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THE SURPRISING DISCRETION OF SOANE AND REPTON

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By 1788, the year in which Humphry Repton swung from a life spent variously as essayist, private secretary and Norwich-based commercial entrepreneur into his engrossing and successful new profession as a landscape gardener, John Soane was already a firmly established country house architect, with much of his practice in Norfolk.

Despite their rather differing clienteles, it was inevitable that their paths would cross from time to time. Among locations on which both worked were Mulgrave Castle, Moggerhanger House, Aynhoe Park, Holwood House and Honing Hall.¹ Generally Repton would be brought in a year or two after Soane's building or rebuilding works were complete and, within the covers of the Red Book which usually resulted from the visit, would feel free to criticise what he found. Fortunately Soane may well have remained entirely unaware of most of Repton's comments upon the siting and architectural detail of several of his important country house commissions. For, although siting was seen to be properly part of the landscape designer's concerns, Repton was quick to enlarge his remit to cover matters of ornament and architectural style.

At Tendring Hall, on the Suffolk-Essex border, where Soane had worked from 1784 onwards, Repton is said to have remarked in his 1790 Red book that, 'had I been previously consulted the house would neither have been so lofty in its construction nor so much exposed in its situation, the same necessity for limiting space which a house is to occupy in a city does not prevail in the country'.²

In a Red Book for Honing Hall, Norfolk, prepared

in March and completed in May 1792, Repton was all too frank. Continuing his comments on the approach he finished with a tart and mischievous criticism of Soane's 1788 additions to an earlier house:³

The proportions of the house are not pleasing, it appears too high for its width, even where seen at an angle presenting two fronts; and the heaviness of a dripping roof always takes from the elegance of any building above the degree of a farm house; it would not be attended with great expence to add a blocking course to the cornice, and this with a white string course under the windows, would produce such horizontal lines as might in some measure counteract the too great height of the house. There are few cases where I should prefer a red house to a white one, but that at Honing is so evidently disproportioned, that we can only correct the defects by difference of colour, while in good Architecture all lines should depend on depths of shadow produced by proper projections in the original design⁴

Repton showed the house with his suggested improvements, in both a distant (Fig. 1) and a nearer view of the house. The client, Thomas Cubitt, was persuaded to add modillions to Soane's full height bow, and probably carried out the suggested light toned banding, still evident as a rendered strip at first floor level in a modern photograph.

While Soane was abnormally sensitive to criticism or interference, and would no doubt have taken Repton's superficial comments very badly indeed, he was also happy to call upon, and take heed of, the professional advice of those for whose expertise he had respect. By the early 1790s he had established a relationship of complete trust with the



Fig. 1. Humphry Repton, view of Honing Hall, from the Honing Hall Red Book. *Private Collection*.

young John Haverfield, son of the eminent gardener at Kew, collaborating with him at Tyringham, to the extent of cheerfully accepting his advice on the design of the bridge, and reinforcing this high regard by consulting him extensively on the layout of the grounds around Pitzhanger Manor, his own country villa at Ealing.⁵

Of commissions which involved both Soane and Repton, it was only at Port Eliot in Cornwall that Humphry Repton preceded Soane. When the latter began to consider major alterations to Lord Eliot's house in 1804 he found that it had been crudely gothicised, but left incomplete. Repton's Red Book reveals that the architect whom Lord Eliot had employed was John Johnson,⁶ a surprising choice since Johnson was County Surveyor of Essex and Leicestershire, and thus some way off both his territories.⁷ But work at Halswell Park in Somerset,

and Killerton Park in Devon might have given Johnson a name in the west country.⁸ He had also been a speculative builder in London, and he lived in one of his own houses in Berners Street, thereby giving Repton the opportunity to refer to him dismissively as 'Johnson of Berners Street.'⁹ Soane was also faced with Humphry Repton's unexecuted architectural proposals laid out in the pages of a Red Book (Figs. 2 and 3). Soane realised that Lord Eliot was not prepared to dismiss Repton's ideas outright. Discovering that in this case his client's landscape gardener was a competing architect, Soane had to move with unusual tact and forbearance.

