

THE ELIZA TRAIL

An intimate tour through the life of Eliza Soane



SIR JOHN
SOANE'S
MUSEUM
LONDON

The Eliza Trail



Find out more about Sir John Soane's beloved wife Eliza by following this trail uncovering her presence around the Museum. This trail is produced in connection with *Dear Friend, I Can No Longer Hear Your Voice*, a film by Anne-Marie Creamer which reconstructs Eliza Soane's lost bedchamber.

The film is on display at the Soane from 9 March to 5 June 2022.

Enter the...

Library-Dining Room



Soane's wife Elizabeth or Eliza was born in 1762 in relatively humble circumstances – her father, Jonathan Smith, kept The Castle pub in Cowcross Street on the edge of Smithfield Market. Both her parents died when she was an infant and she became the ward of her uncle George Wyatt, a wealthy London builder who brought her up, and for whom, when she was older, she kept house.

It was through her uncle that in 1783 Eliza met the young architect, John Soane, who had established his architectural practice in London in 1780, after returning from two years in Italy making a Grand Tour. Soane had been trained in the office of the architect George Dance the Younger who knew George Wyatt well through their mutual City connections.

The couple married on 21 Aug 1784 at Christ Church, Blackfriars, living initially in Margaret Street in Marylebone.

Six years later in 1790, George Wyatt died and left a large portion of his considerable fortune to John and Eliza, part of which Soane used to buy and rebuild No.12 Lincoln's Inn Fields (next door), into which they moved in 1794 with their two sons John and George. Later on Soane bought and rebuilt this house, No.13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which they moved into in 1813, and which would later be left to the nation (along with numbers 12 and 14) as Sir John Soane's Museum.

Here at one end of this dining table Eliza would have presided over the many dinners the couple hosted for friends over the years, which are recorded in their diaries.

The Dining Room is dominated by a portrait of John Soane painted by Thomas Lawrence in 1828, when Soane was 75. But there is also a hidden portrait of Eliza in this room. The ceiling paintings by Henry Howard were not added until 1834 and the head of 'Night' in 'Night and the Pleiades' [[P4](#)] (above the dining table) with its surrounding crepe veil, is thought to be a portrait of the late Mrs Soane, and would originally have marked her customary seat at the table.



In the middle of the room on the right-hand side can also be seen a model of Eliza's tomb [[L78](#)].

Move through the door on the left hand side of the north wall...

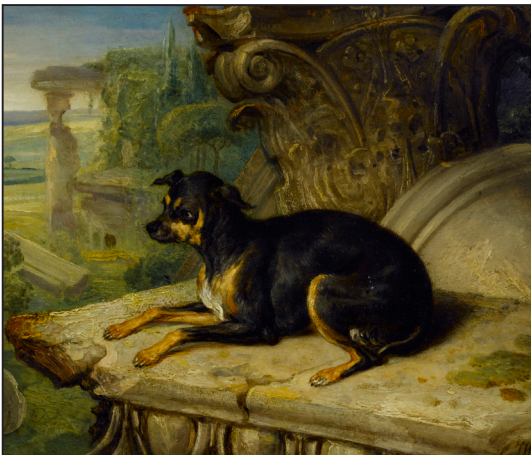
No. 13 Breakfast Room



Another tomb can be seen here – that which Soane designed following Eliza's death in 1815 [[top left, P201](#)] and in which he and their eldest son John are also buried. You can still visit it in St Pancras Gardens and it is one of only two Grade-I listed tombs in London. But it has another claim to fame - it has a very shallow-vaulted dome top which echoes the ceiling of this room, a characteristic Soane design feature. This is said to have influenced the architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott when he was designing the famous red K2 telephone box in 1924.

In this room, John and Eliza would have had breakfast at about 9.00 am – hot rolls and butter or toast and tea or coffee.

On either side of the window can be seen portraits of a small dog, to the left by Antonio van Assen [[P159](#)] and to the right by James Ward [[below left, P189](#)]. This is Fanny, a Manchester Terrier, who was Eliza's beloved lapdog. She joined the family in about 1803, and went everywhere with her mistress, including to the Kentish seaside where Eliza went for her holidays every summer. Eliza's letters home to her husband would always include news of Fanny, and on one occasion she dipped her paw into the ink so Fanny could sign the letter too. When Fanny died on Christmas Day 1820, after outliving her mistress by five years, Soane was heartbroken at the loss of the last link with his beloved wife and Fanny is buried in a tomb in one of the courtyards (the Monk's Yard) [[Vol 82/71](#)].



Head through the lobby towards the Dome Area. Enter the room to your left, behind the cast of Apollo...

Foyle Space

Pause here to watch Anne-Marie Creamer's film [Dear Friend, I Can No Longer Hear Your Voice](#), which reconstructs Eliza Soane's bedchamber. For more information, see the wall panels.

Head around the Dome Area and through the Colonnade, to the door directly ahead...

Picture Room

On the wall near the door is a portrait of Eliza [[P148](#)] painted sixteen years after her death. It was commissioned by John Soane to hang alongside his own portrait in Masonic robes, which can also be seen in this room [[P142](#)]. The portrait of Eliza is based on a sketch made around the time she married Soane. The earliest Museum inventory, 1837, notes that this is an unfinished portrait.

