

## II

ELLIE CASEY

**New wine in old bottles: A comparison between *The Boxley Rood of Grace*, and John Soane's *Monk's Parlour and Cell and Monk's Yard*, with reference to religious symbolism in material culture at the time of the Dissolution, and in the Romantic Era**

This article compares and contrasts the sixteenth-century miraculous crucifix *The Boxley Rood of Grace*, and the architect John Soane's nineteenth century creations, the *Monk's Parlour and Cell* and *Monk's Yard*, which he built in his home at 12-14 Lincoln's Inn Fields. Both the Rood as an object, and the *Monk's Parlour* and *Yard*, as architectural novelty, are conduits for religious symbolism, and this article will examine how that symbolism was represented and treated at the time of the Dissolution, and in the Romantic Era.

---

In 1538, when *The Boxley Rood of Grace*, a miraculous crucifix, was condemned in a fiery sermon by the Bishop of Rochester, and then cut to pieces and burnt, a potent symbol of the old religion was destroyed. In 1824 Sir John Soane designed and built a *Monk's Parlour and Cell* in the basement of his townhouse at 12-14 Lincolns Inn Fields, looking out into a *Monk's Yard*, where he built the ruins of a fictitious abbey in the courtyard, as a satire on the nation's growing taste for the Gothic.

*The Boxley Rood* was a victim of the widespread iconoclasm of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536-40. On the eve of the Henrician Reformation England's religious houses were deeply embedded in the fabric of society - the country was home to approximately 800, including monasteries, nunneries and friaries, housing different religious orders, and home to 7,500 men and 1,800 women<sup>1</sup>. The 1534 Act of Supremacy saw Henry VIII not only declare himself Supreme Head of the Church of England but give himself the power to 'visit, repress...amend all...error, heresies, abuses...' <sup>2</sup> within the Church. Henry, with Cromwell as his vice-gerent in spirituals, thus had the power to dictate religious belief and practice. Cromwell's visitations and *Valor Ecclesiasticus* saw the implementation of the reformist Protestant agenda with the systematic destruction of the material culture of Catholic worship; widespread destruction of reliquaries, shrines and pilgrimage sites were commonplace. As part

<sup>1</sup> R.E. Foster, 'Dissolving the Dissolute? Henry VIII and the end of English Monasticism', *History Review* (2008)

<sup>2</sup> A.G. Dickens and Dorothy Carr, *The Reformation in England to the Accession of Elizabeth I*, (1971) p.65 (The Act Of Supremacy)

of their propaganda machine, and to ridicule and discredit both the monks and the sanctity of the shrine, Cromwell and his commissioners made a point of exposing formerly venerated images as fraudulent, and the exposé of *The Rood of Boxley* in 1538 was part of a series of ‘set-piece’ exposés.<sup>3</sup> Also known as *The Rood of Grace*,<sup>4</sup> the Boxley Rood was a crucifix with the body of Christ supposedly imbued with the miraculous gift of speech and movement. It was proved to be a fake by Geoffrey Chamber, the commissioner charged with the dissolution of the Cistercian Abbey of St Mary Boxley, an institution founded by William of Ypres on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1146. Chamber wrote to Cromwell in 1538 describing the system of levers and pulleys used to operate the mechanism before taking it to Maidstone on market day to show it as a falsity to crowds there, before being taken to London and destroyed.

By contrast the *Monk’s Parlour and Cell* and the *Monk’s Yard* still stand to this day in what is now The Sir John Soane’s Museum at numbers 12-14 Lincoln’s Inn Fields in London. The museum comprises three town houses extended into each other and lived in at various times in his life by Sir John Soane (1753-1837), a highly innovative English architect, collector and educator. Soane bequeathed his house at No. 12 and his house and museum and its contents at No. 13, to the British nation in 1833. On his death in 1837 the house at No. 14 was sold but was subsequently bought back by the museum trust in 1996; all three buildings are now the property of the Sir John Soane’s Museum.<sup>5</sup>

Figures 1 show plans of the basement of No. 12-14 Lincoln’s Inn Fields c.2017, where the *Monk’s Parlour*, *Cell* and *Yard* are situated.

