

# Highlights of the Natural History Collection

Visitors' Guide: Supplement to Fictional Guidenotes 2/6, August 2002

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## Note to Users of this Guide

None of Sir John Soane's Natural History collection is currently available for public view, and it seems to be Museum policy to refuse viewing requests either without reasons given or with steadfast and unsupported denial. (No request has ever been acceded to, to the writer's knowledge.) A recent response to one request to see Soane's siphonaptera elicited the short reply: 'Thank you for your interest in Sir John Soane's Museum. I am afraid the Museum holds no such creatures. There are, however, a number of other museums in London which may be able to assist with your research. Yours faithfully.'

Our brief inspection of the cases and recesses housing the collection begins upstairs, on the first floor. For a full appreciation of the exhibits as they were in Soane's own lifetime, one must imagine the living specimens passing between the cases of the dead, like present-day visitors amongst the statuary. A glossary follows on the reverse.

## First Floor

### North Drawing Room

This appears to be one of the least filled rooms in the building but, as with so much of Soane's work, 'appearance' is made up of the measurable and the illusory.

Large doors on the western side — one numbered '4', the other unmarked — open into a three-foot-deep alcove almost certainly intended for use as barn-style housing for avian nocturnals. No sign it was ever used for living creatures, but two well-preserved but not uncommon owls are still adhered to their shared perch within. Mounts used for this purpose were not available until 1834, indicating that Soane may have been in the process of enlarging this exhibit and, from the storage of meshed frames within, probably soon anticipated displaying living specimens when his own mortality intervened.

Cabinet on western wall, doors numbered 46 and 47 in fact contains only one item, seemingly a large mammalian winged beast. In this author's view, the creature is a confection of skeletal remains of a large predatory cat (probably a small Asiatic lion or a civet) and a goose or swan. Wing bindings are obscured by bandaging. No evidence for Soane's belief or otherwise in the animal's authenticity.

Low cabinets on north wall numbered 103-106 contain small stuffed birds, each species grouped with its eggs.

Other feature of interest: starfish ceiling has a hidden opening in its northeast 'eave'. Some evidence of nesting patterns here, and every reason to believe that swallows or similar had taken up residence within Soane's lifetime, rather than (as conjectured in a late nineteenth century source) nesting marks showing evidence of poor upkeep in the 1850s and 1860s.

### South Drawing Room and Loggia

Cabinet on western wall, doors numbered 48 and 49: like its pair in the North Drawing Room, contains only one item, in this case a large ichthyoid winged beast. In the writer's view, the creature is a confection of skeletal remains of a medium sized aquatic reptile, a large perch or cod and a large flightless bird (probably a

cassowary). Wing and fin bindings (if any!) are obscured by bandaging. Soane's interest in and knowledge of hybrid creatures has not been entirely obscured by the current curatorial anti-nature ideology: some remnant representations remain in the museum; presumably antiquity compensates for their obvious intrinsic naturalness! These can be seen here and there in the museum, somewhat out of context (the writer contends) as this had formerly been provided by skeletal remains and by live and preserved faunal specimens.

Porcelain containers on south side tables contain more than sixty flying insects stuck in amber. A faded and irretrievably damaged note in the eastern of these might have referred to a more ambitious arrangement in the form of a mobile or similar "suspension" (a possible pun).

## Ground Floor

In the space here available, one can only touch upon the extensive range of Soane's terranean creatures. The writer has selected certain highlights, and begs pardon where his preferences do not accord with those of the reader.

### Library/Dining Room

Silver urn in case on west side table contains three dodo hatchlings on (inauthentic) twig nest. Two boxes on same table hold lizards set within dioramas seemingly intended to suggest that lizards are small-scale reproductions of monstrous creatures. No textual references to these yet discovered.

Underneath the room divide are two low cabinets numbered 13 and 48, and labelled as though housing folio and quarto volumes. These 'publications' turn out to be rather elaborate cases for rodents and other small gnawing mammals, which are presented en masse and in poses reminiscent of contemporary illustrated volumes of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Cabinets under west bookshelves house a single crocodile specimen, masterfully dissected so that each section fits a single cabinet. Eastern cabinets may have contained living rodents, as

connective holes show signs of gnawing and scratching consistent with such useage and there is some remnant scent.

Ornate ceiling of No. 14 visible above eastern bookshelf; its design mirrors that of No. 13. Omission of zoological references can only be seen as deliberate.

### Study

It is immediately clear that Soane worked surrounded by references to nature. On the east wall of the study, floral and vegetative forms are most probably chosen on the basis of their hospitality to various species of mecoptera. (On this subject see also Clement Carey, "Botanical Form and Its Microfaunal Complement in the 1831 Reordering of Sir John Soane's Museum", unpublished dissertation, University of London.)

