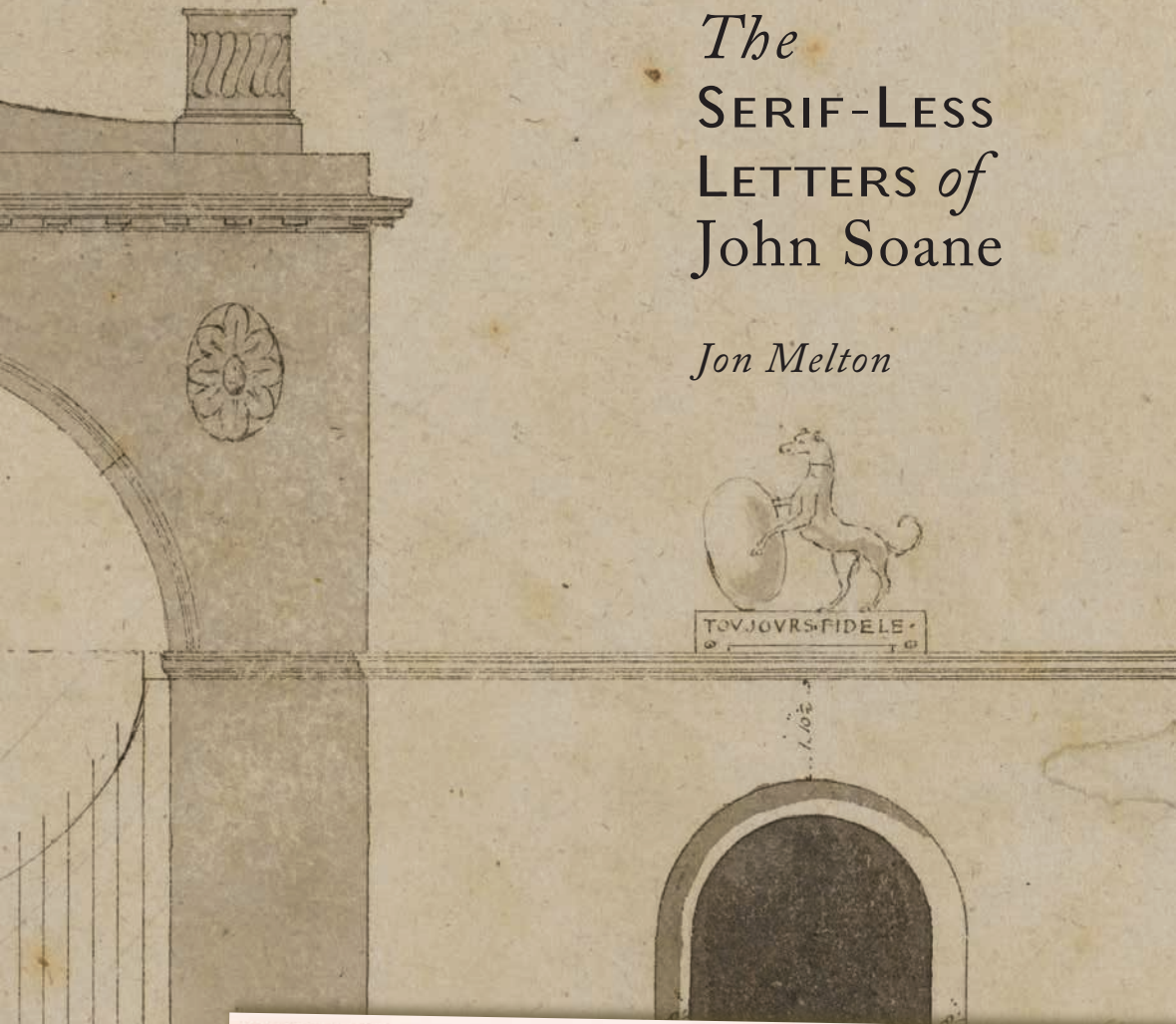


The
SERIF-LESS
LETTERS *of*
John Soane

Jon Melton



88205

Exterior; gateway, detail: central
archway.
(Sir John Soane)



Art Dept. Smith College



LANGLEY PARK. 4. J.H.

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Text set in Adobe Caslon Pro and emfoundry **ETRVSCA Sans**.

Frontispiece

Main image Close-up of the serif-less proposed inscription on Langley Park South Lodges dated August 1790, by Soane's first pupil, John Sanders. (SM 62/8/49). Drawing (9).

© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.