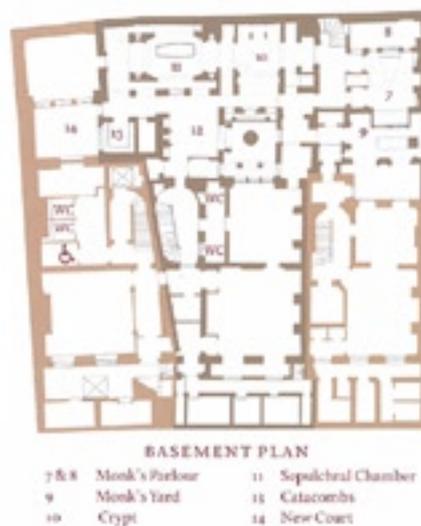


Figure 1. Basement of No. 12-14 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London c.2017.

<sup>3</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, (London, reprint 2005) p.403

<sup>4</sup> *Houses of Cistercian Monks: The Abbey of Boxley, A County History of Kent: Volume 2* (1926) pp.153-55 URL <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38203>

<sup>5</sup> Various Anonymous Contributors, *Sir John Soane’s Museum: A Short Guide*, (London, 2015), p.3

Curators since the 1990s have endeavoured to preserve the museum as far as possible in the state Soane intended. Designed as a satire on the nation's growing taste for the Gothic, Soane created the *Monk's Parlour and Cell*, a suite of rooms for the imaginary monk Padre Giovanni or Father John, a satirical alter-ego of Soane's - in the basement of the house looking out into the *Monk's Yard*, where he created the ruins of a fictitious abbey.



Figure 2. *The Monk's Parlour* at No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields

Soane himself was not particularly interested in religious beliefs, worship or theology. His genius lay in his manipulation of interior spaces. He used his architectural prowess to create within the preserved and restored interiors and exteriors of numbers 12-14, a 'poem of architecture'<sup>6</sup>: the different rooms showcase different architectural styles. In the first published guidebook to the Museum, written by Soane's friend and antiquarian John Britton in 1827 and entitled, '*The Union of Sculpture, Architecture and Painting*,' Soane's endeavour in the houses and museum is described as the wish 'to produce a succession of rich, varied and striking architectural scenery.'<sup>7</sup> *The Monk's Parlour and Cell* and *Monk's Yard* were designed to be a part of this scenery, and the medieval religious style of architecture in these rooms is merely one small

<sup>6</sup> Various Anonymous Contributors, *A Short Guide*, p.2

<sup>7</sup> J. Britton, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting*, (London, 1827), p.6

stanza of an architectural poem. Religious symbolism is jumbled with other styles: the religious is given a ‘cell’ in a series of substantial townhouses. This implies the gentle insignificance of religious medievalism in the face of other styles; the domination of the classical is evident in the museum, with its numerous classical models and the central domed structure in the breakfast room. The Monk’s rooms and yard are essentially a novelty, which Soane designed to produce ‘the most powerful sensations in the mind of the admirers of the piety of our forefathers who raised such structures for the worship of the Almighty’<sup>8</sup> Piety here is referenced with a sense of nostalgia, it belongs to ‘our forefathers’, not to us, and is described as an antiquated notion i.e. Soane is not building for the worship of the Almighty.



Figure 3. *The Monk's Yard* at No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields

*The Boxley Rood* belongs to that earlier, more pious age. Before its violent fall from grace, it was originally considered to be a holy object. Pilgrims would travel to Boxley in Kent to view it, and marvel at its miraculous properties. There are records of gifts to the shrine; in 1387 Lord Poyning’s will references Boxley; and the Abbey housed important visitors as late as 1518, when the papal legate Cardinal Campeggio stayed there.<sup>9</sup> Such was the object’s importance that the Abbey which housed it, St Mary The Virgin,

<sup>8</sup> A. Thomas (ed.), *Sir John Soane's Museum: A Complete Description*, 12<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition, (London, 2014), p.41

