

Curiosities from the vaults: a Bank miscellany

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An exhibition in the Bank's Museum showcases a selection of intriguing objects from a collection that the Bank has acquired throughout the course of its over 300-year history.

In a world of 24-hour news the Bank of England is seldom far from our television and computer screens. The focus on the economic and financial stories of the day, though, can understandably draw attention away from the fact that the central bank of the United Kingdom has been in existence for more than 300 years. So it is perhaps with little wonder that over the period since its foundation in 1694 the Bank has amassed an extensive collection of artworks,⁽²⁾ coins, medals, banknotes and myriad other objects, mainly acquired in the course of its business. 'Curiosities from the vaults: a Bank miscellany', a new exhibition in the Bank's museum running from 31 March to 12 July 2014, sheds light on some of the more curious items in the collection, of which a selection is shown in this article. From secret ballot boxes to saddle bags and the signatures of historical luminaries, individually, each of the selected pieces has an intriguing tale to tell about the social history of the Bank. Together, they provide a snapshot of a unique public collection.

Sir John Soane's secret ballot box

Sir John Soane is regarded as one of the great British architects. Soane was Architect and Surveyor of the Bank of England between 1788 and his retirement in 1833 and spoke of his creation as 'the pride and boast of my life'.⁽³⁾ During his tenure he created a building that was not just a bank but a national monument, extending the Bank to its current 3.5 acre site and surrounding it with the imposing curtain wall which remains to this day.⁽⁴⁾

The son of a bricklayer, Soane went on to study architecture at the Royal Academy. So promising was his work that he was awarded a travelling scholarship that enabled him to embark on the 'Grand Tour'.⁽⁵⁾ Soane spent two years in Italy, and this first-hand experience of the architectural glories of Ancient Rome was a key influence on his style. Having seen these sites himself he was able to produce the kind of architecture sought-after by his patrons (many of whom had 'toured' themselves), interpreting Classical architecture for his 'modern' age. As well as designing the Bank building itself he was also responsible for much of its decorative scheme, including several items of

The secret ballot box designed by Sir John Soane



- (1) The authors would like to thank Mike Anson for his help in producing this article.
- (2) The Bank's collection of oil paintings can be seen at the BBC's Your Paintings website, www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/galleries/locations/bank-of-england-museum-3778, as part of the Public Catalogue Foundation's efforts to digitise and publish all oil paintings in public ownership in the United Kingdom.
- (3) The Bank spent its first 40 years in rented premises, mainly in the Grocer's Company Hall on Princes Street, eventually moving to purpose-built premises on Threadneedle Street in 1734, in a building designed by the little-known George Sampson. This building was extended by Sir Robert Taylor between 1765 and 1788, the year in which Sir John Soane was appointed Architect and Surveyor.
- (4) The curtain wall is the only part of Soane's Bank which remains: the rest of the Bank's buildings were demolished in the 1920s in order to increase capacity of the Threadneedle Street site by replacing them with a larger building.
- (5) This was a trip traditionally enjoyed by young men of the wealthy upper classes. Both an education and a rite of passage, the Tour took in the great cities and monuments of Europe such that the Tourists might experience the arts and culture so valued in sophisticated society, particularly the masterpieces of Antiquity and the Renaissance, which could only be seen by visiting France and Italy.

furniture. For example, lattice-backed chairs made to Soane's 18th century design can be found in the Bank's Parlours,⁽¹⁾ as can the first curiosity featured in the exhibition.

The ballot box was designed by Soane for use by the Bank's Court of Directors, which performs a role similar to the Board of a company.⁽²⁾ Its form is that of a miniature ancient Greek temple with a roof made of palm leaves, and is typical of Soane's Neo-classical style. Made of mahogany, the ballot box allowed a voter to cast their ballot by reaching inside and dropping a small wooden ball to either the left side for 'yes', or right for 'no'. The funnel allows the voter to cast their ballot in secret. The two drawers, lined with baize to muffle the noise, can be removed in order to count the number of balls — hence votes — in each direction.

The secret ballot box is no longer used for its intended purpose; the votes of the Monetary Policy Committee and the Financial Policy Committee, for example, are a matter of public record, and their minutes are published by the Bank. Yet this peculiar, beautiful object provides a special, tangible link to the early committees of the Bank of England who used it, and the distinguished architect Sir John Soane who made it.

Is this Lawrence of Arabia's saddle bag?

At first glance this second curiosity looks like nothing more than a rather battered leather trunk, travel-worn and weary. It has a distinctive curved shape, and is lined with zinc. Yet it comes with a tantalisingly brief entry in the Museum's catalogue ledger: 'Camel pack, leather with metal lining, for carrying gold over deserts'. Over the years, this humble-looking object has been the subject of much speculation, which has grown into an association with a legendary name: could this really be Lawrence of Arabia's saddle bag, lent to him by the Bank for the transportation of gold during his wartime desert campaigns?