Inset images Late nineteenth to early twentieth century photograph and magic lantern slide with the serif-less inscription visible with a magnifier on the greyhound plinths.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The
 SERIF-LESS LETTERS *of*
 John Soane

Jon Melton

AT THE END OF THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, a new style of typeface made its inaugural appearance. Cast as printers' 'Two Lines English' for titles around 1814, it was later advertised as 'Egyptian' within the 1816 type specimen book of William Caslon IV and issued from his foundry in Salisbury Square, London. This typeface was unusual because although it was classical in structure it was designed without serifs and in capitals only. It is the first known example of a sans serif typeface, a style that was to revolutionise nineteenth-century printed advertising and which has dominated typography ever since. The origins of this letter are hard to trace but find their roots in the eighteenth century. Until recently, the earliest datable examples of a deliberate serif-less letter were thought to be those made by the sculptor John Flaxman, evidenced by his monument to 'Capt. R. Willett Miller' in St Paul's Cathedral (1803) and his monument to Isaac Hawkins Browne at Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge (1804–5).¹ Other isolated instances of early serif-less inscriptions exist on provincial monuments, such as those to Penelope Boothby at Ashbourne Church, Derbyshire (1793) by Thomas Banks (1735–1805) and, in the same church, a later memorial plaque for her parents, Sir Brooke and Phoebe Hollins Boothby. The serif-less letter had become accepted on monuments by the final decade of the eighteenth century. The popularity of these serif-less letters and their association with classical style and sensibility ultimately produced a demand for their use within the realms of printing and the need arose to develop a sans serif printing type. In recent years, typographic

1 J. Mosley, *The Nymph and The Grot: The Revival of the Sanserif Letter* (London, 1999), 12–13, 33–5.

historians have striven to establish the evolutionary path of the sans serif letter and James Mosley indicates that the architect John Soane was amongst the first, if not *the* first, to produce serif-less titling in his drawings.²

This chapter examines the evidence for Soane as an early pioneer of serif-less lettering in Britain and the progenitor of the sans serif typefaces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It considers the events that led to Soane's application of serif-less lettering and the reasons he became the principal executor of this radical departure from the roman letter. It also proffers suggestions for why Soane promoted the serif-less letter as desirable for inscriptions on buildings as well as for plans and elevation and perspective drawings in the neoclassical style.

SIR JOHN SOANE

SIR JOHN SOANE (1753–1837) (Figure 15.1) is one of Britain's most eminent architects.³ Best known for his redevelopment of the Bank of England and the Dulwich Picture Gallery, his work is recognised for its pure, neoclassical style. Soane's career spanned the last quarter of the eighteenth century and first quarter of the nineteenth century and his architectural ideology gave rise to a progressive modernism within architectural practice.⁴ Soane's ideology and respect for the classical also extended to his use of serif-less lettering, which he used not only on his plans and drawings but also on the stone inscriptions of some of his buildings.

Soane's intention for a near geometrical serif-less letter developed towards the end of the eighteenth century, forty years prior to the appearance of the first sans serif printing types. His first use of serif-less letters was probably on his design for a proposed British Senate House, executed in 1778–9 whilst on a scholarship Grand Tour of Italy. As was customary, Soane commissioned a draughtsman to perform the final presentation designs: the draughtsman's identity, however, is unknown. The three presentation drawings (numbered 7–9) are described by the Soane's Museum as: 'Hand, Unidentified ? Italian hand'.⁵

2 J. Mosley, 'The Nymph and the Grot, An Update'. Online. 6 January 2007.

<https://typefoundry.blogspot.com/2007/01/nymph-and-grot-update.html> (Accessed 29 April 2018).

3 M. Richardson and M. A. Stevens (eds), *John Soane Architect: Master of Space and Light* (London, 1999).

4 O. Bradbury, *Sir John Soane's Influence on Architecture from 1791: A Continuing Legacy* (London, 2015).

5 Presentation Drawings 7, 8 and 9, numbered SM (Soane's Museum) 45/1/35, 13/2/5 and 13/2/4.



Figure 14.1 John Soane by Christopher William Hunneman, c.1776. (SM P400).
© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Hugh Kelly.

They consist of a plan, elevation and section of a British Senate House, and were sent to London and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1779.⁶ It seems that Soane had carefully selected his draughtsman, as the drawings are extremely fine in execution, particularly in their artistry and use of tonal shading. The drawing (Figure 14.2) includes a double 'architects label', or 'title block', in the form of two antique stone *tabulae ansatae*. The inscription, '· DESIGN ·

⁶ Royal Academy 11th Exhibition (1779), catalogue reference 308.

FOR · A · BRITISH · / · SENATE · HOVSE ·', is rendered in distinctive serif-less capitals (Figures 14.9). As Soane's own title block lettering, as seen on other presentation drawings of this period, leaves something to be desired, it is doubtful he produced the lettering himself. If not Soane, then whose was this accomplished hand? Perhaps it was indeed one of the many Italian draughtsmen who supported the work of young architects on the Grand Tour. Or possibly one of Soane's acquaintances in Italy such as fellow Royal Academy architect Robert Furze Brettingham (1750–1806); Joseph Bonomi (1739–1808) an Italian architect and draughtsman for Robert and James Adam; John Flaxman (1755–1826) and Thomas Hardwick (1752–1829), both contemporaries of Soane at the Royal Academy; or maybe George Dance (1741–1825), a fine artist, confidante and mentor to Soane. Whoever was the draughtsman behind the lettering, this inconsequential title block, with its squared-off, serif-less letters has become a holy grail for typographic historians searching the origins of the sans serif printing types. It is considered the earliest extant record of a deliberate serif-less letter and the precursor to a category of printing types that have become synonymous with the modern age and an increasingly commercial and technological society. Soane regarded the serif-less letter as eminently appropriate both for the titling on his drawings and the inscriptions on some of his grand neoclassical buildings. The titles of the buildings are generally in a pen-drawn outline letter up to half an inch high, filled with a grey wash sometimes simulating the shadow on an incised inscription. By the late 1780s, Soane predominantly used serif-less lettering to annotate his designs, and it seems his preferred lettering for inscriptions on his grand civic or municipal works. There are many examples of his serif-less letter on his drawings at the Sir John Soane's Museum, London, for buildings such as the unexecuted Cambridge University Picture Gallery, Museum and Lecturer Rooms (1791) (Figure 14.5) and on numerous drawings for the Bank of England such as the reconstruction of the Rotunda (1794) and the Lothbury Court development (1797) (Figure 14.8.1). Ultimately, the serif-less letter became Soane's lettering of choice for titling his classical, ancient or antique inspired designs.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SERIF-LESS LETTERS AND THE *TABULA ANSATA*

