The Georgian Group Guides

No 13

LIGHTING

A Brief Guide to the Lighting
of Georgian Houses

Cover: Georgian Light Fittings from Temple Newsam House, Leeds. Clockwise from top left: Brass Chandelier of 1738; Wedgwood Candlesticks of the 1780s; A Regency Mahogany Lampstand of c.1830; Colza-Oil Lamp of 1838 *(Ian Parry)*.

Introduction

This short guide is intended as a general outline of the historical development of Georgian lighting, and suggests how to light a historic property today.

If you are contemplating a new lighting scheme which entails major refurbishment, always consult an independent expert first. Your local District or Borough Council Conservation Officer or a national organisation such as English Heritage, the Georgian Group or the Victorian Society should be able to help in choosing reliable and experienced suppliers and designs.

Historical Development

Candles

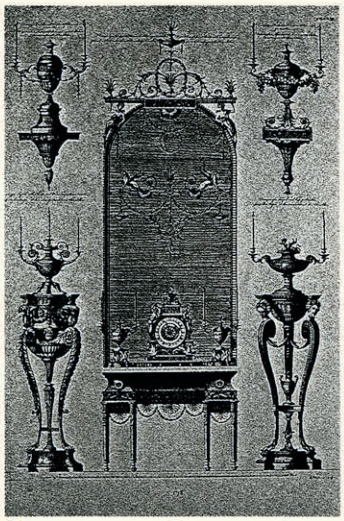
Most Georgian interiors were dark and gloomy. After sunset the only illumination available to most people before the end of the 18th century was either a dim, unreliable oil lamp or erratic, guttering candles. As Dan Cruickshank noted in *Life in the Georgian City*, 'prodigality with candles was not the Georgian rule and the average room was very underlit by the standards of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. The source of this candlelight was usually the wall — either in the form of candelabra on side tables or wall-mounted sconces. Sconces were often fixed in front of mirrors, so as to reflect more light about the room; the circular, convex mirrors so popular after the 1760s provided a particularly effective way of distributing light in this way.

The simplest form of candle was the rush light: a dried rush dipped in animal fat, held in a simple clip mounted on a stand. More expensive were tallow candles, made from rendered animal fat. Unsurprisingly, these burnt badly, and were as smelly as rush lights. Yet more expensive — on average three times more than tallow — and more effective were beeswax candles. These smelt less, smoked less and had a higher melting point than tallow. They were, nevertheless, only available for the rich; and even in grander houses you could determine your relative importance as a guest by whether wax or tallow candles were being provided. (In 1710 beeswax candles were taxed as 4d a pound, tallow at only ½d a pound). Good quality beeswax itself was actually imported; thus candlemakers were often situated in ports.

A Rush Light Mounted in an Iron Holder *(Courtesy Traditional Homes Magazine)*.

The Georgian candlestick epitomised, perhaps more than any other single item, the taste and craftsmanship of the period. By the mid-18th century silver, brass, pewter, glass or porcelain candlesticks were widely available. Of these, the silver candlestick or candelabrum — a stong, distinctly architectural composition, with clean lines and minimal detail — became one of the most popular domestic status symbols. After c.1760 it most commonly took the form of a fluted stick, perhaps with a Corinthian or palm-leaf capital, and a pyramidal or domed foot. The silversmiths of Sheffield came to specialise in candlestick production, industrial innovations of the 1760s such as die-stamping allowing the constituent parts of the candlestick to be assembled far more simply and cheaply than before. By the turn of the century, however, the ceramic candlestick had become the most popular form of candleholder. Porcelain was not only cheaper than silver and metal alloys, but also easier to maintain, while advances in ceramic technology meant that increasingly finely-detailed examples could now be made for a very reasonable price.

