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JOHN SOANE: THE BUSINESS OF ARCHITECTURE

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When articles of agreement were drawn up with the pupils in John Soane's office, Soane undertook to instruct each one in the "Art, Profession and *Business* of an architect". This paper aims, therefore, to focus on the *business* side of Soane's practice and to try to describe the complicated process of putting up a building in Soane's day. It is based on the selection of four country jobs — Malvern Hall, Mells Park, Marden Hill and Pellwall — because each one is well documented by letters from the client, progress reports from the clerk of works, estimates, and entries in Soane's day books, notebooks, account journals and bill books held by the Soane Museum. The drawings, of course, survive but, with very few exceptions, Soane's letters to the client and instructions to the clerk of works do not.

By 1792, when Soane was well settled into his work at the Bank of England as well as running a varied country house practice, his office consisted, at any one time, of between four to six articulated pupils, one paid assistant and the occasional clerk of works. But in the early 1780s up until September 1784, Soane was quite on his own. And it was in the summer of 1783 that Henry Greswold Lewis first consulted Soane about alterations to Malvern Hall in Warwickshire, a late-17th-century house which he had just inherited.

Soane had first met Lewis in Italy when they had visited Sicily together in 1779, and he made his first visit to the house in August 1783 to take survey drawings. He prepared the designs for alterations that September, which consisted of adding wings to the existing block and raising the centre of the entrance front, providing a pediment and a new curved stone portico for the entrance — *à la Tivoli* — which Lewis would have appreciated after his stay in Rome. On March 7 in the following year Soane returned to Malvern where he spent a week "examining the brick earth"¹ so that bricks could be made on site at Henry Lewis's cost. He did the same thing at Tendring Hall in Suffolk later in May, examining the quality of clay for all the bricks which were then baked in kilns on the estate there. Soane also "agreed with the workmen"² — that is the labourers who would do the digging and rough work for the contract and who would be paid on a day basis, probably by Lewis himself. In March and the following months he worked on the written estimates for the client which he presented on June 16. This took the form of a summary specification, with estimated cost. The signed estimate for Tendring survives³ which shows that Soane's is the only signature on the contract taking any responsibility for designing and building the house. How then did Soane actually manage to provide such accurate estimates?

To begin with, as at Malvern, he paid fees to both the bricklayer, William Swan,⁴ and the slater, Henry Eastlake, for "setting out" — that is pricing their work — and would probably have received quotations, which no longer survive, from the other tradesmen. He also bought printed price books as copies survive at the Museum of a plasterers' price book for 1796 and price books of carpenters' and joiners' work for 1796 and 1801. Soane also kept manuscript price books himself containing sample prices for various trades.⁵ One, for example, alongside the item quoted, shows two columns, one for the labour costs, the other the cost of labour and materials.

Soane also kept copies of estimates — for example he had the fully priced estimate for building the shell of Claremont by Holland & Brown, which he may well have had to copy out as an assistant in Holland's office.⁶ He also included several off-the-peg items: he used Joseph

Bramah's patented flush water-closets at Malvern (as he did at Tendring) and off-the-peg door furniture, heating systems and Coade-stone ornaments.

He also standardised his own designs and particularly the details,⁷ as can be seen in a design for a recess in the Eating Room at Malvern.⁸ The drawing has various inscriptions: *Cornice to Bedchamber like the Small Room at Tendring Hall / Chimneypiece like that marked A at Tendring / Entablature like Mr Branthwayte's Eating Room (Taverham Hall) and Base Moldings like Admiral Rowley's Hall (Tendring Hall)*. Soane's architecture has been criticised for its limited number of pet motifs and themes: a need to simplify the design and costing process and to standardise, in the modern sense, may account for this and offer a different interpretation of his work.

The principle problem at Malvern, however, was the problem of site supervision. No payments exist in the numerous sheets of accounts to any full-time clerk of works, although there is the payment of £16 to someone called Mr Bunn, who was not a tradesman, towards the end of the contract.⁹ He may well have been sent to measure up the built work, which was a necessary activity in any job before the final bills could be drawn up. Soane partly solved the problem in two ways. First, between August 1783 and June 1786 he made 11 journeys to the site himself, staying there for three or four days to settle problems and direct the works. Secondly, he employed carefully selected London tradesmen whom he trusted, and whom he had used on many other jobs, who would then have sent in bills which were priced both by the cost of materials and by day work. One of them, for example, was a joiner from George Wyatt's firm, Wyatt being Elizabeth Soane's uncle.

