

MENDING MONUMENTS

by MICHAEL HALL



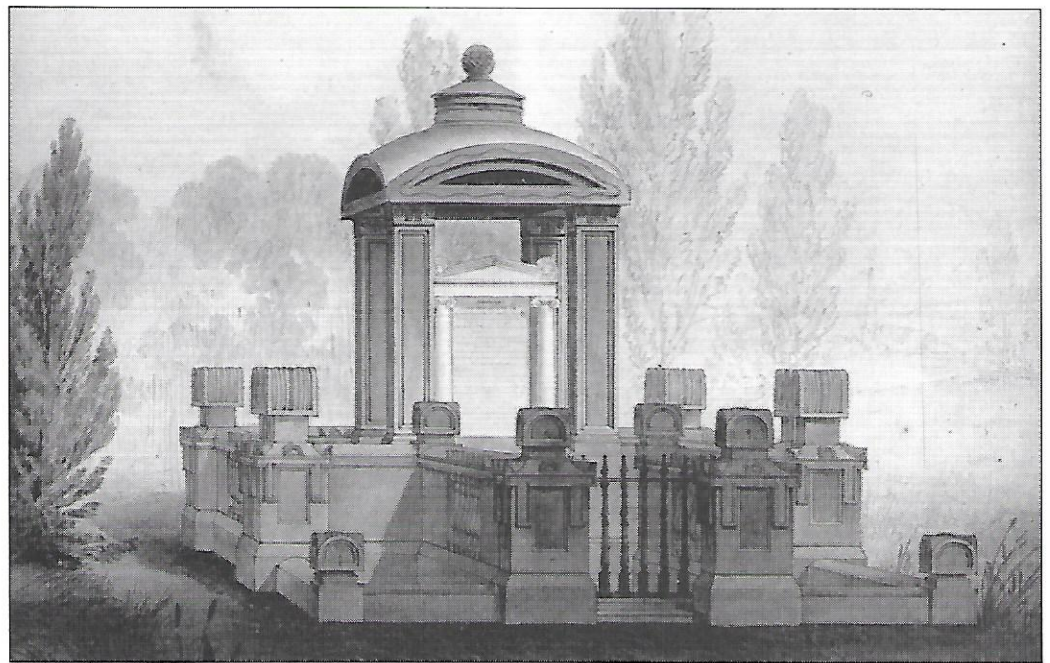
IN the winter of 1815-16 John Soane began the sad task of designing a mausoleum (Fig 3) for his beloved, long-suffering wife, who died in November, her heart broken by the spiteful selfishness of her younger son. Eight years later their elder son was buried there, to be followed in 1837 by Soane himself.

The mausoleum still stands (Fig 2) in the churchyard of Old St Pancras parish church, London (now St Pancras Gardens), just behind the great Victorian railway station. As characteristic a product of Soane's genius as the Dulwich Picture Gallery or his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, it is an unexpected, inspiring sight in this grimy industrial setting.

Yet the monument is in a parlous state. Even a romantic expectation that a mausoleum should evoke the passage of time cannot justify the neglect of this small masterpiece. Still blackened by soot from the steam railway (Fig 6), the stonework has exfoliated in the sulphurous air; acid-producing lichens are causing further damage; the kerbs are subsiding; some of the surrounding balusters are missing and other sections are loose; much of the ironwork has severely corroded.

It is heartening to report that a small group of Soane enthusiasts has raised sufficient funds to embark on the repair of the monument during the summer. In 1989 they founded the Soane Monuments Trust for the rescue of the mausoleum and other neglected monuments by the architect. Although the St Pancras tomb is the priority, the idea for the trust came to the architect Stefan Buzas and interior designer Robin Moore Ede when they noticed with horror the state of the monument to Miss Elizabeth Johnstone in the churchyard of St Mary Abbots, Kensington (Fig 4).

