

## Report on LHL British Library visit Thursday 12 November 2015

### History and background

The tour got off to a slightly inauspicious start with a mass evacuation of the British Library five minutes before we were due to begin. Two groups quickly merged into one, therefore and we were underway just half an hour late.



James, our guide, explained how the British Library works by means of a scale model of the building and gave us a potted history of its origins.

The current Library came into existence in 1972; prior to that, its collections were housed in the British Museum Library. The library consists of four main collections, the first of which was amassed by Robert Cotton between the reigns of Elizabeth 1 and Charles 1. Cotton was responsible for the preservation of the Magna Carta; the original manuscript of Beowulf; an early illustrated copy of the Book of Genesis and the Lindisfarne Gospels, together with 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century maps. Cotton's collection was bequeathed to the British Library by his grandson in 1702 and formed one of its founding collections.

The second major collection was that of Hans Sloane, a botanist and scientist and included 30,000 printed books mostly on medical, scientific or botanical subjects.

The Royal Collection consists of over 9000 printed books placed in the Royal Library by various kings and queens of England. Henry VIII's massive collection demonstrates his hands-on involvement, his level of literacy and interest in affairs of state. His handwriting is all over the texts – particularly in relation to his divorce and the subsequent schism with the Pope and the Church of Rome.

The other major collection is of 16,000 works from Thomas Grenville, consisting of printed books of literature from 15<sup>th</sup>-19th centuries acquired in 1846.

The British Library holds the legal deposit of one copy of everything printed in the UK and Ireland; over 8,000 items are deposited every day. From 2013, a web archive was begun with websites on legal deposit as a digital curation.

From 1972, the British Museum Library, Colindale Newspaper Archive and the Document Supply Centre in Yorkshire merged to form the British Library. The library was built on the site of disused goods yard occupying a large plot of land. The architect designed the building on the basis of the storage of its collections underground where there is no exposure to sunlight and climate control producing a constant temperature of 16 degrees centigrade and 50% humidity at all times.

Any potential problems with damp and water are overcome by means of cavity-wall insulation and rigorous waterproofing which sends water down into a 'foul water room' whence it is pumped through the building and out into the surrounding water courses; a nearby canal and the Fleet River flowing directly beneath.

There are eight underground stores and the library has the deepest basements in London. Three tube lines pass very close and the books have to be kept away from any vibration. The stock is housed in mobile shelving with cranking handles and is shelved according to height not subject - no Dewey Decimal system in operation here.

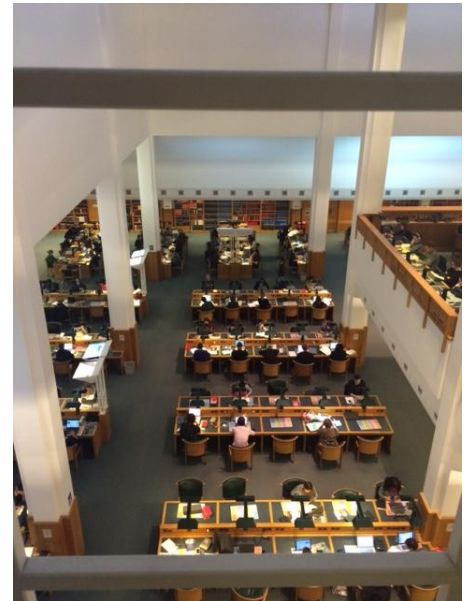
The library has a 255-seater auditorium which is a multifunctional space and serves as a conference centre/cinema and concert hall.

The building was designed in the 'Brutalist' style. The architect, an ex-naval man, wanted the Library to resemble a ship with the Chief Executive's office on the equivalent of the 'bridge', steering the library forward. Unlike many Brutalist buildings, it was rendered in red brick rather than concrete, with low lighting on stairways; brass handrails and portholes. At £511 million, it was the most expensive building ever designed and, predictably, ran out of money well before completion. Planned in the