Thomas Edward Lawrence first travelled in the Middle East during his undergraduate years, furthering his interest in medieval archaeology by working on excavations in Syria between 1911 and 1914. During this time he became fascinated by the various cultures of the region, and his knowledge of the language and political undercurrents of the Arab world were the foundation to his work in military intelligence in the region during the First World War, most notably his role during the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, and the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule. David Lean's 1962 biopic *Lawrence of Arabia* elevated Lawrence to legendary status, so perhaps it is little wonder that an object with such unclear provenance has been linked to the most famous British desert adventurer of all.

A saddle bag for a camel, supposedly used to transport gold



Sadly, the Museum's accessions register has nothing to prove a link between Lawrence and this particular object. Neither has the Bank's Archive, although it does note a connection between Lawrence himself and the Bank. As Lawrence neared the end of his military service, his friends grew concerned that the energies of such a dynamic and unconventional man might be wasted in civilian service, and began looking for roles that would allow him to focus on his literary work. In 1928 he had been offered a position as night-watchman at the Bank of England, a quiet post away from the

(1) The Bank's Parlours can be seen on a small number of open days each year. In 2014 these will be 5 and 12 July and 20 and 21 September. The same chairs, designed by Soane, can also be seen in the library of Sir John Soane's Museum on Lincoln's Inn Fields.

(2) See 'The Court of the Bank of England' in this edition of the *Quarterly Bulletin*.

glare of publicity which followed him, in which he might continue with his writing.⁽¹⁾ Yet more surprising, though, is a copy of a letter in the Bank Archive indicating a rather more high-profile offer that was made in 1935. Montagu Norman, Governor of the Bank of England at the time, was apparently seeking an individual 'with personality within and without the walls of the Bank' to fill the position of Bank Secretary and apparently made a private offer to Lawrence. This offer was never taken up, and there are no official records of it having been made, only private letters.⁽²⁾ Yet the letters hint at a connection between Lawrence and the Bank of England which might have given rise to the notion that this bag had once belonged to him.

Distinguished visitor books

Another curiosity — this time a set — provides links with historical figures whom we are certain did have a connection with the Bank. For over 200 years, distinguished visitors to the Bank have been invited to sign high-value notes, which are preserved in a series of albums, each surrounded by an elaborate decorative border.⁽³⁾ The first of the collection dates from 1842, with a note signed by Prince Frederick of Prussia, and the tradition continues: a million pound note was signed by Her Majesty the Queen during her visit to the Bank in December 2012. Within the four volumes of notes there are many diverse, prominent figures from world history, ranging from great leaders to literary figures: for instance, the collection includes a million pound note signed by President Nelson Mandela on his visit to the Bank in 1996, and a note autographed by the novelist George Eliot in 1874.

A particularly unusual example, featured in this exhibition, is a thousand pound note dating from 1864. It is signed by the 'Choshu Five', five members of the Choshu clan who smuggled themselves out of Japan to the West in 1863, during a time of political isolation when it was illegal to leave Japan. Their signatures in Japanese characters are also shown transliterated into Roman letters: Shunsuke Ito (later Hirobumi Ito, the first Prime Minister of Japan and one of the men behind the Japanese Constitution), Monta Inoue (later Kaoru Inoue, the first Foreign Minister), Yozo Yamao (who studied engineering in Glasgow and later became Secretary of State for Industry, establishing the first Institute for Technology in Japan), Nomura Yakichi (later known as Masaru Inoue, a founder of the Japanese Board of Railways), and Kinsuke Endo (who became the head of the new Japanese Mint Bureau). The Choshu Five became the first Japanese students to study in Britain, at University College London, and spent much time finding out about national institutions such as the Bank of England. Their remarkable voyage would influence the rest of their lives, and that of their homeland: in their careers following their return the Choshu Five established themselves as some of the foremost modernisers of Japan. An object like this is a reminder that

£1,000 note, signed by the 'Choshu Five'



(1) Bank of England Archive file C17/29, Extracts from the Minutes of the Committee of Treasury, 6 June 1928 and T E Lawrence to Herbert Baker, 17 July 1928.

(2) Bank of England Archive file C17/29, Francis Rennell to Leslie O'Brien, 28 May 1969.