When Repton had visited Cornwall to prepare the Red Book in the summer of 1792, his eldest son, the profoundly deaf John Adey Repton, was acting as his assistant, drawing up the plans and elevations for the volume, which was completed in February 1793.¹⁰

A number of the drawings in the Red Book for Port Eliot are signed by the eighteen year-old, who had already spent some years in the office of the elder William Wilkins in Norwich, and who would go on to work with John Nash during the partnership between his father and Nash which ended abruptly in 1800.¹¹ If Repton's apparently foolhardy excursion into architecture in the face of Soane's potential opposition can be seen in the light of providing an opening for his enormously able, but incapacitated, son, his tenacity becomes clear. The clients, Lord and Lady Eliot, at the tip of a triangular discussion, had their own preferences and strong opinions.¹² So the remodelling of the family seat, largely to achieve practicality and comfort, was carried out in good humour and with mutual respect. Soane's dislike of the Gothic and his unease when designing in the style, as well as the clients' apparent preference for it, were all in the Reptons' favour.¹³

The job at Port Eliot perfectly suited the abilities of John Adey Repton, whose knowledge and understanding of Gothic architecture were, by the early 1800s, of an unusually high order. During his time in the elder Wilkins's office he had made a superb series of drawings of Norwich Cathedral, which Wilkins later presented to the Society of Antiquaries, and which prove John Adey to have been an immensely skilful draughtsman and a knowledgeable antiquarian even as a very young man.¹⁴

Humphry Repton's starting point at Port Eliot was the parish church, formerly the church of the priory of St Germans.¹⁵ In Repton's oleaginous prose it is elevated to a

stupendous Cathedral, whose magnitude renders it impossible to be removed, while its more lofty situation prevents its being made subordinate to the mansion: under such circumstances, instead of shrinking from this powerful neighbour, it will rather be advisable to attempt such a union as may extend the influence of the venerable pile to every part of the Mansion, and form of the two objects, now at variance with each other, one picturesque and magnificent whole.¹⁶

This new arrangement would take the form of a cloister, and the house would be suitably gothicised in accordance with that theme. Removing an intrusive Palladian window,

the west end of the front. . . may be externally united into one handsome gothic window, which by its magnitude will extend the importance of the Abbey to the whole of the Mansion, notwithstanding those parts of it which are so much lower. . . . a large window is necessary on the principle that *a number of little parts will never constitute one great whole* but if a few large parts such as the window here mentioned, the gateway, and another large window in the cloister be properly introduced, they will extend the impression of Greatness, and overpower all the lesser parts of the building, in the same manner that the great west Entrance of the Abbey takes off the attention from the smaller windows in the same massive pile.¹⁷

Referring to his (or his son's) use of the gothic, Repton continued,

It may perhaps be observed that in the Cloister proposed I have not strictly followed the architecture of the Abbey which is either Saxon or Norman, a distinction of which very learned Antiquarians have differed in opinion, it is certainly of a stile anterior to the kind of Gothic distinguished by pointed arches, and pinnacles or small turrets; but I conceive there is no incongruity in mixing these different species of Gothic, because we universally see it done in every Cathedral in this kingdom, indeed the greatest part of this Abbey itself, is of the date and stile which I have adopted. . . I trust. . . I shall be deemed to have classically adhered to the general character of Gothic, so long as I studiously avoid the least appearance of Grecian architecture; For however it may be allowable to mix the several stiles of Gothic in the same old English building, I hold it utterly incongruous with good taste, to blend with it that stile of Architecture which was only introduced into this country in the seventeenth century.¹⁸

To assist his argument for the cloister, linking the centre of house to the east end of the abbey, via a gateway, Repton quoted Burke; 'you ought to pass from the greatest light to as much darkness as is consistent with the uses of Architecture'.¹⁹



Fig. 4. Humphry Repton, view of proposed boat house and lodge from the south, Port Eliot, from the Port Eliot Red Book. *Private Collection*.

Inadvertently, Repton had invoked one of Soane's favourite devices, albeit consistently classicised.²⁰

Not content with the linking of house and church, Repton then moved his sights to the adjacent village of St Germans. 'The whole town of St Germain's by the neatness of repair and some attention to the public buildings, may be made to appear what it really is a *part of the Place*.' He suggested adding battlements to the school or courthouse on the side facing Port Eliot, 'and the new stables together with every other building in the town, by assuming the Gothic stile, would become parts of the same magnificent and picturesque *whole*'.²¹

In the year that Repton completed this important Red Book, both he and Soane had been frequent visitors to Holwood in Kent, in the usually frustrating hope of encountering their client William Pitt.²² In

his manuscript autobiography, Repton recalled a summer meeting with Pitt in which the latter had asked

how it was possible to plant out the common which from the narrowness of the screen and the steepness of the hill he had endeavoured to do by various means – I told him at once it was *impossible* . . . I added "When an enemy is too powerful to be conquered, it is better to make a friend of him if you can" – He seemed greatly amused with my remark and recalled it to my recollection a long time afterwards.²³

Repton, who, like Soane, would find working for Pitt difficult and unremunerative, may have remembered the wisdom of the Prime Minister's words in his later dealings with his architect colleague.

