

Sir John Soane and Freemasonry: a Reassessment from the Original Sources

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A brief synopsis of the paper

Much has been made of Sir John Soane's relationship with Freemasonry over the years. Masonic historians have delighted at having found a figure who is both an architect and a Freemason and thus who provides a potential link between the operative side of building design and the craft of speculative Freemasonry. Barely a year goes by without the Soane Museum getting an enthusiastic letter from a visiting Freemason who gets carried away having seen the Museum with all the Masonic symbolism he or she has allegedly perceived within it. Yet as we shall see such an approach is entirely misguided and although Soane may have an Egyptian sarcophagus and skeletons hanging in the Museum and may have held candlelit evenings to show them off, the links are not nearly as straightforward as many conclude and indeed the conclusions drawn are almost always entirely wrong.

Architectural historians have also been guilty of taking Soane's interest at face value and sometimes, of reading too much into it; of jumping to conclusions about Soane's relationship with the Craft that the facts simply do not support. Many have simply ignored it. There has been a definite tendency for the mention of Freemasonry to be avoided in architectural history and seen as a topic that is either something that is in some way distasteful or only studied by conspiracy theorists and as a result, with a few

notable exceptions, the relationship of Freemasonry and architecture in the 18th and 19th century has been and continues to be largely ignored and where it has been studied those studies have often been untrustworthy in scholarship and inaccurate in interpretation.



For the last two years, I have spent a considerable amount of my time in the Soane Museum as a Visiting Scholar cataloguing the drawings that chart Soane's fascinating and often uneasy relationship with the Freemasons and cross-referencing them with the various letters, contracts, diaries and drawings that survive there and elsewhere in Library and Museum of Freemasons' Hall, in the Victoria and Albert Museum and in the private records of the Lodge of which he was a member. This is an ongoing task which I hope to complete around Easter 2020 and thus this is a synopsis and report of a work in progress on the final paper that will appear in its full printed and properly annotated version in AQC in October 2020. The reason for the delay is that there are more letters and diary entries than I expected and it is taking me longer to go through them than I hoped. However these incredible sources enable us to revisit the fascinating story of Soane and Freemasonry with a more critical eye and, as I will show, the picture it reveals is not the one that previous accounts have led us to believe.

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Soane was first approached in early 1813 by the Freemasons when he was 60 years old and already a very famous architect. His first commission was mundane — to provide advice and guidance on the possible purchase of neighbouring properties. The time was immediately before the Union and it was through his contact with the Duke of Sussex, the Grandmaster of the Moderns, and future Grand master of the United Grand Lodge, that he seems to have been persuaded to join Freemasonry. When the Duke found out that he was not a mason the situation was immediately put right. Interestingly the Lodge that was chosen for him was Lodge No. 1 of the Antients' Grand Lodge, titled the Grand Master's Lodge, and his proposer was Thomas Harper the Deputy Grandmaster of the Antients and a key figure in the Union. The survival of Soane's apron and Harper's receipt for it gives us interesting evidence of the extent to which Harper was providing regalia as well as his better known jewels to Masons in the period. Soane received all three degrees in one day and found himself promoted to Grand Superintendent of Works in short order and was immediately involved in the preparation for the ceremony of the Union which was to be held in Freemason's Hall. As both I, and Douglas Burford, have discussed elsewhere, it was Soane who produced the design and organised the construction of the Ark in time for the ceremony, which Soane attended and in which he played a part. Unfortunately he was struck down with illness on the evening and for the following few months incapacitated until he was successfully operated on. However he was also involved in two projects that have gone un-noticed in the following year. The first was the production of a new pedestal for the centre of the Grand Master's Lodge (the new Lodge No.1). As far as we know this has not survived but its production throws an interesting light on the role of central pedestals in Antient's Lodges before the Union, which almost certainly disappeared in reforms of the ceremonies that followed (although that is a point that certainly deserves more research). There also remain a series of enigmatic drawings which were thought to be designs for dressing the Freemason's Hall for the ceremony of the Union but which I now believe were Soane's contribution to a call for designs for new Grand Lodge Certificates.

The next few years were difficult for Soane in many ways. He fell out with his son and his wife died. Some have speculated that the stress caused by the tensions between father and son hastened her death. Soane was distraught. During this period he continued to work as his practice became increasingly busy. Soane did much of the work himself aided by a two or three pupils and assistants. Before the Union he had advised the Grand Secretary not to buy the houses next to the tavern which had been offered for sale. When the offer was refused the freeholder had demanded the kitchens for the Tavern be removed from the rear garden of one of the houses and so one of Soane's first jobs was to move the kitchens in to the basement of the existing Tavern. We have the drawings showing how he ingenuously created a two-storey kitchen in the bottom of the cramped tavern without rebuilding the whole building. He had only just completed this task when the houses were put up for auction and Soane arranged for a bidder to successfully bid for them, putting up the money himself. There followed an awkward period when —as Ric Berman has previously noted — it became apparent that the United Grand Lodge did not have the money to pay Soane back and indeed it was many years before they could afford to do so.