THE *TABULA ANSATA* is a classical roman architectural frame sometimes referred to as a 'label'.⁷ It is square shaped with triangulated tabs and its

⁷ P. Lewis and G. Darley, *Dictionary of Ornament* (London, 1986), 181–2.

origins are rooted in classical antiquity. The *tabula ansata* was a device used during the Roman Empire on votive offerings to the gods, cinerary urns and sepulchral altars. Roman brick stamps have also been found using the device and some—particularly those produced for the Legion’s structural engineers charged with expanding the infrastructure of the empire—contain serif-less letterforms.⁸ The device became synonymous with the authority of Rome, and Soane, or his draughtsman, consciously selected the *tabula ansata* title block in the ‘antique style’ as the most appropriate frame for his titling of a proposed design for a Senate House—a parliament building for London.

Following the Renaissance, the *tabula ansata* was used on architectural drawings of classical building façades, mausoleum tombs and funerary sculptures.⁹ Eighteenth-century architects were familiar with its roots as a roman form and drawings of *tabulae ansatae* were probably made available to architectural scholars at the Royal Academy, who studied the work of Vitruvius Pollio, Andrea Palladio, Julien-David Le Roy and Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

In 1833, Soane acquired folios of Robert Adam’s drawings, mainly executed while on his Grand Tour of Italy (1754–7).¹⁰ They contained illustrations of *tabulae ansatae*, thus indicating the significance of the ornamental frame and the fascination of eighteenth-century architects for collecting and recording roman funerary artefacts and fragments. The *tabula ansata* was often inscribed with a dedication, with the two handles sometimes in the form of wings, or held by a winged putto or the goddess Victory—there to transport the deceased to the gods. Soane utilised the *tabula ansata* early in his career on his design for Mary Hood’s tablet monument c.1786 at the Church of St Thomas, Cricket St Thomas, Somerset, thereby clearly referencing the roman funerary altars he had experienced in Italy and seen on architects’ drawings.¹¹

The *tabula ansata* was particularly suited to neoclassical simplicity and purity. It replaced both the ornate scrolled or strapwork of seventeenth-century baroque labels and the eighteenth-century rococo cartouche as a means to define or

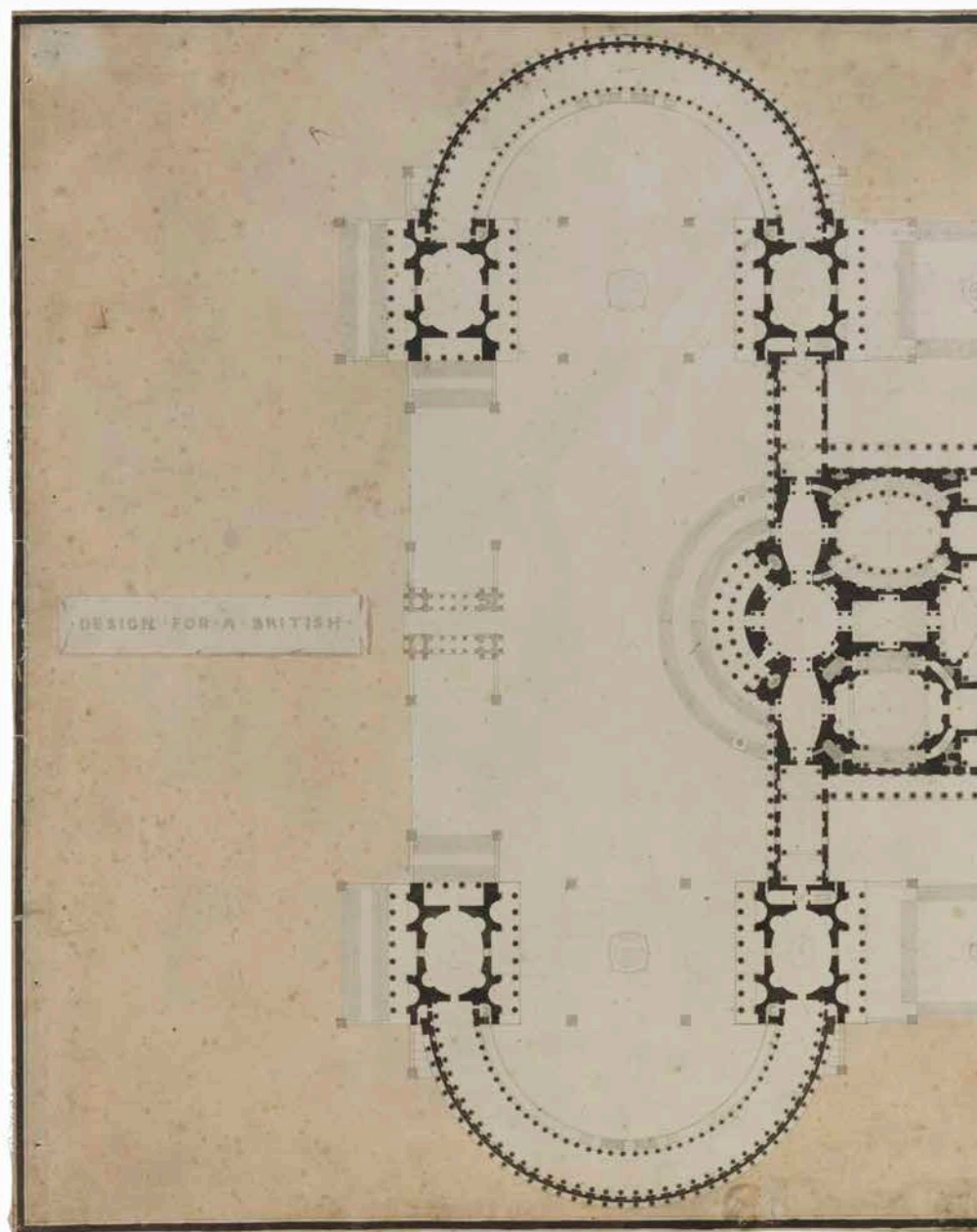
8 J. P. Bodel, *Roman Brick Stamps in the Kelsey Museum* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983);

