



ENGLISH DESIGN GREATS
Sir John Soane

With their dramatic interplay of light and space,
the interiors of Sir John Soane continue to be an
inspiration to architects and designers the world over



PREVIOUS PAGE Soane erected his first ever domed ceiling inside Chillingworth Hall in Staffordshire, a feature that would later become his trademark. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT in Chillingworth Hall's elegant dining room, visitors are watched by family portraits of the owners of old; in the Hall's impressive saloon, light enters the room in dramatic shafts through the elliptical dome; Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire boasts one of Soane's boldest and most exuberant interiors, the Yellow Drawing Room; Soane favoured unbroken views through arched, open doorways, as at Wimpole.



PORTRAIT OF AN ARCHITECT

Sir John Soane was born in 1753 and despite a basic education, he showed early promise. At the age of 15, he was sent to London to work in the architectural office of George Dance the Younger. From there he moved to the office of Henry Holland and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who were at that time involved in a number of important country house commissions. His apprenticeship was supplemented by studies at the Royal Academy where, in 1776, his work won

him a travelling scholarship to Rome.

The trip stood him in good stead, for during it, he attracted the attention of many young aristocrats who, on their return to England, employed him to alter and extend their country houses. In 1788, he won his most prestigious commission to date, when he was appointed as architect to the Bank of England. A number of important public projects followed, including the Royal gallery and library at the House of Lords, the law courts at Westminster and the Privy Council offices at Whitehall. Sadly, many of these have since been destroyed or radically altered but, thanks to Soane's foresight of architectural preservation orders, his own house at Lincoln's Inn Fields has remained largely unchanged and stands as testament to his talent and creativity.

Soane was knighted in 1831 and died in 1837, aged 84. He is buried next to St Pancras Old Church in a tomb he designed himself and which, as another claim to fame, was the inspiration behind the iconic red telephone box.

Sir John Soane was born the son of a bricklayer but died a knight. He was knighted for his architectural achievements. His rise through the ranks of society was due to a combination of talent and clever manoeuvring, for he was quick to see the disadvantages of a humble birth. As soon as he was able, he changed his name from Swan to Soan, later adding the 'e' and acquiring a coat of arms. Yet, what proved the making of him was a travelling scholarship which he won while a student at the Royal Academy and which he used to embark upon a tour of Italy.

His time in Rome allowed him to gather architectural inspiration and threw him in the path of aristocratic Grand Tourists who, with their newly acquired works of art, would soon be looking to improve and extend their grand residences.

The country house commissions Soane won on his return allowed him to build a portfolio of work and establish his own architectural practice. However, he was



keen to move on to bigger and better things, envisaging himself as an architect of public monuments in the grand classical manner. He went on to design many such buildings, in particular the Bank of England, the Privy Council Chamber in Whitehall and the New Law Courts in Westminster. Although, he is best admired for his more private interior spaces, which, with their inventive use of space, clever play of light and pleasing symmetry, are among the most celebrated works in the history of architecture.

CHILLINGTON HALL

Soane used his early country house commissions to test ideas and develop his architectural style. One of these was Chillington Hall in Staffordshire whose owner, Thomas Giffard, employed Soane in 1786 to modernise and extend the existing building. In the process, Soane designed his first ever top-lit room, a feature that was later to become something of a trademark. It had its genesis though as a purely practical

solution to a problem: an impressive new saloon was to be built within the old medieval hall but the windows had been masked by Soane's extension. The only answer was to illuminate it from above, which Soane did by means of an elliptical domed ceiling rising to an elegant oval roof light, through which light enters the room in dramatic shafts.

Elsewhere in the house Soane introduced a graceful sequence of reception rooms, with each room opening onto the next via a series of arched doorways. It provides a beautiful unbroken vista. This architectural device of creating interesting internal 'views' was to become another prominent theme for Soane. He became a master at creating theatrical spaces and opening up unexpected perspectives.

