged under the weight of X-ray machines, was safely propped up.

The greatest find was Mrs. Thornton's dressing room, an oval first-floor chamber decorated and colored like a cameo brooch, where she kept her bottles and potions and received guests. It has curved walls, gilded cupboards with black beading, and a blue ceiling decorated in ribbons and garlands of roses, edged with hundreds of gilded balls. "We took away and analyzed the paint and the layers of rosettes were revealed," says Emma Wishart, one of a team of experts working under the guidance of the paint pathologist Catherine Hassall. "And we took away the little gold balls, recast and regilded them." This is a room that may be used in future for weddings.

Now that it is complete, Lady Erroll walks around the exterior with a kind of wonder and pride. There is none of the English country house meringue and stucco look. It is almost funereal in its austerity, painted in a solemn ochre limewash, and with a veranda made of thin trellised timber pillars. The external paintwork on the windows—the glass drops from ceiling to floor—is as black as a clergyman's cassock. The front door is a color that hovers somewhere between crushed plums and offal. "You could think you were in Italy," says Lady Erroll. "It is so un-English."

Step inside Moggerhanger and you find yourself walking through the compartments





**THE LIBRARY AT STOWE, SOANE'S ONLY MAJOR ATTEMPT AT THE GOTHIC IDIOM, LIES BURIED IN THE CENTER OF THE HOUSE ON THE GROUND FLOOR**

of Soane's mind. Exquisitely tooled rooms lead off each other, with windows arranged in matching patterns. Archways and doors play bat and ball, and an extraordinary floating staircase levitates upwards, decorated only by the thinnest swan-necked balusters stacked like black eyelashes.

The colors are a journey in themselves. The central drawing room has been restored using original techniques, with lath and plaster made of lime and horsehair, and the curved walls painted lavender so that the whole room appears to float. The library is lined and awaiting the reprinting of the original wallpaper, fragments of which were found on site. "I put my hand inside a hidden door in the library and found little pieces of the original shimmering silver wallpaper," says Lady Erroll. "It was the most thrilling moment. We are looking for sponsors to help us re-create it. Soane was an architect before his time. His use of light, it was all very, very modern."

Other important pieces of Soane's work are hidden within houses by other renowned architects. He designed the dining room of Number Eleven Downing Street. He also designed the little-known Gothic Library at Stowe, the palatial seat of the Temple and Grenville families who shaped British politics throughout much of the eighteenth century, and a building described by one critic as "the largest and most completely realized private neoclassical building in the world." It is somehow fitting that Soane's hand should be in evidence here, along with a roll

JERRY HARDMAN-JONES, COURTESY THE STOWE HOUSE PRESERVATION TRUST



## RESTORING STOWE'S MARBLE HALL

DESIGNED BY THE ITALIAN ARCHITECT GIOVANNI BATTISTA BARTOLI AND BUILT BETWEEN 1775 AND 1778, THE MARBLE HALL AT STOWE RANKS AMONG BRITAIN'S GRANDEST INTERIORS. YET UNTIL RECENTLY, THE ROOM, INSPIRED BY THE PANTHEON IN ROME, HAD FALLEN INTO DISREPAIR. TODAY, HOWEVER, THE HALL IS ONCE AGAIN GLEAMING, FOLLOWING A TWO-YEAR RESTORATION UNDERWRITTEN BY WMF THROUGH ITS ROBERT W. WILSON CHALLENGE TO CONSERVE OUR HERITAGE. RESTORATION OF THE MARBLE HALL IS PART OF A LARGER SIX-PHASE PROJECT, BEGUN WHEN THE ENTIRE HOUSE WAS PLACED ON WMF'S 2002 LIST OF 100 MOST ENDANGERED SITES.



call of great architectural names including Sir John Vanbrugh, William Kent, and James Gibbs. Famed landscape architect Lancelot “Capability” Brown, who had a hand in shaping the gardens, learned his craft at Stowe.

