

# Fictional Guidenotes

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

by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence

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## Sir John Soane's Museum of Natural History

Sir John Soane's fame both for his architecture and his collections of antiquities and contemporary art (especially that of his friends at the Royal Academy) continues to this day. The curators and archivists working behind the scenes in his Museum, often twenty-two or twenty-four hours per day, work to preserve this vision of Soane. Everyone who has read even short accounts of this museum has read that here are some of the best Hogarths, here is the sarcophagus of Seti I carved from a single piece of aragonite, here is the marvellous geometric stair of No. 13, signature canopied ceilings, vertical lighting patterns, a room which does not touch the sides of the building.

That the great architect collected such objects and built such features is perhaps no surprise, given his social station and his penchant for expressing that station. But here was a man famed for surprise itself, for illusion, for conjuring space from falling light.

What is less known, virtually unknown, and this writer cannot discern the Museum Trustees' motive other than to speculate that they would not wish Soane's house to be confused with certain Leicestershire stately homes overwhelmed by taxidermy, is that Soane was also a great enthusiast for Natural History. He put together a world class collection for which in the writer's judgment he ought to be equally famous and appreciated.



*Artist's impression of Soane's study c.1825*

Having successively bought Nos. 12 and 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, he determined to add another dimension to his museum. From around 1808 and with increasing fervour until his death in 1837, Soane set up a museum adjacent to and of similar scale to this house as a showcase for his nature collections. He included hundreds of specimens ranging upwards in size from pinned lice. The space of the Natural History Museum is largely conterminous with the space of Soane's arts and antiquities collection. They are like two ideal gases, rarely interacting. (See Afterword, back page,

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## 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>. You may also email your contribution to [bernard.cohen@kcl.ac.uk](mailto: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.

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for note on the ideal gas metaphor.)

There are amongst the current public collections in Soane's Museum a few crude hints of this field of interest: several references to and representations of a much-loved dog, a more-than-coincidental concentration of biological reproductions in marble and plaster, fossil ammonites.

As the visitor passes through each room, he or she will see chests of numbered drawers. These are never opened. Many are sealed with glue or otherwise stopped shut. For information on these unusual 'precautions', please write to the Museum Director with the reference line 'Public Access to Natural History Collection'.

The writer has attempted to establish the contents of this hidden collection. It has not been easy, given the Museum's obstinate adherence to its current self-image, but Soane did provide a few clues to his way of thinking. As is known, the basement of his house/museum is largely taken up with underworld antiquities and artworks; the ground floor largely displays earthly things.

Similar thematics are followed in his arrangements of the natural history collection. With regard to insects and crawling creatures, this is most marked: nematodes and photophobic creatures occupy the basement, while lepidoptera (butterflies) and odonata (dragonflies) can be found upstairs, often pressed between rare and wonderful architectural drawings. On the ground floor

of the house are largely crawling and jumping insects: ants, beetles, mantises and the like.

As a first step towards this expansion, Soane proposed a series of fountains connected by miniature viaducts, putting this forward as a means of increasing public enjoyment of Lincoln's Inn Fields. In fact he had another, larger motive. To this purpose Soane engaged a landscaper, Arthur Portsmouth, who had recently returned to England after serving seven years transportation to New South Wales (for two trivial offences against the Statute of Queen Anne). Portsmouth had played no small role in the development of public gardens in Sydney in the second decade of the nineteenth century and was noted in the colony for his utilisation of native flora in European configurations.

Soane's logic in employing a convicted plagiarist and a man of little English reputation becomes clearer, as does his full intentions with this watery development, when one notes the arrival in London in 1810, also from New South Wales, of a live platypus. The platypus, as neither fish nor fowl — nor mammal nor reptile, as several held — was the subject of much lively debate at the Royal Society. Soane had probably seen a stuffed beast, though many of his contemporaries thought this to be a forgery perpetrated by a rogue taxidermist, and was familiar with Thomas Bewick's



(1753-1828) superb wood engraving from the 1807 edition of *The General History of Quadrupeds*. He became determined to own this strange animal, and to house it in as close to its natural state as England's fair skies permitted.

The Lincoln's Inn Fields aquatic garden project never came to fruition, as no private member could be found to promote the idea in Parliament. The platypus died soon after its arrival in England and found its posthumous way into a glass case at Thos. Newman's Natural Wonders Collection, based in Dover (now lost). Portsmouth won the rare distinction of a second journey to New South Wales — this time for trafficking inferior quasi-Hogarth's.

As for Soane's attempt to purchase a closely related monotreme, named elsewhere as *anisocheris* (and inexplicably omitted by Bewick in all editions), one notes unaccounted expenditure during the relevant period in the architect's otherwise immaculate banking records and observes torn-out pages in the otherwise pristine diary, but despite a half-erased graffito of a platypus-like creature with rear feet of a duck and with its right foreleg benefiting from a primate-like opposable thumb, this writer cannot conclude that Soane ever completed the rumoured transaction. (Neither does the Royal Society record mention of the animal.)

Despite these setbacks, Sir John Soane's dreams and schemes of menagerie did not end. Concurrently, he had begun to convert the upper floors of No.12 into a series of pens and cages. He sought exotica and often found it.

Famously, the architect only admitted visitors to his museum on sunny days, when his static collection appeared at its most luminous. Under cloud or in mid-winter, with the shutters of the house closed even during the few hours of daylight, the character of the house changed radically. He sometimes opened all cages and permitted his beasts to roam from room to room in the upper reaches of the house, chasing and preying (never in the museum proper, of course, where rare and delicate things were preserved).

