



Photo Matthew Slocombe

Above Brass plaque of M. Greenstein purse maker

Hidden Histories

Matthew Slocombe explores the rich history of the SPAB's headquarters



Photo The Greenstein Family

WE LOOK FORWARD TO THE annual opening of our HQ at 37 Spital Square to visitors this September as part of the Open House Festival. It gives us the opportunity to welcome you to explore the interior of this wonderful Grade II listed Georgian house, learn more about our work, and the fascinating history of previous owners and occupiers of the site. It is also a time for the sharing of stories and recollections, and discoveries of past episodes in the house's history.

We often learn as much valuable information as we convey. A good example of this was when descendants of the Greenstein family, Russian Jewish leatherworkers, who lived in the house in the early 20th century visited a few years ago and revealed their ancestors' connection to the house. We had no prior knowledge of the Greenstein's occupation, but they were able to show us that the building's fabric harboured

evidence of marks on the surrounds of internal doors where Jewish mezuzahs were once fixed. These small capsules, set at a slight slant, contained a tiny scroll with text from the Torah and are conventionally put in place within the first month of a building's occupation. Members of the family went on to donate the brass business plaque inscribed 'PURSE MAKER', that had once been attached to No 37's front entrance.

These tangible links with the past are very important to us and have enriched our understanding of this period of the house's past life. We hope for further discoveries of this kind as we piece together its layered history.

TRADING TALES

No 37 Spital Square, London E1, stands right on the border between the Corporation of London and Tower Hamlets borough. It is liminal in many respects: part City, part East End; part



Left The front door and steps of 37 Spital Square

Below far left A Greenstein family wedding, c. 1915

English, part French; part ancient, part modern; and part evident, part hidden.

Visitors to No 37 generally view it as a remarkably unchanged Georgian townhouse. Its intact panelling, six panel doors, sliding sash windows with shutters and eared fire surrounds all point to a construction date of 1740. No 37 was a substantial house, but typical of those built by successful Spitalfields silk merchants in the 18th century. These merchants, including Peter Ogier who is believed to have had No 37 constructed, were immigrants to England. The Ogiers, like many other families in the area, were Huguenot refugees who had left continental Europe under religious persecution and quickly re-established themselves as skilled craftspeople and entrepreneurs in a new home on the edge of London.

The silk trade flourished in Spitalfields from the start of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th. Huguenots lived at No 37 throughout this time. Robert Senecal was the last, remaining until the 1880s and still employing "40 hands" in the silk trade, but by the end of the century, fabric manufacture had gone. The house subsequently became the home of people who were part of a new wave of immigration including the Greensteins.

Close inspection of the building's fabric reveals other clues to its past. The best room on the building's first floor has a fireplace that is not from the original construction date of 1740 but from c. 1800. An insurance certificate held at London's Guildhall shows that the site was in dual occupation by this time. Mrs Mawer, a "gauze stifner",



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Photo Andy Marshall



Photo SPAB

presumably producing chiffon gauze to decorate silk dresses, was one of the occupants. Alongside Mrs Mawer, the insurance record suggests that the main occupant was a Mr Gahlië. It's perhaps fortunate that no physical trace of his occupation remains since he was an 18th century surgeon and quite possibly carried out surgical operations or experiments in the house. Coroners' records from the time show that autopsies were among his duties. Less macabre was his collection of "printed books", valued at a substantial £200.

Apart from the fire surround, no trace of Gahlië or his patients remains in the building. However, paint analysis by Patrick Baty, undertaken as part of decorative work in 2013, showed the many layers of 'stone colour' (a creamy-grey off-white) that had been used throughout the interior during the 18th and 19th centuries. The 2013 work, overseen by Scholar-surveyor Alan Gardner and undertaken by builders Lodge & Sons, also produced evidence that there had once been a near disaster within the building. In the mid 20th century, part of the house had been used as an electrical repair shop. When floorboards were lifted in 2013, a charred electrical fitting and evidence of fire damage were revealed. Fortunately, the fire must have been put out before serious damage was caused.

Photo Andy Marshall



Far left 1740s panelling in a state of disrepair when we took the building on in the 1980s

Left 1740s panelling with Regency chimneypiece now

Right Silk taffeta robe a l'anglaise, woven in Spitalfields, London, 1775-1780, Flynt Center of Early New England Life, Deerfield



Photo Daderot, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



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DECIPHERING THE CLUES

Similar near-misses seem to have occurred during World War II. Blast damage to the building's windows is shown in wartime photographs of 1944, but the only trace remaining today lies in some low-grade replacement window glass. After World War II and until the 1970s much of the building was occupied by Ince and Sons, the UK's longest-established umbrella manufacturer. Photographs from this period in the London Metropolitan Archive show the building down-at-heel. A more impressionist record of the house at that time lies in the childhood memories of the firm's current head, James Ince, who recalls navigating the building's dark and warren-like interior.

