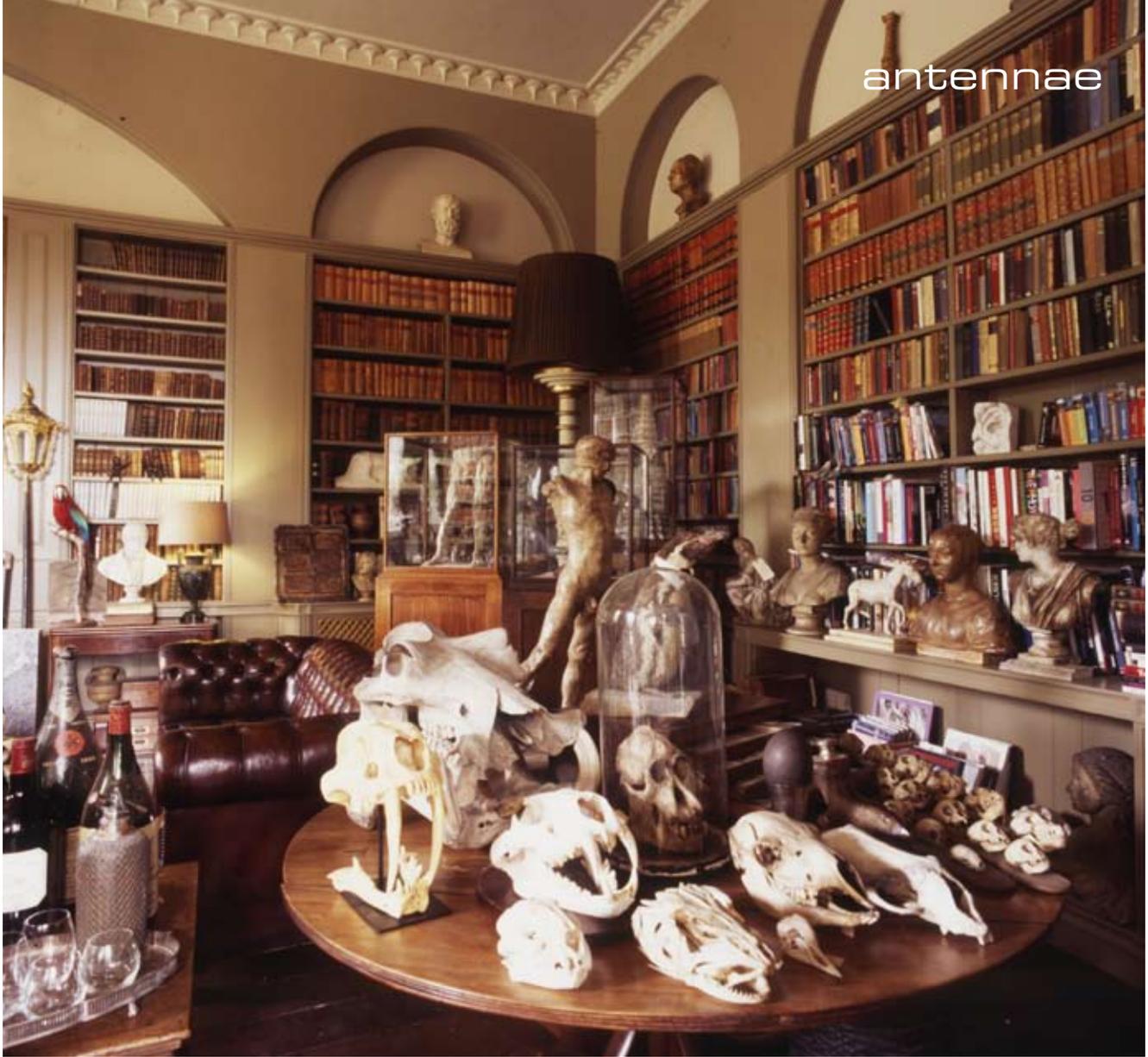




The Edwardian onyx fire surround in the hall at Aynhoe Park is surmounted by a giant foot, nicknamed 'The Big Step'. It is one of the casts that has been recast for sale at The Conran Shop. Between the central columns a replica of a sculpture from the Parthenon frieze represents a Centaur struggling with a Lapith

TRUE TO FORM

Introduced to plaster casts as a teenager, James Perkins determined to build his own collection. Faithful to his young self, he now displays 4,500 reproductions in his Soanian house in Oxfordshire, some of which are being recast and sold by The Conran Shop. Timothy Brittain-Catlin sees it's sometimes best not to break the mould. Photography: James Mortimer >



WHEN JAMES PERKINS was a teenager his mother took him to meet the restorer Mike Aston at work on a plaster cast, and that was it – he was entranced. Like any other young man he'd wanted a hobby and now he had one: he was going to collect these casts on a scale that would impress a Victorian curator. He has in fact ended up collecting them from Victorian institutions that have started to deaccession them. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York offered hundreds for sale, and he bought most of them; when the Victoria and Albert Museum in London needed to sell some, James bought those too. Now he has about 4,500 pieces, and he's eager to share them with others.