<sup>9</sup> Christine King, ‘Shrines and Pilgrimages Before the Reformation’, *History Today*, Volume 29, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1979, <https://www.historytoday.com/christine-king/shrines-and-pilgrimages-reformation> [Accessed: 21 January 2017]

began to refer to itself from 1412, as The Abbey of the Rood of Grace.<sup>10</sup> Writing to Wolsey about accusations of abuses at the Abbey, Archbishop Warham referred to the Rood as ‘much sought after by visitors ...from all parts of the realm’<sup>11</sup> and to the Abbey as ‘so holy a place where so many miracles be showed.’<sup>12</sup> The Rood’s purpose was to elicit shock and awe in its audience, and to inspire musing on the miraculous. Its status as a shrine and its ability to elevate the Abbey into a place of pilgrimage, shows the power of its original religious symbolism. By contrast, in Soane’s rooms, the gentle humour of creating a monk’s retreat for his alter-ego Padre Giovanni breaks the religious potency of the medieval religious symbolism. In his *Descriptions of the House and Residence on the North Side of Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields: The Residence of Sir John Soane* (London, 1836), Soane himself warns the visitor not to take the monk’s suite too seriously. Answering the question of who the monk may have been he uses the quote ‘Dulce est desipere loco/ It is pleasant to be nonsensical in due place’,<sup>13</sup> alluding to the fact that the monk is his own slightly strange nostalgic creation. Soane also indicates that architecturally the medieval is a step back into a period that will never again be relevant; the rooms are tucked away in the basement, while the Picture Gallery room above displays his designs for the classical. This suggests that the classical remains relevant, while the Gothic and the religious symbolism of the medieval era belong in the past.

Mockery plays its part in the story of the *Boxley Rood*, but it was brutal rather than gentle. When Geoffrey Chamber, the Cromwellian agent charged with the destruction of Boxley Abbey, discovered the Rood, it became a symbol of the ‘falsity’ of the Catholic faith. Chamber wrote to Cromwell on 7 February, 1538, claiming he found in the Rood, an object ‘which heretofore hath been held in great veneration by the people’,<sup>14</sup> a series of old wires and rotten sticks in the back which controlled the moving eyes and mouth, of which the monks denied any prior knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Due to the fact that the object had been venerated by the people, and that the abbey had been a pilgrimage site, Chamber, on the advice of other commissioners, ‘...did convey the said image unto Maydston... (and) did show it openly unto all the people...to see the false craft.’<sup>16</sup> Chamber reports the reaction from the crowd was such that they ‘had the matter in wondrous detestation and hatred so that if the monastery had to be defaced again they would pluck it down or burn it.’<sup>17</sup> This source details the outrage of the people at having been hoodwinked. In the only source detailing the Rood’s origins, however, the mechanical elements of the Rood were supposedly common knowledge. In his *Perambulations of Kent* (1570), the local historian William Lambarde records the

<sup>10</sup> M.A. Cave-Browne, *The History of Boxley Parish; The Abbey, The Rood of Grace, And Abbots; The Clergy, The Church, Monuments and Registers; Including an Account of the Wiat Family, And of the Trial on Penendan Heath in 1076* (Maidstone, 1892) p.46 [https://archive.org/stream/historyofboxleyp00cave/historyofboxleyp00cave\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/historyofboxleyp00cave/historyofboxleyp00cave_djvu.txt) [Accessed: 15 January 2017]

<sup>11</sup> *Houses of Cistercian Monks*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> A. Thomas (ed.), *Complete Description*, p.41