G. C. Boon, *Laterarium Iscanum: The Antefixes, Brick & Tile Stamps of the Second Augustan Legion* (Cardiff, 1984).

9 Designs for ornament by a Lombard artisan, c.1500, 4 polyptych frame, in L. Fairbairn, *Italian Renaissance Drawing from the Collection of Sir John Soane’s Museum*, vol. 1, *The North Italian Album* (London, 1998), 19; vol. 2, *Giovanni Battista Montano (1534–1621)* (London, 1998); vol. 3, *Roman Tombs and Funerary Sculptures* (London, 1998), Figs 1199, 1325 (pp. 689, 731).

10 A. A. Tait, *The Adam Brothers in Rome: Drawings from the Grand Tour* (London, 2008), Figs 7, 49 (pp. 21, 80).

11 SM 63/6/14.



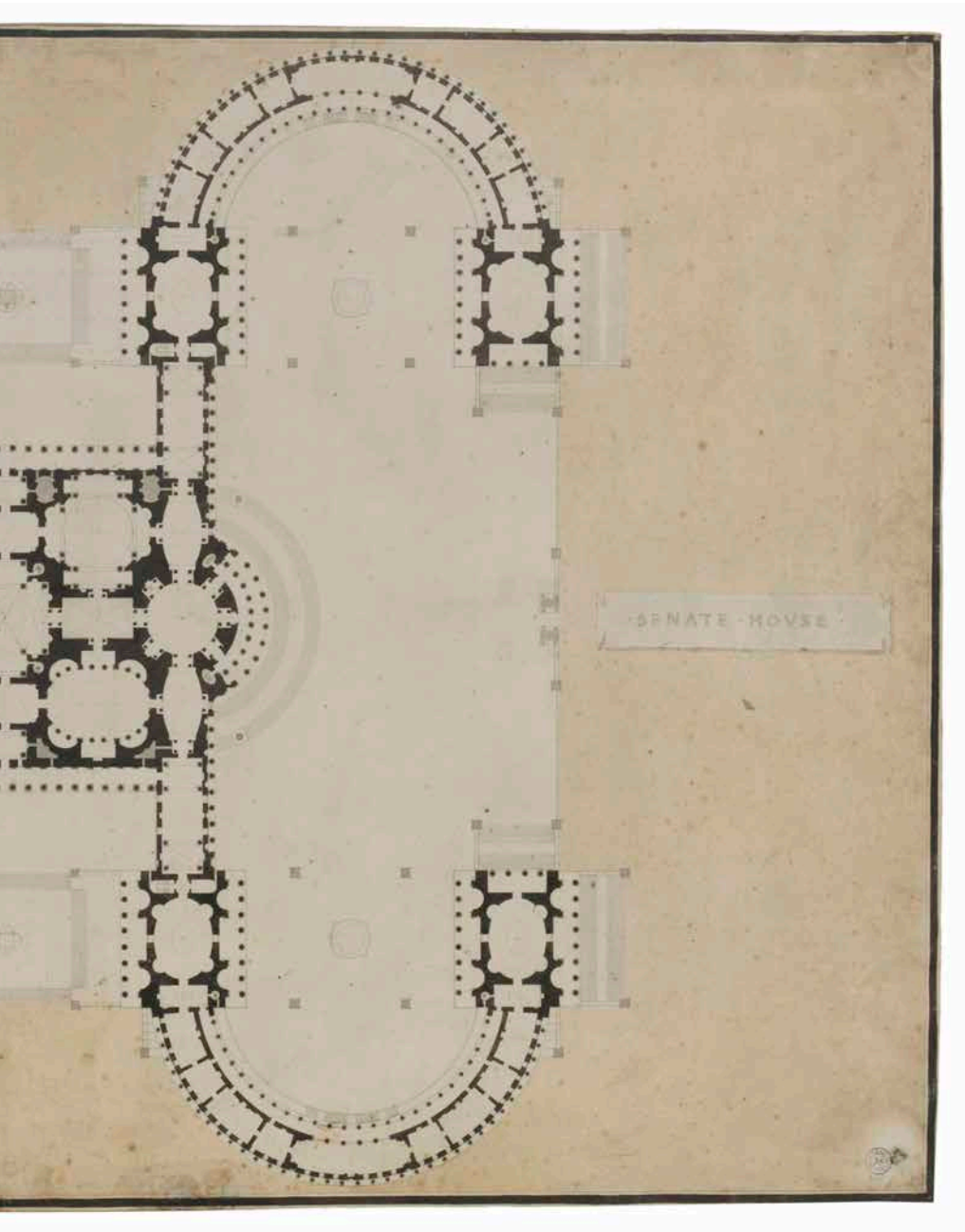


Figure 14.2 Soane's Plan for a British Senate House 1779. (SM 45/1/35). Drawing (7).
 From an unknown draughtsman, with 'serif-less' title blocks.
 © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Hugh Kelly.

ornament a façade, title an entrance portal or inscribe a building in order to elevate its status. Throughout the eighteenth century, the tabula ansata evolved as a result of the illustrated inscribed stone-blocks or stone-ruin fragments used by architects in the foregrounds of their presentation drawings. A sketch by Joseph Bonomi for his proposed Sacristy of St Peter's in Rome (1776) had at its base Bonomi's rendering of a stone plinth with a brush or 'rustic' inscribed title block: an example of the practice of setting building titles 'in stone'. It was a practice that Soane followed with a representation of a stone-ruin fragment on his own drawings for 'PART · OF · THE · TEMPLE · OF · ISIS · AT · POMPEIA ·' (January 1779) (Figures 14.2.1) and for an antique title block 'entablature' on his elevation for 'LA · FACCIATA · DELLA · ROTONDA · A · ROMA · OGGI · CHIESA · DI · SANTA · MARIA · AD · MARTYRES' (c.1778–80). This drawing also included a very fine roman serif inscription on the frieze, which appears to be in a different hand from Soane's.