In 1803 Repton had written to Soane on a professional matter, referring to their 'slight acquaintance' and asking what were the contractual

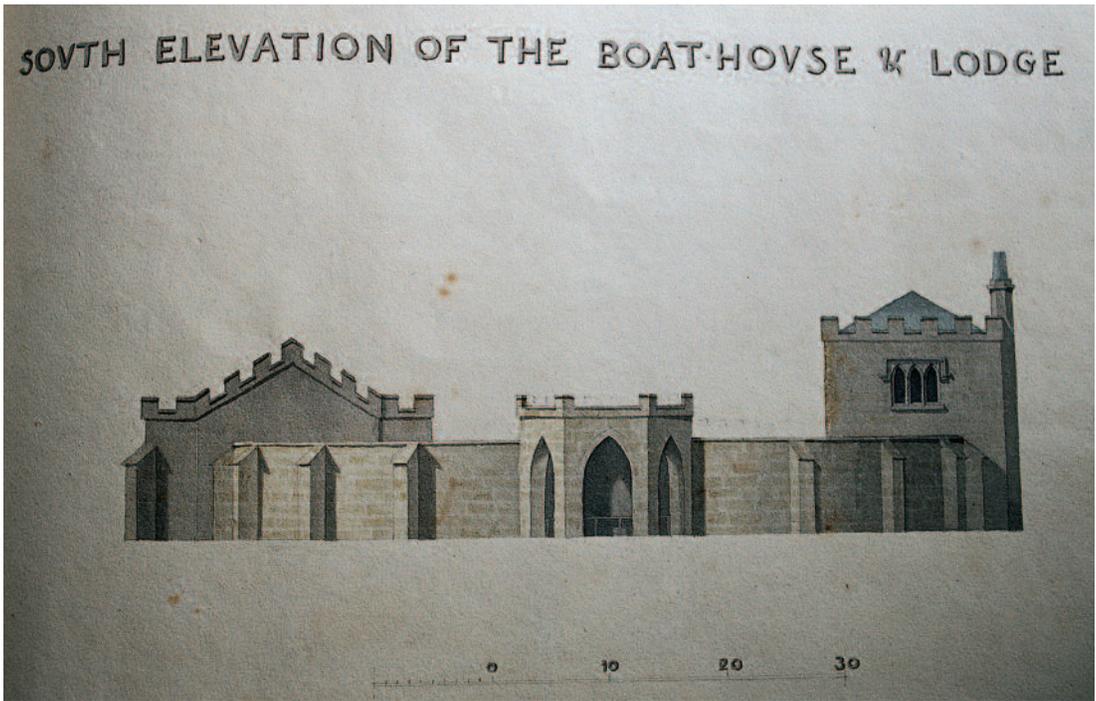


Fig. 5. Humphry Repton, proposed boat house and lodge, Port Eliot, from the Port Eliot Red Book.
Private Collection.

obligations upon a client who had received completed working drawings for a job estimated at more than £15,000 'supposing the work suspended'.²⁴ Presumably Repton was enquiring on behalf of one of his architect sons. Soane's response, if any, has not survived, but by the following year, when their paths crossed in Cornwall, they appear to have been on friendly terms.

Humphry Repton arrived at Port Eliot on 12 September 1804, a few days after Henry Seward, Soane's assistant. The client was also there and detailed work on the setting out of the new 'Seat' or family pew was in progress. Repton was disappointed not to find Soane at Port Eliot. He had been prevented from coming by illness and Repton hoped that he still might arrive: 'may the Gripping Angel who presides over bile & belly aches favor our

meeting.' Repton wanted them to meet 'together on the Spot,' since the repair work being carried out on the church by the churchwardens had 'bedevil'd its character by their new roof & windows,' and he felt that Soane would suggest a 'more massive' solution. But 'the great object on which I want your presence & cooperation is the Entrance - & the connection between the Abbey & Mansion mentioned in my last work which I wish you would consider a little'.²⁵

One of Seward's sketches, dated September 1804, bears the comment 'consider connecting the House and Church.'²⁶ Soane, perhaps in deference to the wishes of the client, had not immediately discounted the idea. Nevertheless Repton's cluttered solution, the lowered northern entrance, with a cloister-type courtyard or heavily planted arcade leading to the church, had no internal or external logic.

