

SOMERSET HOUSE

Hazel Moffat gave a talk at the August meeting on Somerset House. The four main wings of the building were completed almost 200 years ago on land between the Strand and the River Thames. The intention was that it would be an object of national splendour and official convenience. Why was this extraordinary building in the centre of London called Somerset House? When Henry VIII died, his brother-in-law Edward Seymour became King in all but name. His title was Lord Protector but he took the title of Duke of Somerset. In keeping with his status he needed a grand palace. The land between the Strand and the Thames was already occupied. The all powerful Lord Protector decided to clear the site including Bishops' Houses, the Church of St. Mary and the graveyard. Bones were taken north to fields that were not consecrated and reburied, much to the outrage of many people. Building stone was needed. There was some from the houses that were demolished but it wasn't enough so the cloisters at St. Paul's were demolished. The Duke of Somerset was only in power for 2 years. Just as the Palace neared completion he was executed.

The Palace was seized and became Crown property. Cromwell had his lying in state there. In the 17th Century, Stuart Queens used the palace as a dowry house but the accommodation later used for diplomats fell into a degree of disrepair. The garden was neglected. George III and Charlotte didn't use Somerset House favouring Buckingham House. London was the biggest City in the World. George III wanted rid of Somerset House and Government departments were in need of better central accommodation. The estimated cost to demolish the old House and build government offices which would reflect the reign of George II, was a quarter of a million pounds but the cost doubled. Sir William Chambers, the Architect, went to China – he did drawings of Chinese architecture. When he came back to England he came to the attention of the royal family and worked with the Dowager Princess of Wales. He built a Pagoda in Kew Gardens and became Surveyor General of Crown lands. Somerset House became his life's work but he died before the building was finished. It was a difficult site – the land sloped 40 feet from the Strand to the river.

To reflect the glory of the monarch, 16 sculptors were employed. From the Strand side no-one would imagine anything grand on the other side but all the keystones had carved heads. The building was the largest purpose built home for civil servants in the world at that time. It also housed three other organisations – the Royal Academy of Art, the Royal Society and the Royal Society of Antiquities. Hazel showed some pictures and from the Courtyard it could be seen how much bigger the building was. A pair of Sphinx and a Roman altar hid the chimneys and there were 4 statues representing the four continents of America, Africa, Europe and Asia. The building was and still is very decorative and has one of the most exciting staircases - so expensive another one could not be afforded. It is called Nelson's staircase. From the riverfront the grandeur becomes more obvious and why the navy was keen to have offices on the river – they could sail direct to Greenwich and Woolwich before the embankment was built. It was a very busy river. The terrace was the most magnificent promenade in London but people were stopped from using it in 1855 because of graffiti. Hazel listed all the different offices that had been housed there. She felt some members may have visited as family historians to look at Wills. Today it is still an extraordinary home for civil servants and the Arts. There is a new museum underneath the terrace and an outpost of the Hermitage Museum. The Courtyard is no longer a car park and is used for exhibitions and events. Next time I go to London I will look upwards at Somerset House and will no doubt see it with 'new eyes'.

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