

Engagement with classical archaeology through producing a digital edition of the 1844 General Description of Sir John Soane's Museum

Digital engagement with historical museum text

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Introducing the project

This is a reflective paper about the process of undertaking a practical training course in creating a digital edition of 'A General Description of the Sir John Soane's Museum', 1844 edition. It will explore the historical and contemporary contexts of the original book and its digital edition. It will consider aspects of the museum, its collection and related interpretation relating to classical archaeology, however the museum presents artefacts and decorative elements of architecture from a range of eras. The Digital Editions course is run by a library department of Oxford University, participants choose an out of copyright text to work with. Other digitised versions of this text exist; a Google edition has searchable text where the encoding was created automatically (Soane's Museum 1844). The text of the digital edition described in this paper was encoded manually, was checked and has a personal touch, with detailed encoding of editorial elements.

Historical and contemporary contexts of the Description

A unique aspect of this digital editions project was that the museum has been preserved. The museum website states that in 1833, Soane 'negotiated a private Act of Parliament to preserve his house and collection, exactly as it was at the time of his death... Upon his death in January 1837, a Board of Trustees took on the responsibility of upholding Soane's wishes – as they continue to do today' (Soane's Museum no date). The museum is much the same today as in the 1844 Description; though a historical text, the digital edition can be used as a contemporary resource, facilitating contemporary appreciation of the preservation of the museum.

Introductory text in the 1844 Description describes the history of its text up to that point, explaining its purpose 'to provide a general description of the place', and 'to point out the more prominent and striking objects' (p.7-8). A 2016 research article which considered the history of the Description, 'Reading Words and Images in the *Description(s)* of Sir John Soane's Museum' by D.S. Wilkins, looks at '...how the museum-produced guidebooks depicted spatial arrangements'. Discussing editions from throughout the time the museum has been open, the article examines how these have incorporated '...manipulated text and graphics to guide visitors through a constructed narrative, recreated the ephemeral architecture of the museum, and advertised the site's unparalleled union of painting, sculpture and architecture to audiences abroad'. The text has its unique purpose

because the museum doesn't have gallery labels, artefacts arranged without 'organisational systems of chronology, classes, or stylistic categories'. The curatorial concept presents 'natural and man-made objects ranging from ancient to modern times all within a single vantage point' (Wilkins 2016).