The practice of illustrated title blocks was not limited to stone. Other eighteenth-century architects' drawings include the use of decorative labels created with scrolls, swags or banner ribbons. Soane, however, clearly valued the materiality of the carved stone fragment coupled with the purity of the serif-less letters. Rendered in outline and shaded to represent stone-inscribed capital letters, these were considered as most appropriate for his refined, modern architecture. Soane had a particular passion for this squared terminal letter with its origins rooted within the primitivist ideologies of architecture.¹² This passion was carefully respected by his many practice clerks, understudies and pupils—known as 'improvers' who emulated Soane's serif-less letters in their own drawings and office copies, often using serif-less letters for title blocks, titling plans and for inscriptions on proposed new buildings.

INFLUENCES ON AND APPLICATION OF SOANE'S SERIF-LESS LETTERS

Soane also appreciated Etruscan ornament and the architecture of ancient Egypt, with its use of mathematics and concise geometry in building construction.¹³ Both the Etruscan and Greek letter, and the Egyptian hieroglyph, presented a rationalised classical approach to inscribed serif-less lettering. They were simpler and purer than the roman serif majuscule letter,

12 S. de Jong, *Rediscovering Architecture: Paestum in eighteenth-century architectural experience and theory* (Yale, New Haven 2014), Chapter 5. In Pursuit of the Primitive History in the Making, 173–227.

13 D. Watkin (ed.), *Sir John Soane: The Royal Academy Lectures* (Cambridge, 2000), 34–7.

and Soane probably viewed their refined, regular and geometrical structures as having the perfect contours to adorn a new classical architecture fit for a modern age. Serif-less lettering reflected the geometry and symmetry of neoclassical architecture and its lines befitted the structure and material of Soane's buildings. A contemporary Italian architect he met while in Rome may have suggested the approach to serif-less title blocks to Soane. It is unknown, however, if it was a well-established practice in Europe or if it had emerged in England before he left for Italy—and research is just beginning to reveal its true origins and evolutionary path.