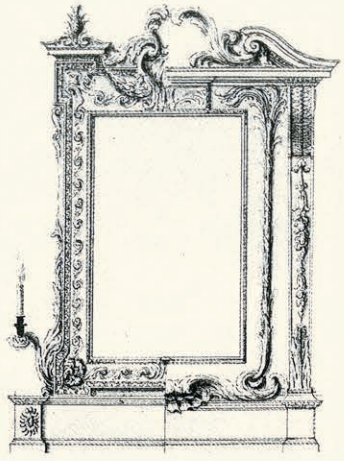
For those who could afford them, elaborate chandeliers were widely available by 1730, made of glass, wood or metal (brass examples having been made since the late 17th century). Of these materials, glass, being the best



Candelabra from Robert and James Adam's *Works in Architecture* of 1773.

reflectant, was also the most popular. When not in use, chandeliers were often wrapped in fabric to protect them from dust and summer flies.

Candles, whether in the context of elaborate chandeliers, sinuous girandoles or simple candlesticks, remained a very important part of the domestic interior throught the whole of the Georgian period. By 1837 oil and gas lamps still remained relatively expensive, and candles were often used to augment lamplight or gaslight. Candles were only truly banished from the domestic interior with the advent of electric lighting at the beginning of the 20th century.



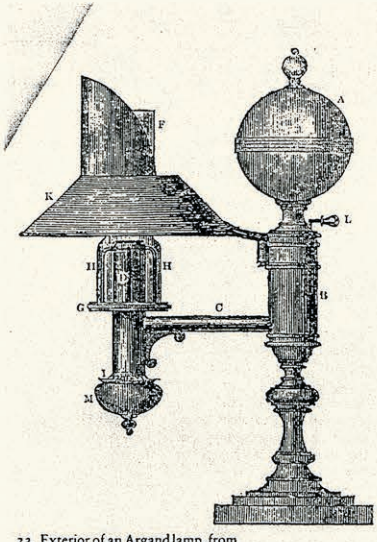
A John Vardy Design of the 1750s for Two Versions of an Overmantel Mirror Incorporating a Candle-holder *(The British Architectural Library/RIBA).*

Oil Lamps

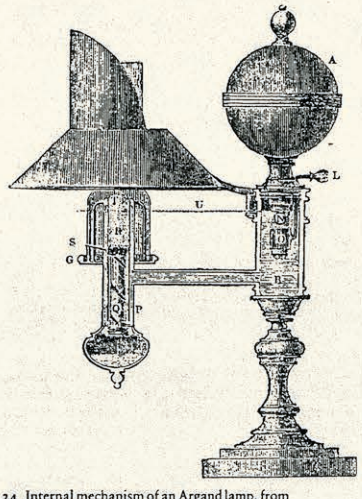
By 1840 the methods of lighting both house interiors and town and village streets had undergone a dramatic revolution. These technological developments, moreover, profoundly influenced the way in which interiors were disposed and decorated and the manner in which indoor and outdoor activities were planned.

The first major breakthrough was the invention of the Argand lamp. Before the 1780s oil lamps were rarely used in Britain, proving extrmely messy, dirty and inefficient. In 1783, however, the Swiss chemist Ami Argand patented a new form of lamp, also known in Britain as a colza-oil lamp after the thick, greenish-yellow rape-seed oil it burned. Argand's lamp was constructed around a revolutionary new circular cotton wick with an internal air channel and a larger surface area from which to burn the oil. The wick itself was placed in a funnel (originally of iron, later of glass) to help promote the upward flow of air. A further distinctive element was the oil reservoir, installed half-way up the side of the funnel so the thick oil could flow down to the bottom of the wick.

Although initially rejected in France, Argand's invention was enthusiastically taken up across the Channel. Matthew Boulton agreed to manufacture Argand's lamps, and following the lapse or Argand's temporary patent in 1786 imitations began to flood onto the market. By 1820 Argand lamps were fairly common in the wealthier homes, and were appearing in the pages of influential publications such as Rudolf Ackerman's *Repository of the Arts*. As Elspeth Moncrieff has noted: 'Suddenly a light was available which produced ten to twelve times the light of a single candle, transforming the activities which could be carried out after darkness'.