<sup>14</sup> Cave Browne, *History of Boxley Parish*, p.60

<sup>15</sup> *Houses of Cistercian Monks* pp.153-55

<sup>16</sup> Cave Browne, *History of Boxley Parish*, p.60

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

tale of the Rood's origin, gathered from local oral sources. Lambarde claims the local people 'to their everlasting reproach, shame and confusion',<sup>18</sup> told him that the Rood was made by an English carpenter who was imprisoned in France. On his return to England while carrying the Rood on his horse's back, the horse bolted, and pitched up at Boxley Abbey where it refused to move until the Rood had been unloaded and positioned in the ground on the spot where its shrine subsequently stood. Lambarde implies then that the real origin of the Rood was common knowledge, and no historian to date has found an alternative 'miraculous' tale of its origin – perhaps its origins were deliberately shrouded in mystery. In any event Chamber's reported outrage of the people was clearly not sufficient to discredit the Rood; it was taken to London where the Bishop of Rochester preached a sermon on it, before overseeing it being publicly cut to pieces and then burned.<sup>19</sup> The Rood was used as a part of reformist propaganda - its falsity was used to discredit monastic institutions, and its display, ridicule and destruction were a demonstration of government power. Proved falsity in such a potently religious symbol was considered a disgrace, and brought shame on those who presented it as genuine.

By contrast the *Monk's Parlour and Cell* and *Monk's Yard* glory in their use of falsehood, but also have a complex intertwining of the real and the fake. Genuine historical fragments and objects as well as contemporary creations juxtapose, until the visitor does not know which is which. The large window in the Monk's Parlour is made up of an elaborate collection of Flemish stained glass, (sixteenth and seventeenth century) pieces designed as genuine religious decorations which would have contributed to the material culture of worship, put together with eighteenth century stained glass.<sup>20</sup> All around on the walls of the Parlour are gothic-style casts, many are neo-gothic plaster casts which may have come from designs for neo-gothic buildings, but are mixed with genuine pieces from Henry VII's chapel at Westminster Abbey.<sup>21</sup>

The fictitious abbey ruins in the *Monk's Yard* include two arches which were originally window openings in the old House of Lords, a thirteenth century building demolished in 1822 when Soane built his Royal Gallery.<sup>22</sup> Other pieces in the courtyard are from the fourteenth century St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, and were acquired in 1800 while Soane was working as architect to the Office of Works.<sup>23</sup> These pieces come from the destruction of the old, and together form something new that contain elements of the original; a pastiche on the medieval is created where religious symbols are romanticised, and a form of romantic idealism remains. The fashion for the creation of Follies in country house gardens and the eighteenth and nineteenth century fascination with ruins is being almost adhered to, but typically of Soane he

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.47

<sup>19</sup> King, 'Shrines and Pilgrimages Before the Reformation'

<sup>20</sup> Helen Dorey, Peter Thornton, *Sir John Soane; The Architect as Collector*, (London, 1992), p.52

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.54

<sup>22</sup> A. Thomas (ed.), *Complete Description*, p.44

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.45

creates outside of the popular imagination, for his use of real medieval pieces ensures he transcends fashion. Both the Monk's rooms and the *Boxley Rood* can be seen in one sense to be masquerading as the genuine article; the Rood was displayed as a miraculous object, and Soane's attention to medieval detail in his collection of rooms and his creation of the myth of Padre Giovanni suggest reality. But both are fake: the Rood was debunked as a machine, and we know Soane built his 'medieval' rooms and ruin in 1824.

