

LASSCO

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AN IMPORTANT VICTORIAN CHIMNEYPIECE

By John Thomas c.1854

The Belgian black marble shelf with outset rounded ends, above a frieze applied with running scrolling foliate gilded electrotype metal appliques, the massive fluted column jambs applied with bellflower pendants raised on polygonal feet, the carved oak and walnut overmantel with an arched mirror plate bordered by inlaid marmo verde panels, the cornice centered by a portrait roundel depicting Isaac Newton in full relief, the flanking panels each with twin outset ionic order columns above the turned waisted socles to support figures personifying science and the arts,

DIMENSIONS: 376cm (148") High, 244cm (96") Wide

STOCK CODE: 22419

LOCATION: LASSCO Three Pigeons

HISTORY

"The John Thomas Chimneypiece" was removed from the Jewish Home and Hospital for Incurables, Tottenham. It stands at nearly four metres high with the arched overmantel mirror surmounted by a portrait relief of Sir Isaac Newton and flanked by inlaid marble panels and columns sitting on the massive Belgian black marble chimneypiece with electrotype metal appliques. It is a spectacular and beautifully crafted chimneypiece. It was made by John Thomas (1813 - 1862) for his lifelong patron and friend Sir Samuel Morton Peto (1809-1889).

John Thomas was a prolific sculptor whose talent and industry was first noticed by Sir Charles Barry during the building of Pugin's Birmingham Grammar School and later resulted in Thomas' appointment as superintendent of stone carving at Barry and Pugin's progressing Palace of Westminster. The contract for the construction of the new Parliament building was being undertaken by Peto. John Thomas and Morton Peto were to work together for many years.

Peto, a self made man and one of the magnates of the Victorian building boom, had worked on Nelson's Column and was speedily constructing hundreds of miles of the expanding railway network in this country and around the world. He had founded the guarantee fund for the 1851 Great Exhibition. He was one of the wealthiest businessmen in Victorian Britain - but it wasn't to last.

Peto had acquired Somerleyton House near Lowestoft in the 1840's. He commissioned John Thomas as architect and stone mason to undertake the extensive renovation and building work at the house transforming what had been a crumbling Jacobean mansion into a Victorian stately home complete with a celebrated Winter Garden, a nod to Paxton's Crystal Palace, and fabulous carved marble chimneypieces throughout. With Thomas he went on to design and construct an entire "model" village there including a new church and school.

By the time of his dramatic financial downfall in the early 1860's, Peto was employing more than 30,000 men, more than anyone else in the world at the time. They were all paid from one bank and the bank folded. In 1864 he sold the house.

Most of the Thomas chimneypieces survived the later renovations at Somerleyton and can be seen there today.

Another of his marble masterpieces had featured at the 1851 Great Exhibition (being illustrated in the catalogue) before being installed at Thomas' other country house project: E.L.Betts' Preston Hall in Kent.

G.W.Yapp produced the Great Exhibition catalogue for Art Journal. Such was its popularity he followed it up with a subsequent volume "Furniture, Upholstery and House Decoration". It featured a full page on a John Thomas chimneypiece. The fireplace illustrated is the chimneypiece found by LASSCO at Tottenham and "designed for the drawing room of Sir Morton Peto, M.P". Yapp dates the piece as "in or about the year 1853". Peto's biographer the Revd. Dr. E. C. Brooks tells us that he had held the lease on 47 Russell Square Bloomsbury, until "the spring of 1854 when he moved westwards into 12 Kensington Palace Gardens -"Millionaires Row"- originally built by Grissell and Peto (himself)". It seems very likely that Peto commissioned this piece at the time of this move. We have not been able to establish if, once made, it was installed at No.12 but the evidence all fits (the "Survey of London" is not entirely clear).

It was ten years later that the Somerleyton estate was sold. the revenue from which enabled Peto, who was to completely recoup from his financial downfall, to construct a larger town house in the adjacent grounds to No.12 to better accommodate his family of twelve and staff of sixteen (Now no.12A, The Nepalese Embassy) and sell the original house.

The next thing that we know for sure is that Sir Samuel Montagu donated the present chimneypiece to the Jewish Hospital, Tottenham, London in 1906 (the year he was elected to parliament for West Cambridgeshire), which is where it remained. Sir Samuel lived very near to Kensington Palace Gardens at that time but it is not currently known how he acquired the Thomas.

LASSCO has uncovered a photograph of the chimneypiece newly installed in the hospital in 1906 published in a 1984 paper by the Jewish Research Group about the Jewish inhabitants of North London. It shows the overmantle complete with flanking figures, (now sadly lacking). The same document describes the then new hospital wing being "heated by special fireplaces which permit of a fine burning for a length of period without interference". This explains the installation at the hospital without the original 1854 grate pictured in the Yapp etching. Detective work and restoration continue and the final link in the story will hopefully be uncovered in the future.

John Thomas 1813 – 1862 (born in Chalford, Gloucestershire).

Architect, Sculptor, Architectural Stonemason

Major Works of Note:

Birmingham Grammar School by A.W.N.Pugin: All ornamental stone and woodwork (now demolished).

Palace of Westminster by Pugin and Barry: Superintendent of Stone Carving to Charles Barry – carved the statues on the north and south fronts, the panels with the arms of the Kings and Queens of England from William the Conqueror to Queen Victoria, statues and bosses for the Victoria Tower, the bosses in St. Stephens Hall and later bronzes for House of Lords.

Buckingham Palace: Reliefs

Castle Howard: The Atlas Fountain

His work 'Charity' was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and then adapted to form a memorial in Christ Church, Chalford, to his brother Richard who died in 1852.

His massive (30 ft. high, 40 ft diameter) majolica fountain, originally for the 1862 International Exhibition, was placed outside the V&A Museum of Childhood until it was demolished in 1926.

Other work includes:

Euston Station (1847): Eight allegorical statues representing the cities served by the line: London, Liverpool, Manchester, etc.

Statue of Hugh Myddleton at Islington Green, London.

Statue of Godiva, held in Maidstone Museum & Art Gallery

Four British lions at each corner of the Britannia Bridge crossing the Menai Strait between the island of Anglesey and the mainland of Wales

Extensive friezes and spandrel figures for Lloyds Bank, Bristol.

Carving and statues on Halifax Town Hall, created ca. 1860-1862 in collaboration with Edward Middleton Barry to design of Charles Barry. Thomas carved three statues for the tower, but died before completing the fourth, which was overseen by another artist to his design.

As architect;

Headington Hill Hall

Somerleyton Hall

His final work was the colossal statue of William Shakespeare displayed at the 1862 International Exhibition. A dispute over its placement is said to have hastened his death in April 1862.

He is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, London.