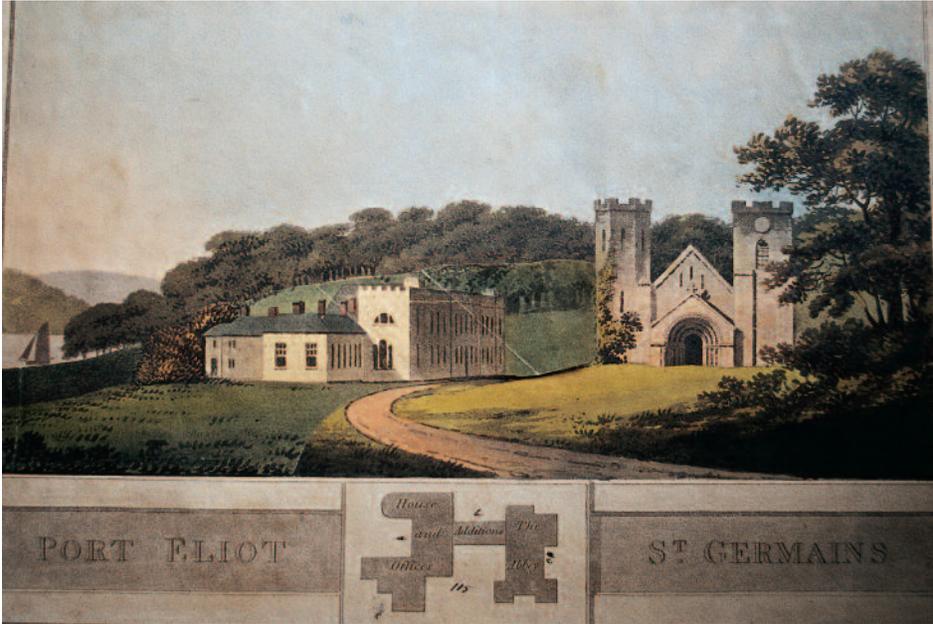


Fig. 6. Humphry Repton, view of Port Eliot from the west in 1792, from the Port Eliot Red Book. *Private Collection.*



Fig. 7. Humphry Repton, view of Port Eliot from the west with proposed alterations, from the Port Eliot Red Book. *Private Collection.*

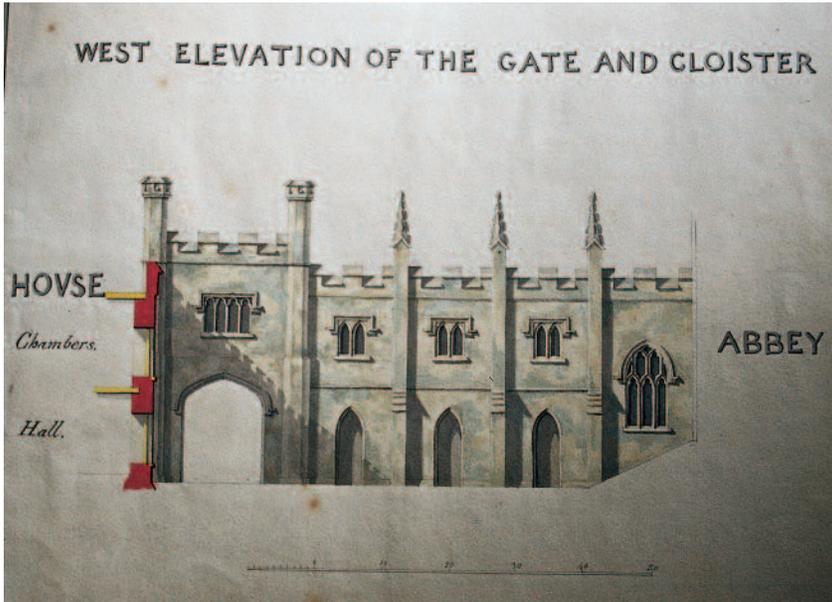


Fig. 8. Humphry Repton, elevation of proposed 'cloister' at Port Eliot, from the Port Eliot Red Book. *Private Collection.*