The process of producing the Digital Edition

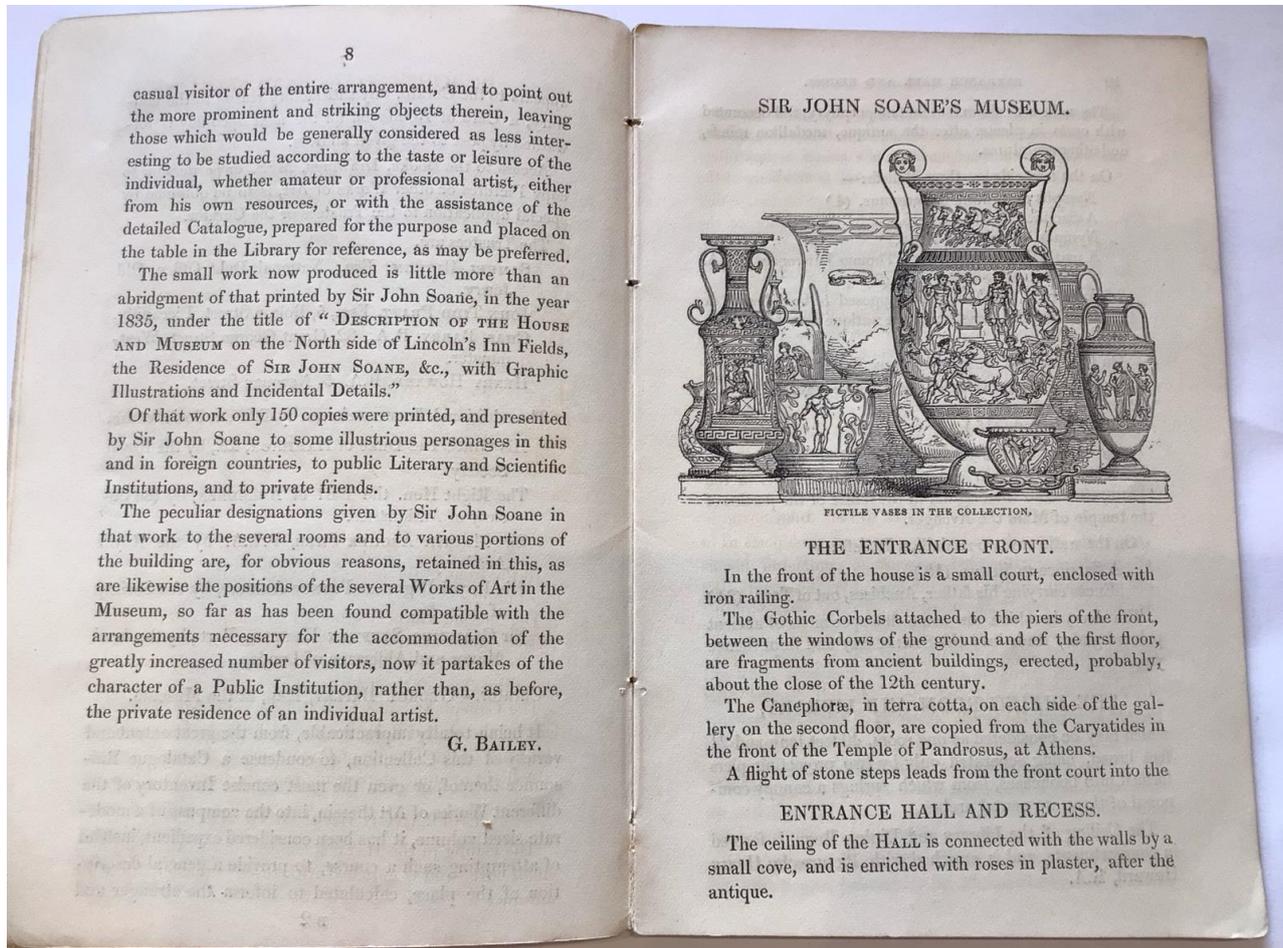
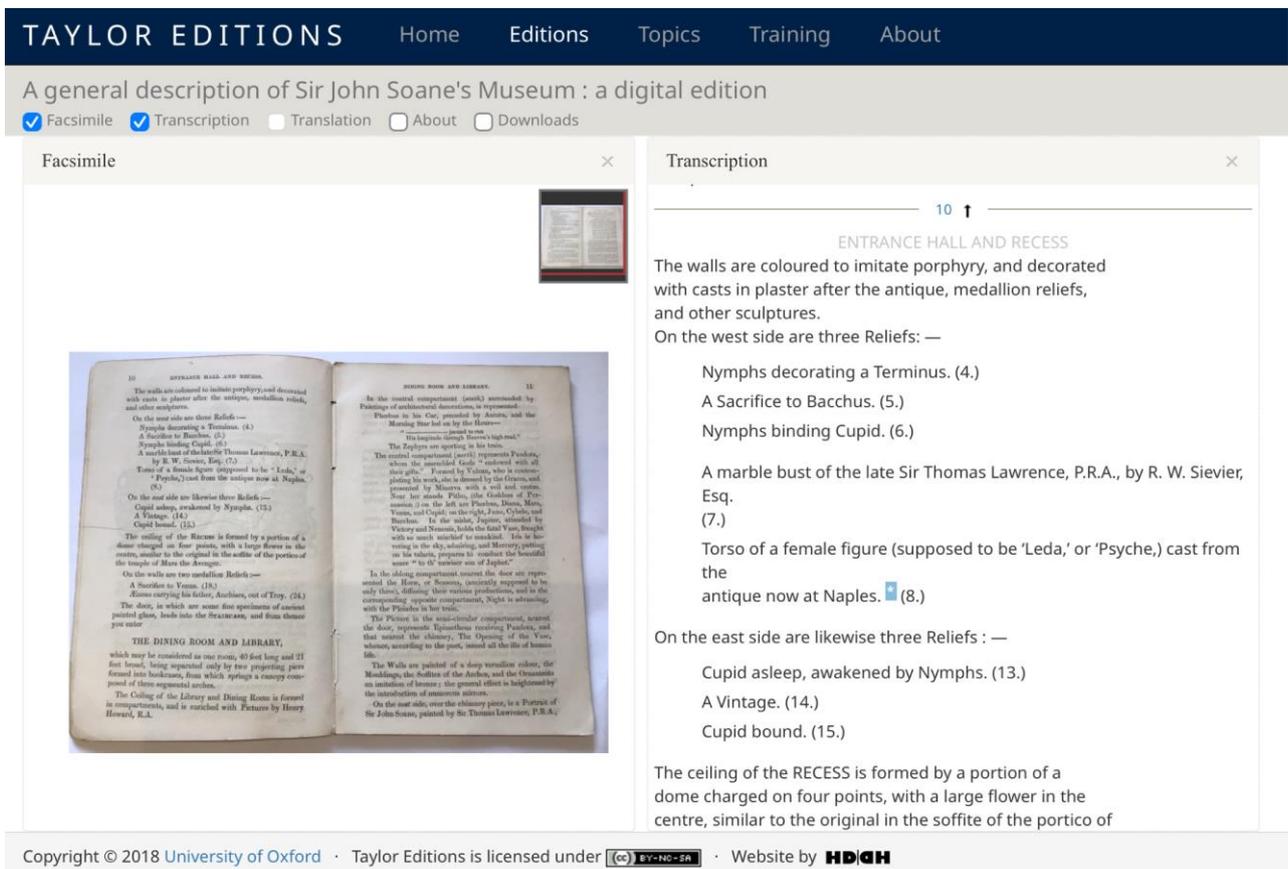


