

Into The Lion's Den

Writer
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Images
Courtesy of
Sam Causer

We meet the architect who has brought the colourful history of one cottage back to life, lion-scratched doors and all

Visiting Margate-based architect Sam Causer at his new offices is to take a step back into the heart of Margate's history. His work to restore and repurpose a derelict 1830s cottage on Princes Street has been not just an architectural exercise, but also one of detective work and historic empathy.

Once two adjoining three-room cottages, later knocked through into one, the 13 Princes Street property was empty, unloved and crumbling. "There wasn't much documented about the building," Sam admits, "but what we did find said that Captain Sadlere, the lion tamer from *The Hall By The Sea* (an early incarnation of Dreamland) in the early 20th century died in 'a cottage on Princes Street' - and this appears to be the only cottage on Princes Street."

This gem of local history made Sam look at certain 'features' of the house a little differently. "There are what look like little lion cub scratchings on the door upstairs," Sam says as we walk up the narrow staircase to have a look. "They might be from a cat but they're pretty big. I like to think that it was a couple of Dreamland lion cubs." Crouching down to look at the deep marks on what would have been a bedroom door, the story of a Margate version of Siegfried and Roy taking his young cubs home with him is irresistible.

It's not the only trace of previous uses that can be read in the cottage. Sam has already restored his own home, a grand Georgian townhouse on Hawley Square. But the cottage backs on to the house, and during work a small connecting door between the two properties was found and reinstated.

"The old doorway was a connection between the two buildings," Sam explains. "It was so exciting when we opened it up again - finding the old timber beams and a hundred-year-old newspaper shoved up inside the wall. You feel like you're suddenly communing with someone who saw this a hundred years ago. You feel a connection with generations past and previous uses."

While researching his Hawley Square property Sam discovered its shared history



ANIMAL TRAINER: CAPT. G. SADLERE.
GRAND HALL-BY-THE-SEA, MARGATE.
Sole Proprietor, LION GEORGE SANDER. General Manager, Mr. CHAS. EVANS.

with the cottage that sheds some light on its other previous incarnations. "The history seems to have been that this would have been two cottages serving the main house," he explains. "By 1900 it was no longer a grand house, it was a combination of a summer boarding house, and in winter it was a feather and fur factory - they would have cleaned fur coats and made feather boas here. And it looks like the whole building was changed for maximum efficiency at that time, probably knocking through to the cottages."

When Sam took over the building however, little remained from this era - the staircase had been removed and many of the floorboards were full of beetles. "The walls had this weird glossy magnolia paint on it which was stopping the walls from breathing," Sam says. This was sanded back to let the brick dry out, but the resulting mottled effect on the walls has both decorative beauty and a history of the building to tell. The walls bloom with patches of pink, blue, green and brown paints from previous decades, creating a kind of abstract, endlessly fascinating camouflage.

Holes in the lath and plaster walls were faithfully filled, and the walls were repointed with lime mortar, not cement.



"It's an intelligent material. It moves. It lets moisture in the wall evaporate which protects the brick," Sam says, "but it's also very slow and fussy to work with." In his quest to use authentic materials where possible, he even found himself going through the old mortar by hand, trying to find out the exact proportion of chalk to lime that the original builders used. As the lime dried in the repointed wall over the summer, lengths of wet hessian were pinned up to ensure that it did not dry out too quickly.

This labour of love has been an exercise both in learning how these type of buildings were made, and an opportunity for both Sam and the craftspeople involved to learn more about traditional building techniques. The fact that the building was going to be office space for Sam's own practice meant that the firm could take their time, without client pressure, but this care for historic buildings is also something Studio Sam Causer is known for.



Sam Causer by Michael Hart

Today the cottage has been transformed into a calm and cosy office space for the growing practice, with further plans to create a workshop space in the cellar, enabling Sam to prototype and produce bespoke products like lights and door fittings.

Sensitive and passionate about Margate's precious architectural heritage, Studio Sam Causer has shown a respect not just for the building's age but for its many previous lives, based on careful preservation and gentle intervention. "I'd always rather repair than replace," Sam says. "That way you can enjoy and live in these buildings because they have the passage of time embedded in them." samcauser.com