



A house for science and enterprise

Chris Jones celebrates the Salomons Museum and the story of Broomhill.



Some houses speak to us of complex pasts and of changing political and intellectual values. One good example of this is

Broomhill on the Salomons estate outside Tunbridge Wells. This includes the historic residence Broomhill, now run as a conference centre and wedding venue. Its grounds are open to the public and there is a small museum telling the story of the Salomons family.

The Salomons family were financiers from the Netherlands who came to London in the early eighteenth century. In 1829, David Salomons (aged 32) and his wife, Jeannette, bought a small villa – Broomhill Cottage – which eventually became the house now known as Salomons. David Salomons is notable figure in the history – not least as a founder of what became the NatWest – but he is also remembered as a leading

campaigner against Jewish disabilities.

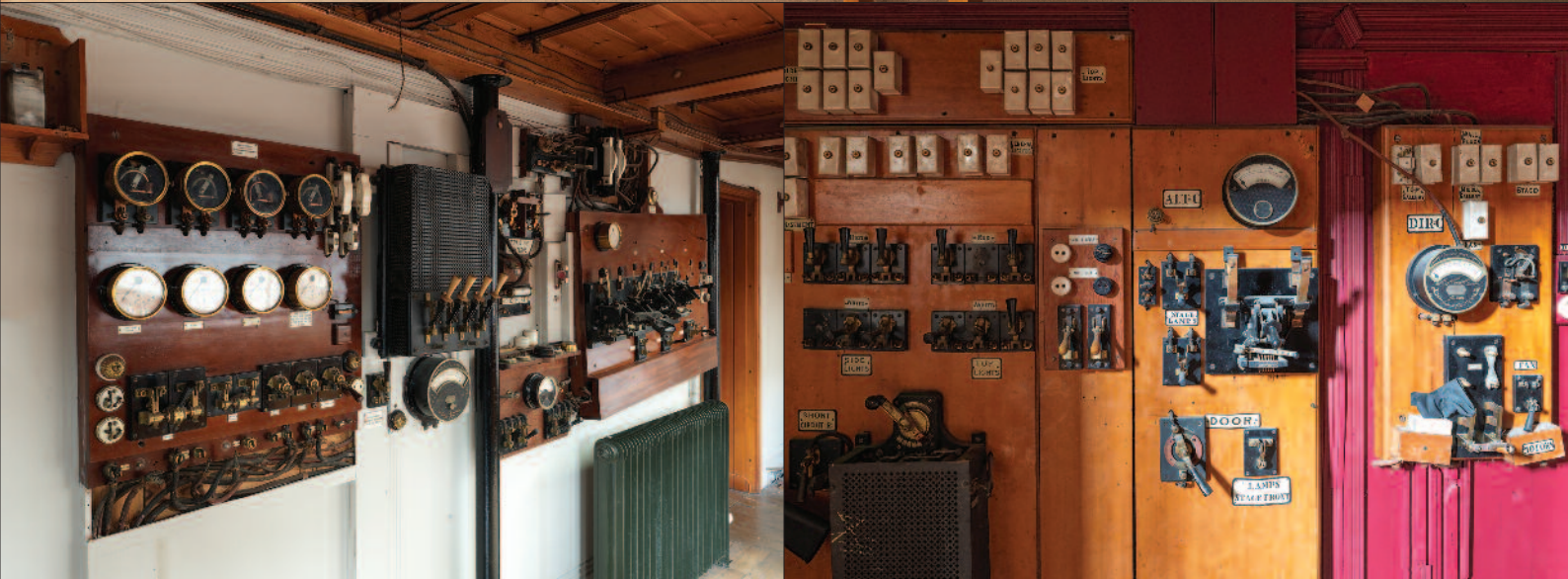
For two decades, the Salomons had a second estate nearby, Burrswood, with a Decimus Burton-designed house, where they lived the life of rural gentry: hosting harvest celebrations each autumn and funding a village school. But when they sold Burrswood in 1851, the Salomons invited Decimus Burton to rebuild Broomhill to. More a country villa than a traditional country house, although set in a park, the house had the normal array of drawing-room, dining room and library, but also a highly regarded picture gallery and sculpture room.

In 1851, David Salomons was elected to Parliament but, because he was Jewish, he was unable to take the oath 'on the true faith of a Christian'. He remonstrated, sat down in the chamber, and was fined £500 for doing so. The bench was later given to him as a memento. The rules were eventually changed,

and David became MP for Greenwich. In 1855 he became the first Jewish Lord Mayor of London. Jeannette, however, was struggling – her mental state had always been a little fragile – and she died in the care of a local asylum.

They did not have children so when David Salomons died in 1873, it was his nephew – David Lionel, then 22, and a serious scientist and engineer – who inherited the house and his baronetcy, which had been awarded in 1869. One of David Lionel's first acts was to build an observatory at Broomhill, although his interest seems to have been more in the equipment than in the stars, with optics a particular interest. Sir David Salomons, 2nd Bt, then built a workshop, probably the best-equipped in the country, lit by arc-lights powered by his own generator. He was a friend of Joseph Swan, inventor of the lightbulb; and was an early adopter of

captions to come



electricity for many domestic purposes. The visitors book at Salomons also lists guest such as Lord Kelvin, William Crookes and William Siemens.

David Lionel Salomons was a leading member of the Institute of Electrical Engineers. He was keen to spread the word about science, and spoke, for example, at the local Mechanics Institute. In the 1890s he built his own lecture room, crammed with equipment for experiments and demonstrations. This developed into a fully functioning theatre with electrically operated lighting, scenery and curtains. In 1914 he installed a huge electric organ – built by the German company Welte. The theatre is still there and used for occasional concerts; the organ too, following a Heritage Lottery Fund grant in 1998.

Sir David married in 1881 – Laura de Stern, from another prominent banking

family. They had five children – four girls and a boy. To accommodate the growing family, he added an east wing, nicknamed the ‘infant asylum’, and an additional storey. His most striking addition was the large stable block, completed in 1894. Usually described as French Renaissance in style, it is built in red-brick and white stone. But Sir David soon developed a new interest – the motor car. He owned the second one in the country; and in 1895, as mayor of Tunbridge Wells, organised the world’s first motor-show.

Sir David was interested too, in x-rays, and wireless, but also in books – he owned some 12,000 – and in art. In 1909, he funded the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. There is little record of social events at Broomhill, with one big exception: a fancy-dress ball in 1879 with 170 guests. He was, however, known to be very fond of formal dinners held by the many clubs and societies he joined.

In 1915 the Salomonses’ son, David Reginald Salomons, died at Gallipoli, along with many other local men, when their ship was accidentally rammed. In 1938, the last surviving daughter, Vera, donated the house to Kent County Council as a convalescent home. Two ‘memento rooms’ were to be kept open to the public in memory of the family and they remain so today. Most of the mementoes are on open display, others can be seen by application to the curator. The theatre, is usually accessible; and the stable block (even if only viewable from the outside), is memorable. ●

thecivicsociety.org/Salomons

Dr Chris Jones is the curator of the Salomons Museum.