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# ARCHITECTS' OFFICES

## Jill Lever

There seem to be no contemporary paintings or drawings or even written descriptions of the architect in his office in the 18th and early-19th centuries. Nothing, for instance, like the painting of a cabinet-maker's office of about 1770 (at the Victoria & Albert Museum) with its partly flat and partly sloped table, comfortably upholstered stool and hanging bookshelves — all snugly fitted into a small panelled room.<sup>1</sup> Or, like the portrait by Zoffany of an eye-glasses maker and his assistant, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1772, about which Robert Walpole pencilled in his catalogue, “extremely natural but the characters too common”.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is why portraits of architects were invariably painted in generalised, idealised settings with only a book or drawing as an indication of their profession.

Pugin's idea of the medieval architect in his monkish study among his books (some of them written by the Pugins) is interesting but fantastic. As can be seen from the frontispiece to A. C. Pugin's *Examples of Gothic Architecture* (1836) drawn by A. W. N. Pugin and again, the frontispiece to the younger Pugin's *True Principles* (1841). Nearer the mark, perhaps, are those three of Phiz's illustrations in Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) that show Mr Pecksniff's front parlour with a selection of his designs adorning the walls and various architectural bric-a-brac.

Generally, architects had their offices in their homes, though those employed on public works usually had an office on site provided for them. A young architect setting up in business might rent a couple of rooms. Thus, George Wightwick, in 1827, “took the front ground-floor room of No. 2 Duke Street, Adelphi with a sleeping garret in the roof”.<sup>3</sup> An enterprising architect might build his own house with office, quite likely as part of a speculative development. The advantage of a good address was that the client would call on the architect, while elegant accommodation was a good self-advertisement.

St Marylebone was one area in London particularly favoured by architects. Gibbs built himself a house on the north-east corner of Wimpole and Henrietta Streets in 1730. William Chambers built a house for himself, and others for speculation, in Berners Street, 1764-70. Adding a drawing office to the stables at the end of his garden, James Wyatt built a house for himself in what is now Foley Place, near Portland Place, about 1780-83. All of these houses are now gone.

Henry Holland had a most desirable location for his house and office: 21 acres of walled garden and pleasure grounds surrounded Sloane Place, built in about 1788 in Hans Town, Chelsea.<sup>4</sup> The office seems to have been in the east wing with its own entrance from Sloane Street. The library was, no doubt, where Holland received his patrons. A gallery or library, well furnished with books, paintings, marbles, models and so on, was an important part of the “showcase” houses built by some architects.

John Nash's house at 29 Dover Street (now demolished) which he moved into in 1798 included a library, study and drawing office. Larger, was the later Nash home and office, part of a pair of houses at 14 and 16 Lower Regent Street, built 1819-23 (also now demolished) with a 70ft-long Gallery of Painting and Sculpture on the first floor and professional offices of eight rooms on the ground floor. Like the adjacent shops, these were probably intended for letting and the first floor, top-lit 50ft Gallery of Architecture with its ante-room, might have been used as Nash's drawing office.<sup>5</sup>

Top-lighting (according to George's André's *Draughtsman's Handbook*, 1874) is not ideal for an architect's office because the draughtsman's hands will be in shadow for much of the time. A western aspect is best "as the light from this direction is less variable and lasts later in the day than from other directions".<sup>6</sup>

Among the areas in London favoured by architects were the West End south of Oxford Street; Bloomsbury; around the Strand; and the lawyer's area of Gray's Inn and Lincoln's Inn Fields to which Soane moved his family and office in 1794. In 1780, as a bachelor, he had rented rooms at No 10 Cavendish Street, moving the next year to No. 53 Margaret Street where he rented one and a half floors. In 1786, by now a family man, Soane bought a lease of No 77 Welbeck Street. At all of these addresses he had both home and office though from 1788 he also had an office at the Bank of England. From 1790 Soane had his office first at Albion Place and then at Great Scotland Yard but both home and office were reunited at Lincoln's Inn Fields in January 1794.<sup>7</sup>

The plan of F. W. Rich's office on the first floor of No 1 Eldon Square, Newcastle upon Tyne, though drawn only 100 years ago, by a pupil on his first day at work, is probably typical of many offices at an earlier period. The principal had a separate room with his confidential clerk in a room next door, and next to this (in the office marked "Quantity Office") was the "irrasuble Clerk of Works, Mr Bennett". The five assistants and two apprentices, shared a large room, the more senior having their desks near the window. Basil Procter's illustrated diary (at the RIBA Drawings Collection) describes "templ[at]es of the different typical mouldings" hung over the desks and a sketch shows the interior of the large office with both flat-topped and sloped drawings tables, and high stools.<sup>8</sup>

A more distinguished architect's drawing office, and the only extant one of its period, is Soane's "upper drawing office" of about 1808. It has simple, joiner-made, flat-topped tables with flat storage for finished perspectives under a hinged top with false drawer as well as storage for rolled drawings in two cupboards.