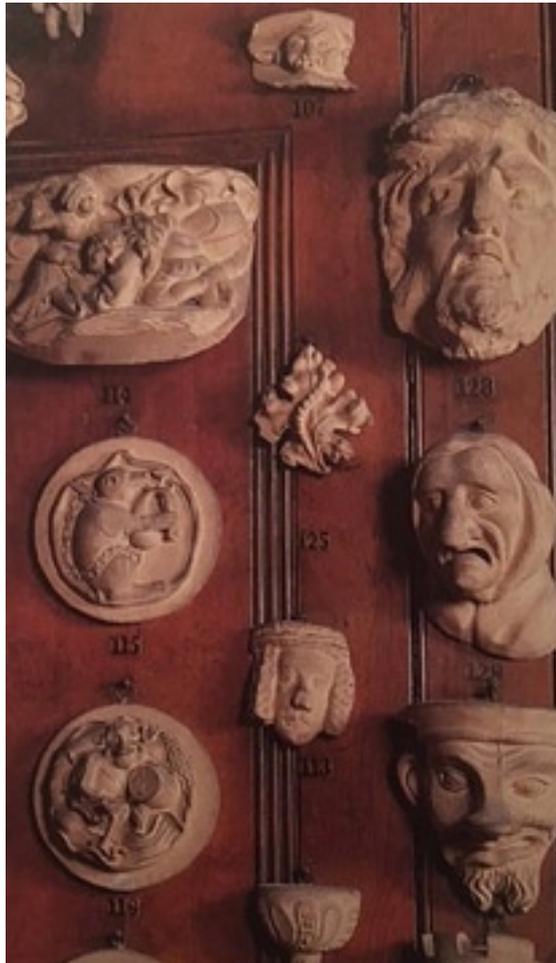


Figure 4. Casts in The Monk's Parlour at No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields

The restricted space, dark colours and stained glass were intended to simulate a sensation of melancholy and claustrophobia, and the rooms are theatrical in their own right, as well as being part of the architectural theatricality of the museum as a whole. The creation of a sense of theatre for fun, variety, to flex creative muscles and to gently mock the Gothic, starkly contrasts with the *Boxley Rood's* violent destruction in the light of its own proved mechanical theatricality, and the theatricality of that public destruction. Soane's *Monk's Parlour and Cell* celebrate the wonder of the material culture of medieval worship, using statues, grotesques, stained glass, whereas the Rood began life as an object of genuine veneration, as well as to thrill and surprise, but its deception led to its destruction.

The choice of Padre Giovanni, a monk, for an alter ego and the subsequent creation of a home for him suggests Soane believed there was a place for self-imposed isolation, and he often referred to himself as a ‘solitary hermit’<sup>24</sup> after the death of his wife Eliza in 1815. However the melancholy is mixed with humour –in the *Monk’s Yard* Soane built an elaborate grave for Padre Giovanni, including a section for his faithful dog Fanny, which has a headstone bearing the legend, ‘Alas Poor Fanny!’, which in reality contained the remains of Mrs. Soane’s lapdog.<sup>25</sup> Similarly the courtyard was paved with bottle tops and bottoms to create a pavement, causing a friend of Soane’s to wonder how a holy monk could have drunk so many bottles of wine.<sup>26</sup> Many of his friends spent happy hours with him taking tea in the parlour, and evidently it was room he enjoyed showing off and hosting in.<sup>27</sup> The reason behind the creation of the Monk’s rooms had elements of the deeply personal; they were created in his home, but were later shared with friends and then in Soane’s own lifetime with the public who visited the museum. We have no hard evidence as to who created the *Boxley Rood*, but its one origin story lists it as a fake made by a carpenter to earn money or to show skill, suggesting the object was conceived out of greed or vanity. The idea that a religious symbol could be manipulated by monks to earn money was part of Cromwell’s strategy to ridicule and discredit both the monks and the sanctity of the shrine, thus attempting to justify the closure of the monasteries.

*The Boxley Rood of Grace* was in its time believed to be the genuine miraculous article in an age of religious belief, but Soane’s *Monk’s Parlour, Cell and Yard* were not part of a religious revival but of an artistic and aesthetic movement. Soane’s use of religious symbolism and the medieval was not, like Baroque, a counter reformation revival, but a folly, a matter of cultural interest divorced from original religious meaning. *The Boxley Rood* was used by the Thomas Cromwell’s regime as the encapsulation, in an object, of the falsehoods which the monks relied on to fool laymen, and its debunking was part of a strategy to discredit monastic institutions and the Catholic faith; it became a tool of government propaganda. Soane’s designs addressed a public fad for the Gothic, but his creation of rooms to house his alter ego, Padre Giovanni, was also deeply personal. The destruction of the *Boxley Rood* was a potent symbol of governmental power, but Soane’s rooms have outlived him, and continue to encourage the imagination of the public.