Less apparently, a desk drawers (numbered 121) contains several cards surmounted with numerous examples of Psocoptera. [Further less elaborately displayed individuals of this order are preserved at seemingly random pages of all monographs in shelves 1 and 3 of bookcase 13 in the No. 13 Breakfast Room — though in all likelihood, given Soane's enjoyment of such games and puzzles, the triple occurrence of 13 is no coincidence.]

### Dressing Room

No evidence of natural specimens in this room but it was central to his dual interests in other ways. From here the visitor can gaze across the Monk's Courtyard to the memorial engraved 'Alas Poor Fanny'. (Fanny, his wife's lapdog, is also the subject of three portraits to be seen elsewhere in the house.)

This memorial also stands midway between human and animal. One overlooks the Monk's Courtyard from Soane's work area, from the Museum proper and, importantly, from No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields.

As noted in the attached commentary, it was in No. 14 that Soane housed his spectacular menagerie, which ranged from common ferrets, weasels, otters, muskrats and other small mammals though to his pride, a pair of leopards.

Could it be that across this courtyard Soane intended for man and beast alike to gaze out on the mortality of all living creatures?

### Colonnade

In the south passage, a large chest with drawers numbered 49 to 56; number 49 also numbered 88; numbers 53 and 54 also numbered 86 and 87; number 51 also labelled House of Lords. Numbers 86, 87 and 88 refer to quantity of reptilian eggs; 'House of Lords' refers to mounting arrangement of juveniles of suborder Lacertilia. Large cupboard number 100 labelled 'Publications' contains not (as reported in Stile, 'Soane on Hunting and Tracking', *Townsmen*, s49 v2, p57) specimens from the New Forest, but is entirely empty, and no reliable record exists of its former contents (if any).

North passage: three large cabinets labelled 51 to 58; 'E/drawings by the late Mr Robert Adam/Publications'; 59 to 66. The numbered cabinets contain geological specimens of little relevance to the zoologist, and probably stored by Soane for a colleague. The

drawings are in fact a series of ten workmanlike pen and inks by the Welshman Adam Roberts (1800-39). Probably fantasies rather than drawn from life, they show Soane in various settings (tropical, arctic, desert), always with local fauna close at hand. Equally interesting is their presentation, framed and on rollers.

### Dome

The fourteen lidded containers under the dome hold preserved specimens of the fourteen amphibian life stages, from fertilisation through to migration of the soul. This series can be seen to counterpoint the family narrative represented in the Picture Room series.

### The Picture Room

Hogarth's clear moral purpose in the two famous series (The Election and A Rake's Progress) is both subverted and personalised by the curious displays kept within the cabinets at floor level around the Picture Room. Soane's life and idiosyncratic relations with his two children is depicted in this biographical diorama series, believed to be unique for the time in its use of mounted and masked rats to represent the various protagonists. (Glass fronted cabinet number 85 is empty and was always intended to conduct light into the Monk's Cell below.) Number 79 contains the only image of Soane's father in the museum, a rodent in a waistcoat. 81 shows Soane at school, studiously bent over his desk. 82 as a hod-carrier (somewhat romanticised). 84 is clearly the wedding banquet. 86 with wife and two children as if posing for a family portrait (which is shown, completed, in the background of 94). 88 and 89 show family disputes. In 88 we see the battle between patriarch and child-pretender, with the patriarch victorious. In 89 the wife dies in place of the father, and the youngest rat can be seen leaving: only the tail is visible. 90 is in mourning. 91 shows Soane Rat at the height of his creative capacity, and the structure on the right is a clear parody of Dulwich Picture Gallery. 92 shows him receiving mail, implicitly from his son begging for reconciliation. 93 shows them meeting, stand-offish. 94 completes the circle: the son is now a junior architect and the family portrait hangs in the background.

### Basement

Two locked green cupboards either side of the Soane Monument model; a third under the colonnade. While Soane never risked allowing larger animals to roam the Museum unleashed, he was happy for the smaller creatures to create a state of nature wherever they might. These cupboards were used as feed stations for (respectively) herbivores, small carnivores, insectivores. Clear evidence of termites in the last.

### Monk's Parlour

Chest of six drawers against west wall was filled with soil and probably held earthworms, for which (as is clear from the décor throughout the basement) Soane had a great fascination.

### Glossary

Lacertilia-lizards; Mecoptera-scorpionflies; Psocoptera-booklice; Siphonaptera-fleas.