

CECILY VAN GEND

Correspondent

The British Museum is a familiar landmark in London streets, and famous in English literature and history. For a century and a half, scholars and revolutionaries, writers, poets, and musicians came to read and study. Among the countless famous figures who have occupied seats in the magnificent domed reading room are Karl Marx, Lenin, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf and George Bernard Shaw. Lenin, whose reading card bore the name Jacob Richter, praised it for having a more comprehensive collection on Russia than the libraries in Moscow and St Petersburg.

The Museum itself was founded in 1753, and the library collection originated in the same year, when the government purchased various collections, including the Harleian Library and the library of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton. George II donated his library in 1757, and the collection was considerably enlarged in 1823 when George IV donated the library of his grandfather; George III, on condition that it was put on public display. Funds for a repository were voted by Parliament, and the beautiful King's Library, in the Museum's east wing, was completed in 1827.

By the 1850s, the library collection had outgrown its quarters. Sir Antonio Panizzi, Keeper of Printed Books, put forward the suggestion that a new building to house it should occupy the empty quadrangle. The famous circular, copper-domed Reading Room, surrounded by rectangular bookstacks, was completed in 1857. For a short while, it was thrown open to all, before being reserved exclusively for the use of card holders. Since the library collection has been moved to its new quarters in the British Library at St Pancras, it is once again part of the public domain, and visitors are welcome to view the magnificent architecture and find out more about the Museum's collections.

The British Library, as its web site points out, is relatively young for a National Library, having grown out of a report of the National Libraries Committee, published in 1969, followed by a White Paper in 1971, which recommended the setting up of a national library for the country. The British Library Act of 1973 brought the British Library into operation. It involved the amalgamation of various institutions: the British Museum (which included the National Reference Library of Science and Invention), the National Central Library, and the National Lending Library for Science and Technology. Subsequently, the British National Bibliography, the Office for Scientific and Technical Information, the India Office Library and Records and the British Institute of Recorded Sound were also incorporated.

# The British Library

Lack of storage space is a perpetual problem in libraries throughout the world. In a copy-right library, the problem is even more acute. Vast quantities of new material are added every year, while little, if anything, is ever discarded. In the British Museum, the lack of space was already being felt in the early part of the 20th century. During the Second World War, the museum and collections suffered extensive damage when hit by bombs, and some of the original bookstacks had to be rebuilt in 1945. Various parts of the collections were housed temporarily in space leased in the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich.

The White Paper of 1971 recognised the pressing need for the rehousing of the library, but the 1973 legislation setting up the new institution made no reference to this, nor to its geographical location. Plans were put forward

for a new building adjacent to the Museum, but these were abandoned after local objections to a building of that size in central London. The closest vacant land large enough to house the collections, staff and services was a derelict goods yard next to St Pancras station.

The architect, Colin St John Wilson, drew up an elaborate plan for the new building, which fell victim to various delays and rising costs. In 1988, the government announced that there was sufficient funding for a building only two-thirds the size of the original plan. Construction began, and was finally completed ten years later. In June 1998 the new British Library was formally opened by Queen Elizabeth.

It is large and imposing. It follows and echoes the shape of the adjacent St Pancras, but with clean, straight lines. It is as though someone has gone over the curlicues and flourishes of the old Gothic building next door with a ruler and set square. The entrance is reached through a large open piazza, dominated by Sir Edward Paolozzi's imposing statue of Newton, after Blake. There is a coffee shop with tables and chairs set out in the piazza, and in summer, open-air concerts are held there. Inside, the foyer is airy and spacious, with exhibition halls, an open-access science reading room, rooms for lectures and seminars, as well as closed-access humanities and rare books rooms. Books are stored underneath



Above: Sir Eduardo Paolozzi's statue of Newton, after Blake, seen through the entrance gates to the British Library building

Right: View from the east staircase of the main entrance hall of the British Library building at St Pancras: Architect Professor Sir Colin St John Wilson



the building in a temperature-controlled environment. There is also a restaurant and public facilities. At the core of the building is a stunning glass and bronze tower occupying six floors with internal lifts. This houses the King's Library.