The engineer James Watt's attic workshop and office at Heathfield Hall,<sup>9</sup> used by him from about 1790 to 1819 and installed at the Science Museum in 1924, has a joiner-made sloped drawing and writing desk, 5ft-long and 2ft-wide. It seems likely that, with work benches, shelves and other fittings, it was made to Watt's instructions by a local joiner. On the desk are damping boxes for reverse press-copying, a process for copying drawings patented by Watt in 1780. On the floor is a screw-down press, apparently unused as it is still in its wrapping paper. There is also a plain, wooden high stool with a sloping seat.

It is probable that even in architects' "show-off" houses, office furniture was simply made to suit the architect's requirements. The drawing table was *the* most important piece of furniture in an office. An early example from a manuscript in the Pepys Library at Magdalene College<sup>10</sup> is of a shipwright's table that is sturdy, flat and with a useful drawer; the top is covered by a green cloth. Another example of a plain, flat drawing table typical of the sort illustrated in several 18th-century books on drawing and perspective can be seen in Thomas Johnson's design for his business card.<sup>11</sup>

The elaborate, so-called "architect's tables" which, when not in use, appear to be flat-topped side tables are not uncommon. Whether they were ever used by professional architects is doubtful. Perhaps one might adorn the library or gallery with a few drawings casually propped on it, to catch the eye of a potential client. Arthur Devis's portrait of a "Young Man at a Drawing Table" (c 1761) at Manchester City Art Galleries shows a characteristic table with a double-rising top that could be used for reading, writing or drawing; the user would have stood at it. Another drawing table with a rising pillar on a tripod and a hinged top that slopes was once owned and used by the late Professor A. E. Richardson — his quill pens are still kept in the drawers. A mahogany table of about 1770, published in *Country Life*<sup>12</sup> this year has a pull-out front

supported on the forward sections of two legs, a hinged-top with an easel support and a narrow rest at the bottom (an indication that this is a reading slope), a large compartmented drawer with ink and sanding pots, and a pair of slides on which candlesticks would have been set. A typical example of an “architect’s table” that could only have been used as such with great difficulty.

Some architects stood to draw. Pugin, who designed his own very plain and solid drawing table, is described by Benjamin Ferrey as “at work standing, stooping to the table”. But it is likely that most sat down to work and though few survive (there are none at the Soane Museum) it can



Fig. 1. The Drawing Board: frontispiece to the English edition, by John Sturt and John James of Greenwich, of Fratel Pozzo’s *Perspective*.

be assumed that they generally sat on high stools. Professor A. E. Richardson owned two drawing stools: both of about 1815 and both (like Watt's) with sloping seats. One is entirely of mahogany and the other has a stuffed leather seat, close-nailed.

Storing drawings can be a problem and the earliest and still most common solution is to keep them in rolls. In 1716, Hawksmoor designed "Closetts, Presses &c for . . . Books, Drawings & Designs" for the Office of Works. John Harris has attributed a drawing at the Soane Museum<sup>13</sup> as Hawksmoor's design for the fitting out of a room with deep shelves to receive rolled drawings. John Talman's design for a paper repository for the Exchequer engraved in Thomas Maddox's *Antiquus Dialogus* (1711) shows how large numbers of papers in rolls were stored.

Highly valued drawings might be mounted in albums or bound into volumes. The earliest bound volume of English drawings in the RIBA Drawings Collection is of about 1671 and consist of a set of survey drawings for Raynham Hall. Lord Burlington preserved Palladio's drawings in 17 volumes, beautifully bound, probably in the 1730s. Other drawings by Inigo Jones and John Webb, owned by Burlington, were kept in specially-made wooden boxes with caster wheels. Two of them are at the RIBA. Another method of storing drawings, and a good way of transporting them, was in metal tubes with a hinged cap at one end. Architect's "tin cases", painted a dark matt green or a shinier black — some of them more than a metre long — probably date from the 1830s or '40s — or earlier.

