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Soane salvation

Wotton House, Buckinghamshire

The home of Mr David Gladstone

The latest transformation of a great house has re-created a spectacular staircase hall. Will Palin reports on the dream, pursuit and realisation of a lost Soane masterpiece

Photographs by Paul Barker

RESPLENDENT behind wrought-iron gates and embraced by its pretty, square, red-brick pavilions, Wotton, Buckinghamshire, exudes confidence and metropolitan grandeur (**Fig 1**). Built for Richard Grenville between 1704 and 1714, its architect remains unknown. Despite the timelessness of its outward appearance, Wotton's fortunes have fluctuated dramatically over the past two centuries. It was almost lost not once, but twice, and has repeatedly found salvation at the hands of dedicated and determined custodians.

In 1820, Wotton was devastated by fire, the interior of the house, including the celebrated staircase with murals by James Thornhill, was entirely destroyed. The then owner, the Duke of Buckingham, at once set about its rescue, engaging his friend, the architect Sir John Soane, to build a new house within the shell of the early-18th-century mansion he so loved. Soane fulfilled his brief admirably, his one minor act of rebellion being to reduce the height of the house, adjusting its proportions to suit his Classical sensibilities.

A thorough makeover in the 1920s subsequently obscured Soane's legacy—his delicate, abstracted Classical detailing and the complex spatial forms either replaced or concealed as part of a remodelling by the architect A. S. G. Butler for the then owner Michael Beaumont. Butler's high-

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quality work took its cue from the Baroque beginnings of the house, introducing chunky Vanbrughian doorcases, cornices and chimneypieces in violent contrast to Soane's refined neo-Classicism. It is worth remembering that, at this time, Soane's architecture was not held in high regard; the antipathy towards his work reached a tragic climax with the destruction, from 1925, of his masterpiece, the

Bank of England—an event that, paradoxically, shocked the establishment into reappraising his work and helped revive his reputation.

By the 1950s, the house was again in danger. Empty,

decaying and facing imminent destruction, it was rescued by the remarkable Elaine Brunner, who undertook her own heroic restoration project, initially under the guidance of Donald Insall. She aimed to restore the Soane interiors, but adopted a pragmatic approach to the removal of Butler's work. In the Saloon, for example, the north and south Butler doorcases were retained and the door to the entrance hall was stripped back to its simple Soane moulding.

Elsewhere, as with Soane's north-south spine corridor, the restorers could afford to be more thoroughgoing. This passageway was a Soane innovation, linking all three staircases (**Fig 6**), freeing up the circulation of the house and allowing apartments on the north side to be accessed by a side door. Its unmasking restored one of the most delightful features of Soane's house, providing striking vistas enlivened by a series of arched openings, an ingenious perspective device that ➤

Fig 1: The imposing central block of the house is flanked to either side by pavilions, now in separate ownership



Soane had employed in a number of other projects, including the Bank of England, Dulwich Picture Gallery and Aynhoe Park.

When April and David Gladstone (Mrs Brunner's daughter and son-in-law) inherited the house in 1998, they continued the restoration work by taking on a major room a year, using a small team of trusted local craftsmen under the supervision of the estate manager, Michael Harrison. This way, costs were kept under control, quality was maintained and new skills could be developed on the job. The immaculate and extensive re-graining of Soane's doors, shutters, arches and wainscoting is evidence of how well this in-house

‘Soane surely would have approved,’

training programme has worked. In this case, it was down to one local decorator who had learned the skill in his far-off apprentice days and was able to pass on the technique to other members of the team.

Wotton celebrated its tercentenary in 2004, when it found itself the subject of a special exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum in London. The exhibition explored Soane's remodelling

of the house after the fire in 1820, bringing together drawings and letters from the Museum archives in an effort to piece together both the story of the commission and a sense of how the house would have appeared after Soane—an architect of striking originality—had completed his work.

At the time of the tercentenary, there was one grand project that remained unrealised. At heart of the house—and at the centre of Soane's re-planned interior—was a majestic, top-lit staircase hall, or ‘tribune’ (Fig 3).

This was one of the architect's signature motifs. He had played with the idea at his house and Museum at Lincoln's Inn Fields and at the Pitt

Fig 2 left:
The first-floor landing, with its theatrical recessions of plane

Fig 3 right:
A view of the tribune showing the dome and its central oculus





Memorial in the long demolished National Debt Redemption Office. The surviving drawings for Wotton's tribune show Soane working on a grander scale and grappling with the problem of reconciling a rectangular plan with a circular dome above without losing symmetry, something he solved with characteristic brilliance.