Photo Matthew Slocombe



Above Embedded timber found at no 37



Photo SPAB

Above Burnt electrical fitting found under floor boards

The basement was probably not accessible to the young James Ince, since it was not deepened and made usable until the SPAB's occupancy in 1980, but it holds some important clues to the building's pre-Georgian past. Part way up one basement wall, buried in the masonry and with only its end grain showing, is an ancient timber. The reason for its presence is not entirely clear, but it is quite possibly the remnant of an earlier timber-framed building on the site. Before the 18th century, most houses in the Spitalfields area were timber-framed. Map evidence suggests that those on the site of No 37 faced east-west, rather than the north-south of ➤

Right Hallway with Victorian coloured glass light

the present building. The whole area was then known as Spital Yard, a name which is preserved in the small dead-end street immediately to the west of No 37.

The pre-Georgian buildings on No 37's site appear to have had small courtyards across the present Spital Yard and onto what is now the site of a large modern office block facing the main thoroughfare, Bishopsgate. When foundations for this Bishopsgate block were dug, archaeologists found back-filled cesspits containing various fascinating objects. Among them were the cores of animal horns – the horn itself was used for objects from clothing to furniture, and sometimes even as a cheap substitute for window glass.

FROM ALE HOUSE TO HOSPITAL

Also in one of the pits was a very early wine bottle, bearing the seal T&A Kent with a King's Head. This seal belonged to Thomas and Ann Kent who ran the King's Head public house in Fleet Street in the 1650s. The bottle dates from this time and as such is from the earliest period of glass wine bottle manufacture in London. Bottles bearing a seal at this date were more like decanters than disposable modern bottles and remained in use until they were damaged. The Spital Yard bottle, now in the Museum of London's collection, has damage to its base. Given its date and location, it seems likely that the bottle was taken as debris from Fleet Street after the Great Fire of London in 1666 and dumped in Spitalfields. Spitalfields was low lying and boggy in the medieval period and the ground level has been raised artificially by around six feet to make it less damp. Great Fire debris would have served usefully for this purpose.

Spitalfields had its own King's Head, far closer than the Kents' tavern. In *A Banquet of Jests* (first published 1630) two characters leave Shakespeare's Curtain Theatre and go to the "King's Head at the Spittle Gate" close by. The Spital Gate had formed the entrance to the great priory hospital of St Mary. No 37 stands on part of its south transept, with the nave running along what is now Spital Square.

Extensive archaeological investigation by MoLAS, now MOLA, in the 1990s,



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was still sealed. The coffin opening allowed a 'Howard Carter' moment for Dr Simon Thurley – now Chair of the National Heritage Lottery Fund but then Director of the Museum of London. The opening lived up to expectation. The sarcophagus contained a secondary coffin of elaborately decorated cast lead. Inside was the body of a woman, as well as grave goods including gold, silk and bay leaves. The 1990s were early days for radio isotope analysis in archaeology, but the technique was used to help understand the woman's origins. It suggested that she was not merely a Roman Londoner, but a Roman Londoner born in Rome. Her final resting place, as for many others from her era, was within a stone's throw of the present No 37 Spital Square.

The hidden history of No 37 has a further twist. Its current address results from a Post Office renumbering of the 'square' in the 19th century. No 37 was originally No 36!

We acquired the building in 1980 from the Spitalfields Trust, who had rescued it from decay and potential demolition in the 1970s. We undertook a major repair project under the guidance of architect Julian Harrap. No 37 is an intriguing historic building that links us to past building traditions and the riveting history of the evolution of Spitalfields and serves as a living case study for our work. We are very proud to continue to add to its story.

37 Spital Square will be open for Members and the public as part of this year's Open House Festival on Saturday 14 September 2024.

<https://open-city.org.uk/open-house-festival-2024>



Above Robert Senecal

Photo Claudia Hussein



Above Rosabel Senecal

Photo Claudia Hussein

that took place as part of the area's redevelopment, established much of the priory's historic layout. The hospital housed the sick of medieval London, and the area is named after the 'Spital' in 'Hospital'. The priory hospital's presence is the reason why the ground beneath No 37 is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument. A hint at the site's hidden history lies in the area's current street layout which carries echoes of the priory building's plan. Above ground, there is now little trace of the priory, but some of the smaller stone paving slabs in No 37's courtyard are believed to be medieval and re-used. There is also a beautifully carved and re-set stone corbel in the basement, almost certainly of priory origin.

Medieval people were not the first to live or be buried on No 37's site. London was an important Roman settlement, and No 37's plot is due north of the single Roman crossing point of the river Thames. Gracechurch Street, which becomes Bishopsgate, is on the line of a main Roman road through the city. During the Roman period, the area that is now Spitalfields, being outside the city wall, was used for brickmaking – and also for burial.

A HYBRID HISTORY

In 1999, the MoLAS archaeological excavations yielded an astonishing Roman discovery within metres of No 37's rear wall. This was a high-status stone sarcophagus which, on discovery,