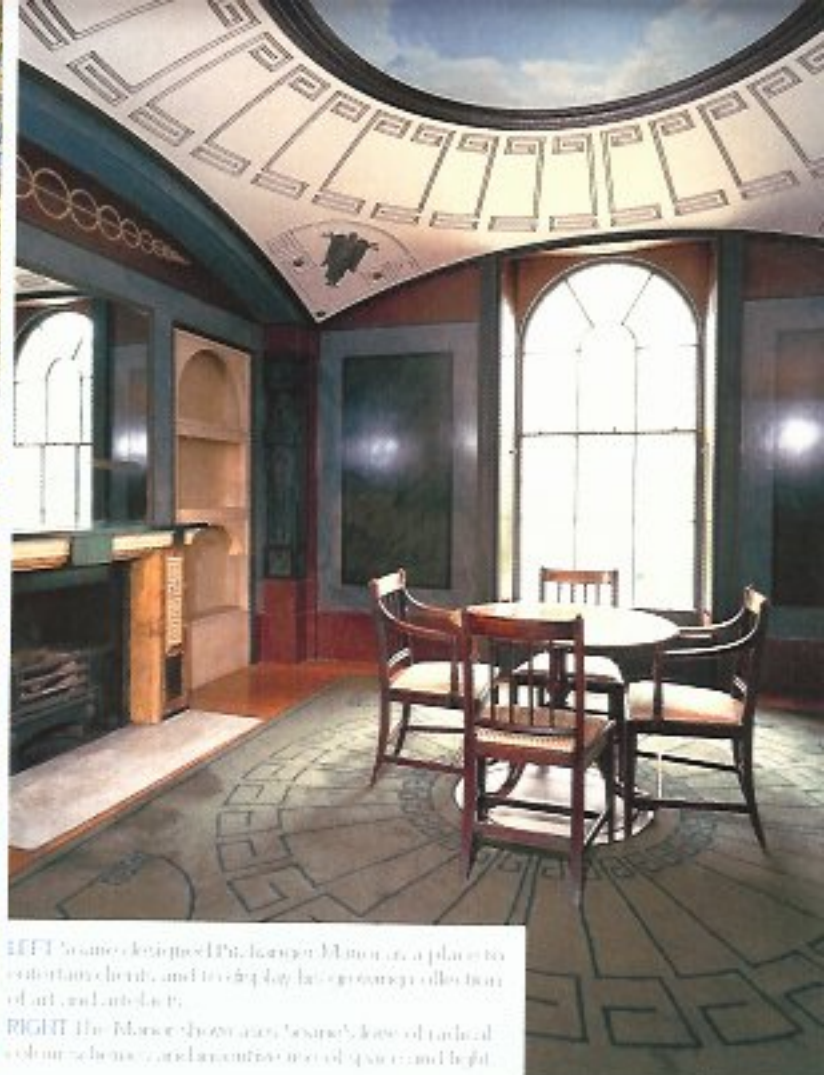
Chillington Hall, Codsall Wood, Wolverhampton WV8 1RE. Tel 01902 850236. www.chillingtonhall.co.uk. House open Easter weekend, May bank holiday Sundays and Mondays, Sundays in July, and

Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays (and bank holiday Monday) in August 2009. 2pm to 5pm. Adults, £6, children, £3.

WIMPOLE HALL

One of Soane's most important patrons, Philip Yorke, encountered the architect in Naples. Upon doing so he wrote to his uncle to say he had met 'an ingenious young man'. When Yorke inherited an Earldom in 1790 and, with it, Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire, he summoned Soane to transform the estate. The ambitious, sophisticated Earl was keen to breathe new life into the interiors which he found dull and traditional. He also wanted to create a space suitable for staging country balls and concerts.

Without altering Wimpole's pristine, symmetrical exterior, Soane totally rearranged the internal space to make way for a vast double height drawing room. This involved not only the removal of the service staircase on the ground floor but also several bedrooms on the first floor. ▶



LEFT Scame designed Pitzhanger Manor as a place to entertain clients and to display his ever-growing collection of art and artefacts.
RIGHT The Music Room at Pitzhanger Manor, a place of radical colour schemes and a contrast of light and dark.

which was then totally reshuffled to provide adequate accommodation. The resulting Yellow Drawing Room is one of Scame's boldest and most exuberant country house interiors and was inspired by a mid-sixteenth century villa he had visited in Rome. Scame also revisited the use of top-lighting this space, this time via a circular lantern which overlooks the large T-shaped room. With its domes, arches and apses, the room is almost church-like in appearance, the fireplace acting as an 'alter' at the head of a central 'nave'.