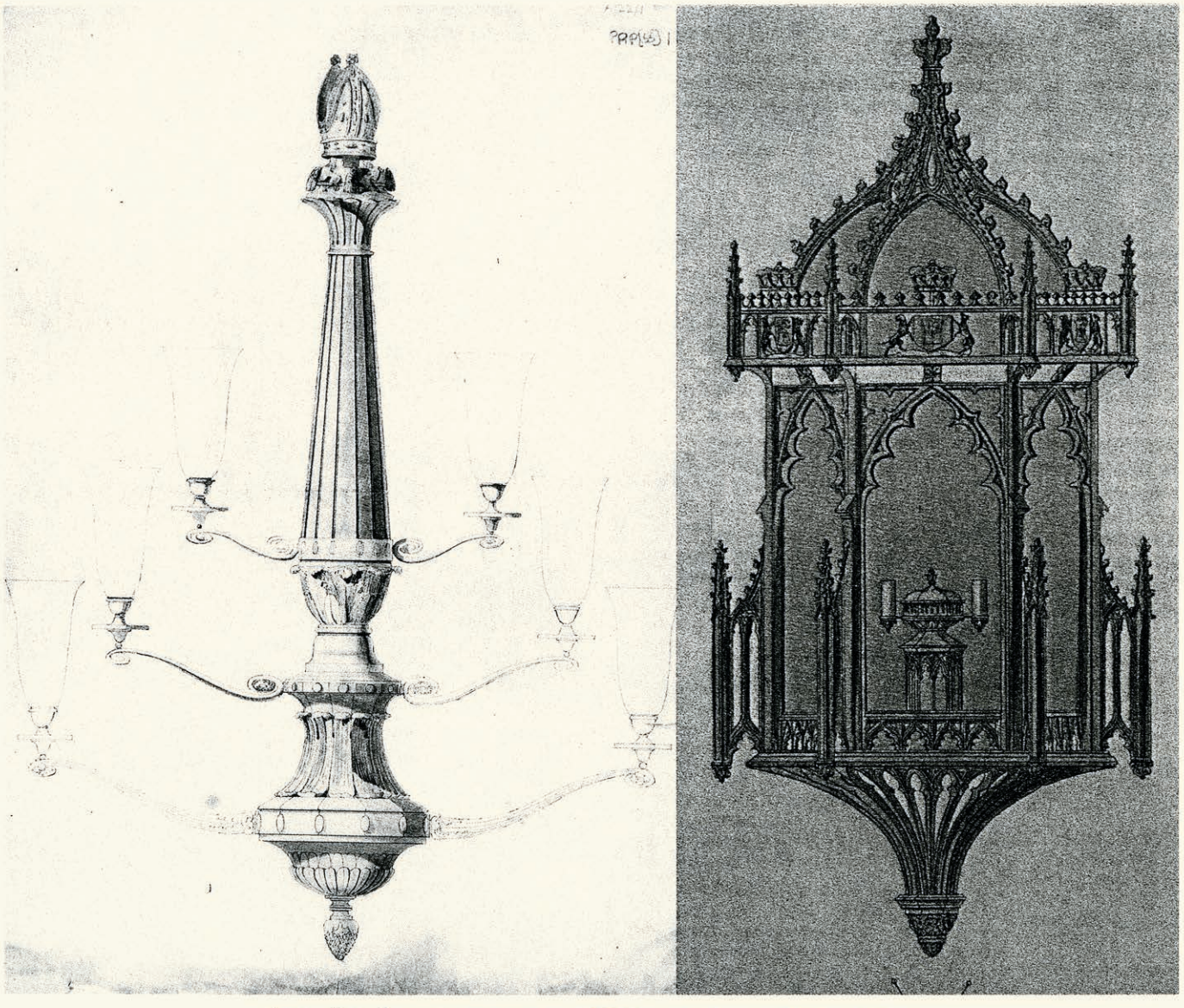
23 Exterior of an Argand lamp, from *The Penny Encyclopedia* (1839)