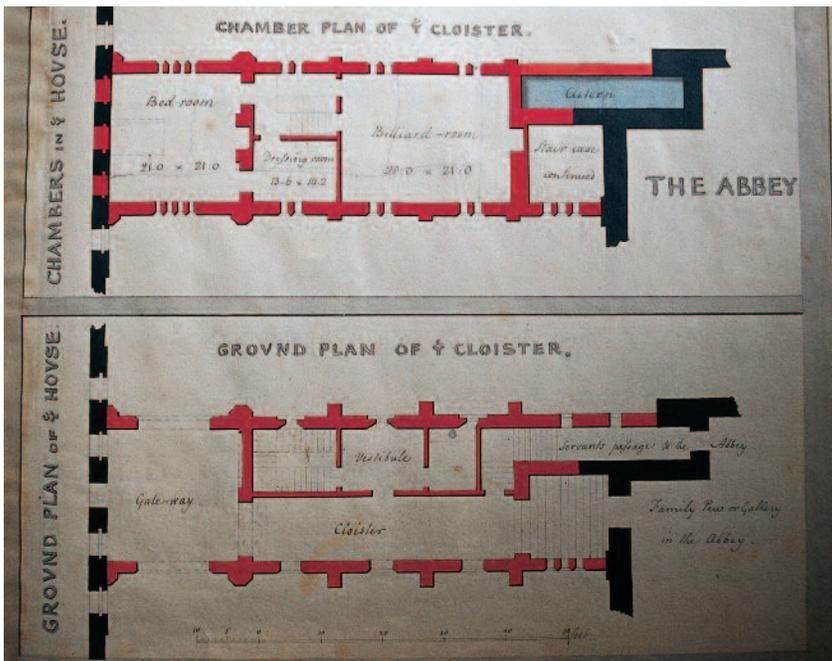


Fig. 9. Humphry Repton, plan of proposed 'cloister' at Port Eliot, from the Port Eliot Red Book. *Private Collection.*

Repton's own uncertainties are clear in a letter written on October 26 from his home at Hare Street, near Romford, forwarded to Soane by Lord Eliot almost a month later.

Whether this Cloister should as originally proposed extend from the Centre – or from the two ends of the house will be a subject for your deliberation, but I hope you will agree in the propriety of *uniting* two objects which cannot possibly be *separated*.

an impression which, Repton emphasised, is best considered from the water. Then, perhaps unwisely, given the well known views of his correspondent, he embarked on a rambling discussion of the preferred style of Gothic for the house, mixed '*Castle Abbey & House Gothic* preserving the true characters of each separate,' avoiding symmetry, but 'without the affection of unnecessary irregularity'. With a digression on replacing mullions with sash windows and providing a picturesque outline of the whole (as seen from the Plymouth road) he excuses himself for the lengthy letter.²⁷ Did Lord Eliot purposely delay forwarding Repton's letter 'which came a day or two after you left us & ought of course to have been forwarded long since,' while Soane produced his own plans for a new west front, which Eliot had received by November 20?²⁸ Diplomatically turning Soane's attention back to improving the north front, he noted that 'I agree with Mr Repton that at Port Eliot the comfort & convenience of the inside is of more importance than the Regularity of the outside.'²⁹ Lord Eliot, ever the politician, skilfully gave weight to Repton's views while rejecting Soane's realignment of his house. At the same time he placated both men by pointing out that his own scheme for a new Gallery had proved unacceptable to everyone.

Soane's proposed western elevation for Port Eliot was not a happy scheme.³⁰ He had not risen to Repton's exhortations to properly gothicise the house, currently 'of no Character except that of Islington & Clapham where a pointed window & a

notched parapet is deem'd Gothic.'³¹ Soane's scheme was, despite Repton's words, symmetrical with mullioned windows, drip moulds and crenellations; while the stables, built in the following year, formed a rectangular courtyard familiar from many of Soane's country houses, but for their massive machicolations and light Gothic fenestration.³² The notion of linking house and church, and of moving the entrance from the north to the west, were both matters on which Soane agreed to differ with Repton but only after careful consideration. In fact neither man prevailed upon the client, whose emphasis, sensibly enough, lay upon internal improvements rather than external aggrandisement.

The later account of the relationship between himself and Soane which Repton provides in the notes for his autobiography touches upon this meeting.³³ The uncustomary docility with which Soane allowed Repton to offer him advice at Port Eliot was, no doubt, affected by two considerations. First, they both shared a client of particular influence and acumen, whom neither wished to lose; and secondly, in trying to arrive at an architectural solution at Port Eliot, it was the professional advancement of his son that concerned Repton, rather than his own, an objective with which Soane may have had some sympathy.