Having satisfied his patron's desire for a dramatic entertaining space, Scame set his mind to a very different task: the remodelling of Wimpole's farm. The Earl, a keen agriculturalist, wanted to be at the cutting edge of modern developments whilst retaining a picturesque vision of the rural farm. Thus, the latest machinery was housed in timber-clad thatched barns and built in a style to reflect the local vernacular. Scame's design still forms the core of Wimpole's farm, providing a

suitably rarefied home to the rare breeds of cattle, sheep, pigs and horses that live there today.

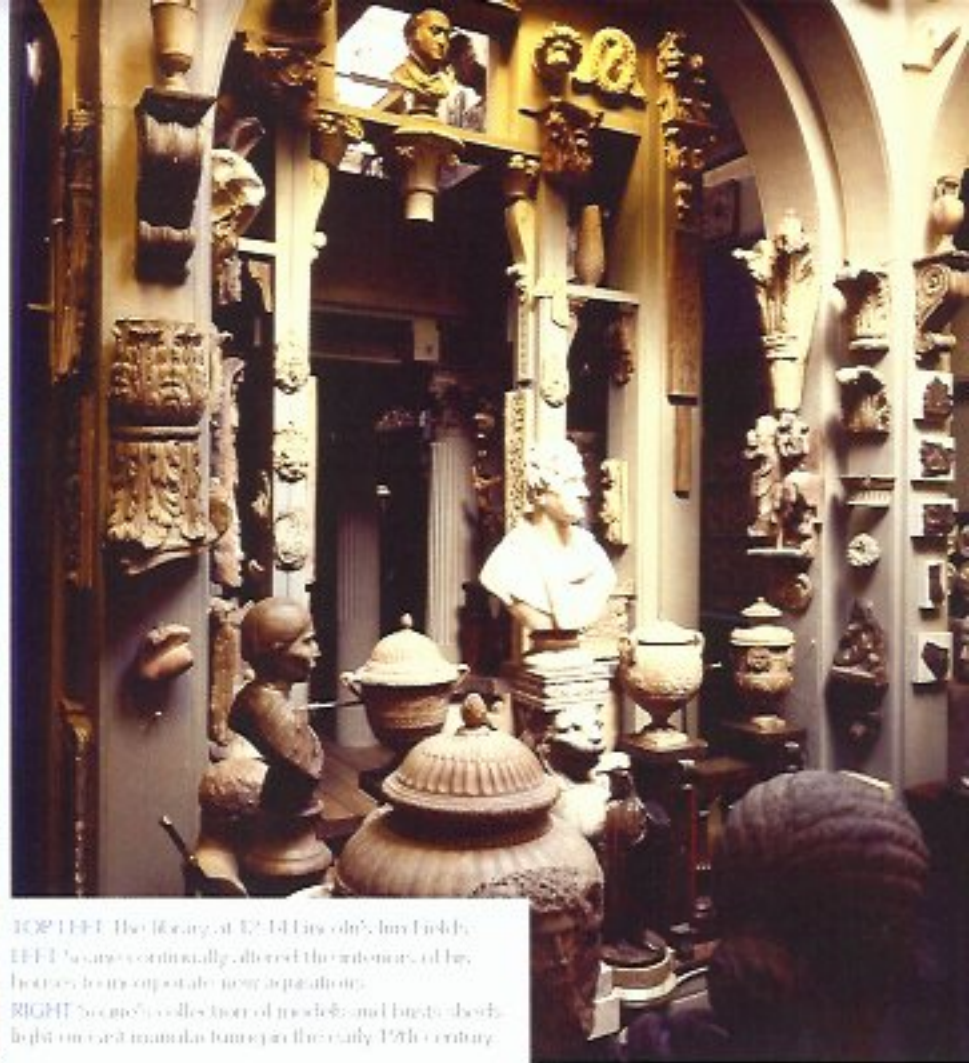
Wimpole Hall, Arrington, Royston, Cambridgeshire SG8 0BW. Tel 01223 206000. www.nationaltrust.org.uk. Hall open from 28 February until 1 November 2009, from Saturday to Wednesday, and on Thursdays from 18 July until 27 August, 10.30am to 5pm. Adults, £8.80, children, £4.95, prices for the farm, garden and estate vary. Visit the website for more details.