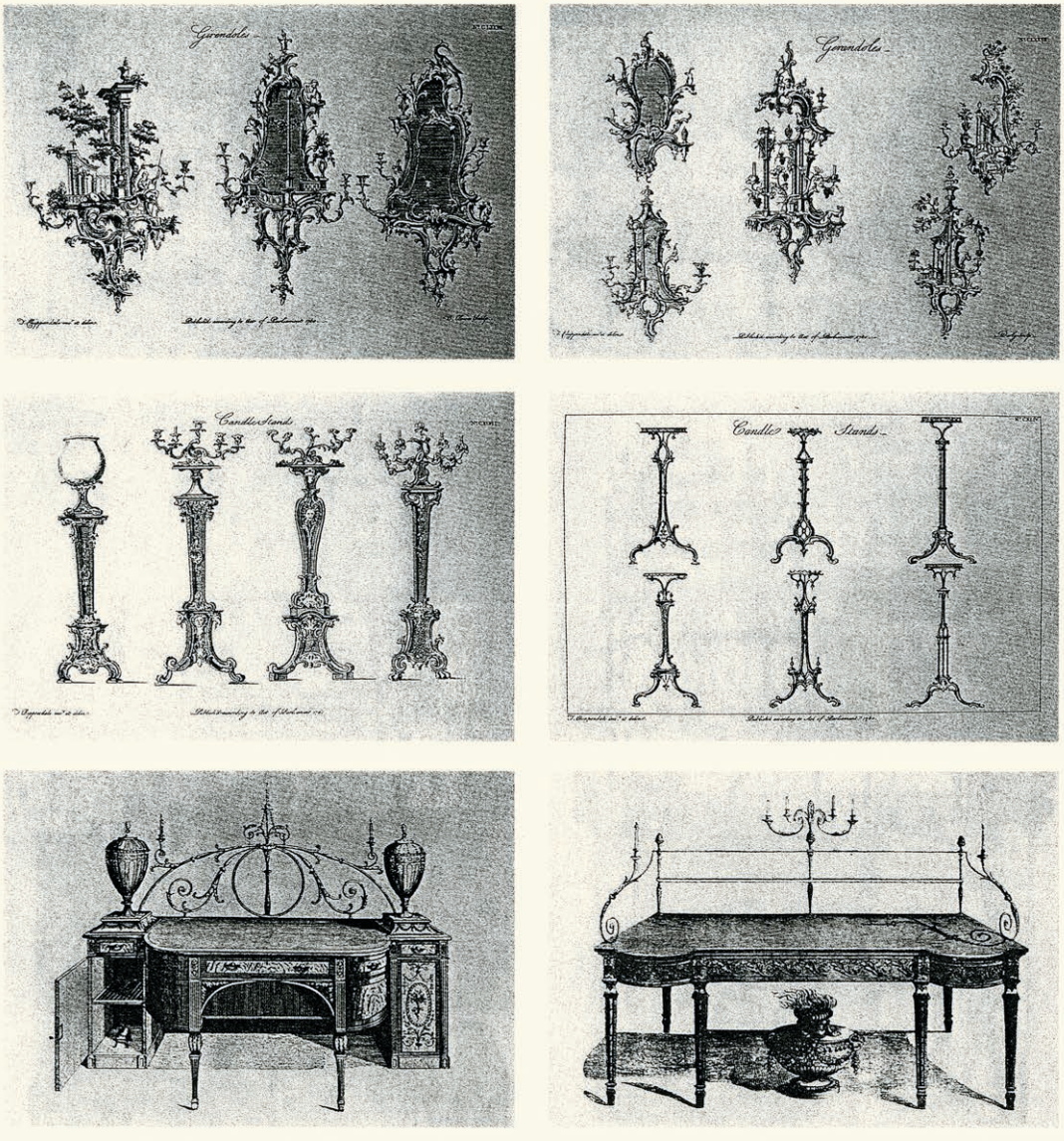
24 Internal mechanism of an Argand lamp, from *The Penny Encyclopedia* (1839)