There is no clear example of the use of serif-less letters in the formal inscriptions of Imperial Rome. There are, however, many examples of early Roman Republican serif-less epitaphs and informal scripts. Letters without serifs were also cut for use as both bread and brick stamps, and appear on surviving lead pipes of Roman aqueducts as well as on lead ingots. These examples range from simple lineal mono-line letters to angular flared letter strokes that it's thought, limited clogging within the stamp or mould when pressed into the medium.¹⁴ However, it is Etruscan and Greek-Hellenic antiquities which are generally accepted as the root of modern sans serif printing types: letterforms that have, perhaps, evolved from ancient and classical brush scripts, via informal incised letters, through the partially flared terminals of a medieval letter, and on to the 'rustics' of a romanticised picturesque style of lettering. But eighteenth-century serif-less letterforms may also have been informed by the inscriptions left by ancient Britons, such as the Celtic, Runic and Anglo-Saxon letters on early medieval churches.¹⁵ With the extensive re-release of William Camden's *Britannia* (1587) in 1722, 1753 and 1772, culminating in Richard Gough's edition in 1788, a renewed interest in British antiquities prevailed. These publications included a number of antiquities displaying inscriptional serif-less characters, which may have informed the development of 'rustic' or a more anglicised style of lettering.¹⁶

14 G. C. Boon, *Laterarium Iscanum: The Antefixes, Brick & Tile-Stamps of the Second Augustan Legion* (Cardiff, 1984), 16–20; J. C. Anderson, *Roman Brickstamps: The Thomas Ashby Collection* (London, 1991).

15 J. S. Cornhill (publisher), *Marmor Hardicnutianum.—Archaeological Anecdote* (1789), 177; *European Magazine*, 17 (Mar.–Apr. 1790); J. C. Brooke, *An Ancient Saxon Inscription over the South Porch of KIRKDALE CHURCH in Rydale Co. Ebor* (1776), engraved by [James] Basire Se. [Senior].

16 W. Camden, *Britannia* (Latin edn.) (London, 1587, 1594, 1594, 1600, 1607); P. Holland, *Britain by William Camden* (English edn.) (London, 1610, 1637); E. Gibson, *Britannia by William Camden* (London, 1695, 1722, 1753, 1772); R. Gough, *Britannia by William Camden* (London, 1789, 1806).



Fig.14.3 Soane's Temple of Isis 1779. (SM 45/3/2). Close-up of Soane's unaccomplished serif titling. © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Hugh Kelly.



Fig.14.4 Pantheon c.1778-80. (SM 45/3/54). Close-up of Soane's title block serif hand lettering. © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Hugh Kelly.



Fig.14.5 Cambridge University Museum 1791. (SM 71/3/13) Drawing (6).
Sonean-style stepped plinth serif-less title block.
© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.



Fig.14.6 Felbridge Monument 1785. (SM volume 41/56 recto) Drawing (2).
Close-up of the proposed serif-less inscription on the entablature.
© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.



Fig.14.7.1–4 Norwich Gaol 1789. (SM 73/3/8) Drawing (7) by Thomas Chawner, Soane's pupil from 1788–94. With serif-less inscriptions and title blocks.

© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.



Fig.14.8.1–2 Lothbury Court south entrance 1797. (SM 10/3/23). With a proposed serif-less inscription © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Hugh Kelly.

National Debt Redemption Office 1817. (SM 48/2/31) Drawing (18). Close-up of both serif and serif-less inscriptions. © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.

In Italy to an array of different ancient inscriptional styles both formal and informal. There were also examples of geometrically drawn letters with partial or vestigial serifs—the slight flaring of strokes—which appeared in England in Jacobean architecture, most notably in the roofline balustrades of grand seventeenth-century houses such as those at Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk and Castle Ashby, Northamptonshire, both c.1624. These vestigial serif letters were probably cut according to the structural practicalities of large stone letters, but they point towards a rational approach for constructed letterforms.

If not from historical sources, Soane probably created serif-less letters based on his understanding of classical architectural order and desired something close to aesthetic perfection in their execution. Mosley suggests that Soane references the vestigial serif inscription on the Temple of Vesta, Tivoli (50 bc).¹⁷ With its near monoline and geometric forms, the Temple of Vesta was certainly studied by Soane's mentor George Dance in 1763, who produced a well-executed study of the frieze, including the partial section of the inscriptional letter. Soane copied Dance's drawing and also sketched the remaining structure at Tivoli during his own Grand Tour. Tivoli was of particular interest to Soane who devoted a corner of his house in its honour, and when the architectural opportunity arose Soane did not hesitate to reference the temple: most notably on his 'Tivoli Corner' for the Bank of England, which still stands at the junction between Princes Street and Lothbury. Records in the Soane's Museum indicate numerous serif and serif-less inscriptions on his proposed drawings for the Bank of England. Many of the serif-less stone inscriptions, particularly those for Lothbury Court (1797–1801) (Figure 14.4.1), were probably never executed.¹⁸ The Bank's internal offices, halls and courts were demolished in 1925 to make way for a larger building designed by Herbert Baker (1862–1946). Photographs taken by Frank Rowland Yerbury (1885–1970), just prior to the Bank's demolition in 1925, provide glimpses of serif-less letters, and although much of it appears to be Victorian, some inscriptions seem to be in the style of John Soane.¹⁹

In drawings produced in 1817 for the new National Debt and Redemption Office on Old Jewry, London, Soane presented a number of proposed façade inscriptions on the front elevations and perspectives, including one (Figure 14.8.2) that appears to offer a choice between a serif or serif-less letter.²⁰ This

17 J. Mosley, *The Nymph and The Grot*, Figs 13, 14 (London, 1999), 11, 22–5.

18 SM (26) 10/3/23.

19 H. R. Steele and F. R. Yerbury, *The Old Bank of England, London* (London, 1930); *The Old Bank by F. R. Yerbury*, vol. 1 [Photographs] 1–50, Neg. (No. Pic.34A), Bank of England archive.

