



Fig.1 (Previous) Case of drawing instruments in the Drawing Office, Sir John Soane's Museum. © Sir John Soane's Museum. Photo: Matt Tidby

Fig.2 Case of drawing instruments open, with numbered key to contents (see Appendix 1). © Sir John Soane's Museum. Photo: Matt Tidby



The bold numbers in brackets refer to the list of instruments in the display case, Appendix 1¹

This display of drawing instruments (Figs 1, 2), which can be seen in the newly restored Drawing Office at Sir John Soane's Museum, rather charmingly evokes the atmosphere of the office when in the early 19th century it was the busy epicentre of Soane's architectural practice, filled with his young apprentices and clerks. Left behind in the office after Soane's death in January 1837 and recorded in the inventory of the contents of the house and museum taken that year by the first Curator, George Bailey – who had himself been first a pupil and then Soane's chief clerk – they were arranged in this case in the mid-1980s by Margaret Richardson, then Assistant Curator at the Museum, with the help and advice of Maya Hambly, author of *Drawing Instruments 1580–1980* (Sotheby's Publications, 1988).

In the main, we know little about their individual provenances as remarkably few bills for drawing instruments survive in Soane's archive, but two items at least we can be sure belonged to Soane himself. The first is a small shagreen-covered tapered pocket instrument case with a flip-top and spaces for a scale, pen and two other instruments (all missing) (2). Dating from c.1800 and with brass and silver mounts, it is inscribed *J.S.* on the top. Of similar date and also marked *John Soane* is (12), a small, green, fish-skin-covered eight-sided case for compasses (missing), marked on the base 'Wellington, Opticians, Crown Court, Soho, London'. Alexander Wellington, who described himself on his bill-head as a 'Mathematical

Instrument Maker', was someone whom Soane patronised on a regular basis, as can be seen from the two bills illustrated below (Figs 3, 4).

Another instrument bearing a maker's name is the pair of brass proportional dividers, marked up for *circles, plans & solids* and inscribed *J. Sisson, London*, probably by Jeremiah Sisson (fl.1736–88), c.1780 (6).² The 23-year-old Soane is pictured holding just such a pair in his 1776 portrait by Christopher Hünne-man (Fig.5), painted to celebrate his being awarded the gold medal for architecture by the Royal Academy in that year. Is it too fanciful to suppose that they might have been purchased as part of a set to replace the two sets of drawing instruments, one in silver and one in brass, Soane had had the misfortune to lose when coming back over the Alps from his Grand Tour in 1780 when the bottom fell out of his trunk?³

The quill in the display is a modern one, but countless quills were used and worn out by Soane's pupils during the 50-odd years his architectural practice lasted, as finds during the restoration of the Drawing Office reveal.⁴ The quill cutter (11) was an oft-used piece of equipment, as testified by the small pieces of quill that regularly fell out of the margins of the Office Day Books when I was cataloguing them.

Appendix 1 – Items in display case (see Fig.2 for numbered key)

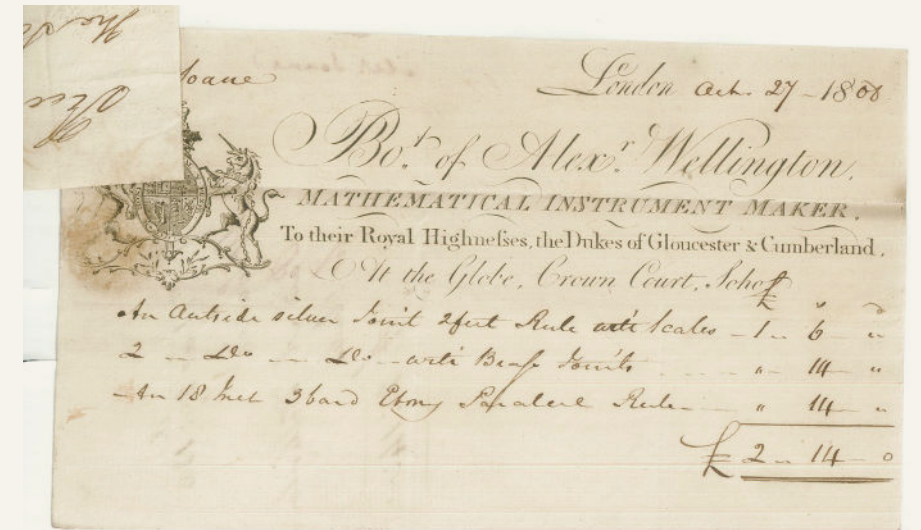
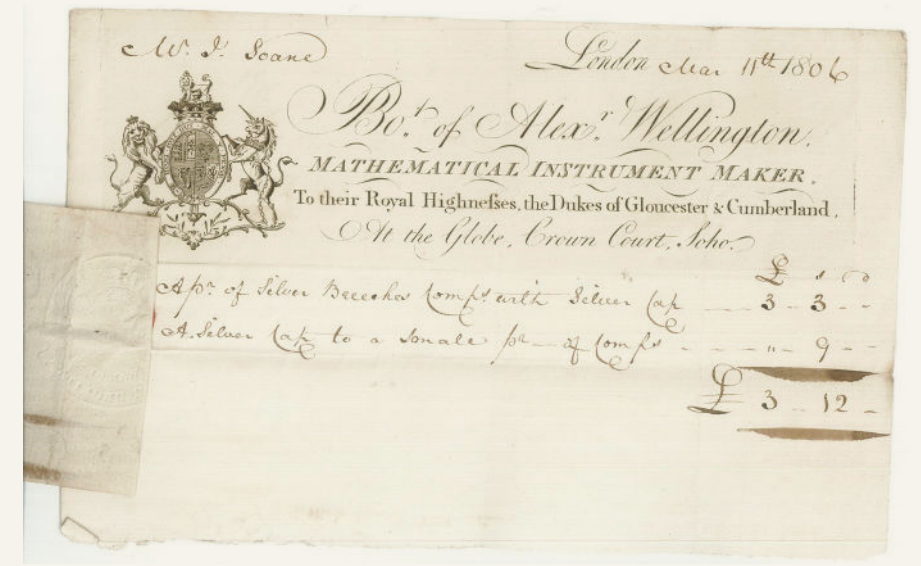
1. Two mahogany pyramids, probably used by Soane to demonstrate geometrical solids, or, if used in conjunction with adjacent lamps, the effects created by shadows (SM X284, X285).