An Argand Lamp Illustrated in *The Penny Encyclopaedia* of 1839 *(James Lomax).*

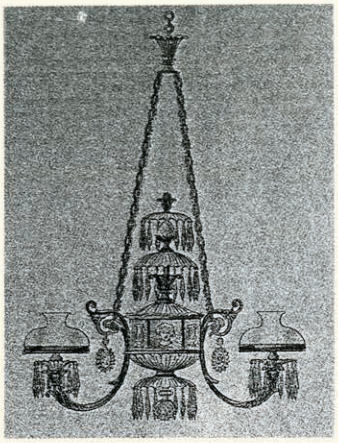
Argand lamps were made from a variety of materials: an observer of 1786 noted 'crystal, lacquer and metal ones, silver and brass and every possible shade'. They could be many-branched; some metamorphosed into full-blown (if rather ungraceful) chandeliers. In 1809 the 'sinumbra' lamp solved the problem of the bulky, shadow-casting reservoir, the oil being passed through tubes in the rim of the lampshade, which in turn enabled the reservoir to be removed. Yet there was still the problem presented by the physical nature of the thick, sluggish colza oil itself. During the 1820s a Frenchman, Franchot, invented a an ingenious spring-loaded piston to pump the oil into the wick; his lamps were soon known as 'moderateurs', after the name of the valve needed to control the oil flow. By this time, too, the safety match had appeared (1824), allowing for easier lighting of these increasingly sophisticated lamps. It was not until the 1860s, however, that a more refined, less viscous substitute was found for colza oil: paraffin.



ARGAND LAMPS INCORPORATED INTO (LEFT) A J B PAPWORTH DESIGN OF 1803 FOR A THREE-TIERED BRASS CHANDELIER *(THE BRITISH ARCHITECTURAL LIBRARY/RIBA)* AND (RIGHT) AN ACKERMANN DESIGN OF 1825 FOR A 'GOTHIC LAMP FOR A HALL'.



THE CANDLESTICK AS FURNITURE. CANDLEHOLDERS INCORPORATED INTO GIRANDOLES (TOP) AND CANDLESTANDS (MIDDLE), FROM THOMAS CHIPPENDALE'S *THE GENTLEMEN AND CABINET MAKER'S DIRECTOR* OF 1754, AND INTO SIDEBOARDS (BOTTOM), FROM THOMAS SHERATON'S *THE CABINET-MAKER AND UPHOLSTERER'S DRAWING BOOK* OF 1791-4.



Pellatt and Green's 1822 Design for a 'Drawing Room Lustre' (A Form of Chandelier), Featuring Two 'Sinumbra' Colza-Oil Lamps.

Gas Lighting

Shortly after the Argand lamp first appeared, a new technological wonder helped to brighten the streets and homes of Georgain Britain. In 1787 Lord Dundonald became the first individual to install coal-gas lighting in his home. And in 1803 Frederick Winsor erected the first public gas lights in Westminster's Pall Mall, while also fitting up his own house with one-and-a-half inch gas pipes. Winsor — an extrovert refugee from Moravia — subsequently shot to prominence through a well-timed marketing stunt: illuminating the facade of Carlton House with gaslight for the King's birthday. Encouraged by an admiring Prince Regent, in 1812 Winsor founded the Gas-Light and Coke Company at Cannon Row in Westminster; from there he pumped gas to light such prominent landmarks as Westminster Bridge and the Drury Lane Theatre. Two years later additional gasworks were opened in Shoreditch, Spitalfields and Finsbury, and by the mid-1820s Winsor was supplying gas to 70,000 domestic and street lamps in the capital.

The pace of progress did not instantly solve every lighting problem. The brightness of the gas lamps could not be increased; thus there simply had to be more of them. More seriously, the new gas piping inside the home was often carelessly buried under only a thin layer of plaster, or sited adjacent to heat sources or main passageways. As a result, gas explosions were by no means uncommon during the 1820s and 1830s. Nevertheless, gas lights remained a vast improvement on both candlelight and oil lamps.