20 SM (18) 48/2/31; (19) 48/2/24; (20) 48/2/14; (21) 48/2/4.

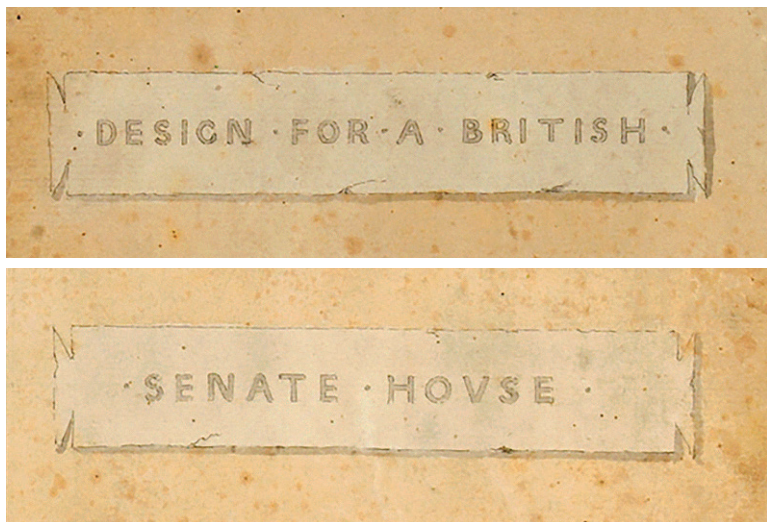


Figure 14.9 Close-up of the *tabula ansata* 'serif-less' title blocks from Soane's Plan for a British Senate House 1779. (SM 45/1/35). Drawing (7).
© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Hugh Kelly.

elevation drawing displays a split-rendered inscription—**NATIONAL DEBT REDEMPT ... / ... AND ANNUITY OFFICE**—on the front fascia at first and second floor levels, half in serif and half in serif-less lettering: an indication, perhaps, that Soane was attempting to encourage the inscriptional use of serif-less letters on nineteenth-century architecture. Following his proposal for a British Senate House (Figures 14.2 & 14.9). Soane establishes his architectural practice and promotes the commercial use of serif-less letters from the mid-1780s. The Soane's Museum, holds a number of examples of his serif-less titling, annotations and title blocks from this time, including a proposal for a museum for the Society of Dilettanti in which he included a *tabula ansata* of bulleted serif-less forms: ' SECTION · OF · A · BVILDING · / · PROPOSED · AS · A · MVSEVM · FOR · THE · / · DILETTANTI · SOCIETY ·' (1783–4). The design even included an inscription for a central statue plinth, thought to be in the hand-style of George Dance. Soane's draughtsman Robert Baldwin (fl. 1762–1804) dated the drawing using small serif-less capitals:

‘APRIL MDCCLXXXIV / I. SOANE ARCHT.’, but the project was never realised. In 1785, Soane designed a monument, erected in 1786, to Edward and Julia Evelyn at Felbridge, Surrey. The drawings included a proposed serif-less inscription (Figure 14.6) rendered on the entablature of the column: ‘SOLI / DEO / GLORIA’, draughted by John Sanders (1768–1826), Soane’s first pupil from 1784 to 1790.²¹ The monument was subsequently purchased by Sir Stephen Aitchison (1863–1942) and transported in 1927–8 to the grounds of Lemmington Hall in Northumberland, where the column’s inscriptions are recorded as having been recut during restorations in 1941.

On several of Soane’s subsequent and more prominent works, serif-less inscriptions are also indicated, but there does not appear to be any obvious relationship between the serif-less letters and the buildings to which they are applied. Soane proposed serif-less inscriptions (Figures 14.7.1–2) on the Norman-Gothic revival façade of Norwich Gaol (1789), with Thomas Chawner (1774–1851), a pupil of Soane from 1788–94, executing the drawing.²² Soane continued to use serif-less letting in title blocks and annotations on drawings for numerous provincial projects, both grand and modest, such as the Cambridge University Museum, mentioned above, also drawn by Chawner, which included serif-less titling throughout and a serif-less inscription in capitals on a Soanean-style stepped funerary alter/plinth title block (Figure 14.5).²³

Soane had several Norfolk clients, including Sir Thomas Beauchamp-Proctor (1756–1827), who, from 1784, commissioned him to redevelop two sets of lodges on the approach to his Langley Park estate. Still standing today, the south lodges are flanked by two greyhounds carrying armorial shields and standing rampant on plinths in the Soane mausolea or funerary style.²⁴ The plinths carry the Beauchamp-Proctor family motto, **TOVJOVRS · FIDELE**, in bold, square-cut, serif-less capitals with an angled rectangular centre bullet separating the two words (Figures 14.10.1 & 14.10.2). Bullets accompany most examples of Soane’s serif-less lettering—a convention observed in roman antiquity and which appear in classical drawings from the Renaissance onwards. The inscribed serif-less letterforms and the plinths at Langley have the same degree of weathering and discolouration as on the main structure, indicating that these inscriptions are contemporary in date with the build. Although faint, these inscriptions can also be viewed on a magic lantern slide and on an early twentieth-century photograph of the lodges in the author’s possession.