<sup>24</sup> H. Dorey, ‘Death and Memory: Soane and the Architecture of Legacy in Sir John Soane’s Museum’ in *Death and Memory: Soane and the Architecture of Legacy*, (London, 2015) p. 15

<sup>25</sup> Various Anonymous Contributors, *A Short Guide*, p.14

<sup>26</sup> Dorey, ‘Death and Memory’ p. 15

<sup>27</sup> Various Anonymous Contributors, *A Short Guide*, p.14

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Primary sources**

The Sir John Soane's Museum, 12-14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London

**Secondary sources**

Baskerville, Geoffrey, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London, reprint 1965)

Britton, John, *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting*, (London, 1827)

Cavendish, Richard, *Sir John Soane's Museum*, *History Today*, Volume 44, (1994)

Cave-Browne, M.A., *The History of Boxley Parish; The Abbey, The Rood of Grace, And Abbots; The Clergy, The Church, Monuments and Registers; Including an Account of the Wiat Family, And of the Trial on Penenden Heath in 1076*, Maidstone, 1892, p46  
[https://archive.org/stream/historyofboxleyp00cave/historyofboxleyp00cave\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/historyofboxleyp00cave/historyofboxleyp00cave_djvu.txt)  
 [Accessed: 15 January 2017]

Dickens, A.G. and Carr, Dorothy, *The Reformation in England to the Accession of Elizabeth I, Documents of Modern History* (London, reprint 1971)

Darley, Gillian, *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic*, (London, 1999)

Duffy, Eamon, *The Stripping of The Alters: Traditional Religion In England 1400-1580* (London, reprint 2005)

Elton, G.R., *England Under The Tudors* (London, third edition reprint 1991)

Foster, R.E., *Dissolving the Dissolute? Henry VIII and the end of English Monasticism*, published in *History Today*, online archive (2008)

Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations; Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors*, (Oxford, reprint 1995)

Christopher Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England 1400-1530*, (Oxford, 1989)

*Houses of Cistercian Monks: The Abbey of Boxley, A County History of Kent: Volume 2* (1926) p.153-55 URL <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38203>  
 [Accessed: 3 January 2017]

MacDonald, S (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Oxford, 2006)

Palmer, Sue (ed.), *Death and Memory: Soane and the Architecture of Legacy*, (London, 2015)

Richardson, Margaret, and Stevens, Mary Anne, (eds.) *John Soane Architect: Master of Space and Light* (London, 1999)

Soane, John, *Descriptions of the House and Residence on the North Side of Lincoln's-Inn-Fields: The Residence of Sir John Soane*, (London, 1836)

Stroud, Dorothy, *Sir John Soane Architect*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (London, 1996)

Summerson, John, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, (Middlesex, 1970)

Thomas, Abraham (ed.), *Sir John Soane's Museum: A Complete Description*, 12<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition, (London, 2014)

Thornton, Peter, and Dorey, Helen, *Sir John Soane; The Architect as Collector*, (London, 1992)

Various Anonymous Contributors, *Sir John Soane's Museum: A Short Guide*, (London, 2015)

### Websites

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol3/pt1/pp26-31> [Accessed: 12 January 2017]

National Archive Online- <http://www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk> [Accessed: 4 January 2017]

[www.soane.org/](http://www.soane.org/) [Accessed: 2 January 2017]

[www.soanefoundation.com/](http://www.soanefoundation.com/) [Accessed: 2 January 2017]

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol3/pt1/pp26-31> [Accessed: 12 January 2017]

### List of Figures

Figure 1: Basement of No. 12-14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London c.2017. <http://www.soanefoundation.com/no14.html> [Accessed: 16 January 2017]

Figure 2: The Monk's Parlour at No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, <https://assortedscribbles.wordpress.com/2013/08/30/5-discoveries-at-the-sir-john-soanes-museum/> [Accessed: January 2017]

Figure 3: The Monk's Yard, at No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, <https://parksandgardensuk.wordpress.com/2014/08/29/sir-john-soane-and-gardens/> [Accessed: 21 January 2017]

Figure 4: Casts in The Monk's Parlour at No. 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields, <http://www.soanefoundation.com/no14.html> [Accessed: 19 January 2017]