His casts include antique heads and feet, a Lapith fighting a Centaur from the Parthenon frieze, various monster candelabras, an elephant, a Roman philosopher, a triumphal arch, a whole set of decorative cornices (one from the pre-

1834 House of Lords), gods and goddesses, a pair of sphinxes and the biggest ceiling roses you have ever seen. And this is just a fraction of his whole collection. Nearly everything is Classical but where a Medieval bishop is needed, you can be sure that James has located one and found a place for it. Plaster casts were originally

made before the invention of the camera or the development of foreign travel to show artists and architects what historical design looked like, and some were huge – James, like the Victoria and Albert Museum, has some bits cast from Trajan's Column in Rome. Others were tiny, to illustrate, for example, the decorative carving on a Corinthian frieze.

One of the most famous collections of antiquities (including originals) is that of Sir John Soane, the irascible, idiosyncratic Neoclassical architect. In the early decades of the 19th century he created in his London house the permanent exhibition that survives today (*WoI* May 2008). ▷



Top: in the Soane-designed library, James has covered a table with his collection of animal skulls. Above: a staircase at the eastern end of the house was probably designed by English Baroque architect Thomas Archer in the reign of Queen Anne. Ionic columns on the wall are punctuated by vast ceiling roses



It is therefore most appropriate that James has restored a country house with Soane interiors in which to display his pieces. Aynhoe Park, near Banbury in Oxfordshire, was a Restoration mansion remodelled, probably by the Baroque architect Thomas Archer, in the reign of Queen Anne; around 90 years later it was altered again, by Soane, for Tory MP William Cartwright. Soane raised the height of the wings of the building on the garden side, creating a splendid

library at the west end and an orangery at the east, and he linked the rather austere stable and kitchen pavilions to the house with flamboyant miniature triumphal arches. Sitting in the library one can almost see all the way along the garden front, via a succession of characteristic Soanian spaces with shallow-domed ceilings.

And if one can only 'almost see', it is because the whole of the house is now stuffed with James's plaster-cast collection, ▷

Above: a headless Pallas Athena stands at the bottom of a Soanian staircase at the west end of the house. Behind her is an illuminated 20th-century German model of sculpture from the pedimental frieze of a Greek temple. The classical theme is continued on the staircase wall by capitals of different architectural orders



supplemented with pieces by contemporary artists and a great deal of taxidermy. The dining room, for example, has a jumping jaguar and a crowned lion, and James is going to install a motor in the latter to give guests a bit of a fright. A duck has landed on the table and a couple of zebras mooch nonchalantly around the edges. In the orangery we meet Joan of Arc on a horse, except that all that is left of poor Joan is her legs. These share the room with (among much else) the head from Michelangelo's David, some fine caryatids and a set of Verner Panton chairs. The gentleman's loo has an extraordinary revolving chandelier. New pieces by Sophie Ryder scattered around both inside and out fit in very nicely. The library itself has a bit of everything: in the corner is a wild sheep from the Gobi desert, Cellini's Perseus, a harp, a lamp and some stuffed parakeets.

You too can share this extraordinary environment because James, a lifelong

party organiser, has opened Aynhoe Park for special events: weddings, parties, and weekends with top chefs cooking for supper club members. But best of all you can actually take some of it home: James's mentor, Mike Aston, is making new casts of some of James's favourite pieces for sale. A personal connection with

Sophie Conran has led to an arrangement with The Conran Shop, which will exhibit and sell a selection of nine new casts taken from the originals, both large and small; the range includes a foot, the Aynhoe cat (called Monty) and a unicorn's head, as well as a large ram's head and a striking Juno. Your own 4,500-piece collection starts here ■

Aynhoe Park, Aynho, Banbury, Oxon OX17 3BQ (01869 810636; aynhoepark.co.uk). Copies of nine different casts from Aynhoe will be exhibited as part of the 'Conran Classic' collection at The Conran Shop, 81 Fulham Rd, London SW3 (020 7589 7401; conranshop.co.uk), until 18 Oct. Prices from £500



Top: in the foreground on the right in the orangery is a ram's head keystone, one of the nine casts from Aynhoe reproduced for The Conran Shop. Above: James stands in the workshop with his copy of the horse's head from Donatello's *Gattamelata* and a head of Juno to his left. Both are included in the Conran collection