One cannot but catch one’s breath as you approach Stowe. Perched on a Buckinghamshire ridge at the end of sweeping driveways and parkland, it is now occupied by Stowe public school. The great north front is designed to look like a veritable palace, built to enfold what one commentator of the time called “the finest rooms in Europe.” Arriving here, you follow in the footsteps not just of Soane but of every king and queen who stayed there during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The entrance is designed to inspire awe. The central pillared portico, flanked by long colonnades, gives way to the imposing North Hall with a William Kent ceiling depicting the Roman days of the week and Mars, God of War, handing Viscount Cobham a sword.

The state rooms play like a kind of architectural concerto on the piano nobile, with views to the lake and pavilions. There is the Blue Room with its Bacchanalian ceiling in blue and gold, the Library with its vast mahogany bookcases and ornate ceiling, and the Music Room built around 1780, with painted panels by Vincenzo Valdre, decorated niches, Corinthian columns of scagliola, and a Valdre ceiling adapted from a Guido Reni composition in the Villa Borghese in Rome. The Drawing Room was Queen Victoria’s favorite and painted for her by Joseph Nash.

Nothing, however, quite matches the most spectacular room of all, the Marble Hall. An elliptical hall of Carrara marble with 15 scagliola columns, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, it flowers into a huge dome, sculpted in ornate plasterwork with 160 coffers of tapering size, with a frieze of 300 figures depicting a Roman triumphal procession. This whole fantasy of orgy and restraint has just been restored with substantial support from WMF through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage. The Stowe House Preservation Trust is in the middle of an extensive rolling program of repairs with four more phases to come, estimated to cost £42m at 2002 prices.

So it is extraordinary, in this great flamboyant monument to classicism and to excess, that one finds, buried in the center of the house on the ground floor, the Gothic Library by Soane. It is a surprise because it is Soane’s only major attempt at the Gothic idiom, many of the details being directly copied from King Henry VII’s Chapel in Westminster Abbey. It is also a surprise because it is used as the headmaster’s study and thus carries heavy psychological baggage. The film star David Niven, for example, remembered being beaten in this room—a memory that must have seemed more like a Gothic nightmare than the Gothic fantasy that Soane intended.

The room is a remarkable period piece with a low ceiling of such complicated plaster fan vaulting, enriched with Gothic canopies at either end over mirrored panels, decorated with hundreds of flowers, that would have been fitting for any Tudor monarch. It apparently took eight plasterers 210 weeks to complete. The walls are lined with floor-to-ceiling Gothic carved wooden bookcases designed to display the outstanding collection of Saxon manuscripts of Thomas Aste, Keeper of the Records at the Tower of London, who had left them to the Marquis in gratitude for favours.

According to Michael McCarthy, who authored a treatise on Soane and the Gothic library, this room represents “the culmination of a trend in architectural design that originated with Horace Walpole” and is “among the more neglected monuments of the history of art.” It is now hugely enjoyed by the current headmaster of Stowe, Anthony Wallersteiner, who studied history of art and loves to sit here. “The whole idea was that Stowe should nod to the Gothic,” he says. “In the heart of the house there would be a reminder that there is an indigenous architectural style which celebrates Saxon freedom and Saxon creativity. It is to King Alfred that we owe the creation of the Withan, the first parliament, and a national army, and it was a Whig conceit that there had been an unbroken tradition since then.”

While Soane here executed the Gothic style perfectly, and toyed with it in the Monk’s Cell in his own house, it wasn’t a style that spoke from his heart. One of the great sadnesses of his life was when the Houses of Parliament burned down in 1834; the architectural brief stipulated that the new buildings must be either Gothic or Tudor, effectively putting him out of the frame. We can only imagine what he might have given us if he’d had the chance. As it was he had what he considered his greatest work engraved on his tomb. Sir John Soane. Architect of the Bank of England. ■



COURTESY SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM, LONDON

**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE BUILDINGS BY SOANE  
ARE DEPICTED IN AN ILLUSTRATION BY ONE  
OF THE ARCHITECT'S PUPILS JOSEPH M.  
GANDY, 1815.**