Filled in by Butler in the 1920s following a structural failure, and with no complete record of its original appearance, the tribune remained mysterious—and any chance of its reinstatement slight. However, one small but important step was taken in 2004, when the architect Ptolemy

Dean produced a watercolour reconstruction based on the few surviving Soane plans and elevations (*COUNTRY LIFE*, May 14, 2004). The resulting drawing was revelatory—at last, the tribune's complex spatial form could be analysed and understood. Furthermore, Mr Dean's view provided valuable information on the physical construction of the space. For Mr Gladstone, this watercolour kept the dream alive.

Mr Dean—acting as project architect—then produced more detailed designs, but the cost of implementing the scheme still seemed prohibitively high. Mr Gladstone remained unperturbed, however, and, in discussion with Mr Harrison, devised a phased

approach, so the work could be tackled in bite-sized chunks over a period of several years. The idea would be to keep the workforce to a minimum and, if possible, to avoid expensive items such as full-height scaffolding. Starting in 2010, the core team included J. & S. Dearn (demolition), John Blaine and Brian Jones (plastering and decoration) and Richard Jeffery (carpentry), with specialist timberwork by Conifer Joinery. Mr Harrison himself undertook most of the decorative plasterwork and ironwork.

His wife's death in 2013 only served to strengthen Mr Gladstone's resolve and give renewed urgency to the project—which he now saw as ➤



a way to honour April's memory. Work began that year, under the supervision of Mr Harrison. His team worked from the top down, first reconstructing the upper dome, with the distinctive ring of plaster honeysuckle motifs, termed acroteria, at its base. Sadly, the originals had been lost, but using Soane's drawings and examples sourced at the Soane Museum, these Grecian details were re-created. The same process of information gathering allowed Sarah Mayfield to model and cast another of Soane's favourite details, the winged angels used for the spandrels of the dome (**Fig 5**).

As the team descended to gallery level, they were faced with the challenging task of reconstructing both the pier supports—which, rising from the corners of a rectangle to form a square above, appear to defy the rules of geometry—and also the gallery itself, which had failed structurally. All the decorative work, including the wood graining, was executed from tower scaffold and ladders before the blocked gallery floor was removed.

Whenever he reached an impasse, Mr Harrison would go back to the original Soane drawings, where there was usually a clue to unlock the problem. He talks of the project team 'feeling their way' at each stage, taking cues from surviving architecture and using an intuitive understanding of Soane's work developed from years

‘Whenever an impasse was reached, the original Soane drawings usually unlocked the problem’

of experience of working on his Wotton interiors. This instinct for what Soane himself would have done meant that small deviations from the original scheme, such as the substitution of simple iron stick balusters for the Tjhou-esque wrought-iron panels shown in Soane's drawings, do not disturb the eye.

The final phase of work involved the opening up of the gallery at first-floor level, the reinstatement of the hanging heraldic Gothic 'canopy' and the re-creation and redecoration of the ground-floor elevations of the hall. The remaking of the canopy was aided by the discovery, by Mr Harrison, of the original shields, which Elaine Brunner had stored in the attic (**Fig 4**). The acorn pendants were copied from examples at the Sir John Soane's Museum. At ground level, the plaster rustication (a favoured Soane wall treatment) and the extensive wood graining unite

Fig 4 above left: **The heraldic panels are painted on canvas and survived to be reinstated in the restored tribune**

Fig 5 above right: **One of the new winged angels in the angles of the dome. Its face is modelled on that of the late April Gladstone, in whose memory the tribune has been restored**

Fig 6 facing page: **The tribune opens off the central corridor running through the width of the house**

to form a sumptuous visual springing point for the glories above.

Completed in April this year, Wotton's restored tribune is a triumph. Mr Harrison and his small team, under the guidance of Mr Dean, have demonstrated that with skill, care, patience and scrupulous attention to detail, it is possible to re-create even the most enigmatic and intricate interiors from very limited records. And it has been achieved in a refreshingly uncomplicated (and old-fashioned) way. No big contract, no squabbles over costs and programme and no heavy-handed engineering solutions. Soane surely would have approved.

As a piece of architecture, the tribune all but defies description. In common with Soane's best work, it employs an array of theatrical and picturesque effects (including hidden light sources and structural trickery) to engage, delight and disorientate (**Fig 2**). The complexity is heightened by the interweaving staircase, which, on its exciting upwards journey, peeps out through dissolved areas of wall, affording glimpses of the hall below.

As a contribution to Soane's legacy, the reinstatement of Wotton's tribune ranks with the superb recent restoration of Soane's private apartments at 13, Lincoln's Inn Fields (*COUNTRY LIFE*, July 15, 2015). It is a heroic gesture on the part of Mr Gladstone, whose determination, courage and vision have driven this project to completion. 

