

Open House London



Archifacts sheet

Norwood Hall

Norwood Green Road, Southall

The House

Norwood Hall was designed by Sir John Soane for his friend and business associate John Robins. The foundation stone was laid on August 8th 1801 and the house was finished by the following summer at a cost of £440 1s 8d.

Sir John Soane (1753-1837), the son of a bricklayer, was probably the greatest architect of the 18th century. He was Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy from 1809 until his death and during his career completed 320 commissions. The Bank of England and the ground floor of the Foreign Office are probably his most famous but Cricket Lodge, Somerset (the location for the TV series 'To the Manor Born'), Stowe House, Northants, Dulwich Picture Gallery and his own country home Pitshanger Manor beside Ealing Green are all noteworthy examples of his work.

John Robins was an estate agent, auctioneer and furniture maker and worked with Soane over a twenty year period, providing the furniture for the Bank of England and commissioning Soane for his speculative housing projects. He lived in Norwood Hall from 1802 until his death in 1831 and Soane designed his elaborate sarcophagi which can be seen in the graveyard of St Mary's Church next door to Norwood Hall.

In fact Soane's association with the area pre-dates this house, the residents of the house that previously stood here were the Biscoe family and Soane built their new home, Micklefield Hall in Hertfordshire. As he was building Norwood Hall, Soane restored the memorial to Joseph Biscoe, Deputy Chirographer of the Court of Common Pleas, which is also found in St Mary's Church. Joseph was the grandfather of Elisha Biscoe, the last occupant of the house that was demolished to make way for John Robins's villa.

The house was extended and extensively modified in the late 19th century by the Unwin family. An attic floor and an additional wing were added and the current

entrance created. At the same time the interior was remodelled in the in the Arts and Crafts style fashionable at the turn of the century – the fireplaces and library are particularly fine examples of this – however fragments of Soane's designs remain. From the Twenties the Unwins sold off part of the estate for housing development, nearly all the houses north of Norwood Green as far as Poplar Avenue stand on land once part of Norwood Hall. They sold the house and the remaining nineteen acres to Middlesex County Council in 1946 for £13,000 and it remained in public ownership, becoming a horticultural college in 1956 and later Ealing Tertiary College and Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College.

The house underwent a £1.3 million refurbishment, funded by the Sikh Community via Sri Guru Singh Sabha Southall, following its purchase in 2008. New additions to the building are a wheelchair lift at the front entrance and a lift inside to the upper floor levels for people with disabilities.

The Garden

The first information we have about the garden is found in the 1814 Enclosure Award map. This shows the house, the Walled garden, the Cottage, the stable block and the Ha-Ha behind the house. A number of important features are visible on the 1865 Ordnance Survey map. The glasshouse is visible as is a system of paths in the Walled garden and the pond, and these remain largely unaltered.

At this time the drive was in the front of the house and the main entrance was to the east – what is now the back entrance to the site. The house had two orchards near the Walled garden. Immediately behind the house were the pleasure gardens set out in typical mid-Victorian Gardenesque style.

By 1894 the first glasshouses appeared in the Walled garden. By 1934 the front drive was no longer in use and the entrance moved to its present position.

A Tour of the House and Garden

1. For the best view of Soane's vision go behind the house (where a line of trees marks the old front drive running parallel to the building) to see the original front door and the impressive pillars either side. The Portland steps in front of it belonged to the house that originally stood here and as such are over 250 years old.

Across the front of the building you will see the distinctive triumphal arch, which is a minor echo of Soane's own house, Pitshanger Manor and can be seen on many Soane buildings. What is unique is that there is no precedent for such an arch in a simple villa and it was never copied widely meaning that Norwood Hall has a special place in architectural history.

Although the windows have been extensively altered the blind oculi are Soane's, as is the parapet below the additional third storey.

2. From what is now the front of the house an attractive avenue of trees leads towards the playing fields located outside the grounds. To the left is Khalsa Primary School and to the right an orchard of cherry trees borders the Walled garden, which is accessed through gates and is still in use. The brick buildings to the right as you enter are to be demolished, leaving the tall wooden structure which contained a water tank, to make way for a day nursery and gym.

3. Return to the house and the entrance added by the Unwin family. As soon as you come into the house you will see the motifs of the Arts and Crafts movement. Inspired by William Morris it sought to hold back the tide of mass produced products and create designs for craftsmen that looked back to earlier times.

The panelling draws its inspiration from the Tudor period and is typical of the movement. They are deliberately simple in design and made from oak, only extending part way up the wall in order to keep the rooms light. The door furniture on all the doors on this floor are excellent examples of the style – made from wrought iron and with elaborate detailing and twists. The large wooden fireplace surround to the left carries the coat of arms of the Unwin family.

Turn right past the reception desk, in the transverse corridor at the top of the steps Soane's ceiling is still visible – the shallow domes are highly characteristic of his work. This was the original entrance hall. The office in front of you (not currently open) was probably once the library and is high Arts and Crafts – the use of oak once again, the hammered copper chimney flue and particularly the plant design of the wallpaper. To the right there is a room with a series of white-painted shelves and glass-fronted cupboards around the fireplace and along the opposite wall.

4. The glasshouse accessed from the corridor to the left of reception was built in about 1860 and although many features have been covered the cast iron pillars and attractive tiled floor can still be appreciated. Further along the corridor the end room has an ornate fireplace, as has the room above and the landing leading to it, reached by the heavy wooden staircase rising from the reception area.

5. On leaving the grounds turn left along Tentelow Lane to the church. To the left of the church gate and clearly visible from the path is the tomb of John Robins. An elaborate tribute by John Soane to an old friend decorated with columns, lion's claw feet and sea shell motifs and topped with an urn. In the ground just in front of the sarcophagus is a large slab which bears the legend 'The entrance to Mr John Robins' vault'.

6. About 80 yards further down the road past the church gate there is a row of terraced houses. A stone set in the brickwork at first floor level says, 'A free school erected by EB 1767'. The 'EB' is Elisha Biscoe, the last Biscoe to live in Norwood Green, who provided 'a large sum of money to educate and clothe 30 boys and 10 girls belonging to the Parishes of Norwood and Heston'.