Soane later learnt to employ and control a team of freelance clerks of works whose importance in the history of architectural practice cannot be too highly emphasised. The role of a responsible clerk on site was worth more than any number of young gentleman pupils back at the office in London.

Soane's work at Mells Park in Somerset, which lasted from 1810 to 1824, is documented by 143 letters to Soane from the clerk and Colonel Thomas Horner, the generous and endlessly tiresome client. James Spiller had originally designed and partly built the proposed alterations to Mells Park but had resigned halfway through the job largely, one suspects, because of Horner's interference. Sir John Coxe Hippesley, Mrs Horner's brother, begged Soane to take it on, which he did. He first visited the house in July 1810 and on August 8 sent off 13 designs for the decoration of the drawing room and library on 11½ sheets of imperial paper. Horner was delighted writing on the August 17 that the drawings "are so exceedingly neatly and temptingly done as to make one wish to step into them immediately".¹⁰ He asked Soane to put the work in hand, but not to hurry himself, for, as he said, "you have given me a very convincing proof of your expedition".¹¹ Horner was engaged in working on the stables and offices and waiting, as Sir John Hippesley suggested, for "the cash to come in", so very little happened until May 1815, when Soane sent Richard Matthews as clerk of works to supervise the work.

The Horner job was managed rather differently from the others as Horner provided the materials and workmen and paid them himself. In order to inject some degree of control over the quality and execution of his design Soane introduced Matthews to control the workforce and solve any problems on site. He was to check the numbers of days worked by each man and cost the bills accordingly, which Horner then paid. He was also meant to send a weekly progress report to Soane but Horner rather regrettably insisted on writing each week instead — letters to which Soane regularly replied with great patience. In every letter Horner pressed Soane to visit them saying he was the "main spring of all",¹² and over the years from 1810 to 1821 he did in fact make 20 journeys, often staying between two to three days on each visit, the actual journey taking a day and a half with an overnight stay. But in May 1815 Horner had to make do with Matthews and was at first delighted with him saying that "he seems a very intelligent steady man and *not* a fine gentleman. He arrived here yesterday and would have written to you himself according to



Fig. 1. View of Mells Park showing Soane's proposed porch, 1815. (Sir John Soane's Museum.)

your desire but I told him I would have that pleasure myself. . . . He is now employed in taking the elevation of the house; I presume what he is now doing is for you to settle how the front is to be managed . . .”¹³

By June 24 Soane's perspective for the front with its new porch (Fig. 1) did in fact arrive and, although Horner felt it was handsome, he hesitated, fearing it would be expensive, “tedious in its execution”, too high and too large a projection between the flanking bays. *And* he had been living in “such a sad litter” for so long . . .¹⁴

Soane replied promptly: “All the points attended to have been so often and fully discussed that for me to give any further opinion would be troubling you to little or no purpose. Some small portion of *decision* is necessary — Consult your own *feelings* and pull down the new porch or any other part of the alterations made from my designs.”¹⁵

Horner was relieved, writing “I will now cordially confess the *truth* to you, which is that I do not, nor ever did, *quite* like the Porch as it now is. I allow it would have been much better to have said this at once . . .”¹⁶ Soane obviously replied in a rather abject way as Horner wrote again two days later: “You are completely mistaken in supposing you have failed in pleasing either Mrs Horner or me — there is not a single thing you have done that has not delighted us both — the only alteration we wish done is *some* reduction of the porch.”¹⁷

Work pressed on during the summer of 1815 with Matthews directing the putting up of ribs for the ceiling dome in the library and plastering the walls. Matthews and Horner between them sent Soane a sketch for a modified and lower porch in August which Soane finally agreed to after improving and tidying up the design.