For me the most fascinating aspect of the new library is the John Ritblat Gallery, containing a permanent display of the most outstanding of the works in its possession. Among the early illuminated manuscripts are the Lindisfarne Gospels, the supreme masterpiece of early Anglo-Saxon book production. The Latin version dates from 721, with the oldest surviving translation of the gospels into English being added between 950 and 970. The scribe who added the Old English translation, Aldred of Chester-Le-Street, recorded that it was 'Made for God and for St Cuthbert' by Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne. There is also a copy of the famous Gutenberg Bible, printed in 1455, the first time moveable type was used.

The Magna Carta is the cornerstone of liberty in the English-speaking world. This document is not a sweeping statement of principle, but a series of detailed concessions on feudal law. The versions on display tell the story of its birth, and how it came to be regarded as possibly the most momentous document in English history and literature. 'No free man shall be seized or imprisoned or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.

To no one will we sell, to no one deny, or delay, right or injustice.'

Also among the treasures on display is one of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, covering the breadth of his interests, from mechanics to bird flight, with the text in his characteristic mirror writing, written left-handed from right to left.

The literary collection spans more than a thousand years, from Anglo-Saxon poems to drafts by living authors. There are manuscripts and rare printed books, and every possible form of prose, verse and drama. There is a copy of Beowulf, the most important poem in Old English, dating from the first quarter of the 11th century. Copies of First Folio editions of Shakespeare, manuscripts of Chaucer's work, Jane Austen's writing, that of Dickens, the Brontës, Lewis Carroll, Virginia Woolf, Kipling, Yeats, Seamus Heaney, and James Joyce, are all on display.

As a result of legal deposit, as well as gifts and bequests, the museum also houses one of the world's most comprehensive collections of musical scores, from medieval times to the present. On show are the score of Handel's **Messiah**, and the lyrics

of the Beatles songs **Yesterday** and **Ticket to ride**, written on scraps of paper, showing many alterations, and charting the gradual evolution of the song.

The map collection, dating from the 8th century to the present, is also unrivalled. There is the earliest 'realistic' map of the world, dating from about 1050; also the first printed map to show any part of America, and the only surviving maps from the hand of Gerard Mercator, one of the best-known mapmakers of all time.

Initially I was rather sad to think that one could no longer imagine scholars at work under the spectacular dome in the old building, but seated in rather more clinical surroundings. But the new building is far more spacious, and probably more comfortable. And it is certainly a pleasure to be able to view the wealth of

treasures now so beautifully displayed. The old domed building at the British Museum has become part of the Queen Elizabeth Great Court. In 1998, following the removal of the library to St Pancras, the bookstacks on the perimeter of the reading room were dismantled and a new floor constructed across the entire courtyard. This was roofed over to provide the largest covered square in Europe, and the Reading Room was restored to its original, 1857 decorative scheme. Today visitors are able to sit in the beautiful wooden chairs once occupied by the famous scholars, and picture those names of yesteryear hard at work, poring over their books.

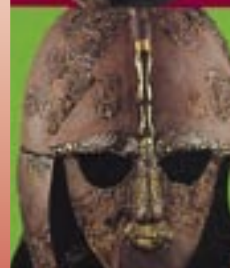
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Above: The Museum's Great Court provides a focal point for any visit

Above left: Opening page of St Luke's Gospel from the **Lindisfarne Gospels** - produced about A.D. 698

Left: A bronze bench by Bill Woodrow at the British Library



Left from top down:

**The Collections**

**Egypt and Sudan** - section of the gilded inner coffin of Henutmehyt, a Theban priestess

**Greece and Rome** - bronze head of the Roman Emperor Augustus

**Asia** - section of a gilded bronze figure of Tara, a Buddhist goddess

**Africa and the Americas** - turquoise mosaic mask of the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca

**Britain and Europe** - Anglo-Saxon helmet from the ship burial at Sutton Hoo