



Soho House

Introduction

Soho House was the home of Matthew Boulton from 1766-1809. The house in Handsworth is about 2 miles to the north of Birmingham City centre.

Soho House is now the property of Birmingham City Council. Restoration work began on the house in 1990 and the house was opened as a museum in 1995. Extensive research was carried out to reconstruct an image of the house c.1800. A **huge archive** relating to Boulton and containing numerous original documents was used to provide vital clues as to how the house would have looked. This archive is now kept at Birmingham Reference Library.

Soho House is a unique and important survival – it is one of Birmingham’s most important 18th century buildings and is **grade II * listed**. It is also recognised to be of nationally outstanding importance.

Matthew Boulton (1728-1809) is an eminent figure in the history of Birmingham. He was an **industrialist, manufacturer and entrepreneur**.

Matthew Boulton is perhaps best known, however, for his partnership with **James Watt**. Their advancements in the development and manufacture of steam engines were probably the most important single contribution to the early years of the industrial revolution. Boulton and Watt engines employed the use of a condenser and rotative motion in order to power all sorts of machinery. Boulton is also well known for his central role in the Lunar Society.

Matthew Boulton first came to Handsworth in 1761. When he first leased the site there was a mill that enabled him to expand his manufacturing enterprises. On Handsworth Heath close to the Hockley Brook he established his **manufactory**, he also took over the lease of the house and occupied the building from 1766 onwards. The **name Soho** is thought to be a throwback from when there was an inn on the site; the sign on the inn depicted a huntsman crying “so-ho”.

Matthew Boulton was **married** to Mary Robinson the daughter and co-heiress of Luke Robinson of Lichfield. Mary died around 1756 and Boulton later married her sister Ann. They had **two children**, Anne Boulton and Matthew Robinson Boulton. MRB followed his father into the manufacturing business along with James Watt Junior. Around 1815 he bought a grand country house in Great Tew, Oxfordshire. Anne Boulton lived at Soho until adulthood and then moved to Thornhill House in Handsworth.

The Garden

The garden at Soho House was originally over one hundred acres, there is little of this left now. The laid out garden at Soho House has been landscaped as a suburban garden with evidence for planting based on what was found in the Boulton archive. The Hermitage is a reconstruction of the place where Boulton would retreat for quiet contemplation.

The House

Parts of the original house still exist within the fabric of this building. During Boulton’s occupancy there were many alterations, additions and enlargements. The house we see today is largely the result of a major building phase carried out in the late 1790/ early 1800’s. It was the work of **James and Samuel Wyatt leading architects** of the day – with much personal input from Matthew Boulton.



Soho House is **neo classical in style**. It is largely intact apart from loss of the service wing that was demolished 1860's and further demolition in the 20th century. The house has **many unique features** particularly the use of **slate to clad the exterior**. It looks like stone but it is in fact large pieces of slate fixed to the brickwork. The slate is covered with a mixture of sand and paint to imitate ashlar stone.

The Entrance Hall

The Entrance Hall still has the **original mahogany doors** and Boulton handles as well as original hinges and locks. The cornice in this room is popular style of the time known as "Doric drop", the **pillars are made from marble** and the **floorcloth is a reproduction** of the sort Boulton had. It is made from painted canvas and the pattern is exactly what Boulton specified. On the left wall there is a "**jib**" door which the servants would have used. The portrait of Boulton is by Lemuel Francis Abbot and it shows him holding one of the ledger books used at the Soho Mint.

The Drawing Room

The Drawing Room was one of the principal rooms in the house and we have much evidence of how this room would have been decorated. Archaeological investigations revealed a paper with a colourful border paper probably dating to the 1790's. This **paper has been reproduced**. The **chairs** by James Newton were originally in this room. **The fireplace has been recreated** using old photographs taken for Country Life magazine in the 1920's, at this time the house was run as a hotel, and a design in the Boulton and Watt Archive. There is one original corner decoration that has been incorporated into the reproduction fireplace. The **piano** is by Carolus Trute and is the sort of instrument Anne, the daughter of Boulton, would have played.

The Breakfast Room

The Breakfast Room is furnished with an elegant, and strikingly modern, side **cabinet by James Newton**. It is rosewood and marble and contains Royal **Worcester and Pinxton porcelain**. **Original items** in this room are the **shutters and the chimneypiece**. The **wallpaper is hand made in small sections** that are stuck together before attaching to the wall and it is a reproduction of a paper found here at Soho. Receipts in the archives show that Boulton had Brussels carpet. **The carpet** was made locally in Kidderminster. It is manufactured in narrow strips and sewn into position, with a border stitched around it. This room receives a lot of light during mid morning and would have been a perfect place for Boulton and his family to take breakfast. The **Wedgwood basalt ware** on the mantelpiece reflects Boulton's love for the new and unusual and also reminds us of his friendship with Josiah Wedgwood.