Daylight

The Georgians were very sensitive to the detrimental effect of direct light on their important furnishings, and went to great lengths to minimise its effect during the day. By the later 18th century muslin sub-curtains — often with an embroidered border — helped filter the harmful light entering via the window. Shutters or blinds, too, were often pulled during the day so as to preserve the furniture and fabrics. It must also be remembered that even relatively modest, middle-class households retained servants who could be employed to turn furniture out of the sun, to apply furniture covers when necessary, and to safeguard carpets with druggets or 'paper carpets'. The absence of such hired help in the 20th century has, inevitably, encouraged many Georgian fittings to deteriorate rapidly in recent years.

This View of the Celebrated Chippendale Desk in the Library at Temple Newsam Shows how Dramatic the Effect of Daylight Bleaching can be: Compare the Faded Woodwork of the Top Drawers with the Original Colour of the Hidden Drawers Below *(Ian Parry)*.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The Historical Lighting Club (UK), 23 Northcourt Drive, Abingdon, Oxon

The Rushlight Club (US), Suite 196, 1657 The Fairway, Jenkintown, PA 19046, USA

Department of Furniture and Woodwork, The Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL, tel. 071 938 8500.

Temple Newsam House in Leeds is an invaluable source of 18th and 19th century lighting and expertise. In November 1992 the house is launching an exhibition on historic lighting (at Temple Newsam from 5 November until 10 January 1993, and thereafter at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery), which will be accompanied by an authoritative catalogue. For details of both the exhibition and the catalogue telephone Temple Newsam on 0532 647321.

FURTHER READING

Jonathan Bourne and Vanessa Brett, ***Lighting*** (Sothebys, 1991)

Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, ***Life in the Georgian City*** (Viking Penguin, 1990)

Christopher Gilbert and Anthony Wells-Cole, ***Lighting the Historic Interior*** (Leeds City Art Galleries, 1992; available from Temple Newsam House — see above)

Arthur H Hayward, ***Colonial Lighting*** (1927, reprinted by Dover 1962)

Elspeth Moncrieff, "The Argand Lamp" in ***The Antique Collector***, February 1990

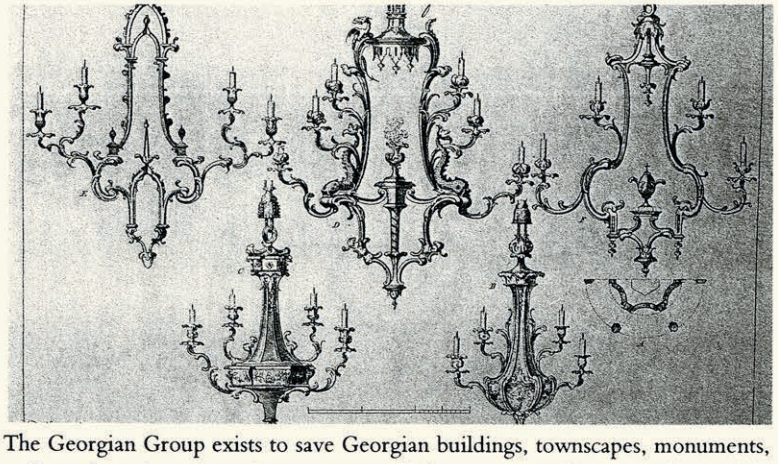
Alastair Laing, ***Lighting*** (V&A exhibition catalogue, 1982)

Roger W Moss, ***Lighting for Historic Buildings*** (The Preservation Press (USA), 1988

Steven Parissien, ***Regency Style*** (Phaidon Press, 1992)

Sandwith & Stainton, ***The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping*** (The National Trust, 2nd ed. 1990)

Traditional Homes magazine (14 Leicester Place, London WC2H 7BP, tel. 071 437 9011) has a useful selection of past articles on the subject of historic lighting



The Georgian Group exists to save Georgian buildings, townscapes, monuments, parks and gardens from destruction or disfigurement, and to stimulate public knowledge of Georgian architecture and Georgian taste. The Group offers a yearly programme of visits and educational events; applications for membership can be obtained from the Group office at 6 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 5DX, tel. 020 7529 8920. The Group is a registered charity (no. 209934) and benefits from Covenants.

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