

Register

Renovation will restore Soane's reputation for curiosity

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It is not so much its physical obscurity that makes Sir John Soane's Museum "London's best-kept secret", given that 120,000 people already find it each year, as the mysteries contained within its walls, and the £7 million renovation project now starting will reveal many more curiosities.

The pre-eminent architect of his day, Sir John Soane was also an insatiable collector, of architectural drawings for the benefit of his students (he was professor of architecture at the Royal Academy), but also the knick-knacks of art and curiosity that sparked his interest.

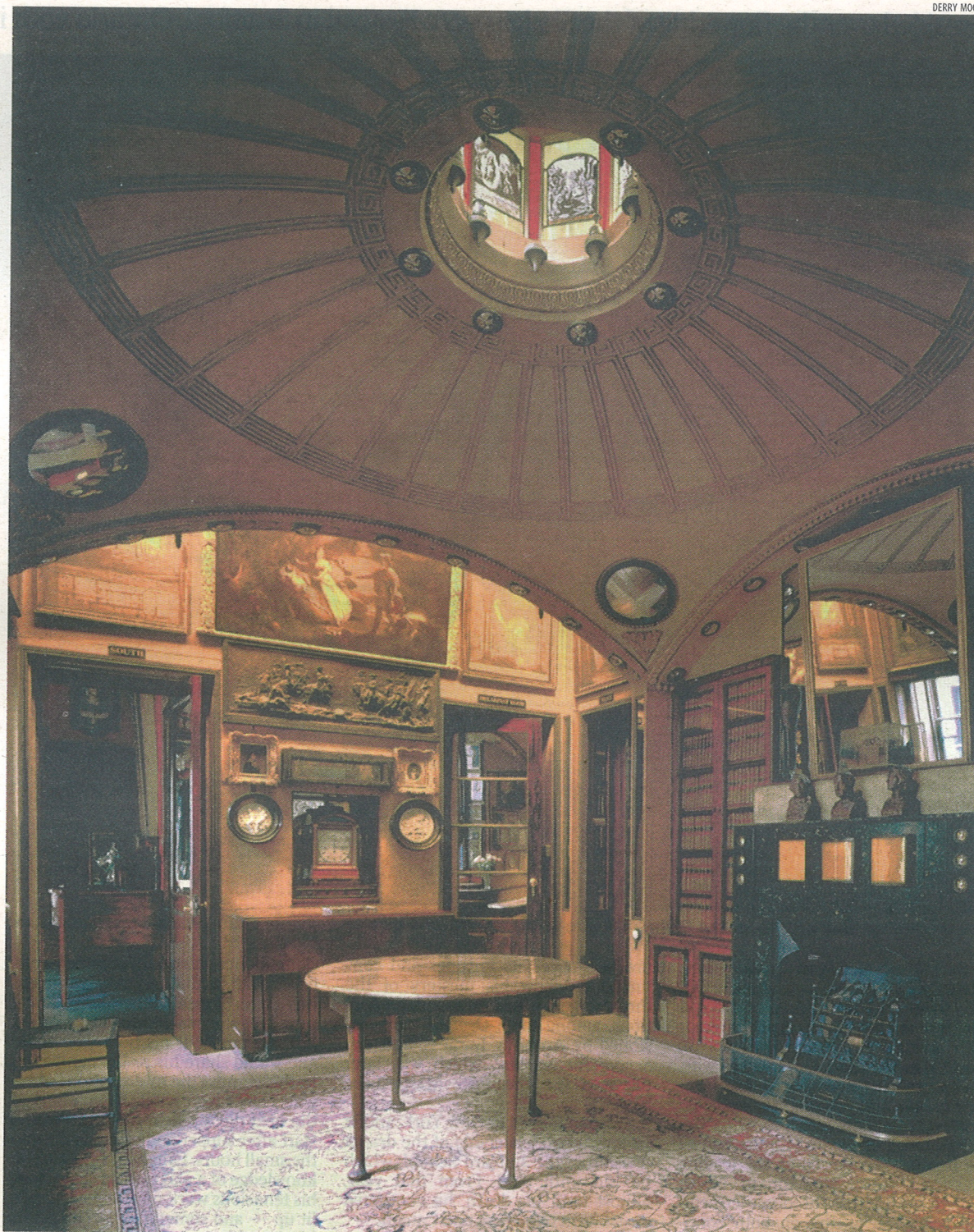
He built No 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1792 and by the time he died in 1837 had added Nos 13 and 14 to create a museum. He left them to the nation under the Act of the Settling and Preserving of Sir John Soane's Museum, with the proviso of offering free access "to Amateurs and Students in Painting, Sculpture and Architecture". He had bought antique marble sculptures, Hogarth's series *The Rake's Progress*, Canaletto's *The Grand Canal*, a 13th-century wooden boss from Westminster Abbey, a Roubilic medallion portrait of Handel, Sir Robert Walpole's desk, a Turner, a Reynolds and other paintings by friends and contemporaries, and the entire collection architectural drawings of his hero Robert Adam.

"The museum has kept everything that Soane collected," says Tim Knox, the museum's director. "We're cleaning, restoring and redisplaying hundreds of objects left to the nation, and we'll recreate the rooms and spaces that Soane carefully designed."

One of the first acts of the trustees after his death was to strip out the private apartments at the top of No 13, including Soane's bedroom and bathroom, his wife's morning room and their private oratory, to become offices.

Working to paintings of the rooms that Soane had had done in the 1820s, these rooms are all to be restored to the way he knew them, the colours and fabrics all exhaustively researched under Tim Knox. Added to that he is installing a new exhibition gallery and conservation studios, and a lift to allow full disabled access at last. The work will be completed in 2014, the anniversary of the building of No 13, and he still needs to raise £500,000. The museum will remain open for the duration of the restoration.

Over the past 160 years successive



The three-year restoration programme for Sir John Soane's Museum in Holborn, Central London, will cost £7 million

curators have added elements and made mostly discreet alterations, but at one point No 14 was sold and let. Seven years ago the museum was able to buy it back, and four years later a lease ran out so that it came under the director's control. Now it gives the museum the space to return to Soane's vision once again. The restorers have been helped by a chance discovery on the shelves of the British Library ten years ago of a book of 144 prints, drawings and watercolours devoted to the buildings closest to Soane's heart, including his home.

A small toilet is being returned to the use Soane had given it as a small sculpture gallery, and a room added in the later 19th century is to become a "cabinet of curiosities" with some of the oddities Soane had, such as the brooch Charles I wore at Naseby, Mrs Soane's jewelled gloves, and a mummy's head. The house is full of architectural invention, and the light channels running from the roof he used to illuminate the

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interiors are being restored. A hitherto undiscovered basement tunnel has been found and will provide a new link between storage space for the collection and a new court.

One of Soane's greatest delights was his picture gallery, an ingenious small salon which is enlarged by screens folding out of the walls revealing more and more pictures, of varying quality. All 12 paintings of *The Rake's Progress* are concealed under one fold; on the opposite wall the screens fold out twice to reveal a recess which contains the model of the building Soane considered his masterpiece, the Bank of England, which was demolished in 1937.

Pride of place goes to the Canaletto, and above it, barely visible, is a small undistinguished painting of *A Hen Defending Her Chickens*. The artist is Sir Francis Bourgeois, who commissioned Soane to design the Dulwich Picture Gallery, and the genial Sir John acquired it as a gesture to his friend rather than an example of Georgian fine art. "Some of them are works of art, some of them are just curiosities, some of them are really rather dull," says Simon Jervis, chairman of the Soane and former director of the Fitzwilliam Museum. "But they're all Soane."