

Chapter VIII

Access to the Museum and Reading Room: Public and Government Opinion to 1810

For the diary entry of 21 October 1814 Henry Ellis wrote, "Saw Mr. Quin who gave me a Note to the Editor of the Times; with whom I had a long Conference on the Subject of the two Letters in his Newspaper concerning the Museum. A spirit of hostility appears to be raised against us."¹ The two letters and the one Quin showed Ellis levied charges against the Museum for access policies that the writers thought were too harsh and unreasonable. Although the 'spirit of hostility' seemed especially sharp because there were three letters published within two months, it was not the first time that the public had complained. From the beginning visitors had comments about the Museum. At first the opinions were personal, reserved for a diary or a letter. Gradually, as prospective visitors encountered difficulties gaining access, the comments became more vocal or public and were expressed in newspapers and magazines. The writers assumed that the British Museum had been created for everyone and that the government supported it with tax payers' money.

The British Museum Act secured the public's right to visit the Museum, but it was left to the trustees to interpret the Act and implement procedures. The policies were a cornerstone for the management, so that who and how people entered and used it was not left to caprice. For Ellis the letters to The Times were an indication that in spite of the Museum's attempts, there remained people who were dissatisfied with the rules. One of the letters concerned the Reading Room, but the other two picked on the exclusion of the public during the summer holiday. The trustees had abolished the ticket system four years earlier, and the relatively static number of

¹Ellis, Diaries and Memoranda, no. 2, Add. MS 36653, fol. 48-49.

people who had visited the Museum before 1810 had been dramatically increasing since the change. In spite of the numbers, twenty years later some members of Parliament were just as dissatisfied when the Museum was open, and when the government held hearings on the British Museum, one of the major concerns was access. As a result, it is the purpose of this and the following two chapters to examine the public's and the government's response to access to the British Museum, to see their perceptions of a public museum and who it was for, to trace the attempts to make the 'secret' activities and affairs at the British Museum more open or public by making the trustees more accountable to Parliament and the public, and to see whether public opinion had an effect on policy.

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere Jürgen Habermas stated that by the eighteenth century in Great Britain, France, and Prussia private people (those who were separate from the court and the powers of the state) had "come together to form a public . . . to compel public authority to legitimate itself" and to engage them in a debate over the spheres they regulated.² The public became reasoning subjects, and as the receiver of regulations from above, they were the ruling authorities' adversary.³ This concept of a 'public' is supported in the evidence relating to access at the British Museum. Up to the beginning of the Regency, many of the remarks about access to the Museum were personal, reserved for a diary or a letter, sometimes a memoir, and intended for a very small audience who would read about it at a later date. While the author might have felt strongly about access when he or she penned his or her thoughts, access was not the subject of the work but was buried in the larger record. If the book were a description of the Museum, the author concentrated on the collections.⁴ Any remarks on

²Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 25, 27.

³Ibid., p. 26.

⁴A View of the British Museum: or, a Regular Account Relating What is Most Remarkable and Curious to Be Seen There (1760); Alexander Thomson, Letters on the British Museum (London: J. Dodsley, 1767); John and

access were passing comments addressed at no one in particular and were not demands to anyone for change. The documentation up to 1810 basically concerns how one gained access, and a greater portion of the evidence relates to the ‘museum’ as opposed to the ‘library’ section of the British Museum.

After 1810, when Planta completely abolished the ticket system, there was also a noticeable increase in criticism of the Museum. In a notable refinement of Habermas’s work, Roger Chartier in The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution attributed the plethora of public opinion to institutions that permitted debate - salons, cafés, clubs, but particularly the large number of periodicals, and the topics were "subjected to no limit, and no domain was to be forbidden."⁵ In far more cases than not, the authors and speakers addressed access as the sole topic of commentary and debate to be read or heard almost immediately with a demand or an approval to a specific audience (trustees, librarians, or the government). The evidence of the British Museum is more evenly divided between comments on the ‘museum’ which pertain mostly to when a person could enter the Museum, and the ‘library’ or Reading Room and how a person obtained a ticket. As the evidence falls into convenient patterns, the first chapter will pertain to opinions up to 1810, and the analysis of the period after 1810 will be broken into chapters focusing on access to the Museum and to the Reading Room.

