

SIR JOHN SOANE (1753-1837), ARCHITECT, AND

HALSNEAD HALL, WHISTON

**I**n a letter dated 13 January 1954, Miss Dorothy Stroud of Sir John Soane's Museum, London, informed me that whilst cataloguing the architectural work of Soane she had discovered several drawings of a house endorsed "Richard Willis, Esq., Liverpool", and some entries in a Soane ledger giving details of designs and working instructions supplied to "R. Willis, Esq., George Street, Liverpool". Miss Stroud asked me if I could identify the house. The name "Willis" suggested Halsnead Hall, which was demolished in 1932, and a comparison of the drawings with a photograph of the south front of the Hall confirmed this surmise. I am indebted to Miss Stroud for sending me the relevant entries in Sir John Soane's "Ledger A" and details of the drawings and working instructions. On 14 April 1789, Soane sent Willis "three fair drawings of three designs for Houses", followed on 9 May by "two fair drawings of Designs of Plans and Elevations". An entry dated 13 July recorded "Working drawings of the design approved". Further working drawings "of the entrance front, &c." were sent to Willis on 15 August.

Three sheets (office copies) of plans and elevations survive in the Museum. These show a house with a seven-window frontage and a central feature consisting of a giant Ionic portico with four three-quarter engaged columns. Alternative treatments for the upper part of the portico are shown, one being an arrangement of three vases and swags above the entablature, and the other the normal pediment. The pediment, as Plate No. 13 shows, was adopted. It is not easy to determine from these surviving drawings precisely how much of the interior of the house was changed in 1789, but the entrance vestibule was clearly marked for alteration and two alternatives were suggested. All the Museum drawings have full dimensions, and it is obvious that Willis obtained Soane's designs for execution by local workmen. The first sheet, with pencilled plans on both sides, is dated 8 May 1789. The second, dated 12 July, shows in ink an elevation for the south front and portico, as well as a plan of the vestibule with suggested alterations, and marginal comments, *e.g.* "Lintols of the hall and chamber story should be laid so as to admit one pane of glass in each sash to throw up into the head of each window". On the reverse of this sheet is a drawing for the "Entablature to the door and windows—full size . . . the Mason is desired to be very careful in preserving the profiles of the mouldings according to the drawings". The third sheet, dated 15 August, shows an elevation of the south front with the portico, and a plan for this and the vestibule, the latter by now apparently