In September, problems arose. Soane, caught up in the ghastly saga of his son's anonymous attacks in the *Champion* newspaper, failed to send instructions for finishings and

Horner repeatedly wrote asking him to come or to send an *efficient* clerk of works. Matthews could obviously not improvise on the Soane theme and had, as Mrs Horner said, “a deficiency of energy”¹⁸: he left on October 26 to be replaced by James Cook, one of Soane’s best clerks who had worked on Dulwich. The Horners liked Cook: he was “so brisk and clever”¹⁹ and work proceeded on the porch, only to be delayed by the problems Horner had in quarrying the right pieces of stone for the columns and capitals. It was nearly finished by the end of the year, and by February 23, 1816 Soane had sent Horner designs for the next project in the house — the conversion of the long gallery connecting the eastern and western sides, designs the Horners obviously did not understand as Cook had to make a model to explain it to them. He was extremely efficient, keeping an account book of moneys received from Colonel Horner to pay the men, another of money paid to the workmen, weekly time charts and payments and a book listing daywork of the carpenters and plasterers. But by May he had had enough: he could not bear Horner’s interference and wrote to Soane explaining that he was leaving to go into Staffordshire: “the reason of my not returning was that Colonel Horner always wrote to you every week”.²⁰ Only a few progress reports exist from Cook to Soane and it is obvious that he resented this lack of communication with the architect.

John Mitchell, the head carpenter, took over as foreman and took on the duties of checking the day work and communicating occasionally with Soane. Year after year Horner made improvements which culminated in the Best Staircase, but in December 1822 the large girder, put in by Spiller across the western bay, sank and caused cracks to appear on the side wall of the house and on the ceilings of the rooms underneath. Mitchell explained to Soane that Spiller had wanted to use deal or oak but that Colonel Horner had insisted on fir which is bad timber “to sink endways”.²¹ “I fear you will find the settlement *pretty considerable*”, wrote Horner “and standing in great need of your skill to remedy — but with you as my sheet anchor I have little fear of Mr Spiller being set to rights and that all will be well again”.²² Soane did reply in the following week but he made no further journeys to Mells and sent in his final bill on March 17, 1824 — payment for expenses and 5% commission on the total works estimated at £8,000. Horner did not agree with this estimate as he had probably not kept accounts of the materials he had paid for over 14 years, insisting that at the very outside only £4,000 had been spent since 1810. He finally did agree, however, after Soane had consulted a solicitor, and Soane was able to settle up the final account on February 12, 1829.

By contrast Soane’s work at Marden Hill in Hertfordshire went like clockwork and is a classic example of his particular method of practice. Marden was owned by Claude George Thornton whose brothers were both directors of the Bank of England, both of whom had employed Soane in a private capacity and had highly recommended him. Thornton had a house in Russell Square but in 1818 bought the Marden estate. He did visit Marden regularly but did not live on the job as Horner did at Mells. He first wrote to Soane in August, 1818 wanting to put the house into a “comfortable condition”. He said: “although I do not think that much need be done, I am desirous to consult you with the business. It is by no means necessary to give you the trouble of managing the concern, which excepting a very trifling alteration to improve a dining room will be confined to painting and papering. But I am desirous of employing any person you may recommend to draw up and inspect the work . . .”²³

How he had underestimated John Soane, who paid his first visit to survey the house on October 5 and must have discussed extensive alterations as a long list, dated October 1818, survives in Thornton’s hand of areas in the house and offices needing attention.²⁴

A plan of December 18, 1818²⁵ shows the existing house which was designed in 1790 by Francis Carter. Indicated in red are the early modest proposals — demolition of offices on the right to allow for a butler’s pantry and small alterations to the dining and drawing rooms. But by December work was already in hand for the complete internal alteration and decoration of the