PITZHANGER MANOR

Scame, ever the self-improver, also harboured a desire to be a landowner. When his wife Eliza inherited a considerable sum from her uncle in 1790, that dream became an achievable reality. The legacy enabled him to buy a London townhouse, 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields and, six years later, he complemented this with a house in the country. Pitzhanger Manor in Ealing, then a quiet village a few miles from the capital, was already well known

to Scame who, as a 15-year-old apprentice, had assisted in its extension. His plan was to demolish the property and build a new house in his own style, but he retained this eighteenth century addition, wanting to keep a memento of his training.

Scame designed Pitzhanger as a place to entertain clients and display his ever-growing collection of art and artefacts as well as proclaim his social status. Yet his main intention was that it should inspire his two sons, John and George, to follow him into architecture. In that respect, the project was a failure. George, a wayward young man, showed no inclination towards the profession and in 1815, published a vicious attack on his father's work, upon which Scame was blamed for his wife's early death. The elder son, John, was less troublesome but still a disappointment to Scame. Despite the advantages of a Cambridge education and a trip to Italy, he showed little interest in architecture. In 1810, Scame admitted defeat and sold Pitzhanger. Returning 10 years later, he wrote in his diary, 'walked



TOP LEFT The library at 12-14 Lincoln's Inn Fields. LEFT Soane continually altered the interiors of his houses to incorporate new acquisitions. RIGHT Soane's collection of masks and busts, mostly light-colored marbles from the early 19th century.

round poor Ealing. O John, John: what has idleness cost you.'

Soane's dream may have been shattered but Pitzhanger—a remarkable architectural achievement—lived on through a succession of owners. In 1901 it was bought by Ealing District Council, initially as a home for the local lending library. However, since 1985 when the library moved to other premises, the council have been restoring the interiors to their original splendour. The Manor now operates as a cultural venue and contemporary art gallery.

Pitzhanger Manor Gallery and House, Waldpole Park, Mattock Lane, London W5 5EQ. Tel 020 8567 1227. www.ealing.gov.uk. Open Tuesday to Friday, 1 to 5pm, and Saturday, 11am to 5pm. Free entry.

12-14 LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS
Soane bought his London townhouse, 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, in 1792. Although located in the middle of a terrace, he

demolished the existing house and rebuilt it to his own specifications to serve as both home and office. However, his growing collection of architectural artefacts soon necessitated more space and, in 1807, he bought the neighbouring property, no 13. A sitting tenant prevented him from occupying the property immediately but he converted the stable block into a 'museum'. He was, by this time, Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy and in order that his students should benefit from his impressive collection of books, casts, models and drawings he opened his house for their use the day before and the day after each of his lectures. Soane went on collecting his whole life, continually altering the interiors to incorporate new acquisitions. In 1825, he threw a three-day party to celebrate his most important purchase, an ancient Egyptian alabaster tomb. Among the 900 invited guests were the current Prime Minister, Robert Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool, along with artist

J.M.W. Turner and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, both key cultural figures of the Romantic Movement.

As he grew older, Soane's designs became increasingly quirky. In 1823, at the age of 70, he purchased a third house in the terrace, no 14, turning the outside space into a romantic gothic courtyard laid with bottle tops and bottoms. Such unexpected delights lie around almost every corner. With their interconnecting, labyrinthine interiors, the three houses are fully expressive of what Soane called "the poetry of architecture".

Before he died, Soane negotiated an Act of Parliament to preserve the house and its collection and, to this day, it remains a place of pilgrimage and inspiration to architecture students and enthusiasts the world over.

Sir John Soane's Museum, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3BP. Tel 020 7405 2107. www.soane.org. Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 5pm, also first Tuesday of the month, 6 to 9pm. Free entry. ■

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