Portfolios (the first published usage of the word being in 1722 according to the Oxford English Dictionary) were another way of storing and transporting drawings, but flat. Sale catalogues of architect's libraries and collections — Hawksmoor, Chambers, the Adams — make it clear that they were often used and sometimes in great numbers. A foolscap-sized, half-bound portfolio with marbled paper boards, green linen ties and lined with grey-blue sugar paper made in 1785 by Brooke's "Original Portfolio Manufactory" of 8 Coventry Street, London is preserved at the RIBA Drawings Collection.

Sir John Soane kept a portfolio *cabinet* with a table flap, made in about 1812, in his Breakfast Room. It is illustrated in the 1835 *Description of the House and Museum . . . [of] Sir John Soane* (pl XXIX). William Wilkins's portfolio *stand* still survives in a private collection. A drawing made by George Moore in about 1831 and inscribed "View of a Room in Exeter Hall, London as arranged at a *Conversazione* of the Architectural Society" shows many portfolios and one portfolio stand.<sup>14</sup>

Cabinets with sliding, adjustable shelves were available to drawing and print collectors from the early 18th century at least, and a good example is kept at the RIBA Drawings Collection.

I have not yet been able to discover when plan chests were first made. But Mr Peter Thornton has kindly drawn my attention to a wood engraving by Jost Amman (1539-91) that shows a glass painter at work with, in the background, a five-drawer plan chest. And Dr Giles Worsley has found a sketch of a three-drawer plan chest among the Talman drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>15</sup> The first extant examples are probably those at the Soane Museum. The earliest dates from about 1808 and another, decorated with carved rosettes to give it a medieval flavour, is in the Monk's Parlour and dates from about 1823. It is shown in a lithograph published in 1827 as the frontispiece in John Britton's *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting Exemplified by a Series of Illustrations of the House and Galleries of John Soane*. What is interesting about both of these Soane plan chests is that the drawers are at the "wrong" end, that is, they are fitted in at the narrow end. A handsome plan chest (once in the RIBA Library) that belonged to Decimus Burton and was probably made by Taprell and Holland has two sets of drawers, side-by-side, with shallow, shelved cupboards on the ends, as well as a carved "chimera" at each corner.

One of the most profound changes to affect architectural drawing occurred in the second

half of the 15th century when the production of paper in the wake of the invention of printing was hugely increased. The more liberal use of paper as a drawing material that this permitted encouraged a greater freedom in design and drawing methods. But despite John Brisco's 1685 patent for paper "as white and good as French or Dutch"<sup>16</sup> good quality drawing paper was not manufactured in this country until the mid-18th century. Inigo Jones, for example, had used paper imported from Strasbourg, France or Italy. Cheaper paper was also needed by architects for roughing out ideas and for large-size details. Wren's office at St Paul's had used a coarse, large-sized paper made in Venice that was intended as wallpaper and wrapping paper. Another functional paper adopted by architects from at least the 1770s was cartridge paper, first patented in 1747. It was originally made for making cartridges for guns: gunpowder and the lead shot or ball were wrapped in it. Examples of its use for drawings now in the RIBA Drawings Collection include the set of working drawings by George Steuart for Onslow Hall, 1780, or the many hundreds of drawings for Ashridge Park by various of the Wyatts, from 1813.

An attractive blue or grey-blue paper (made from old rags, particularly sailors' clothes), patented in 1665, and used by sugar bakers for winding into cones to hold loaf sugar, was also used by architects for drawing on or for mounting their drawings on. An early example (at the RIBA) of what seems to be sugar paper was used for an Office of Wren design for an arcade,<sup>17</sup> while various albums including that of Alexander Roos have their pages made from sugar paper.

There were many improvements to drawing paper throughout the Georgian period. The introduction of wove paper by James Whatman in 1757 eventually replaced laid paper with its characteristic grid of wire lines. Rather helpfully, because of Customs and Excise requirements, English paper made after about 1792 had to include the year of manufacture. By 1810, finishes included hot pressed, not (hot pressed) and rough, all available in sheets that became larger and larger culminating in extra-Antiquarian (56 x 38ins). These large sheets were used, for example, by such architect artists as J. M. Gandy for some of his Royal Academy summer exhibition drawings.

Tracing paper, for which different recipes were given from the 14th century onwards, could be bought over the counter from the 1770s. Pricking through, in which a drawing is laid over a blank sheet and the main lines of the design are pricked through to this sheet with a needle-pointed instrument thus forming a guide for the draughtsman to copy, was a long established method of transferring designs that continued into the 19th century. A newer method of reproducing drawings was James Watt's reverse copying process which he used extensively for Boulton & Watt's engineering drawings. Patented in 1780 it was not, apparently, taken up by architects. Blueprints are said to have been introduced in 1842 and anastatic was patented in this country in 1844. A lithographic process, it was probably used by Charles Barry's office before then and certainly from 1845 for some of the working drawings for the Palace of Westminster in the RIBA Drawings Collection.