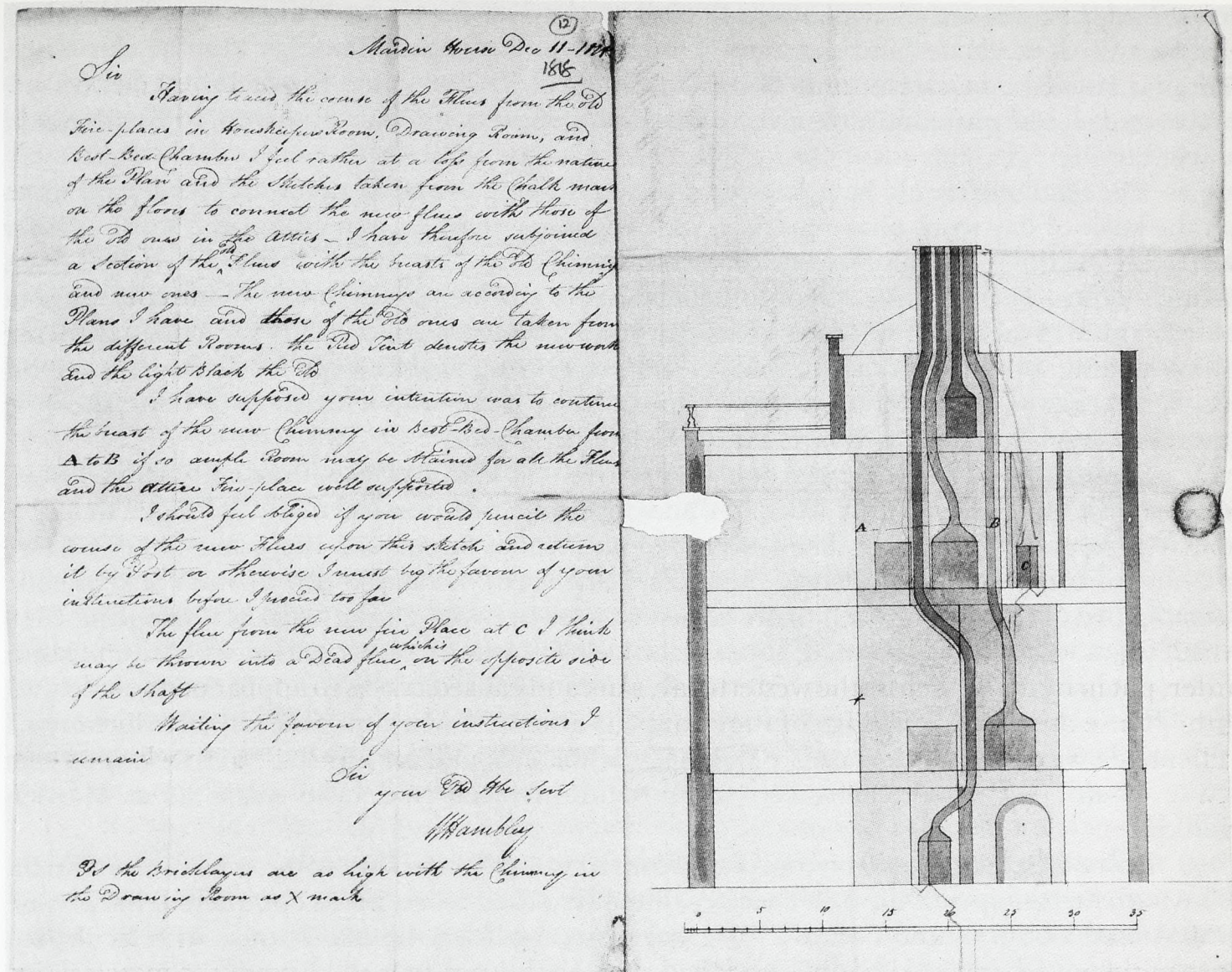


Fig. 2. An illustrated "progress" letter from the clerk of works, William Hambley, showing his sketch of the chimney flues at Marden Hill. (Sir John Soane's Museum.)

principal rooms, and in the following year Soane persuaded Thornton to alter the staircase and vestibule and to build a new porch surmounted by a tiny vaulted room which Pevsner has called one of his masterpieces.

Soane installed an excellent Clerk of Works, William Hambley, on November 23, who wrote weekly progress reports to Soane, seeking advice, information and sending the "returns of the men's time".²⁶ An illustrated letter to Soane of December 11, 1818 is typical of the advice he sought. He writes: "Having traced the course of the flues in the Housekeeper's Room, Drawing Room and Best-Bed Chamber I feel rather at a loss from the nature of the plan and sketches taken from chalk marks on the floors to connect the new flues with those of the old ones in the attics . . . I should feel obliged if you would pencil the course of the new flues upon this sketch and return it by post".²⁷ (Fig. 2). Although Hambley deferred constantly to Soane he was sufficiently enterprising to improvise when a reply to his queries was not forthcoming. For example on January 16, 1819 he wrote "Not having received your instructions in answer to my last letter relative to the opening from the Butler's pantry to the proposed new building, and the bricklayers not having anything else to do, I have finished it with an Arch and carried the flue from the scullery copper over one side of it according to the sketch I sent".²⁸

The tradesmen on the job were, with the exception of a plasterer from Hertford and local labouring bricklayers, all from London and men well known to Soane and often used on other

jobs. They become familiar names in the bill books over the years: William Good, plumber; William Watson, glazier and painter; Thomas Grundy, mason; Thomas Martyr, carpenter; Thomas Poynder, bricklayer and Thomas Palmer, plasterer. Soane would have known their prices and would probably have given them their instructions, with drawings, in London and not at the site.

