

## Case study for Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	Repair and maintenance
Name of project/group:	The Music Room at Earsham Hall, South Norfolk
Location:	Earsham Hall, South Norfolk
Duration (if applicable):	

### Short description of project:

The Grade I listed building is a very early example of the work of architect Sir John Soane. It appears to be his first commission of many in East Anglia. It is a small, individual building, constructed adjacent to Earsham Hall in about 1780. John Soane converted it in 1784 to a Music Room within the shell of the original building. Internally, it has a barrel-vaulted ceiling, decorated with square floral motifs and two semi-circular apsed ends with domed ceilings displaying diminishing floral plaster motifs.

By 1998, it had deteriorated to the extent that it was considered for the 'Buildings at Risk Register'. The owner, who is a descendant of the family who once owned Earsham Hall, embarked on a programme of repair, renovation and conservation. The main aim was to restore the building to its original condition and give it a lasting use. Though other options have been considered, a residential use with new accommodation in former workshops behind the Music Room was decided to be the most viable in the long term. Sufficient work has now been carried out to ensure that the building is no longer considered for the Register. The owner is funding this one-off project in its entirety.

### What would have happened without this project/group?

It was important and necessary that the Music Room should have a use which would help to repay the cost of the building work and fund the building into the future. Without such a plan it is likely that the building would once again fall into disrepair as the cost of conservation work is very high. Use as a residential property with the new accommodation chiefly in former workshops to the rear was considered suitable and with effective participation from Historic England and the conservation team at South Norfolk Council, Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent were granted. The majority of conservation work has been completed but the residential conversion is just about to begin on site. If this work had not been initiated it is almost inevitable that the building would have decayed further and it would have taken intervention by the Local Authority to carry out the necessary work. As funding is in short supply such Local Authority expenditure would have been highly unlikely. The building could then have been lost.

How did the project achieve its objectives?

The owner appointed the Architect for the project in 1998. He has led the design, the planning and the conservation aspects of the work since then. The project is still in the process of completing its objectives. The first major objective has now been met, namely the completion of the majority of conservation work. The second objective of providing a lasting use for the building is now about to start and the permissions will soon be implemented. For the completed work, a specialist in plaster and decoration conservation was employed to repair the cracking and de-laminating plasterwork. He and his team also cleaned the plaster and redecorated the ceiling with paints which matched the composition and colour of the original. Similarly, a company who specialises in traditional ironwork dismantled, restored and reinstated the iron railings around the south terrace. Conservation work has also been completed to the large and delicately detailed windows and external doors. Throughout the planning and execution of the conservation work the owner and the architect have worked in close collaboration with Historic England and the Local Authority. This collaboration will continue through the succeeding stages.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

This is an important, but small, building which shows how, even in his very early days, John Soane was a master of space, detail and light. It also plays an important part in the immediate landscape. Its conservation was therefore crucial in both historic and local terms. Although Earsham Hall and the Music Room are now in separate ownerships, the relationship between them is still apparent and available to be appreciated. The work completed so far, as well as the soon to start work to make the Music Room and its immediate adjuncts into a small residence, will ensure in both the short and the long term that this little gem will sit effectively in the landscape for a long time to come.

The most effective evidence of the importance of the building is the large and detailed report carried out by the architect and the owner which charts the history both of the building and the family who commissioned it. It shows the importance of the building in the life of the great architect John Soane (later Sir John) and its relevance locally and nationally.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges would anything be done differently?

The major challenge was to ensure that the use to which the building was to be put would bring the financial benefits required to ensure the long-term security for the building. Although a residential use was also initially considered and gained permissions, a commercial use was a strong contender. While the Conservation work was being planned, organised and accomplished, an alternative use as a Therapy Centre was seriously considered for a long period of time and for good reasons. Such a use would have allowed not only a continuous use of the building but also a brilliant use of the adjacent walled garden (also a Listed structure) and the surrounding landscape. This consideration led to

long delays over the final use of the building but did not affect the initiation of the conservation work. It is to the great credit of the owner that he has provided very considerable sums of money to complete the conservation work before the final use had been decided. However, the plan did not materialise for various reasons. Use as a residence has now been agreed to be the most suitable use and the work about to start is on this basis.



The Music Room (Photo: Lucas Hickman).

What is the future for the case study?

As far as the building is concerned, the procedures, though very long-winded, have resulted in the potential long-term conservation of an historically important small building. The Conservation Report prepared as a part of the project could be shared with the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, where it would be available to scholars and students researching the life of Sir John Soane.

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