For the better part of fifty years, people had to apply for a free ticket to visit the British Museum. The process required the visitor to apply on one day and to return on another to find out the date of the tour. People saw the collection by a guided tour. An analysis of this

Andrew Van Rymsdyck, Museum Britannicum, Being an Exhibition of a Great Variety of Antiquities and Natural Curiosities, Belonging to that Noble and Magnificent Cabinet, the British Museum (London: I. Moore, 1778).

⁵Roger Chartier, The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 21-22.

procedure will reveal attitudes towards the system and perceptions of the British Museum as a national system.

In the early years the officers felt their way on the day-to-day procedures. The trustees recognized that the statutes and practices might be improved so they invited the officers to submit comments. During this time, on 20 April 1761 J. Hutchins wrote to a trustee, Sir George Lyttelton, concerning a Reading Room ticket. He found that according to the rules, he needed "to have Leave from a general Meeting of the Trustees, or of the Standing Committee. Should those Meetings not happen Weekly, I may be detained too long to no Purpose, is it then possible to Remove this hindrance by any Application or Recommendation, [sic] previous to my coming to town?"⁶ It was one of the first expressions of 'discontent' over access submitted to the trustees. The results, however, were different from Hutchins's anticipation, because in the previous June, the Board had voted to give the Principal Librarian the right to admit people for the same reasons mentioned in Hutchins's letter. It was a problem of bad communication, for the trustees' minutes for 9 June 1761 stated that directions for applications had been printed "in order to prevent improper applications and unexpected disappointments."⁷

It was not surprising that Hutchins was ignorant about the procedures. Advertising of the Museum and among businesses in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries was hardly conducted in newspapers or journals. Normal business, including the advertisement of the British Museum, relied mostly on word of mouth.⁸ The trustees displayed the statutes inside the Museum and occasionally published the statutes in periodicals like The Gentleman's Magazine and The Daily Advertiser, but they placed nothing outside the walls. At that time the

⁶British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Sir George Lyttelton, Correspondence, St. 754, fol. 89.

⁷General Meetings, Minutes 2 (19 June 1760): 328, 2 (9 June 1761): 354.

⁸Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 190.

Museum was surrounded by a high brick wall, and prospective visitors had to ask the porter at the gate for permission to see the statutes.⁹ So, from the beginning the British Museum represented a secret institution which required a 'public' to demand an account or explanation on procedures and trustees' decisions.

Advertising the opening hours was a persistent problem and indicated that the Museum was not prepared to rectify the public's inaccurate anticipation of a visit. By the end of the century, Noel Desenfans, who called for the British Museum to become an art museum, lamented, "But as many are ignorant of the mode of application [to the British Museum], and few are certain whether in a month they will not have more serious engagements. . . ." ¹⁰ By the public's response little if anything had changed by the 1830s. John Whitehead wrote to Sir Charles Long, a trustee, complaining about the porter's rude behavior during the Easter recess. He had asked to see the Museum but was told it was not open for the week. When Whitehead answered that he did not know, the porter replied, "All the world know it for there are thousands of Books sent out from there every year."¹¹ The porter was referring to the synopsis which had a list of the statutes and was sold in bookshops. The porter was reprimanded, but his mannerisms were not the problem. After the incident, the trustees had a sign with the hours put up outside the gates, but for no apparent reason it was taken down. Another visitor came directly to the point in a letter to the editor in The True Sun. "Instead of there being a large board, or two, placed in front of the building informing the public when and at what times it is open, and what kinds of persons are admissible, there is no information whatever - all is a dead blank."¹²

⁹Noorthouck, A New History of London, Including Westminster and Southwark, p. 744.

¹⁰Noel Desenfans, A Plan, Preceded by a Short Review of the Fine Arts, to Preserve Among Us, and Transmit to Posterity, the Portraits of the most Distinguished Characters of England, Scotland, and Ireland, Since his Majesty's Accession to the Throne (London: Sampson Low, 1799), p. 34.

¹¹Original Letters and Papers 6 (6 April 1826): fol. 2147-48.

¹²The True Sun (25 July 1834), p. 2d.

