

London in the first half of the 18th century

4 December

A cold winter morning saw us gathered near to the half-timbered summerhouse in the centre of Soho Square ready for Treve Rosoman, our guide for the day, to give us an introduction to the area. Soho was developed following the Great Fire of London when some of the 100,000 homeless people moved westwards from the City. Soho Square itself (originally called Kings Square) was built during the late 17th century and in its early years was one of the most fashionable places to live in London. Today more than three-quarters of the original buildings are gone.

Our first visit was to the Grade I listed House of St Barnabas on the corner of Greek Street and Soho Square. Built speculatively in 1746, the house was bought by the Beckford family in 1754. The Beckfords were wealthy plantation owners in Jamaica and William Beckford was a city alderman and Lord Mayor of London in 1762. The original front door (complete with lock and very large key) leads into a fairly plain entrance hall which acts as a foil to the richly decorated staircase leading to the elegant rooms above. One of the most striking features of the house is the amazing rococo plasterwork done by the same plasterers who worked on the Mansion House. From the first floor galleried landing we were able to admire the quality of the stairwell decoration, with busts and deep relief swirling scrollwork surrounding not the family portraits one might expect but two remarkable Glasgow School paintings of boxers by Peter Howsen. The ceiling of the drawing room is the most celebrated feature of the house, with heads representing the four seasons and a central medallion with

four putti holding symbols of the four elements of earth, air, water and fire.

The drawing room also retains its original pegged Baltic pine floorboards. Until the 1750s floorboards were not nailed to the joists but the edges were drilled horizontally at six-inch intervals and pegs inserted to join each board to the next, the resulting solid floor simply resting on the joists. After the 1750s there was a marked decline in the quality of floors as fitted carpets came into fashion. We also learned of removable skirtings and dado rails which allowed a neat joint to be made with wall coverings, and behind which remains of early wallpapers can sometimes be found.

Glancing through the window to the house next door (26 Soho Square, William Robinson's house) Treve Rosoman told us of the supply in 1759 by Thomas Chippendale of 414 yards of wallpaper, some of which had two-colour flock decoration, difficult to make and very expensive. In April 1985 large sections of red-and-gold flock wallpaper were carefully removed from number 26 during reconstruction work, and beneath one section was found on the plaster a pencil drawing for the window to the front elevation, almost certainly in Chippendale's own hand. At the end of the Georgian era, Soho changed dramatically and in the space of 20 years had become an unfashionable place to live. The house was then taken over by the Metropolitan Board of Works and the civil engineer Bazalgette worked there. In 1862 the House of Charity (a Christian organisation to help the homeless of Victorian London) moved in and one of their first tasks was to build the chapel, which was completed in 1864. On our way to see the chapel we were surprised to find that the house has a large garden, one of the very few private gardens remaining in Soho and possibly the garden (and house) upon which Dr Manette's imagined



RFS members gathering outside the house of St Barnabas



Plasterwork example at the House of St Barnabas

lodgings in *A Tale of Two Cities* is based. The chapel was designed by the architect Joseph Clarke and is thought to have been based on a Romanesque chapel at the Abbé de Montmajeur in Arles. It contains a series of mosaics from the 1860s, possibly by the firm of Salviati who were major suppliers of this sort of work to churches across Europe.

The charity continued until the outbreak of the Second World War when the nuns who ran it moved back to Clewer and the house was requisitioned for war work. Charitable use was re-established after the war when the house was opened as a women's hostel, a use which continued until 2006. The current charitable work provides a life skills programme which assists those who are currently homeless, or who have recently experienced homelessness, back into lasting employment and independence.

A quick dash back through Soho Square and into Dean Street brought us to number 68 and our second visit of the day. The house was built by John Meard the younger for his own use. Meard was one of the great carpenters of his generation and worked with Wren at St Paul's and on some of the city's other great churches including Hawksmoor's St Mary Woolnoth. Number 68 Dean Street was completed in 1732 and has remained almost intact, being one of the best surviving examples of early Georgian domestic architecture in London. Starting in the basement, we were treated to views of not one but two cesspits. Uncovered during the restoration of the house by a workman accidentally falling into one of them, these are remarkable brick structures, complete with gulleys and troughs and originally with domed tops, which sometimes leads to



Hinged flap for upper sash

them being mistaken for ice wells. The cesspit for the family was discovered in the rear vault (the 'necessary house' having been on the floor above) and that for the servants in the front vault under the road. The remains of one of Richard Frith's illicit system of culverts were also found under the kitchen floor.

Making our way upstairs, the hierarchy in joinery and decoration became apparent. The plain, flat panelling in the old basement kitchen leads to double fielded panelling with a dentil cornice on the ground floor and dentil with carved egg and dart cornice on the first floor, with the complexity progressively reducing again on the second and third floors. Our attention was drawn to the windows, where only the bottom sash is hung on

counterweights, the top sash resting, when open, on flaps which hinge down from the frames on either side.

During the restoration work an unusual discovery was made at the top of the house in the roof space. Repairs to the ceilings on what was thought to be the top floor revealed that the space above had been floored over and on further investigation two sealed-up attic rooms were discovered, divided by a partition wall made of old window shutters and interconnected by a four-foot high wooden door. Inside one of the rooms was a giant ale bottle discarded by the plasterers in 1732. The purpose of these rooms is a mystery as it is thought that servants did not live in at that time. However, fireplaces have since been discovered in the attics of two houses in Meard Street and a complete servants' quarter in number 5 Meard Street, so it seems that in these houses at least the servants probably did live in the attics.



Boards worn down to show floor pegs.



Attic room with shutter partition and four foot door

After lunch we headed west and out of Soho to Brook Street and the Handel House Museum. Handel was the first occupant of 25 Brook Street which was part of a small development by a speculative builder, George Barnes. Brook Street was built between 1717 and 1726 to connect Hanover Square and Grosvenor Square and was a good upper-middle class area. Handel was the first occupant of the new house, moving there in 1723. Although away from the then artistic centres of Soho and Covent Garden, it was within easy walking distance of St James's Palace, where Handel conducted his official duties, and the King's Theatre, Haymarket, the focus of his Italian opera career. He lived there for 36 years until his death in 1759. The house has been much altered over the years, both inside and out, with one Victorian owner having all the panelling ripped out specifically because he did not wish his property to become a shrine to the composer. A shop-front was installed and the façade significantly altered in the early 20th century.

The Handel House Trust was set up in 2001 and has restored as faithfully as possible the early Georgian interiors of Handel's time with later walls and partitions being removed and the original sequence of rooms reinstated on the first and second floors. The houses at 27 and 29 Brook Street retain much of their original detail and were used as models for reproducing the panelling, cornices, shutters and so on.

Handel died in April 1759 and an inventory of the contents of the house was not taken until August, by which time some valuable items may already have been removed. But the list included some of the furniture and its location within the house and examples which fit the inventory description have been acquired by the Trust to give a good idea of how the rooms looked and functioned in Handel's time. These included a canopied bed with crimson harrateen curtains, and a spinet with skunk tail keys made in 1749 by Joseph Mahoon of Golden Square. A double-manual harpsichord has been made to the specifications of the one that Handel would have owned and used in the house and our 'Soho Day' ended with a recital on this instrument.

Our very grateful thanks to Treve Rosoman for being such an informative and entertaining guide and to Jeremy Bate for organising our day. We are also indebted to Peter Bignell who showed us round the House of St Barnabas and was able to answer all our questions about the house and the charity, and to David Bieda who not only knew 68 Dean Street inside out but also had us in fits of laughter. In addition we extend our thanks to the trustees of the Handel House Museum and to the guides who showed us round

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