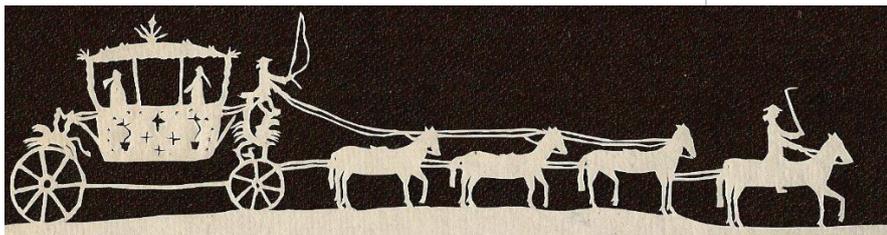


Tourist Attractions in Georgian London

by Mike Rendell

It's a familiar problem: you have guests to stay for a whole month, and you need to know how to keep them entertained. Well, the choices open to you in the latter part of the Eighteenth Century were not that different from those today. There was always the Tower of London (where you could see the Royal Mint in operation, the Royal regalia and of course the menagerie of wild animals). There were wax works and there were trips to the theatre (Drury Lane and Covent Garden).

If the weather was fine you might hire a coach and four and go and take the water (and listen to a bawdy musical show) at Sadlers Wells, or go for a walk in Ranelagh Gardens with its fine rotunda. Or you might just like to go and see a remarkable piece of opulent showmanship at Cox's Museum in Spring Gardens, Charing Cross.....



A popular Georgian pastime was to make elaborate cut-outs using card and very sharp scissors

My ancestor Richard Hall was a hosier operating from Number One London Bridge. He had married one of two sisters. The other sister lived in the Cotswolds with her husband, the improbably wealthy William Snooke, and they came up to Town every Spring for four or five weeks, staying with the family. This annual pilgrimage gave the 'country cousins' the chance to re-stock their wardrobes, catch up on fashions, and spend as if there was no tomorrow! What is fascinating is that both Richard and William kept diaries and it is interesting to see the same event described from two different perspectives. In general William recorded what they ate and what they saw, while Richard tended to record what it cost!

One attraction more than any other kept drawing them back, and that was Cox's Museum. It wasn't cheap: entry cost half a guinea (10/6d). Richard would lay out another ten and six for the brochure. I still have it and it shows something of the spectacle presented to the public: the museum contained a number of salons, each with its own collection of be-jewelled automata. The foyer was dominated by giant portraits of King George III and his wife Queen Charlotte, painted by Johan Zoffany. "Before the portraits, upon a Throne of gold 32 feet in circumference of six steps, stand two rich and finely adorned altars of silver, border'd and embellish'd with gold".

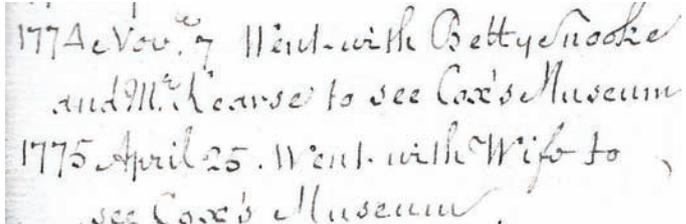
The exhibits were on the grand scale - twenty three in all- with elephants nine-feet high, and tigers made of silver and set with

precious stones, alongside much more dainty clockwork models, usually based on animals or birds. One exhibit was a "magnificent Asiatic Temple, ornamented with gold, jewellery, palm-trees and other rich embellishments, out of the dome of which gradually rises a pagoda to the Musick of its chimes. The temple itself stands on a Rock, adorned with various Animals, Shrubs, Flowers, Fossils etc. The stand or pedestal upon which it is placed is composed of Palm trees of a beautiful transparent green, growing on a Rocky ground; upon which Crocodiles, Plants, Corals and other aquatic productions may be seen: in the centre is a pool of artificial water, surrounded with bull-rushes, and within the pool water Fowls are seen, variously sporting on the surface. This piece is ten feet high".

Nothing subtle about that! Another item, featuring humming birds hovering over ornate flowers, is described as having "upwards of one hundred thousand stones of different colours, by which the shades and tints of the flowers are beautifully expressed".

The undoubted star of the Museum display was the life-size silver swan, first exhibited in 1772. It created a sensation in London and became a "must see" for all those of fashion and taste. It is now exhibited at the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle in Durham and it is perhaps best to quote from their own website:

"The Silver Swan is perhaps the best known and best loved object in The Bowes Museum. It is a musical automaton in the form of a life-size model of a swan, comprising a clockwork mechanism covered in silver plumage above a music box. It rests on a stream made of twisted glass rods interspersed with silver fish. When the mechanism is wound up, the glass rods rotate, the music begins, and the swan twists its head to the left and right and appears to preen its back. It then appears to see a fish in the water below and bends down to catch it. It then swallows the fish as the music stops and resumes its upright position. The whole performance lasts about forty seconds. In reality the fish has been concealed lengthways on a pivot in the swan's beak and returns to this position. In real life swans do not eat fish."



1774eVou. 7 Went with Betty Snooke
and M. Kearse to see Cox's Museum
1775 April 25. Went with wife to
see Cox's Museum.

Richard Hall's diary entries show meticulously recorded costs of all activities

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Tourist Attractions in Georgian London (cont.)

Even today the operation of the mechanical swan can give rise to spontaneous applause from the audience. It is a bit like watching the beautiful engineering of a soft-top car retracting its hood into the boot. Everything works with incredible precision. It certainly captured the imagination of Mark Twain. Writing in *The Innocents Abroad* he remarks “I watched a silver swan which had a living grace about his movements and a living intelligence in his eyes – watched him swimming about as comfortably and unconcernedly as if it had been born in a morass instead of a jewellers shop – watched him seize a silver fish from under the water and hold his head and go through all the customary and elaborate motions of swallowing it”

Examples of James Cox’s craft are still to be found in the Chinese and Russian Imperial collections, and in a sense were the fore-runners of the Fabergé eggs. Known as “sing-songs” the elaborate mechanical pieces were produced in huge quantities for sale in the Far East. It appears to have been Cox’s undoing - his business grew too big too fast. At one stage it is reported that he was employing nearly a thousand jewellers and skilled craftsmen in London alone. The value of his unsold stock items rose to an incredible £750,000. Unfortunately trade with China and the Far East took a down-turn, payments were not made and therefore Cox was unable to meet his debts. He ended up petitioning Parliament to be allowed to dispose of the museum stock by public lottery, on the grounds that the items owned by him were designed so much with the Far

Eastern tastes in mind that they could not be disposed of “by the common way of sale”.

James Cox may have got permission from Parliament for his lottery, but the subsequent ticket sales were sluggish and proved insufficient to stave off his bankruptcy. It was a sad end to a splendid exhibition.



Pic: kind permission of the Bowes Museum, where the swan now resides.



About Mike Rendell

Mike Rendell is a retired lawyer who lives in Spain. His first book about his Georgian ancestor Richard Hall has recently been published: [Journal of a Georgian Gentleman](#). Mike has an excellent blog [here](#) and a web site [here](#). And he’s on Twitter as [@GeorgianGent](#). Mike is currently doing research for further historical publications.