

Fictional Guidenotes

to Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields

by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence

No. 3 of 6, September 2002

A Report on Conditions at Lincoln's Inn Fields



Editor's note

The text beginning overleaf is reproduced from a water-damaged and barely legible sheaf of papers found on a building site on the north side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, where Sir John Soane's house once stood. One can only speculate as to its precise purpose – indeed, in this age of research many appear to do little else than to speculate. It seems most likely, however, that the original was not intended for print but as unsigned notes towards a verbal report or a tour of the remains. The author is seemingly a caretaker, and the recipient of the news in all probability is an absentee property owner on an inspection visit.

Although the text itself is published as is, or as best as could be deciphered from such a document, for convenient navigation of this text the editor has taken the small liberty of interspersing the likely former names of rooms to which specific elements of the text refer. It is hoped that readers will not find this intervention too much of an imposition.

The original manuscript was headed 'The Current Circumstances at Lincoln's Inn Fields'. The alteration for the present document is intended to avoid any confusion: circumstances at Lincoln's Inn Fields are now considerably different from the conditions then 'current'.

BC

Contribute your own fictional guidenotes to Soane's Museum

Museum visitors and friends are invited to contribute their own writing about objects, spaces and ideas from Sir John Soane's Museum. To contribute, please visit the museum website at <http://www.soane.org/fictional>. You may also email your contribution to bernard.cohen@kcl.ac.uk. Finally, you may post your contribution on disk to Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence, Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3BP, United Kingdom. Please send email or post contributions in text-only format.



[Manuscript begins]

Library-Dining Room

Thank you for coming at such short notice and in these far from ideal circumstances.

I will briefly outline current plans for the uses of the residence and some of its contents. Obviously, no work has yet been done towards this, and some of the rooms will need to be reconfigured. I should also say that some or most of these projected arrangements are not of my making and that I do not appreciate implications to the contrary.

Despite the disorderly appearance, some rooms have been disposed of already. We've been quite lucky in this, as a group of three people showed up at the right time, wanting to live near the park and having little more in the way of furniture or other luggage than a bag with a few tennis racquets. There seem to be three of them, and they have the suite of rooms above the former exhibition space in number twelve. There may be four. I'm not so good with faces or with counting. Definitely only three showed up at first. We are in the process of working out a leasing arrangement. This at least is a promising development. More later on the subject of formal and informal agreements for provision of residence.

No. 12 Breakfast Room

I wrote to you about the problem with tree roots. I was trying not to worry you unduly and certainly had no wish (let alone intention) to conceal facts. Now that you're here I must no longer defer the rest of the information on this matter, which is that there is also a tree. I have asked Eugene to investigate

our options. He has not returned. Not surprising, perhaps - it is not yet a week and Eugene has of late acquired a habit of unexplained absences.

Still, the tree's rate of growth is alarming. It has already rendered the corridor at the rear of number twelve impassable. Eugene, being of optimistic disposition, would no doubt remind you that there is plenty more space elsewhere. My mind is not entirely assuaged by this thought, particularly as there are signs of woody weed

growth in other areas of what has been the residence. By 'signs' I mean a general widening of cracks and crevices in damp areas of the basement and most eastern parts of the ground floor. One might speculate other causes for this kind of damage, but in my observation it is of a kind with one stage in the succession which preceded the tree's appearance and expansion. That is, crazing, splitting and bulging followed by the bursting through of a plant which had already obtained some considerable girth and stature in its dark place of origin.

Eugene, who is my friend and whose opinions therefore I would not disparage, felt it important to mention the, as he put it, 'microclimatic alterations' around the tree. I was not entirely clear on what basis he made this assertion. If he meant some moss has also grown, I can confirm it: moss has also grown. If he intended to refer to the roughly circular drier zone surrounded by a rough circle of great moistness, I can corroborate this too. The tree roots draw up water and the driplines, as I believe they are known in arboreal milieux, do indeed drip.

South and North Drawing Rooms

On the subject of moss trails, also mentioned in earlier correspondence, these have spread throughout the upper levels. Plimsolls are now requisite for traversing floors two and above in No. 13. I am considering fixing a rope or wooden ladder to what is now a slope, both for access and to deter further corrosion of utility. Younger visitors take pleasure in sliding, and this activity has resulted in further wear on the

second floor, some bannister damage and a jump in general cleaning and pre-leasing expenses.

I have asked these children to calm down but this has had no effect or a worsening effect on their behaviour. I have asked the parents to intervene but they refuse. More recently, I discovered a series of letters I had written to parents on this subject in the gutter outside the house, unopened.

No. 13 Breakfast Room

I thank you for your continued attention. I know your extensive portfolio requires a careful allocation of your time, and I'm sure Eugene would join with me in appreciation of your extra effort in relation to the Lincoln's Inn Fields problems.

Things are not what they were.

When I mentioned visitors, both earlier in this presentation and in my letter, I also should have made clear that these visitors do not regard themselves as 'visitors' but as residents. I have not as yet been successful in dislodging them. The uninvited inhabitants rebuffed my attempts to serve their notices to quit. I have appealed to Eugene for assistance. He is non-committal. I have called the police, who have been polite but concentrating on more 'revenue-productive operations'.

Things are also not what they were with regard to the house itself. The ceiling has lifted. Rain and airborne insects have free access. The former seems to generate rapid expansion of moss trails, and growing populations of the latter, no longer only at dawn and dusk, hover over the plush green inclines. Many of us are now covered in red, itching welts, and even Eugene, less affected than almost anyone because of his penchant for long-sleeved garments, has complained vehemently. One wonders whether the insects may some time in the future affect his commitment, though I hasten to add that this shows no current sign of abatement.