On drawing instruments nothing need be said since the subject has been admirably covered by Maya Hambly's book published in 1988.<sup>18</sup> Of drawing *aids*, the most important must be the drawing board and T-square.

An early illustration of a drawing board was published in Jean Dubreuil's *La Perspective Pratique* in 1642. It was described as 18ins long, 15ins wide and ½in thick. A very small board, just larger than foolscap size (16ins by 12 or 13ins). These simple "panel-boards" were replaced by "clamped" or "ledged" boards as paper sizes became larger.

A T-square, placed for a left-handed draughtsman, is illustrated in Dubreuil's engraved plate and, as well, the drawing sheet is shown as fastened to the board with "four little pieces of wax, NOPQ". Some of the drawings from Wren's office at the RIBA have a dab of sealing wax at each corner of the verso. As do other drawings of the 18th and early 19th centuries. The method

was particularly used to fix two sheets together for pricking through. Weights were also used to keep drawings flat and immobile on the board. Drawing pins seem to have been used in the professionally advanced office of Sir Charles Barry from about 1837. Some of the Reform Club drawings (at the RIBA) have what appear to be contemporary pin holes in their corners.

A drawing board, a fixed and an adjustable T-square, a drawing table, stool with pierced top for lifting, and various instruments are shown on the frontispiece of the 1707 edition of Andrea Pozzo's *Perspectiva* (1693) giving a good idea of the draughtsman's equipment at this time.

A very fine drawing by Jean Jacques Le Queu (if it is his), dated 1782,<sup>19</sup> of "the instruments . . . of the good draughtsman" show, at the top: a rectangular pan for ink and water, a circular pan for mixing colours, and sticks of yellow, rose-pink, blue and black colours. Underneath, there are three brushes with lark's quill, swan's quill and white metal holders, and ebony handles. There are also twin water pans. The bottom half of the illustration has part of a drawing board of well-seasoned walnut, properly grooved. On the board is a straight edge, crow's quill pen, Cumberland lead pencil encased in wood, an "embosser", a paste wafer "made from parchment, sugar and orange water", a triangle set square, a lump of alum, compass with pen, pencil holder and — on the side of the board — a stylus, sponge and India rubber. There are too, many notes on the drawing addressed to the "good draughtsman", including lengthy instructions on how to prepare and stretch paper, and a note on cleaning drawings with bread crumbs.

Of casts, fragments, samples and all those other things found in architects' offices in the Georgian period, there is not — alas — space for discussion, but it is, perhaps, worth mentioning that the first British portrait that I have found so far of an architect at his drawing board is that of Robert Lorimer, aged 22, painted by his brother in 1886.<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

1. Victoria and Albert Museum Ac. No. Pl-1961.
2. The Royal Collection, Johan Zoffany, "John Cuff and his Assistant".
3. G. Wightwick, "The Life of an Architect", published in *Bentley's Miscellany*, XXXI-XXXV, 1852-54, and XLII-XLIII, 1857-88, 542.
4. *Particulars and Conditions of Sale of . . . Sloane-Place*, 1807. RIBA Library.
5. J. Britton and A. C. Pugin, *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*, 1825-28, II, 287-89.
6. p.2.
7. Information from Mrs Susan Palmer, Archivist, Sir John Soane's Museum, 1991.
8. Diary for 1894 kept by Basil Procter (1876-?1943), presented by Ian Gow, 1991, to the RIBA Drawings Collection, 150-53.
9. Shown in a photograph, Science Museum Library, 2566.
10. "Fragments of Ancient English Shipwrighting", Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.
11. Heal Collection, 56.7, Department of Prints and Drawings, British Museum.
12. March 28, 1991, 80.
13. Sir John Soane's Museum, 43/10/13.
14. RIBA Drawings Collection.
15. Jost Amman, *Stande und Handwerker*, 1568; Victoria and Albert Museum Ac No E142-1940.
16. Patent 246.
17. AF1/19/2.
18. M. Hambly, *Drawing Instruments 1580-1980*, 1988.
19. Reproduced in P. Duboy, *Le Queu, an Architectural Enigma*, 1986.
20. RIBA Drawings Collection.