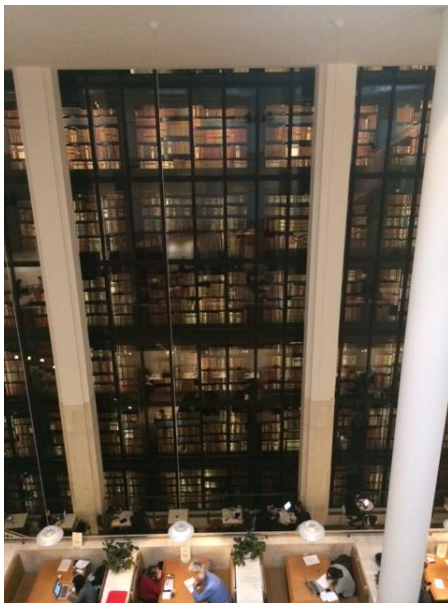
1970s; work started in the 1980s but the cost of materials and labour and strikes were not factored into the plans. The first room, therefore, opened in 1997 in a truncated building. The British Library is now a Grade I listed.

## Reading Rooms

Nowadays, it is much easier to join – readers are asked to provide proof of ID, address and purpose. Each of the four basement storage areas has a delivery room. ABRIS, the library's automated work request system, informs the reader where the book is held. When an order is placed, the reader receives a print-out with all the information relating to the book. The order is scanned on a computer terminal which tracks all books ordered and who has seen them which prevents theft.



## King's Library Tower



Probably the most eye-catching part of the Library is the King's Library Tower dominating the centre of the building with the spines of old volumes facing outwards behind the stunning glass edifice which houses the collection. At the start of his reign, George III, an avid reader, sent his agents all round Europe and built a vast library which now numbers 80,000 volumes. The books were originally in a special room at the British Museum and a few remain there still. The shelves in the tower sit on rollers and it is possible to pull them backwards and forwards. Barrows are filled to transport them. The volumes are behind specially treated glass providing a strong deterrent against fire. The tower resembles a fortress and is well defended in every sense. The collection contains first editions of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales; Shakespeare's first Folio; a workbook of Queen Elizabeth I's from Hatfield House

containing her Latin and Mathematics homework.

## Unique and precious objects

The Klencke Atlas was given to King Charles II in 1660. Reputed to be the largest book in the world and very difficult to use, it must be moved around on wheels and takes three people to turn the pages. For this reason, it has been digitised for readers to access.

The library also holds the second smallest book in the world which is a 1mm square book of the Old King Cole nursery rhyme.

The Maps Room houses all Ordnance Survey; police and MOD maps as well as very old and rare maps such as a map of St Petersburg displaying its unique history.



Map of St Petersburg

The Codex Sinaiticus, one of the two earliest Christian bibles and a 'treasure beyond price', was bought from Stalin.

Alexander Fleming's lab books are also held.

## **Funding**

The British Library receives £80million grant-aid from the Government. Charging for membership was rejected because the Library would be regarded as a commercial enterprise and government funding would be withdrawn.

## **Digitisation**

Not all items in the Library will be digitised but 8,000 books per day are processed according to the criteria of oldest, most valuable and most fragile including the Magna Carta and the original manuscript of Alice in Wonderland, for example. The Colindale Newspaper archive has been digitised as there was not enough space to store hard copy; the digitisation is done at British Library and then sent on to the new facility which has floor to ceiling storage in a low-oxygen building with no fire risk at Boston Spa in Yorkshire

## **Endangered archives**

The British Library has the facility to keep fragile archives in smaller rooms with nitrogen gas pumped in to preserve documents on papyrus. Collections such as the National Library of Iraq's archive have been entrusted to the Library to take advantage of these facilities.

## **Business and IP Centre**

The tour concluded with the impressive Business and Intellectual Property Centre, founded to help business start-ups. The New York Business Library's proactive model was followed in investigating its customers' needs to make them aware of how to develop. 1:1 sessions are available with business people. Famous entrepreneurs give free talks. Courses and workshops are run with the British Library's partners. The future-looking approach of the Centre underpins much of the work of the rest of the library. A networking area is provided. The 'Success Stories' section showcases examples of the users' innovation on display.

The visit gave a fascinating insight into this amazing building and its work and passed all too quickly. Grateful thanks are due to Elisabeth Chalmers for organising and James, our guide.