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Sir John Soane's Museum project aims to restore original design

By Ed Sexton

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FEATURE



Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. Picture courtesy Sir John Soane's Museum

A £6 million project has been launched to return the Sir John Soane's Museum back to the great architect's original designs for the 100,000 visitors who explore the unique London venue every year.

The Opening up the Soane project covers the three properties designed by Soane at 12, 13 and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, and will improve access and open areas of the museum never been seen by the public before.

Soane established the house as a Museum in an 1833 Act of Parliament and asked that the museum, in number 13, should be "kept as nearly as possible" in the state in which he left it.

However, the following years saw various rooms changed to make way for offices and staff accommodation. Now, following the restoration of number 14, number 13 is to be returned to its original layout.



Museum Director Tim Knox with the mummified cats at the Museum he chose for Culture24's Curator's Choice. Picture courtesy Sir John Soane's Museum

The museum is hopeful the work at number 13 will be completed by 2012, the 200th anniversary of the building of the house.

"Soane realised that his sons were not interested in following his calling, which he saw as tragic. He decided to leave his house to a trust to be opened as a museum," says Museum Director Tim Knox.

"On his death, number 14 was sold for the benefit of his son and grandchildren, as he felt they should get something even though he didn't particularly like any of them. Number 12 was let out as income for the museum and in 1967 the trustees decided to make use of the house. Number 14 was acquired later."



Some of the Museum's vast collection in The Dome Area. Picture courtesy Sir John Soane's Museum.

The historically-significant museum needs financial backing to help get the mission completed by 2012.

"We have spent three years working on the plans and have now come up



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with a scheme which will make more of the museum available to the public, giving access to areas that the public have never seen before," says Knox.

"The entrance hall of number 13 will be restored back to how it would have looked in Soane's day – the hats, coats and general museum clobber will be moved to number 12, where there will be a cloakroom.

"This will help improve circulation, and we are keen that visitors will still enter through the front door of number 12. That will mean a short dash outside, but you will enter the house exactly as Soane would have done."

Disabled access will be improved with a simple scissor lift granting access to the lower ground floor of number 12, where a new lift will be built in an existing lift shaft. The lift will have to open in three different ways across four separate floors, which Knox admits will "take some planning".

The Breakfast Room. Picture courtesy Sir John Soane's Museum



Staff also face the daunting task of returning Soane's complex and occasionally cluttered interiors back to their original designs.

"There are detailed inventories from curators during Soane's time and a detailed inventory was carried out when the house became a museum, so we can place around 90 per cent of the objects," explains Knox.

The current gift shop will be moved, a picture room will be reinstated and a mirrored bookcase will be placed behind the statue of Cupid, closing off the picture room and reflecting Cupid's backside.

"We also have a series of the pictures which offer further detail on how the rooms were laid out and what colour they would have been. Research is being carried out to find the original colours of the rooms to be restored," adds Knox. "This is all part of the detective work of getting his things back to the way they once were."



The Drawing Room. Picture courtesy Sir John Soane's Museum

Despite missing out on Heritage Lottery Fund support, Knox remains confident the Museum will get the backing it needs to carry out the ambitious project, and reckons around half of the funding has already been secured.

"Some backers are waiting for news of the HLF bid that will come through in March next year, but I am confident that someone will come forward with the money," he says.

"We will be giving the Museum a new lease of life. This is a permanent change, not just an exhibition that will be switched after a year, so the project represents good value and I know Soane would approve," he muses.

"It may not be large and trendy, but this most British and eccentric of all house museums has a very special place in the hearts of all who know it. It's one of Britain's best-kept secrets."

Referenced venues

SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM
13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BP, England

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