21 G. Darley, *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic* (New Haven, Conn., 1999), 76.

22 Entrance front elevations, SM (7) 73/3/8.

23 SM 71/3/13, drawing (6).

24 SM 62/8/49, drawing (9).



Figure 14.10.1 & 14.10.2 Langley Park South Lodges dated August 1790, by Soane's first pupil, John Sanders. (SM 62/8/49). Drawing (9). With a close-up of the serif-less inscribed motto.

© Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.



Figure 14.11.1 & 14.11.2 Langley South Lodges today, with detail of a greyhound statue with Soane's 'serif-less' inscription. © Jon Melton, emfoundry.com. Photo: Jon Melton.

A close study of the serif-less letters at Langley (Figures 14.11.1 & 15.11.2) reveals a very subtle curl to the 'J' at the base that respects the early roman alphabet's lack of 'J' and use of the letter 'I'. The 'J', consciously modelled as has been the 'R', which demonstrates a slight wave in the leg and the flat-cut terminal of the curve that mirrors the 'J'. These features echo the original drawn letters on the presentation drawings of the three elevations for the Norwich Gaol produced in June 1789 by Thomas Chawner and executed around the same time as the Langley south lodge drawing.²⁵ On the Norwich Gaol title blocks, the 'C' mirrors the curl of the Langley 'J' with a squared off terminal to a final curl stroke (Figure 14.12). This distinctive, crossbar-less 'C' is seen on the Dilettanti proposal, and other Soane drawings with serif-less titling. This suggests that Soane's office had distinct design intentions when creating its serif-less inscriptional letterforms. Soane selected his letter carvers very carefully and maintained a strong working relationship with them. As Dean commented: 'The other key factor for efficient working was the use of skilled contractors who were familiar with Soane's way of detailing and who could proceed with the minimum amount of drawn information. Soane was passionate about the need to employ trusted tradesmen as a means of providing a consistent quality for an agreed price'.²⁶ Soane certainly demanded his purist sensibilities be reflected in the quality of the serif-less inscription. These letters were redrawn by the letter carver directly onto stone and were very probably discussed and approved by Soane's office, possibly by Sanders, who produced the drawings for the Langley lodges, or Chawner: both experienced in draughting Soane's serif-less titling.

Abstracts of bills at the Soane's Museum show that James Nelson was the stonemason often charged with producing Soane's more intricate stone and marble work. Soane's 'Bill Book 5' establishes James Nelson as the mason who produced the two Langley Park greyhounds and therefore most probably the plinths. This supposition is supported by an entry within Soane's archive bills noting Nelson was well-versed in producing inscriptions, having executed, in 1801, a lengthy inscription of fine roman serif letters on the family Mausoleum of Job Matthew Raikes, an ex-Bank of England Governor.²⁷

25 SM (7) 73/3/8.

26 P. Dean, *Sir John Soane and London* (London, 2006), 37.

27 SM Archive 6/41.

CONCLUSION

This chapter traces Soane's early use of sans serif titling and, importantly, documents the earliest known extant sans serif inscriptions in situ on his architecture. It demonstrates that Soane's purist sensibility and primitivist ideology extended to all aspects of his practice, including his letterforms both as titling on drawings and for inscriptions on his buildings, and that his early pupils freely adopted and executed these letters, with John Sanders leading the way from 1784. Soane can be seen as a progenitor of sans serif typefaces, perhaps their true source, and can therefore be regarded as a 'prophet of modernism'.²⁸

More importantly, it allows this research to continue with an investigation into Soane's inspiration for the use of sans serif titling on his Royal Academy scholarship submission in 1779 for the 'Design for a British Senate House'. It is now clear that Soane followed a distinct model and architectural ideal for the use of serif-less letters in architecture, one that, via Soane, ultimately led to the prevalent use of sans serif by the modernist architects of the early twentieth century.²⁹



Figure 14.12 Close-up of Thomas Charner's *tabula ansata* title block for the Norwich Jail 1789. (SM 73/3/8) Drawing (7). Focusing on the deliberate style of 'G'.

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28 R. Guilding, 'Glowing Credentials', *The World of Interiors*, 28.5 (London, 2008), 16–20.

29 J. Melton, 'The True Source of the Sans', Presentation, Conference, Antwerp (2018).

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz5X9my_X5Q&index=22&ct=0s&list=PL0oMAzSh5W9q64iHo9pMa0WdgUdz411hD.

Specimen overleaf

Soane Sans, a capitals typeface derived from Soane's 'serif-less' inscription seen at the Langley South Lodges. © Jon Melton, emfoundry.com. Photo: Jon Melton.

A B C D E

F G H I J K

L M N O P

Q R S T U

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