His wife Elizabeth was stoical as she appears in portraits, though in one of her portraits higher in the



house (G Jones RA, oil on canvas; not currently on public display) scarring is clearly visible — most probably from a fox or weasel bite, as Soane had at this point acquired neither No.14 nor any of his larger predators.

Soane's double collection was an open secret around the Fields; his neighbours alluded to the cries of strange beasts filling the square at all hours of the night.

In 1822, Soane acquired No.14, demolished and rebuilt it specifically to house his more and more spectacular zoological collection. One deduces that immediately upon this acquisition he purchased two leopards and set about keeping and taming them in the front portion of that house. By 1830, in all probability, No.14 teemed with otters and marmosets, muskrats and minks, diamond-patterned snakes of Pompeian red, parrots from all continents where they dwell, small hopping marsupials; a deep pool below ground held a narwhal, schools of flashing silver fish and two dozen yellow-crested penguins.

The architect claimed, however, that the property had been let out to the lawyers Messrs Williams and Bethell.



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### ***Afterword: Natural History and the Theory of Gases: a Soanean metaphor***

It is easy and perhaps obvious to describe Sir John Soane as a sculptor of space. Such a description, however, fails to convey the extent of Soane's engagement – through spatial metaphor — with the physical and biological sciences.

One must consider Soane's house-cum-museum as metaphorically related to contemporary scientific developments. In particular, the writer refers to the Ideal Gas Law first set down by Emil Clapeyron (1799-1864) in 1834. Briefly put, the Ideal Gas Law relates atmospheric pressure, temperature and volume to the number of gas molecules. (As with many or most ideas, by the time of its publication the atmosphere for this thinking was already well established. For the purposes of this argument, we do not need to reflect on subsequent qualifications, corrections and disproofs.)

The Ideal Gas Law assumes that the gas molecules themselves take up no volume and, important to Soane, that their behaviour is what occupies space.

It is almost impossible to walk around this house without feeling Soane's process of organising, but what exactly did this process entail? It is contended that Soane's approach to the arrangement of his collections parallels ways in which gases take up space: ideas take no space, but exert pressure (which one might, at the risk of obscurantism, designate 'ideational tension') between juxtaposed objects.

That is, ideas themselves, because they are dynamic, create a kind of volume. So, at least in this way, one might indulge the metaphor that ideal gas molecules are like ideas.

A second metaphoric strand one might draw from the gas laws is that of different molecules filling the same space — and ideal gases are assumed to disperse in such a way as to fill all available space, so that oxygen and nitrogen will both occupy every corner of the room despite the presence of the other.

In much the same way, antiquities, artworks and creatures living and non-living fill the space of Sir John Soane's Museum. It is a pity only that the public is not trusted with the full extent of Soane's genius.

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### **Note**

There is no evidence that Sir John Soane (1753-1837) undertook what has been attributed to him above. He did, however, successively purchase Nos. 12, 13 and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields and, as reported, subsequently let out No. 14 to a law firm of the name given. Items of furniture mentioned (and numbers thereon) and the general layout of his house-cum-museum are presented accurately as far as possible. There is no evidence supporting the descriptions set out above of the contents of cabinets, wardrobes or other articles of furniture. Taxa named in the above *Guidenotes* reflect modern classifications rather than those contemporary with Soane. It is the author's intention that this anachronism be corrected in future editions.

All items pictured in these *Guidenotes* may be found at Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, with the exception of roaming zebra.

Some people and animals identified in the above *guidenotes* are historical Bewick (and his publications), Clapeyron, Fanny the dog, Jones (but not the painting mentioned). Dates as given.

A platypus was first brought to Britain in 1798 or 1799. (It was dead on departure, not after arrival as suggested above.) There was debate as to its authenticity. One theory held it was the work of clever Chinese taxidermists. (See Ann Moyal, *Platypus*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, 2001 and numerous other sources for histories and versions of its taxonomic interpretation.) The anisocheros is an invention. Its name (a play on platypus, which

translates from Greek as broad foot) means 'odd hands'. There is no record of Soane ever having purchased leopards.

Clement Carey, Thos. Newman (and his collection) and Arthur Portsmouth are inventions. Their names derive from streets near Lincoln's Inn Fields. No one was transported to New South Wales for plagiarism. (Forgery was a capital offence, often commuted to transportation as in the case of architect John Nash's [contemporary and rival of Soane] student Francis Greenway, who contributed several fine buildings to the colony.) With regard to breaches of (proto) copyright, the 1710 Statute of Anne set the penalty for copying at forfeiture and destruction of all copies and forfeiture of 'one penny for every sheet which shall be found in his, her or their custody, either printed or printing, published, or exposed to sale'. An 1835 intellectual property law was known as the Hogarth Act after the painter and engraver whose works are held in the Museum and who had been a frequent victim of plagiarism and unscrupulous copying. (See Christina Scull, *The Soane Hogarths*, Sir John Soane's Museum/Trefoil Publications, 1991, pp 7-8)

There is no evidence of booklice.

The sarcophagus is in pretty good shape, and early damage (loss of pigment) is attributed not to corrosive bird droppings but the ravages of the moist English climate.

No painting in Soane's collection shows any of his family or contemporaries carrying injuries from bites or mauls. *BC*

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## **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>. For more information about Bernard, please see his website at <http://www.hermes.net.au/bernard>.

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