

British Library Visit Report

On Wednesday 12th June, two groups of library staff from London health libraries visited the British Library (BL), the national library of the United Kingdom. I was really interested in going on this visit to learn more about the BL collections and to explore some of the history behind the organisation itself.

History of the British Library

The tour started in the main hall and our guide told us about the history of the BL and how it came to be in its present location. The BL was originally integrated with the British Museum, but moved location in order to acquire more space. The library became legally separate from the British Museum in 1973. The original library was created to house the royal library of George III which was given to the British Museum in 1757 under the conditions that the collection was;

-kept intact

-kept on display

-able to be used

These conditions have been followed through to this day, with 60 titles still being used on a regular basis. The King's library collection is today a centerpiece of the BL's building at St Pancras, often called 'the jewel in the crown' of the library's collections. The collection is presented in a glass display cabinet in the centre of the library; allowing a full a view of the items intricate bindings. This 'foundation collection' provides a stunning introduction to the library and illustrates the historical and cultural significance of the collections held at the BL.



The library building itself is a product of the work of architect Colin St John Wilson, work which took over thirty years to complete. The building is an example of Brutalism and was the largest public building constructed in the UK in the 20th century. The building has total floor area of 112,000 sq meters and is spread over 14 floors (nine above ground and five below). St John Wilson's vision and process for the building was anecdotally summed up by our guide who informed us that the architect wanted each of the 10 million bricks in the building to 'smile'. The British Library moved fully from the site of the British Museum and its other numerous locations, to its new home on Euston Road in 1997. We were informed that when the collection moved from the British Museum, it was the largest book move in history.

The British Library collection requires over 625 km of shelves and grows by 12km each year. This works out as 2 million new items each year. The BL is unable to extend any further on current site due to a medical research development and half of the collection is held in Yorkshire at the Boston Spa site. This is where almost all cataloguing is completed and their document delivery service takes place. The library collects from all countries in 400 different languages and has specific language cataloguers based at its Boston Spa site. Since the 18th century, the BL has been a legal deposit library, receiving a copy of every publication produced in the UK and Ireland. The library operates on a budget of £100 million each year from government. We were told of research that was carried out that showing that for each £1 the BL is given, it produces £5 revenue for the UK, mostly from its Business and IP centre. You can read more about this research here: <http://bit.ly/8oniCo>.

We were informed that the library is not immune to staffing and service cuts, having suffered staffing cuts of 10% in 2012, mostly to its site in Yorkshire.

Collections

There is no classification scheme for books in storage; each item is given a unique identifier number on arrival. The exception to this is that books on open shelves, for example in the reading rooms, are classified using Dewey Decimal. We were shown the bust of former librarian Anthony Panizzi (1831-1866) who decided to shelve the library's books by size to make the best use of space. The BL still uses card catalogues in many of its reading rooms and also uses Microfiche and microfilm readers on a regular basis, because of the stability and preservation benefits of this technology.

The library's holdings range from material over 3,000 years old, to today's newspapers. The library has a collection of; 310,000 manuscript volumes, 4 million maps, 260,000 million journal titles and the world's largest music manuscript collection, after acquiring the Royal Music collection in the 1950s. The library has an automatic acceptance policy from publishers.

Digitisation

The BL is currently involved in several digitisation projects, one of which involves archiving 65000 websites, in order to preserve sites which are culturally significant and may be of value to research. You can find out more about this project here: <http://bit.ly/19mOiTQ>. Staff are also working with Google on an ongoing basis to make 250,000 books available online through Google Books; digitizing 40 million pages from 1700-1870. Information about this project is here: <http://bit.ly/149VP4X>

Reader Services

We were taken to have a look around the reader registration area, where all users must first register for a readers pass by showing proof of address. You can order books in advance of your visit to the library through their website. All items are ordered from storage and library rooms are interconnected by track way to transport

books to required areas. This track way covers 30003 ways around the library. We were advised that generally, readers should expect to wait up to 70 minutes before their item is delivered to their chosen reading room, although on many occasions this period is considerably less. Until recently, readers had to apply for a readers pass and a separate manuscript pass, although this is no longer the case. The library has gone through a process of widening its audience in recent times where previously use of the collections was only open to postgraduate students, academics and final year undergraduates.

The rooms open to readers are as follows;

Asian & African Studies Reading Room

Business & Intellectual Property Centre

Humanities Reading Rooms

Manuscripts Reading Room

Maps Reading Room

Rare Books & Music Reading Room

Science Reading Rooms

Social Science Reading Room

Treasures Gallery



Our visit ended in the Treasures gallery where we viewed some of the library's rare and valuable material including the Codex Sinaiticus, which was written in the middle of the 4th century. This codex is the earliest manuscript of the complete New Testament. The treasures gallery is also home to other important items such as Magna Carta, one of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, a collection of the early works by Shakespeare and Beatles manuscripts.

I would like to extend thanks to Elisabeth Chalmers for organizing the visit and to the British Library staff who provided such an informative and engaging tour.

Report written by Amy Holvey; Library Assistant at Reay House Library, South London and Maudsley NHS Trust.