The Dining Room

The Dining Room is also known as the **Lunar Room** and it is where the Lunar Society met. The **Lunar Society** was a group of free thinking scientists and industrialists including Joseph Priestley, Erasmus Darwin, Josiah Wedgwood, James Watt, and William Withering. They met for dinner to discuss their thoughts, ideas and experiments and were guided homewards by the light from the full moon. Boulton was known to have admired the marbled columns at Shugborough and the curtains made of marbled calico. The **table, by Benjamin Wyatt, belonged to Boulton** and the chairs are red leather, gothic backed chairs by Gillows of Lancaster. These chairs were acquired as Boulton had gothic backed mahogany chairs supplied by James Newton. A number of **Boulton's wares are on display** in this room; tea vase c.1770, the candelabrum, the wine coolers and the perfume burners. The freestanding contraption is a **replica of an electrical machine** that belonged to **Joseph Priestley**. **Two of the windows are original** to the house, they are constructed of a metal known as "**Eldorado**" (an alloy of copper, zinc and iron) that was developed by **James Keir**, one of the Lunar Society members. The benefits of Eldorado were that it could produce thin joints of metal suitable for windows and fanlights.



The Study

The Study contains a Gillows desk standing on top of it is a **letter-copying machine** patented by James Watt. An early photocopier! (May still be on loan to Aston Hall) The chair is one of a pair and is known as "**Klismos**" from the Greek word for throne. The pastel picture above the mantelpiece is by John Russell and is called "**The Face of the Moon**" c. 1795. (The original will be on display April - June 2004, then a photograph will take its place. Once they're both framed up though it's difficult to spot the difference.)

Boulton's interest in anything innovative is clear throughout the house. He had a **flushing Bramah W.C.**, located in the lobby area; a **steam heated bath** and an impressive **underfloor heating system** (probably the first one since Roman times.)

The Fossilry

The Fossilry is where Boulton kept his fine collection of fossils, rocks and minerals. We don't house his collection here, it is kept together as an extremely important study collection within BM&AG.

The Cellar

The Cellar would have been used for storage. We have small areas displayed to show a **wine and beer** cellar. There is a reproduction of archive from 1804 which shows the prodigious quantity of wine the household got through - 378 bottles of port alone! The cellar also houses the remains of a **huge central heating** boiler. It is thought to be one of the first houses in Britain to have central heating installed - discounting the Romans of course.

Display Rooms

Upstairs there are a number of Display Rooms with cases and panels which describe Boulton's work and family life. He manufactured an enormous variety of metalware – buttons, buckles, snuffboxes, candelabra. Some of the finest quality works in silver, Sheffield plate and ormolu (a cheaper base metal gilded with powdered gold and mercury - an extremely toxic process!) were produced at Matthew Boulton's **Soho Manufactory**. In order to get his silver hallmarked more efficiently Boulton petitioned parliament and established the Assay office in Birmingham in 1772. Boulton also set up the **Soho Mint** for the production of minted coins, medals and tokens.

The Powdery

The Powdery contains a japanned wooden day bed and side cabinet and is the room for powdering wigs and faces.

Miss Boulton's Sitting Room

Miss Boulton's Sitting Room would have had lovely views over Soho Park. It has a **japanned sofa** in the manner of George Hepplewhite and a **satinwood secretaire**. This room is charmingly feminine complemented by the red, stippled **engravings after Angelica Kauffman**, a most popular artist of the period. The wallpaper in this room is a popular 18th century design and is called "Mistletoe". An attractive **fanlight** above the door is made from Eldorado metal.



Miss Boulton's Bedroom

The next room is Miss Boulton's Bedroom. The **bedposts are 18th century** but the hangings are reproduction and the chairs and the side table are both attributed to James Newton.

Matthew Boulton's Bedroom

Matthew Boulton's Bedroom was where the library was situated until 1803 when it was moved to the western end of the domestic wing. The bedroom now contains a four poster bed and a wing back chair made by Thomas Carr who we know Boulton bought furniture from. The **fine portrait of Matthew Boulton is by C.F. von Breda 1792**. It shows Boulton at the pinnacle of his career. In the background the manufactory amid production smokes away while he is able to quietly indulge in his own personal interests.

The Family Room

The Family Room depicts other histories of Soho House and gives information about some of the family members. After MRB left Soho it was let on a **succession of leases**: it was a Girl's School, a hotel, a vicarage for the newly built St Michael's church, a hostel for GEC apprentices and a hostel for the local Police. The Police built the adjacent building which we use as our Visitor Centre.

Soho House Today

Although now a museum to the life and work of Matthew Boulton, Soho House is still evolving. We are acquiring objects constantly as well as researching aspects of late C18th interiors, architecture and gardens. We regard our role as a museum in the community very highly. The temporary exhibition gallery stages a changing programme of people focused exhibitions and there are always events and activities taking place. Just as it was in the 18th century, Soho House witnesses the meeting of minds in a relaxed and stimulating environment.