

Sir John Soane's Museum

Our 'Day Around the Inns of Court' ended with a visit to Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, considered by some to be 'the best recorded house in the world.' Certainly it has had its share of detailed description and commentary, first from Soane himself, and by subsequent historians, not least in Jeremy Bate's excellent notes for the visit.

We were guided in small groups to the newly refurbished apartments on the second floor, which formerly comprised the curator's flat. They have been restored as closely as possible to their appearance at the time of Soane's death in 1837. Here we saw the small sculpture gallery and passed through Mrs Soane's cosy morning room, with her own picture hang recreated. This also demonstrates one of the features of the house – the large collection of original picture frames (and in many cases glass) that survives. The furniture in this room includes a particularly fine Indian ivory leather-topped oval table with a set of 'bamboo' chairs, and a specimen marble side table. Mirrors, first noted here, are seen all over the house, clearly designed to give an illusion of space in the many small rooms: they are even fitted to the backs of doors.

We progressed to the model room, formerly Mrs Soane's bedroom, now practically filled with a cork recreation of part of Pompeii, made in about 1820 by Domenico Padiglione. In the 1890s this was cut up into three parts (one can appreciate the reason – it is huge!) but has now been partly reconstructed by the German model-maker, Dieter Cölln, giving a bird's-eye view of this historic site. Other models include several of Paestum, the source of Soane's design for the Bank of England. Many others, including a group in plaster-of-Paris by the French maker, François Fouquet, are ranged round the room, with

architectural drawings and pictures of buildings furnishing the walls.

From here we passed into Soane's bathroom with its iron bath encased in mahogany. In a different part of the house he installed two flushing lavatories, one for his own use and one for the servants. Such plumbing arrangements were very advanced for the early 19th century. Both the bathroom and the bedroom next door have been papered with a facsimile of the Cowtan original, with a rewoven carpet after a period design on the floor. The decoration includes blue and white china displayed on Soane's 'very old' Chinese Chippendale shelves and a group of Dutch painted glass roundels of the months, already 'antique' when Soane bought them. Soane's own meticulous numbering system for his ornaments and furniture has guided much of the re-ordering of these rooms.

After this fascinating excursion into the private apartments we progressed to the south drawing room, furnished with 16 ebonised and cane-seated 'Trafalgar' chairs by John Robins, c. 1810, and a pair of rectangular card tables with brass mouldings. Robins was a personal friend for whom Soane also designed furniture, and Robins supplied furniture to Soane's designs for the Bank of England, his most important architectural commission. Next door, the anteroom, or north drawing room, led from the staircase landing, with the dining room and library below. Here the early 18th-century rosewood Cantonese chairs of sgabello form, with mother-of-pearl inlaid backs, are an eye-catching feature: Soane purchased them in the early 19th century. The fireplace in this room looks forward to art deco, 100 years before its time, but after noting Soane's plain style and ingenious use of space, this comes as no surprise.

His economical use of every available inch in his rooms, with plain mouldings (or none) for furniture and architectural elements, and his ventilation and plumbing systems were advanced for the period and a source of pride. It is probably no coincidence that in his tiny dressing room/corridor (complete with pull-out desk) there is a framed plan of the house drains displayed among drawings by Canaletto and Hogarth! Notable are his built-in cupboards, pullout tables and shelving, bookcases within the shutter housings of windows and 'chimney' hangs for pictures in small spaces.

Our visit was greatly enhanced by the kindness of the room stewards who patiently answered numerous questions, and by the expert guidance of John Bridges, the curatorial assistant who accompanied us in the private apartments.

Noël Riley