Desenfans noted that it took a month to get a ticket. By the nature of the system there was bound to be a delay, and by comparison to other visitors' stories, the comment indicated that the system was taking longer. The earliest account of the British Museum is found in the correspondence of Thomas Gray, who visited the Museum in April 1759 and received a Reading Room ticket 20 July. In a letter (10 April 1759) to a friend, Mason, he wrote, "[If] you would see it, you must send a fortnight beforehand, it is so crowded."¹³ The Museum had been open for three months and already there was a two week waiting list for a ticket. By the time of Samuel Curwen's visit in 1776, it took a fortnight to three weeks,¹⁴ Carl Philip Moritz, who visited in 1782, said that it took two weeks,¹⁵ and Desenfans in 1799 said it took a month. Charles W. Peale, the founder of one of the first American museums in Philadelphia in 1786, delivered a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1800 where he said, "The trouble to obtain a sight of the British Museum, (although it has been encreasing [*sic*] in valuable articles, and supported at very great expense for a series of years,) renders it of less value to the public, than a private collection belonging to Mr. Parkerson, called the Leverian Museum. . . ."¹⁶

In some instances visitors received immediate access. On one occasion Moritz, and on three occasions (1775, 1776, and 1780) Curwen went to the Museum without a ticket in hand, and entered either that day or the next. It was not the norm to be so fortunate, because both men

¹³Thomas Gray, *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, 3 vols. (Oxford: University Press, 1935; Reprinted ed. with corrections and additions by H.W. Starr, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 2: 620.

¹⁴Samuel Curwen, *The Journal of Samuel Curwen, Loyalist*, ed. Andrew Oliver, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1: 170.

¹⁵Moritz, *Journeys of a German in England in 1782*, p. 59.

¹⁶Charles W. Peale, *Discourse Introductory to a Course of Lectures on the Science of Nature*, Delivered in the Hall of the University of Pennsylvania, Nov. 8, 1800 (Philadelphia: 1800), p. 20-21. Peale was an artist who studied in London from February 1767 until the spring of 1769. Although there is no evidence that he visited the British Museum, he must have heard about it while he was there and received additional news after he returned to the American colonies, because Mr Lever did not open his museum in London until February 1775.

acknowledged relief at not having to wait the customary number of weeks. Twice, Curwen's good fortune was the result of people who failed to show up for tickets. On the third occasion he appealed to Dr. Harper, the under-librarian, who referred him to the porter for a ticket.¹⁷ Moritz had made the acquaintance of Rev. Charles Woide, an assistant librarian, who enabled him to jump the queue. At the other extreme was the four month waiting list that occurred in 1776 mentioned in Chapter III.

As Curwen gained immediate access on a visit in June 1776 during the midst of the backlog, it was a phenomenon that deserves greater analysis. In August 1776 Harper had written that the April applications had not been satisfied and that people were to check weekly to see where they were on the list. If Harper's account was true, then how was Curwen able to enter on a first application in June? The answer can be found in his response to the first ticket, "some who had given in their names neglecting to appear." By this time people had to apply three weeks in advance for a ticket, but if on the appointed day they could not attend or did not pick up the ticket, it was given to people like Curwen who happened to show up when there was a vacancy. Also, if people who had applied in April could not attend on the first appointed time but kept reapplying, then within a few weeks the number of new applicants compounded with the number who were reapplying would mushroom by August.

However long or inconvenient the access process was, people wanted to visit the Museum. As the Countess of Bute wrote to Wilhelmina Tichborne, "I wish to see nothing in L[ondon] but her selfe [?] and the musæum."¹⁸ The trustees acknowledged that when leading the tours, the officers were to explain the objects in the rooms to the people, but from the

¹⁷Curwen, *The Journal of Samuel Curwen*, 2: 688.

¹⁸Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Robert Halsband, vol. III, 1752-1762 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 210.

beginning the tours were not capable of educating or satisfying many people's curiosity.¹⁹ There was not enough time to see everything in two hours, the groups were rushed from room to room, and there were no guidebooks. In the preface to The General Contents of the British Museum Edmund Powlett wrote that "the Time allowed to view it was Short, and the Rooms so numerous, that it was impossible, without some kind of Directory, to form a proper Idea of the Particulars", and that it was impossible for the officers "to gratify every particular Person's Curiosity."²⁰ As Powlett admitted, his book did not give an account of everything but gave general remarks on a few things. Although the book ran into a second edition, it was sold at bookshops and not at the Museum, and not everyone knew of it. Carl Philip Moritz, who visited the Museum in June 1782, had Wendeborn's guidebook, and to the scornful astonishment of the librarian, when the rest of the tour saw that he "had this book they gathered round me and I taught these English . . . what they might see in their own museum!"²¹ After Pierre Grosley visited in 1772, he suggested that instead of a catalog or guidebook, that the librarians and other learned men be stationed in all the apartments so they could answer any questions.²²

Another idea arose in the London Magazine when the author commented that slips of paper with descriptions should be placed on every article. The author confessed that it was the tour guide's job to answer questions, but "if he is inclined, [emphasis added] and able to give you proper information" he could never answer all the questions, nor did the author want to

¹⁹British Museum, Department of Manuscripts, Dr John Ward, British Museum Statutes and Rules, 1756, Add. MS 42,852, f. 2.