- 2. A small green shagreen-covered tapered instrument case, silver-mounted with a flip-top, with spaces for a scale, pen and two other instruments (missing). Top inscribed *J.S.*, c.1800 (SM X296).
- 3. A turned mahogany flat case containing an example of Soane's seal in red wax (SM X295).
- 4. A semicircular brass protractor, c.1800 (SM X1206).
- 5. A 6-in. ivory drawing scale, inscribed *Elliott Bros of the Strand, London*, c.1800 (SM X1205).
- 6. A pair of proportional dividers, brass with metal tips, inscribed *J. Sisson, London* and marked up for *circles, plans & solids*. Probably made by Jeremiah Sisson c.1780 (SM X1207).
- 7. A parallel ruler, mahogany with brass fittings (SM X283).
- 8. A brass oval seal engraved with initials *J.S.*, and a brass stamp with raised initials *J.S.*, both with wooden handles, used for stamping drawings prior to their leaving the office (SM X280, X281).
- 9. A circular metal paperweight with a brass knob with decorative lion's head to top (SM X297).
- 10. A china ink-pot with small ink-well with brass lid (SM X287).
- 11. A mahogany quill cutter with brass fittings (SM X286).
- 12. A small, green, fish-skin-covered eight-sided case for compasses (missing), silver-mounted with top inscribed *J. Soane* and base marked *Wellington, Opticians, Crown Court, Soho, London*, c.1800 (X290).
- 13. A French boxwood folding rule with brass hinge and tips, c.1800 (SM X291).

Fig.3 Bill from Alexander Wellington, Mathematical Instrument Maker, Crown Court, Soho, 11 March 1806, for a pair of silver breeches compasses with silver cap, and a silver cap to a small pair of compasses. SM Archives 16/14/100. © Sir John Soane's Museum

Fig.4 Bill from Alexander Wellington, Mathematical Instrument Maker, Crown Court, Soho, 27 October 1808, for an outside silver joint 2-ft rule with scales, two of the same with brass joints, and an 18-in. 3 band ebony parallel rule. SM Archives 16/11/111. © Sir John Soane's Museum

Fig.5 Christopher William Hünne-man (1755–1793), Portrait of John Soane, 1776, SM P400. © Sir John Soane's Museum. Photo: Jeremy Butler



- 1 I am most grateful to my colleague Matt Tidby for taking the photos for Figs 1 & 2 and for annotating Fig.2.
- 2 Maya Hambly, *Drawing Instruments 1580–1980* (London: Sotheby's Publications, 1988), 75.
- 3 Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *John Soane's Architectural Education, 1753–80* (New York: Garland Publishing 1977), 332–35. In a letter in slightly halting French to an unnamed Swiss official Soane lists the possessions lost, including: 'Quelques instruments pour un Architecte d'Argent dans une boîte avec le nome. Quelques instruments pour un Architecte du Cuivre dans un boîte', adding that, of everything he has lost, it is his two Royal Academy medals and the drawing instruments that he would most like to retrieve. Whilst the modern translation of 'Cuivre' is copper, it seems likely that Soane means brass here.
- 4 See Helen Dorey's article on Soane's drawing office in this issue.