The final bills would have been assessed in different ways. Soane would have paid some on the basis of day work plus materials, with Hambley sending in regular time sheets. Other work, for example, the joinery and paintwork was measured by an assistant or pupil from Soane's office. For example, George Bailey, Soane's principal assistant, spent four days at Marden in 1819 and 1820 measuring carpentry and paintwork, followed by eight full days in the office writing up the accounts. One of the measuring books kept by Bailey shows his measurements of carpentry at Marden,²⁹ and can be compared with another book showing measured work at the Picture Room at Lincoln's Inn Fields.³⁰

Some of the materials at Marden were reused — old bricks from the demolished offices, for example, and the columns, architrave and cornice for the porch actually belonged to Soane and were originally made for Bank Buildings in Princes Street. On the other hand, a large quantity of brickwork was specially "reduced" that is cut or sanded down, and consequently rather expensive. Soane himself made 12 visits to site between December 1818 and June 1819 which was a relatively high rate of supervision. Mr Thornton corresponded with him but was seldom pressing and rarely interfered. He often delivered Hambley's letters to Soane adding on one "The work does not make such progress as I had hoped; but it is too substantial to be hurried . . . I am a *convert* to the Staircase".³¹ In his last letter to Soane on July 22, 1819 he hoped that Soane would visit to see "how very comfortable thus far you have made us at Marden Hill".³²

Pellwall, near Market Drayton, in Staffordshire, was Soane's last country house, on which, as he said, he had spent "his best energies, intending that, when it was completed, his private professional labours should cease".³³ He was responsible for the main house with its elegant pilaster strips with incised lines, which stood on high ground, as well as for the offices, stables, triangular lodge, gardener's house and immense, walled, kitchen-garden. The clients were Mr and Mrs Purney Sillitoe, with whom he remained the best of friends all through the 1820s seeing them for dinner or tea at least once a week. By May 24, 1822 the plans of the house were finally settled and Sillitoe stipulated that the house itself should not cost more than £10,000 with the outer offices, stables, lodge and garden to be costed separately. Shortly afterwards, on June 3, Soane wrote to the builder John Carline in Shrewsbury asking him to tender for the job of building the shell of the house.

"I wish to have the house covered in as early in this year as possible — I will, therefore, thank you to make all needful enquiries respecting timber and bricks etc so that we may be able to come to some agreement as to the prices as far as relates to the shell of the building. The only competition I shall pursue will be to yourself and some other builder. Let me hear from you as soon as convenient and you shall than know the day I shall be at Market Drayton".³⁴

Soane's approach to Carline was an unusual step. To begin with, as far as it has been possible to trace in this preliminary survey, Soane rarely, if ever, used a general *builder*, who would quote for the job, order the materials and coordinate the different trades. He also did not generally believe in going out to tender and when forced to do so by the Office of Works for the Board of Trade building, wrote "The execution of the exterior of the Board of Trade . . . is of such vital importance to the Office of Works that I most sincerely trust that a tried and faithful tradesman accustomed to such works may not be passed by for the saving of a few pounds to make room for another who with the best intentions cannot be supposed equally competent to complete the works".³⁵

In the case of Pellwall, however, Soane may have needed to speak to two local builders to test their qualities, and he was anyway only prepared to let Carline undertake the main *shell* of the house rather than the internal finishings. He was also to have problems with Carline, who had recommended a bricklayer, William Wade, whose bricks were so infamously bad they could not be used, and who also exceeded the estimate of £4,409 for the main shell of the house. Soane continued to use him, however, to build the basic structures of the other buildings on the estate.