That is an early work by Soane. It was designed in July 1784, a month before his marriage, and was commissioned by a



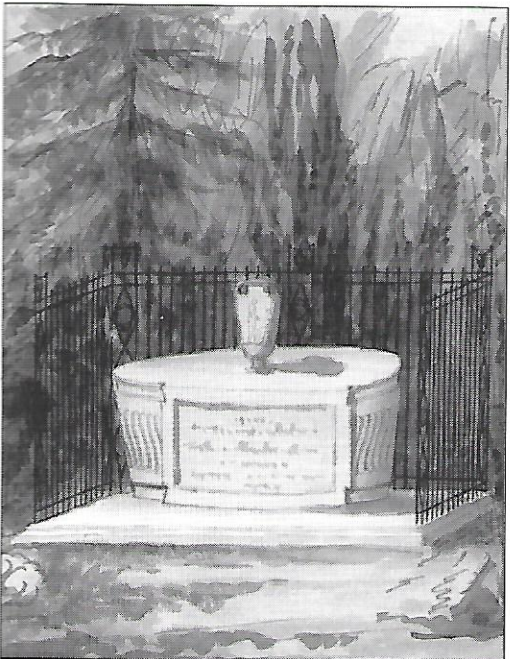
(Top left) 1—Sir John Soane's epitaph, on his mausoleum in Old St Pancras churchyard. (Top right) 2—The mausoleum today, in need of restoration. (Above) 3—The mausoleum in 1816

notorious Irish rake, Lord Bellamont, whose relationship with Miss Johnstone remains mysterious. Today, the refined neo-Classical sarcophagus is subsiding gently into the earth, no doubt undermined by a nearby tree. The trust plans to raise and secure it as well as cleaning the stone and making good the damage caused by iron cramps, which will be removed. It is not quite clear how much of the monument remains underground; a sketch, preserved in the Soane Museum, London (Fig 5), shows a shallow plinth which is now wholly invisible, and long-vanished iron railings.

The problems of the Soane mausoleum are more complicated. The trust is fortunate to be able to draw on the expertise of Miss Dorothy Stroud, Soane's

biographer, and the architect Julian Harap, who is in charge of the restoration. The stonework will be gently cleaned of dirt and graffiti, so making apparent the now hidden contrasts between the white Portland stone structure, the buff-coloured York stone paving and the marble block which carries the inscriptions under the shallow dome (Fig 1).

Repairs in the late 19th century involved the use of hard cement pointing, which will be removed. In addition, recent emergency insertions of small sections of stonework will be replaced by accurate replicas of the original. One very weathered marble column under the dome will be turned, if it proves capable of repair, so that its most damaged face is hidden.



(Top left) 4—Miss Elizabeth Johnstone's sarcophagus at St Mary Abbots, Kensington. Repair is a priority for the Soane Monuments Trust. (Above left) 5—A 1784 sketch showing the monument's original plinth and railings. (Right) 6—Stonework on the Soane mausoleum

The iron gates to the crypt will be repaired; they are now painted black, but scrapes will determine, if possible, the original colour.

One major difficulty is caused by Soane's choice of Coade stone for the balusters in the surrounding balustrade. This patent artificial stone can no longer be accurately reproduced. Indeed, the secret had already been lost by the late 19th century, when some of the balusters were replaced, for the substitutes are a yellowish terracotta that contrasts unpleasantly with the cream-coloured Coade. New balusters will be substituted, in the lightest possible terracotta, to make a better match.

It is to be hoped that the plans eventually adopted for the King's Cross redevelopment will take account of the

presence of the mausoleum on the western edge of the site. Clearing away the present overhead wires and shunting tracks would provide a much worthier setting. Some improvements would be easy—removing the large, circular flowerbed in front of the monument, for instance. The narrow beds that flank the steps leading down to the crypt, however, are part of the original design: a case for authentic planting?

The trust has a list of 10 other monuments by Soane, ranging geographically from a column in the park at Lemmington Hall, Northumberland, to an obelisk at Boconnoc in Cornwall.

It sees its task as being not only to initiate repairs itself, but also to prompt action from local authorities or other

bodies. A recent success is the re-awakened interest in the Simeon Monument in the market place at Reading, which has been much mutilated over the years. It is hoped that this elegant obelisk can be restored as part of a new scheme of pedestrianisation. Similarly, the restoration of the memorial column and urn in the grounds of Colne Park, near Colchester, is about to be undertaken by the Essex Heritage Trust.

Contributions to the Soane Monuments Trust may be sent to the treasurer, the Hon. Piers Gibson, 25 Sumner Place, London SW7 3NT. Further information may be obtained from the secretary, Robin Moore Ede, 21 Bruton Place, London W1.

Photographs: David Giles.

Illustrations: Sir John Soane's Museum.