²⁰[Edmund Powlett], The General Contents of the British Museum: With Remarks (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), p. ix-x.

²¹Moritz, Journeys of a German in England in 1782, p. 59.

²²Pierre Jean Grosley, A Tour to London: or, New Observations on England, and its Inhabitants, trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols. (Dublin: J. Exshaw, E. Lynch, J. Williams, R. Moncrieffe, T. Walker, and C. Jenkin, 1772), 2: 176.

monopolize the guide.²³ By the late 1780s Friedrich Wendeborn's account of the Museum indicated that little had changed. He knew of no complete or satisfactory catalog of the collections, "but it were to be wished, that the public might soon be in possession of one. . . ." He also wanted labels in legible handwriting attached to the objects at an appropriate height, so the "curiosity of strangers . . . might be gratified, and their questions answered, without giving unnecessary trouble to the gentlemen who attend the company."²⁴

In the accounts the authors couched their unhappiness in civil phrases like, 'it were to be wished' and other similar rhetoric. Without appearing combative they criticized the Museum and hoped it would provide more information on the specimens. One individual who refused to appease the Museum and offered one of the most disappointing accounts of a visit was William Hutton of Birmingham. For many years he had wanted to see the British Museum and refused to leave London without fulfilling the wish. Hutton came across a man who had a ticket for the next day and sold it for "less than two shillings." When he arrived on 7 December 1784, there were about ten in the group. "We began to move pretty fast, when I asked with some surprize, whether there were none to inform us what the curiosities were as we went on?" The librarian replied that it would be impossible to talk about everything, and that the names were written on many of the items. Hutton nor anyone else in the company asked anything more but followed in haste and in whispers. "It grieved me to think how much I lost for want of a little information." Further down he wrote, "I went out much about as wise as I went in," and the disappointment turned to anger as he recounted the time, money, and humor the visit had cost him. As for the librarian Hutton commented, "I am sorry to rate our conductor at the British Museum, a little

²³London Magazine (October 1776): 548-49.

²⁴Gebhardt Friedrich August Wendeborn, A View of England Towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century, trans. the author, 2 vols. (Dublin: William Sleater, 1791), 1: 226.

below a common prostitute, and rank him with a private sentinel." Hutton concluded the account by vowing not to return unless he had a friend or guidebook to explain what he saw.²⁵

It took the Museum more than twenty years to provide the guidebook Hutton and the other visitors yearned for, and it was a combination of circumstances, most notably the public's outcry, that prompted the trustees to have a guide printed. According to Joseph Planta, ". . . the Synopsis of the Contents of the Museum has been completed. As the public called loudly for such a guide especially through the Gallery of Antiquities, Mr. Planta, although he had not an opportunity of receiving the directions of the Trustees, ventured however, . . . to allow Copies to be sold by the Messenger."²⁶

As Hutton put it, the Museum suffered from two faults. There was no one or no reference to explain the curiosities, and the tour moved too fast. The librarian had two hours to show the library, manuscripts, and rooms packed with scientific and ethnological specimens and antiquities. With bad labeling and a reluctant guide, it would be a taxing experience for anyone attempting to consume everything he saw, and the tour would naturally appear to be moving too fast. Moritz said that he went through the natural curiosities section in one hour. "So quickly was I conducted through this museum, however, that I saw merely the rooms, glass cases and book repositories: not the true British Museum."²⁷ Sophie von La Roche commented favorably on her guide, Dr. Woide, who moved them a little slower, but she said they "had no time to visit the nature exhibits" (scientific specimens). She attempted to give a full account of the things she saw, but lamented, "There is hardly time enough amidst a swarm of foreigners to take note of

²⁵William Hutton, A Journey From Birmingham to London (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1785), p. 186-97.

²⁶Officers' Reports 1 (12 November 1808): fol. 137.