Return to the main stairs of no. 13, and head down. At the bottom, turn right and then left...

Front Kitchen

Climb up to the first floor. At the top of the stairs, go straight ahead...

South Drawing Room



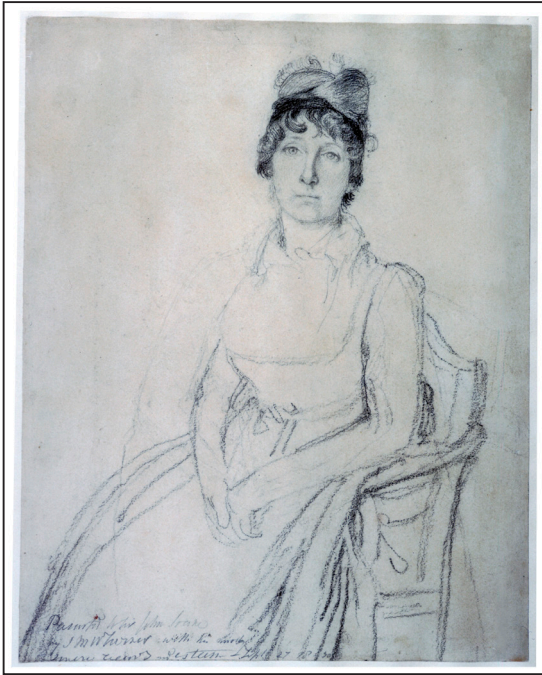
As a married woman one of Eliza's principal duties was to run the household and supervise the servants, of whom there were five – a Butler, a Footman, two Housemaids and a Cook. We know that she had a very good relationship with them – when she died in 1815 the authoress Barbara Hofland, a friend of the Soanes, described her as 'the best possible mistress to her servants, who idolized her'. There are periodic references in her diary to sending them to the theatre or to entertainments like Vauxhall Gardens. She and Soane were particularly humane to one of their housemaids, Ann Collard - when she became mentally ill in 1809, they paid for her upkeep in a private mad house (as they were then known), and many years later Soane left her an annuity in his will so that she would continue to receive care after his death.

The Drawing Rooms were where John and Eliza spent the evening after dinner, particularly when they were entertaining guests – and we can imagine lively conversation, card games (we know from her diary that Eliza enjoyed these) and music – Eliza had a pianoforte (which Soane later sold after her death). The singers Nancy Storace and John Braham were friends and perhaps there were impromptu recitals when they came to dine. Certainly there was the occasional dance – Eliza recorded in her diary on one occasion 'Mr S out of town – had a little dance'. She had a great capacity for friendship and much enjoyed social occasions – in one entry in his diary shortly before her death Soane records: 'Mrs S was in the evening at Mrs Kinderley's ... in great spirits and as usual the delight of all the party!'

Either side of the fireplace are two pole screens [[Vol 82/29](#)] to protect ladies' complexions from the heat of the fire, and we think that the panels were probably embroidered by Eliza who was a keen needlewoman.

Above hang portraits by William Owen of [above left, [P228](#)] Soane and [below left, [P229](#)] the couple's two sons, John (born 1786) and George (born 1789). When this portrait was painted in 1805, John was away at Cambridge University and is shown in his cap and gown. Sadly he died of tuberculosis in 1823, from which he had increasingly been suffering since teenage days.

George developed a habit of getting into bad debt at university and eventually found himself in debtors' prison, his parents having refused to pay off any more of the money he owed. He came out, enraged, in 1815, and wrote two articles viciously satirising Soane's architecture which were published in the *Champion* newspaper in September 1815. When Eliza saw them she is said to have said 'This is all George's doing, he has given me my death blow, I shall never hold up my head again'. She died only a few weeks later on 22 November 1815. Her



obituary in the Gentleman's Magazine makes it clear that she died from a burst gall bladder, but Soane chose to apportion all the blame to George and disinherited him, leaving the house and collections to the nation on his death in 1837, through a private Act of Parliament.

Lastly, on the window wall there is a rather charming sketch portrait of Eliza by John Flaxman [left, [P225](#)]. This was probably done in about 1800 when the couple were still living in No. 12. It only came into Soane's possession years later, in 1831 when it was given to him as a gift in celebration of his recent knighthood by his friend the artist J M W Turner, who had found it in a sale. Soane's delight in receiving it is pointed up by the inscription he hung underneath, which he adapted from a passage in Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne*: 'Dear Friend, I can no longer hear your voice – teach me what I must do to fulfil your wishes!'. This inscription gives Anne-Marie Creamer's film reconstructing Eliza's bedchamber its title.

Head downstairs from the exhibition galleries and go through the door on your right...

No. 12 Breakfast Room

We are now in No.12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, the Soanes' first house in the square. Here, you can see a watercolour by Joseph Michael Gandy showing the room in 1798 with the family at breakfast [below, [14/6/1](#)].



Tour written by
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Services

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Soane office, London: No 12
Lincoln's Inn Fields, Interior
perspective of Breakfast Room,
by J.M. Gandy. 1798.