

U3A Bikers
In the steps of John Soane, architect
Friday 13th May 2022

We assembled at Dulwich Picture Gallery. Fourteen riders had signed up but one had a problem with an electric bike. He had to cancel and so there were thirteen of us, out for a ride on Friday 13th! Unlucky? No!



We took the opportunity to extend a warm welcome to a new member, Jan Rae, joining for her first ride with us.

The Dulwich Picture Gallery is a John Soane-designed building, and so the first on our list.



After a short briefing to keep us all safe, and a description of the ride by Niesje, we were off along familiar roads to Burgess Park and on to the second Soane building, St Peter's Church, Walworth.

However, full of enthusiasm for the ride (and for the coffee stop), the ride leader of the second group forgot to take the turn to the church!

Realising the omission, the group about-turned and headed back, exchanging greetings as we passed the first group who had just completed the visit. They were somewhat perplexed to see the group heading in the opposite direction!!



With the front door firmly locked and with no prospect of looking inside the church the groups continued on towards the Old Kent Road.

As most of the group know, there is now an excellent cycle route around the Elephant and Castle, bring us out at St George's Circus and Blackfriars Road.

An earlier recce ride had identified a suitable café for a stop, *The Masters*, with outdoor seating and a tempting display of pastries and cakes.



Blackfriars Road has a dedicated 2-way cycle lane all the way from St George's Circus, northwards, with traffic lights to ensure safe cycling across Blackfriars Bridge.

It continues on along Farringdon Road, past Stonecutter Street and Plumtree Court, names from an earlier age.

We turned off Farringdon Road at the distinctive landmark of the Sir John Oldfield pub, to follow Saffron Hill and Herbal Hill, reminders of previous trading activities here.

On we went to the Postal Museum in Phoenix Place where it is possible to see the Mail Rail that was used to carry mail to and from the sorting office in Mount Pleasant.

Quiet streets took us on to Judd Street, crossing busy Euston Road on traffic lights and into Midland Road, sandwiched between the British Library and the glorious St Pancras Hotel designed by George Gilbert Scott (and saved from demolition by Sir John Betjeman).

A short ride brought us to St Pancras Churchyard, "a leafy green park with a churchyard".

We were here to find the Sir John Soane Mausoleum. The tomb was designed by him for his wife, but became the family vault and it is where he is buried. There are steps leading down to the vault. He never recovered from his wife's death but the monument he created for her inspired Gilbert Scott's iconic red telephone kiosks, as is readily seen.



There was major restoration work in progress in the park, with new kerbs, paths and grass. Chatting with one of the workmen, obviously proud of the park and the work (and rightly so), we were directed to two other features.

Firstly, the tomb of **Mary Wollstonecraft**, with the inscription: "Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: Born 27 April 1759: Died 10 September 1797."



Also here is the **Hardy Tree**, a tree surrounded by a spiral arrangement of old gravestones, partially enveloped by the tree roots. The story is that when London's King's Cross train station expanded north in the mid-1860s, the tracks cut through this churchyard.

The novelist Thomas Hardy, at the time working as a junior architect, was assigned the task of clearing the site to make space. Once the bodies were exhumed and re-buried, there remained the gravestones; Hardy's solution was to place them in a spiral around an ash tree.



The church was worth visiting too; it is believed to be one of the oldest sites of Christian worship in the city.

From here we continued through the park and on to a road leading to our “surprise”.

This was the Camley Street Natural Park, a LWT property beside the Regent’s Canal, and known by very few of the group. There was another surprise in store for us, however, as the plan to have lunch here was thwarted because it was closed for a function!



So we headed back to Judd Street, past Coram Fields and over High Holborn into Lincoln Inn’s Fields.

On the north side stands the Soane family home, which is now the Soane Museum.

Retracing our steps back to High Holborn we made our way via the bus lane towards our last Soane building.

This was the Bank of England, the grand edifice occupying a rectangular site on Threadneedle Street.

We rode around each side and on Lothbury Street found the very grand figure of Sir John Soane himself, appearing - as one of us remarked - rather like a Roman emperor; he is seen here clutching a scroll and triangular ruler.





Photographs taken, we headed down to St Paul's and Paternoster Square where we discovered the café not only had good coffee but also *Pastel de nata*. A phone call to Niesje to give this news soon brought her and the group down to join us, post-haste. Fortunately, we had left some for the group to buy! Before heading home, we said a "big" thank you" to Niesje who had the idea for this ride and found us a good, safe route. This added to our knowledge of parts of London most had not visited before, and some of its local history too. A great ride!

Distance: 20 miles, about 5 hours

Riders: Andrew, Ann, David, Denise & John, Felicity, Irene, Jan, Jane, John, Martin D, Martin G, Niesje.

Ride Leaders: Niesje, John

Group Convenor: John Clements

Report: John Clements, 14th May, 2022

NOTES Sir John Soane RA FSA FRS (10 September 1753 – 20 January 1837) was an English architect who specialised in the Neo-Classical style. The son of a bricklayer, he rose to the top of his profession, becoming professor of architecture at the Royal Academy and an official architect to the Office of Works. He received a knighthood in 1831. His best-known work was the Bank of England (although his work there is largely destroyed), a building which had a widespread effect on commercial architecture. He also designed Dulwich Picture Gallery, which, with its top-lit galleries, was a major influence on the planning of subsequent art galleries and museums. His main legacy is the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields in his former home and office, designed to display the art works and architectural artefacts that he collected during his lifetime. The museum is described in the *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* as "one of the most complex, intricate, and ingenious series of interiors ever conceived".



Mary Wollstonecraft (27 April 1759 – 10 September 1797) was an English writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. Until the late 20th century, Wollstonecraft's life, which involved several personal relationships that were unconventional at the time, received more attention than her writing. Today Wollstonecraft is regarded as one of the founding feminist philosophers, and feminists often cite both her life and her works as important influences.

The Hardy Tree. In the mid-1860s, Britain's rail system was experiencing massive expansion, and London was outgrowing its existing lines. To accommodate the growing population of commuters, an expansion was planned and this directly affecting the graveyard at St. Pancras. It required the sensitive task of exhuming the remains and reburying them at another site.

At the time, Thomas Hardy, who in the following decades would publish many classic novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was just a lowly architect and the job was assigned to him.

After the work was completed, there remained hundreds of headstones. Hardy's solution was to place them in a circular pattern around an ash tree in the churchyard in a spot that would not be disturbed by the railway. Over the years the tree has absorbed many of the headstones.

Acknowledgement:

Information from Wikipedia.

Postscript

I was intrigued by the pattern that appears on the frieze of the Dulwich Picture Gallery and St Peter's Church, Walworth, and what it was called. Niesje was able to provide the answer.

It is apparently a **meander**, a decorative border constructed from a continuous line shaped into a repeated motif. Such a design is also called the Greek fret or Greek key design, although these are modern designations.

For details see:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meander_\(art\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meander_(art))

It is not found on the Bank of England building because the original building, built under the direction of its chief architect Sir John Soane between 1790 and 1827, was rebuilt by Sir Herbert Baker in the first half of the 20th century; he demolished most of Soane's masterpiece, an act that was described as "the greatest architectural crime in the City of London of the twentieth century".