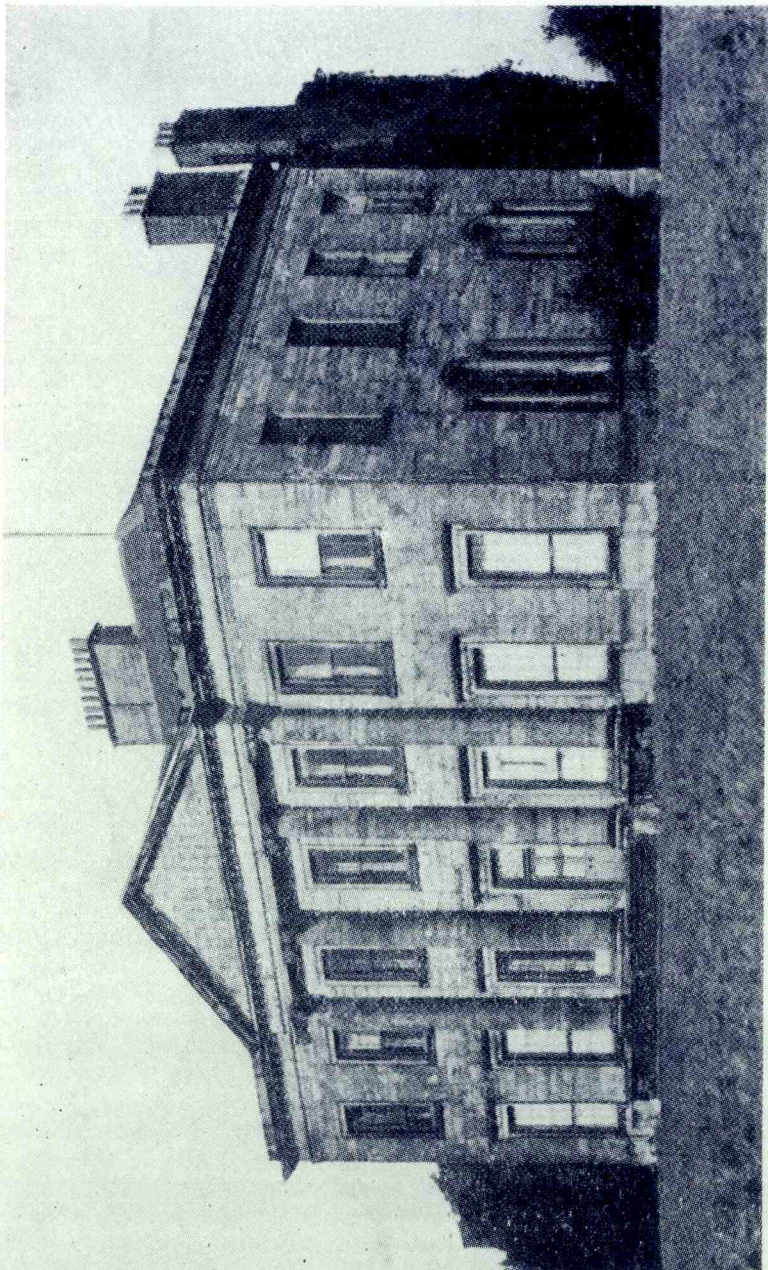


PLATE 13 : HALSNEAD HALL, WHISTON  
The South Front







agreed upon as an apsidal apartment with four doorways leading from it. This sheet bears the note "window dressings are already sent". Soane charged £37 5s. 6d. for the designs and this was paid by Willis on 12 September 1789.

Halsnead Park came into the possession of the Willis family in 1684 when it was purchased by Thomas Willis, a Liverpool merchant. Willis, a Berkshire man of ancient lineage, settled in Liverpool after the Restoration. He died on 21 March 1694/5; his only son, Martin, had predeceased him in the previous December. Both were buried at St. Nicholas's Church, Liverpool. Martin, who married Ellen D'Anyers, had two sons, Thomas<sup>(1)</sup> and Daniel, who successively held Halsnead and died without surviving children, in 1727 and 1763 respectively. Daniel bequeathed the estate to his cousin, Thomas Swetenham, who assumed the name of Willis and died without direct heirs in 1788 when Halsnead, under the entail of Daniel Willis, devolved upon his distant kinsman, Ralph Earle of Liverpool, who was then 73 years old. Ralph Earle was the eldest surviving son of John Earle, 1674-1749, who came to Liverpool from Warrington in 1688 and laid the foundations of the family fortunes. On succeeding to Halsnead, Ralph Earle and his elder son, Richard, assumed the surname of Willis. The younger son, Willis, retained (perhaps not surprisingly) the surname of Earle.

Ralph Earle, who had been mayor of Liverpool in 1769, lived in Great George Street, then a new and aristocratic residential district. After his death in 1790 his widow and younger son continued to reside there. Richard, the elder son, to whom Soane sent the drawings in 1789, is recorded as the builder of the new south front of Halsnead Hall. The present head of the Willis family, Major Charles Rodolph D'Anyers Willis of Mildenhall, Suffolk, is fourth in descent from Richard Willis. He sold Halsnead in 1929. Of the numerous descendants of John Earle of Liverpool, Major D'Anyers Willis, of course, represents the senior line.