Fig. 1. Photograph of a double page spread from *A General Description of the John Soane's Museum*, 1844 edition (p.8-9) photograph taken by C.Frampton (2021)

The first task was to take photographs of every double page spread - Fig. 1 is an example image. The text was transcribed, then encoded using an xml programme. This included encoding page breaks, paragraphs, running headers, and lines of poetry. More complex aspects included encoding chapter headings where the chapter headings were in sentences part of the previous paragraph, also complex lists containing nested lists. Links were integrated into the text, relating to individual items chosen by the editor, to related entries on the Collections Online section of the museum website, presented within editorial notes. Also included were links to webpages relating to quotes in the text from works by authors Shakespeare and Milton, aiming to encourage user exploration of related information on the internet. The first link is to information relating to text describing architectural detail in the front of the house; '...Canephora, in terra-cotta, on each side of the gallery on the second floor, are copied from the Caryatides in the front of the Temple of Pandrosus at Athens' (p.9). The text in the museum website entry includes information about how much Soane paid for these -£41, and mentions the relationship between the single Caryatid in the British Museum, and similar statues in London (Soane's Museum no date). To complete the digital edition,

links were added within the text, to photographs taken at the beginning of the process. Fig 2 is a screen shot demonstrating the completed digital edition.



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ENTRANCE HALL AND RECESS

The walls are coloured to imitate porphyry, and decorated with casts in plaster after the antique, medallion reliefs, and other sculptures.

On the west side are three Reliefs: —

Nymphs decorating a Terminus. (4.)
A Sacrifice to Bacchus. (5.)
Nymphs binding Cupid. (6.)

A marble bust of the late Sir Thomas Lawrence, P.R.A., by R. W. Sievier, Esq. (7.)
Torso of a female figure (supposed to be 'Leda,' or 'Psyche,) cast from the antique now at Naples. (8.)

On the east side are likewise three Reliefs: —

Cupid asleep, awakened by Nymphs. (13.)
A Vintage. (14.)
Cupid bound. (15.)

The ceiling of the RECESS is formed by a portion of a dome charged on four points, with a large flower in the centre, similar to the original in the soffite of the portico of

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Fig. 2. Screenshot demonstrating the completed digital edition C.Frampton (2022)

Contemporary encouragement of citizen engagement through technology

To discuss an example of another form of contemporary digital engagement at the museum, in February 2022, an immersive evening event happened- 'Soane Lates: Gods, Myth and Ritual'. The myths of Ancient Greece and Rome came to life- the spaces were transformed 'into an imaginative version of the ancient afterlife', through 'spotlighting and soundscape', and 'object talks and readings of the classical epics'. Visitor photography was encouraged, facilitating citizen engagement with archaeological themes through creativity with live digital technologies, with multiple participant/ contributors of images. A competition on social media encouraged tagging, with a chance to be featured on the museum Instagram platform, (Soane Museum 2022); social media hosted visitor interaction through technologies, beyond the event. Fig. 3 is an example visitor photograph. Until recently the museum did not allow visitor use of technologies in the galleries at all since this might cause distraction.

Conclusion

Producing a digital edition of the 1844 Description preserved a historical resource with information about this unique museum. The type of writing gives a perspective on how the museum has presented/ promoted itself through text in the past, which is relevant today since the museum is much the same as when the book was produced. The process of encoding the historical text engaged with its editorial technicalities, through contemporary technology.



Fig. 3 Visitor photograph taken at Soane Lates: Gods, Myth and Ritual C.Frampton (2022)

Author Contributions

Writing – original draft: Frampton,C.

Writing – review & editing: Frampton,C.

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