In other respects the work proceeded comparatively smoothly. Thomas Ward was engaged at 36s a week as clerk of works — that is at a slightly lower rate than Hambley at Marden, who was a more efficient and capable man — and sent to the site on July 17 where he directed the works, sent Soane weekly progress reports and supplied the builders with the office working drawings. By November 1823 the shell of the house was finished and Soane's trusted and specialist tradesmen from London were at work: Thomas Palmer, plasterer; Thomas Grundy, mason; William Watson, painter and glazier, all of whom had worked at Marden.

On June 18, 1825 Sillitoe could report that he had taken a survey of all the buildings and had great pleasure in saying that the whole were very satisfactory and that they appeared to be proceeding very fast towards a finish. He also told Soane that Ward, whom he had found to be very steady and attentive had asked for a rise in wages. By August Ward had gone to work for a Mr Ball at Nantwich and Sillitoe despaired that anything could be finished without some person on the spot. Soane sent Richard Hall, a freelance assistant who in fact made eight journeys to Pellwall between 1822 and 1828, and then replaced Ward by Stephen Bumstead. The Sillitoes did not move in until August 1828 when they wrote saying they were "tolerably comfortable" and "very much gratified with the fruits of their labour".³⁶

No one did more than Soane in his day to defend the role and professional standing of the architect. His early definition of the architect's duties in 1788 — "to be the intermediate agent between the employer, whose honour and interest he is to study and the mechanic whose rights he is to defend"³⁷ — still holds good today. His hatred of the architect-contractor and general fear of overcharging led him to alienate his fellow members at the Architects' Club in 1795 over the problem of charges. At that meeting it was proposed that 2½% should be charged for measuring on top of the customary 5% as architects' charges had remained the same for 100 years. Soane's argument was that the cost of building equalled the increase to the diminished value of money, that workmen were more expert and so less supervision was required while easier travelling made it possible to undertake more work.

At the same time he was aware from his own experience of the great burden placed on the architect and could tell his students at the end of the 6th Royal Academy lecture that he hoped that "ere long the respective and distinct duties of the Architect, the Surveyor, the Measurer, the Builder and Contractor will be properly distinguished from each other".³⁸

Current architectural practice has indeed benefited from the steps to formalize the professions of surveyor and quantity surveyor in the 19th century, but it is doubtful if Soane would have approved of the further erosion of the profession by the emerging duties of the interior designer, services consultant and project manager.

NOTES

1. Soane's *Notebook*, March 8, 1784.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Drawer 28. Set 3. 1A.
4. Soane's *Notebook*, May 26, 1784.
5. Printed and MS price books are in a packet labelled *Price Books*, Mirror Cupboard.
6. *Copies of Bills*, 1785, 23.

7. Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey was the first to explore the idea of standardisation in Chapter 14, *John Soane: The Making of an Architect*, 1982.
8. Soane, *Precedents*, f 80 verso.
9. *Account Book*, 1781-86, 42.
10. Mells Parcel, 4/1.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mells Parcel, 4/5.
13. Mells Parcel, 4/6.
14. Mells Parcel, 4/7.
15. Mells Parcel, 4/8.
16. Mells Parcel, 4/10.
17. Mells Parcel, 4/11.
18. Mells Parcel, 4/39.
19. Mells Parcel, 4/25.
20. Mells Parcel, 1/4.
21. Mells Parcel, 4/135.
22. Mells Parcel, 4/136.
23. Private Correspondence, VII, B2,3.
24. Private Correspondence, VII, B2,4.
25. Drawer 3. Set 2. 3.
26. Private Correspondence, VII, B2, 11.
27. Private Correspondence, VII, B2, 12.
28. Private Correspondence, VII, B2, 14.
29. 12, nb 29.
30. 12, nb 27. Many similar measuring books survive at the Soane Museum.
31. Private Correspondence, VII, B2, 23.
32. Private Correspondence, VII, B2, 24.
33. Sir John Soane, *Designs for Public and Private Buildings* 1832, 43.
34. Private Correspondence, VII, B1, 5.
35. H. M. Colvin (ed.) *History of the King's Works*, VI, 1782-1851, 133.
36. Private Correspondence, VII, B1, 31.
37. Sir John Soane *Plans, Elevations and Sections of Buildings executed in several Counties*, 7.
38. A. T. Bolton, (ed), *Lectures on Architecture by Sir John Soane* 1929, 105.