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If we trace Soane's involvement in Freemasonry in this period we can see the pattern emerging that was to continue for the rest of his life. I have searched the records of the Grand Master's Lodge and these reveal that Soane stopped attending shortly after the Union and never attended again, although he remained a member for the rest of his life. Likewise despite being a Grand Officer, searches of the records have shown that Soane only attended Grand Lodge 6 times in 24 years. This is important because, as I will show, it destroys both the current historical opinion that Freemasonry was important to Soane as a source emotional support after the death of his wife and that he had a deep understanding and appreciation of its symbolism and love of its ritual. Indeed everything as I will show points to precisely the reverse: that Soane had virtually no understanding of Masonic ritual or symbolism and did everything he could to avoid attending meetings, politely replying to repeated invitations to grand dinners that he was too busy to attend. Even those Committees he was on, he rarely bothered to attend. What does become clear is that instead he chose to work directly with the Grand Secretary and much more importantly with the Duke of Sussex and that Soane would meet with them regularly and agree designs which were only later presented to others and ultimately to Grand Lodge to be rubber stamped. This method of working suited Soane on two levels. Firstly it meant that he did not have to deal with tiresome committees, he only had to persuade one person. Secondly, it gave him direct and regular contact with a Royal Duke, which he found flattering and enjoyed. The correspondence suggests that the feeling was mutual.

I have been able to show that following the purchase of the neighbouring houses, Soane produced a number of designs for a new Temple (with a kitchen below) for Grand Lodge behind these houses beside the old Freemasons' Hall designed by Thomas Sandby but for lack of funds these could not be acted upon and were abandoned. I have been able to show that these were previously wrongly dated because many years later Soane presented them again and simply changed the dates. The first works that Soane actually got to carry out after the creation of the kitchens (1814-1819) mentioned above were to do with the repairs required to the roof of Sandby's Hall and its staircase that was on the verge of collapse (1821-24). Through a careful examination of the drawings I can show that Soane took the opportunity to completely remodel the interior of Sandby's Hall and the staircase that led to it. This included moving the organ to an organ loft and creating a proper setting for the enormous Grand Master's throne which had been made for the Prince of Wales (now in the Museum) in its place. He also arranged the first hanging of portraits in the Hall. All of these fittings would later be destroyed in the fire but they appear in various engravings of the time.

By 1824 finances were recovering, Soane had been paid for the houses and for his work done but attempts to buy further neighbouring properties had fallen through. Attention again turned to creation of a magnificent new Temple or Lodge Room behind the two houses Soane had purchased. Soane and his assistants began to produce schemes after scheme with Soane rushing off to show them to the Duke as regular intervals and obviously both men were excited by the project and its possibilities. The minutiae of the discussions are for an architectural history which I hope to write in the future and for the online catalogue which hopefully will go live this summer. For this paper what is particularly interesting is how Soane wrestles with a very compact site and the problems

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of producing a large room on it. What become apparent is that early on Soane was told that the Master's chair had to be placed in the East. This was the shorter axis and seems to have controlled all the initial layouts and plans and perspectives survive showing it in this position. Then comparatively late in the design sequence everyone seems to have realised that this was impossible and the chair was swung round to the longer axis but by this time much of the work had actually been built and the project was compromised as a result. This story is apparent through the drawings. The decoration is also revealed and what is clear is the extent to which is singularly lacking in any Masonic reference. Far from being deeply Masonic, the decoration simply follows the same patterns Soane commonly used elsewhere. Nevertheless the result was, as I shall show, an ingenious interior. It was completed right at the end of Soane's life. Despite the fact that he was living round the corner he did not attend the opening dinner (the Duke sent him note thanking him), nor did he come to the Ball held in his honour when he received the RIBA Gold Medal when he was in his eighties. He did have the painting made of himself sitting in the regalia he borrowed for the occasion from Grand Lodge and we have a letter some months later reminding him of the need for its return.

The story of Soane and the Freemasons is thus not the one we have been led to believe. It is tempting to suggest that perhaps Soane may have initially hoped to find some spiritual side to Freemasonry that was lacking and thus he abandoned it in disappointment and kept up only the professional connection, but there is nothing in his papers that suggests that. They show that Soane was neither a particularly religious nor a particularly spiritual individual and do not suggest he thought in this way. He enjoyed theatricality and created theatrical interiors but Masonic symbolism was not his sort of thing. Moreover the letters, diaries and papers all clearly show that Soane was not an active and eager Freemason, although he was proud of his association with the craft and enjoyed the friendship that the connection gave him with the Duke of Sussex. He was essentially Grand Lodge's architect and whatever his grand title suggests the letters and papers show he acted for the Craft in a purely professional capacity, but that he enjoyed doing so. To imbue this relationship with mysticism or a wish to fulfil some deep psychological need is simply a mistake. Nevertheless there is no doubt, as I will show, that Soane was proud to be associated with Freemasonry and as he was, I would argue, one of this country's greatest architects, Freemasonry should be equally proud to be associated with him.

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