It is probable that Thomas Willis built a house on the site of Halsnead Hall when he bought the estate in 1684. The 1662 hearth tax returns disclose that Whiston township possessed only eight houses assessed for the tax. Henry Ogle, who paid on ten hearths, was probably of Whiston Hall. Of the other houses that of George Pemberton, assessed at four hearths, was probably within the area of Halsnead Park and may have been the house originally bought by Willis, although, of course, it is possible that a larger house had been built between 1662 and 1684. In a paper in these TRANSACTIONS in 1890, T. Algernon Earle stated that the north front was "rebuilt" in 1727. It would appear, therefore, that a late seventeenth-century house stood on the site and that its rebuilder was

<sup>(1)</sup> Browne Willis, 1682-1760, the noted antiquary, one of the founders of the Society of Antiquaries, appears to have been of this family. He claimed this Thomas Willis as his cousin. *Victoria County History of Lancashire*, Vol. III, p. 352, note 2.

Daniel Willis who inherited the estate in that year. A view of the north front in Twycross, *Mansions of England and Wales* (1847), shows that the rebuilt portion consisted of a pedimented central feature, set slightly forward, flanked by narrow wings. The doorway, approached by several steps, was surmounted by a swan-neck pediment. Above the ground floor, running along the whole front, was a broad stringcourse which acted as a cill to the seven first-floor windows which, like those of the ground and second-floors, had moulded architraves. The wing cornices were surmounted by a plain balustrade which died into the central pediment. This front was of red brick with stone facings and probably led to the house being called "Red Hall". It is so named in Yates's *Map of Lancashire* of 1786 and in Carey's *Itinerary* of 1802. The name was changed to Halsnead before 1817, in which year Matthew Gregson in his *Fragments* referred to "Richard Willis, Esq., of Halsnead Hall, Whiston, near Prescot, formerly called the Red Hall".

T. Algernon Earle stated also that the south front was built "during the lifetime of Mr. Richard Willis". This rebuilding, of course, would be to the Soane designs of 1789, although Mr. Earle makes no reference to Soane in his paper. A number of books which mention Halsnead have been examined, but no mention of Soane's connexion with the house has been found, and the present head of the Willis family was unaware that Halsnead's south front was from that architect's designs. The frequency with which architects' names are forgotten has many times been commented upon by architectural historians, and Sir John Soane has suffered from this forgetfulness in a number of cases.

Soane, like Thomas Willis (the first of Halsnead), was a Berkshire man. He was born at Goring-on-Thames in 1753. His father was a bricklayer. "At fifteen," says John Summerson in *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830*, "he had chosen the profession which, with passionate affection and unabated ambition, he pursued until his death in his eighty-fourth year in 1837." He won the Royal Academy Silver Medal in 1772 and the Gold Medal four years later. Sir William Chambers, the reputed architect of Liverpool's first Theatre Royal in Williamson Square, introduced Soane to George III, who nominated him travelling student for three years, which time he spent in Italy. Returning to England in 1780 his first few years of professional life were spent in building country houses of the "middling" type. He made a wealthy marriage in 1784. In 1788, the year before he sent the Halsnead designs to Richard Willis, he was appointed to the important post of Surveyor to the Bank of England, and it is with the enlarging and rebuilding of the Bank that his name is chiefly associated. He designed many public and private buildings of which Dulwich College Picture Gallery (1812) is perhaps the finest surviving example. This building was reopened in 1953 after restoration necessitated by bomb damage in 1944. He was elected A.R.A. in 1795 and R.A. in 1802, and was



appointed professor of architecture to the Royal Academy in 1806. William IV knighted him in 1831.

As an architect, Sir John Soane's most outstanding characteristic was the vital personal style which he developed after 1800 and which earned for him the reputation of being "the most original British architect since Vanbrugh". It was a style based on classical forms ignoring, however, the rigid grammar of the Greek orders as interpreted by Palladio and slavishly copied by the English architects who succeeded Vanbrugh and preceded Robert Adam. Soane's buildings, particularly in their interiors, displayed striking originality and earned for their creator a unique position in English architectural history.

That Halsnead Park, which appears to have been the sole example of Soane's work in either Lancashire or Cheshire, should have fallen a prey to encroaching industrialism is regrettable. The house, as mentioned above, was demolished in 1932 and the principal features of the park are now the slagheaps and the pit-head buildings and plant of a large colliery.

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