The effect on myself and the other permitted residents is dispiriting to say the least. It's all very well to use terms such as 'architectural cycles' and 'natural reclamation' as I've seen in various recent publications, and almost unbelievably, in the advertising material circulated by one real estate agency in relation to the Lincoln's Inn Fields house. Such language bears no relation to the real world, where some of us are at least trying to maintain not just appearance but also structural soundness in the house. Although I'm well aware of the saying 'a resonant phrase outlasts bricks and mortar' and its prominence in the literature of one school of estate agency, please understand the situation *in situ*. Here it is clear beyond

doubt that glossy writings are a hindrance. I appeal to you to suppress them wherever possible.

Basement – Dome and Passages

Some ghouls have settled in the basement. Due to the puddles, they sleep on platforms and tables and have gone to the extent of upturning a cupboard to increase the sleeping area. There are signs of bedding in the sarcophagus. Anything I have had to say on the topic has been ignored. I post notices but these disappear almost instantly. I have attempted to engage two of these undesirables in conversation and can replicate the exchange:

Me: Please be careful as you're damaging some of the contents.

Ghoul 1: We *aresome* of the contents.

Ghoul 2: No. We're fixtures.

They laughed and continued with their sawing.

On another occasion I heard one singing (to a decidedly triumphalist tune) the lyric, 'I'm an effing archaeologist with an effing tub of glue.' My investigation revealed various marble fragments being reassembled in a most unfortunate and suggestive manner. My intervention was not successful. I lost large amounts of hair when the glue-wielder forcibly attached a thumbless hand to my head, and afterwards I had to prevail on Eugene to cut the glue out with scissors. I still remember the nasty, mocking cry of 'Crow about that, Mr Rooster.'

I explained that Rooster was not my name, but elicited only further laughter.

Monk's Parlour

Conditions have been steadily worsening, as I have mentioned, and it is now possible to say that the deliberate ruin in the courtyard is the only element of the house which has *not* been ruined. (This ruin: permit me to describe it as the most unhumble expression of humility, a most disingenous construction.) The remainder of time is all that has survived time. The rest has been taken apart not by wear and nature but by silent grinning indecipherable people who act as though entitled.

Things are not as they should be. In the lessons I learned from famous old books, the licentious are the ones supposed to be ruined. The tales end well: hardworking people and legitimate property holders – and, of course, their properties and goods – thrive and prosper. Here, the proper order is upside down. Ghouls and others of barbarian disposition occupy civilised spaces built with civilising intent.

That the front portion of No. 14 collapsed several weeks ago, as was no doubt made obvious to you by the pile of rubble standing where there had been a house, simply emphasises this curious inversion. The old stone arches, which had been quite subsumed by the height of their containing courtyard, now dominate their surroundings. They have become a landmark not only for transient ghouls (I seek a substitute word without lighting on one, so 'ghouls' it remains), but also for photographers: a surprising combination, if I may say so, ghouls and photographers sharing an aesthetic. It would be amusing were it not so tragic, that in the midst of all this unmaking a sentimental attachment to the Picturesque persists.

New Picture Room

An unfortunate slogan has been daubed across the wall at the rear of No. 12, namely 'Practicality before Art'. Various smaller scrawls follow a similar theme: 'Recycle Now!'; 'Put the wreck to work' &c.

The inhabitants, furthermore, and to the great detriment of the property, practise this extreme ideology. A large cabinet, formerly a centrepiece upstairs, has been converted into a bar with built-in solar generator. Also from upstairs, two chandeliers have been affixed to poles and now serve as clothing racks. Chairs are joined to make beds; beds furnished with cushions and trays become dining suites; large convex mirrors have been inverted and used for some obscure gaming activity; anything small and hard is a weapon, anything large a shield.

Pointing out that such acts are gross abuses and misuses is, as you may be able to imagine, utterly without effect.

Picture Room

Wooden planking extended from the rear portion of No.14 - what had in earlier times not so very long ago comprised Soane's one-room art gallery - to this ruin provides an elementary shelter underneath, and I've also seen the more daring amongst the current dwellers clamber across the top or withdraw some beams in the manner of a drawbridge.

Four of the famous picture planes have been reconfigured as front doors for this now isolated miniature 'castle', fiercely defended by the thieves and looters who have settled within. I fear to go there, even when my charge as auditor of the premises ought to provide a mantle of authority. Of course I do not neglect duty, have not neglected my responsibility, despite much personal risk. On a dutiful visit to this room not six weeks ago, I was held a prisoner against my wishes for two hours, taunted and threatened by my captors. Nonetheless, I undertook the full inspection you would have received last week by second-class post.

I'm sure the envelope also carried my shock at the conditions. With the roof's collapse, I was horrified to discover the dwellers' new 'interpretation' as they put it, of 'living under canvas'. As a Roman once succinctly put it, 'O tempora! O mores!' They had constructed a makeshift shelter from four good-sized paintings making up William Hogarth's renowned series, *An Election*. These scoundrels' profanity is further shown by their vulgar yet assonant renaming of this series. Despite the uncomfortable situation in which I found myself, I could not help but notice the strong resemblance between the subjects of the paintings and my damaged tormenters.

Eugene's only comment on the episode was, 'Could have been worse'. And he laughed at their Election joke.

Sometimes Eugene, good friend that he is, provokes sincere reservations.

[Manuscript ends]



About Fictional Guidenotes

Fictional Guidenotes are written by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum. They will appear monthly from July to December 2002 and are also available via the museum website at <http://www.soane.org/fictional>. Also on that website are other fictional and less fictional writings related to the Museum, including contributions from members of the public. Your contribution is welcome. See the front of this publication for details. For more information about Bernard, please see his website at <http://www.hermes.net.au/bernard>.

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