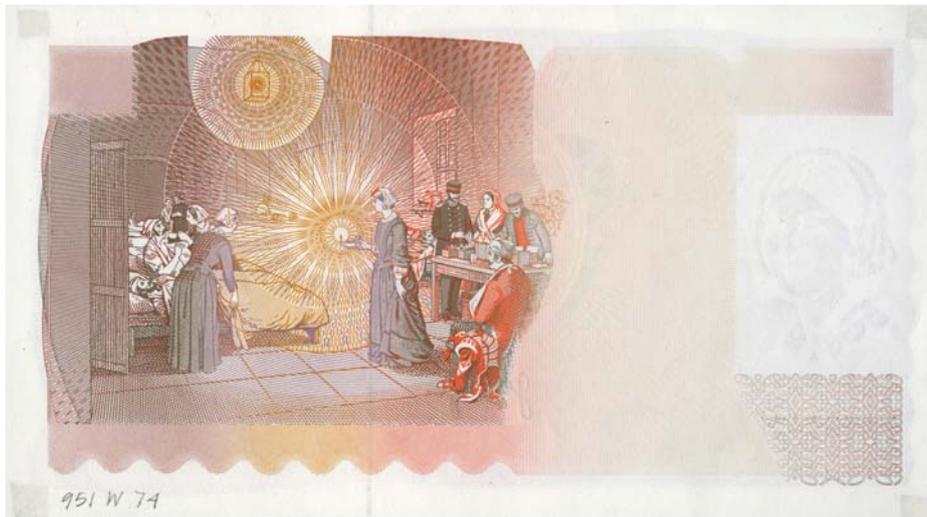
(3) While the face value of these notes appears high, they are not issued in the legal sense (they are unnumbered) and so do not appear under the Issue Department Balance Sheet. Formally, these notes remain within the Bank and form part of the Bank's stock of unissued notes. For a primer on money (including banknotes) see 'Money in the modern economy: an introduction' in this edition of the *Quarterly Bulletin*.

even in 1864 the Bank of England drew visitors from all over the world. Today the Bank continues to provide a forum for central bank staff from around the globe to learn and share experiences in the Bank's Centre for Central Banking Studies.⁽¹⁾

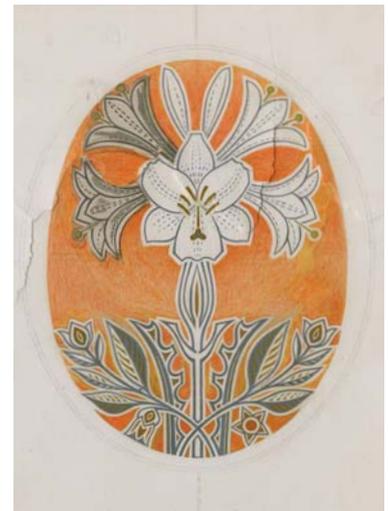
Also on display

Also among the Bank's curiosities are a set of sketches, printing plates and test prints that give an insight into the design process for the 'Series D' £10 note, in circulation between 1975 and 1994. The reverse of the note features a portrait of Florence Nightingale at work in the field hospital at Scutari during the Crimean War; a vignette on the front of the note depicts the lily, a symbol used by Nightingale. Together, such source materials, sketches, printing plates and test prints show the development of the design through to the finished note in the days before computer-aided design. The designs incorporated hard-to-copy security features such as guilloche patterns and micro-printing, which remain on banknotes today. These are now supplemented by advanced security features, such as the motion thread on the 2011 issue Boulton and Watt £50 note.⁽²⁾

Test print for the reverse of the Series D £10 note
(Florence Nightingale is the figure holding the lamp)



Sketch for the lily vignette on the
front of the Series D £10 note



The treasures in the Bank's collections extend to a number of Roman and Medieval finds excavated during building works. Sir John Soane's Bank of England may have been the pride of his career, but by the 1920s it was no longer adequate for the needs of a modern central bank. Between 1925 and 1939, a rebuilding programme saw Soane's Bank building on Threadneedle Street gradually demolished and replaced by a much larger building, seven stories high and with three further levels below ground. While excavating the vaults and foundations of the new Bank building, workers uncovered the rich archaeology of an area which forms part of the oldest settlement in London, dating back to Roman times. These finds included pottery, coins, wooden writing tablets, metal tools and leather shoes, all of which had been impressively preserved by London's clay soil.

(1) For more information about the Centre for Central Banking Studies see www.bankofengland.co.uk/education/Pages/ccbs/default.aspx.

(2) For information on current security features on Bank of England banknotes, and education materials, see www.bankofengland.co.uk/banknotes/Pages/educational.aspx.

A selection of these Roman and Medieval finds will feature in the exhibition, a reminder that the Bank's location, today the heart of the City of London, has been a centre of trade and commerce since ancient times.

Medieval water jug, found on the site during rebuilding work



The upper portion (neck and handles) of a Roman amphora, or storage jar



Curiosities from the vaults: a Bank miscellany is open from 31 March to 12 July. The Museum is in the Bank of England's Threadneedle Street building (entrance on Bartholomew Lane). Its regular opening hours are Monday-Friday 10.00–17.00 (except Bank Holidays). In addition, the Museum will open to the public on Saturday 5 July and Saturday 12 July, when we will be offering tours of the Bank of England building as part of the City of London Festival. For further information about visiting and special events see www.bankofengland.co.uk/museum.