Repton felt that he had been outmanoeuvred by Soane who overturned

my beautiful plan for Port Eliot. . . my design for bringing together the house and the Abbey did not suit the fancy of my fanciful friend (who knows but little about Gothic) so the plan was totally changed.³⁴

Nevertheless when, some years later, he found himself under attack by Soane in one of his Royal Academy lectures, Repton found it an obscure kind of complement. Though hurt by the public humiliation, he claimed that he was flattered by being so marked out for attention.³⁵ On balance, Repton believed that 'he has as much good nature as he has seeming asperity' and easily forgot their differences.

NOTES

- 1 Gillian Darley, *John Soane: an accidental romantic*, New Haven and London, 1999, *passim*; Ptolemy Dean, *Sir John Soane and the country estate*, Aldershot, 1999, *passim*.
- 2 A mystery. John Wallace, in the *Dedham Vale Society Newsletter*, No. 38, 1995, uses this quote from the Tendring Red Book, which he believed to belong to the Rowley family, but Sir Charles Rowley Bt. has no knowledge of it. Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton; Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England*, New Haven and London, 1999, refers to the Tendring Red Book as lost.
- 3 Dean, *op. cit.*, 179, with a modern photograph of the bow that Soane added and Repton finished off.
- 4 Humphry Repton, Red Book for Honing Hall (private collection).
- 5 Darley, *op. cit.*, 108.
- 6 Humphry Repton, Red Book for Port Eliot, 1793 (private collection).
- 7 Nancy Briggs, *John Johnson*, Chelmsford, 1991, *passim*, which does not record his work at Port Eliot.
- 8 Briggs, *op. cit.*, *passim*; Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 550.
- 9 Repton, Red Book for Port Eliot, *cit.*; Dean, *op. cit.*, 104 and 113, n. 3.
- 10 Repton, Red Book for Port Eliot, *cit.*
- 11 Colvin, *op. cit.*, 804–05. In his *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 1803, Repton claimed that his son's name had been 'suppressed in many works begun in that of another person, to whom I freely, unreservedly, and confidentially gave my advice and assistance' [Daniels, *op. cit.*, 14].
- 12 For Lord and Lady Eliot, see Richard Hewlings, '11 Downing Street: John Soane's work for John Eliot (1797–1805)', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, XXXIX, 1995, 51–2.
- 13 David Watkin, *Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures*, Cambridge, 1996, 325–30 and 391, for Soane's appreciation of the sublime qualities of Gothic, contrasted with his hatred of the Gothic Revival ("Gothic mania").
- 14 S. Rowland Pierce, *Norwich Cathedral at the end of the Eighteenth Century*, Farnborough, 1965.
- 15 Nikolaus Pevsner (revised Enid Radcliffe), *The Buildings of England: Cornwall*, London, 1970, 174–77.
- 16 Repton, Red Book for Port Eliot, *cit.*
- 17 *Idem.*
- 18 *Idem.*
- 19 *Idem.*
- 20 Soane used it at Tyringham, for instance [Darley, *op. cit.*, 108–09].
- 21 Repton, Red Book for Port Eliot, *cit.*
- 22 Darley, *op. cit.*, 82–3.
- 23 London, British Library, Add. MS. 62,112.
- 24 London, Sir John Soane's Museum (hereafter SM), II.R.2, 23 January 1803.
- 25 SM, 6/4, Repton to Soane, 13 Sept. 1804.
- 26 *Ibid.*, Seward 'memoranda,' Sept. 1804.
- 27 *Ibid.*, Repton to Soane, 26 Oct. 1804.
- 28 *Ibid.*, Eliot to Soane, 20 Nov. 1804, thanking him for his letter and plans ('you appear to me to have been very happy in your design for the western front... the Additions correspond with what at present exists of that front').
- 29 *Idem.*
- 30 Dean, *op. cit.*, 105, fig. 7.6.
- 31 SM, 6/4, Repton to Soane, 26 Oct. 1804.
- 32 Dean, *op. cit.*, 107–08.
- 33 London, British Library, Add. MS. 62,112.
- 34 *Idem.*, quoted in Darley, *op. cit.*, 217.
- 35 Darley, *op. cit.*, 217. In the opening section of Lecture X, delivered in 1815, Soane made a number of general points about 'decorative gardening' [Watkin, *op. cit.*, 624–27] and included a fleeting reference to Repton as an antiquarian. It therefore seems likely that he was referring to John Adey, rather than Humphry Repton. There is no other reference to Repton in the published lectures, so the slighting references to himself which Repton mentioned must have been spontaneous comments, perhaps offered in the knowledge that he was in the audience.