²⁷Moritz, Journeys of a German in England in 1782, p. 59.

everything one would like to see."²⁸ When she visited a second time she wrote, ". . . I left the museum with its myriad wonders sadly, as I should have liked to become acquainted with it all in a leisurely way. . . ."²⁹ Curwen, who also commented favorably on his guide, Dr. Gifford, was not satisfied after a third visit and wrote, "The almost unnumbered curiosities in natural as well as artificial way coming fast upon me confounded memory, latter destroying the traces of former by the quickness of the transition."³⁰ He concluded that he would need another visit which he accomplished in May 1781. Benjamin Silliman, a chemistry lecturer at Yale University, was in England in 1805 and 1806 and thought the manuscript collection was the highlight of the Museum, "but the rapid manner in which they hurried us through the different apartments did not allow me time to examine many of these."³¹ Another American, Louis Simond, despised the guide. ". . . Our conductor, pushed on without minding questions, or unable to answer them, but treating the company with double entendres and witticisms on various subjects of natural history, in a style of vulgarity and impudence which I should not have expected to have met in this place, and in this country."³² Simond attended the Museum when the tours were probably at their worst. The procedure had eight tours daily with the first at 11:00 a.m. and the others following in succession as fast as there were attendants to conduct them.

Before the last bastions to restricted access, the ticket and the guided tour, came to an end, a visitor to the Museum in the summer of 1810 published an account in The Monthly

²⁸La Roche, Sophie in London, 1786, p. 104, 110.

²⁹Ibid., p. 157-158.

³⁰Curwen, The Journal of Samuel Curwen, 2: 690.

³¹Benjamin Silliman, A Journal of Travels in England, Holland, and Scotland, and of Two Passages Over the Atlantic, in the Years 1805 and 1806, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Boston: T.B. Wait and Co., 1812), 1: 184, 288.

³²Simond, An American in Regency England, p. 44.

Magazine. The article has significance, because the author, who went under the pseudonym 'Inquilinus', introduced the problems that potential students and researchers incurred, and his solution suggested a museum public. According to Inquilinus, when he visited the Museum a few years earlier, it took "the greater part of two or three days in getting admission . . . and then was hurried through the rooms" in a manner that made it impossible to study the objects.³³ On a second visit he and a companion arrived at 11:00 a.m. but had to wait until 1:00 p.m. for the earliest available tour. Once inside the Museum and to his surprise he discovered that nothing had changed. Before he had the time to view all the mineral specimens, the attendant told him that it was time to go to the next room, and so he had to remain with the group. Inquilinus claimed that the experience proved that the defects needed to be remedied, because the British Museum was 'a public institution, supported by the nation.'

Inquilinus thought the greatest evil at the Museum was the limited time to view the collections. According to him they were allowed twenty minutes in each room. His bitterness led to philosophizing on the role of the institution in relation to the student. The Museum was of little use if it was not subservient to those who used it. He was aware that properly introduced students could come to the Museum at other times, but he asked, ". . . How many humble students of Nature are there that never can be so introduced," and he thought the procedure should not be necessary, because taxes supported the institution.³⁴ As a solution he suggested that "every decently-dressed male and female above the age of twelve" be admitted to any part of the Museum with unrestrained access and unlimited time. Inquilinus indicated a similarity of thought with the Museum over who the public was, for with the exception of ages (the British Museum allowed people above the age ten to enter) the concepts were identical. The public was

³³The Monthly Magazine 30 (1 Oct. 1810): 237.

³⁴Ibid.

unknown people who were watched by warders but were trusted to behave themselves in a large group setting.

Many of the visitors who commented on their visit left no record as to what, if anything, they anticipated from a visit. From those accounts that survive, many people left the British Museum not completely satisfied. Those, like Hutton and Inquilinus, who attended with a specific purpose, were even more disappointed. There was a failure to satiate the public curiosity or to educate visitors to their satisfaction. These visitors were not given enough time to look and not enough information about the specimens.

Evidently, Sir Joseph Banks' statement about the visitors was not wholly accurate, because the museum public was trying to find meaning in what they were looking at. Banks accused persons of low education of asking senseless questions and the better educated of coming prepared. The evidence, though, indicates that many of the better educated were not always prepared for a visit and tried to ask questions. The reason for senseless or numerous questions was answered by the visitors themselves. The objects were not properly labeled, there was not a guidebook, and the tours moved too quickly. In addition people of all levels were amazed and fascinated by the numerous different objects that were housed in one location. It is unknown whether the educated visitors asked reasonable or senseless questions, but it is clear from the London Magazine, Hutton, and Simond that some of the librarians and attendants did not like answering questions. The better educated suffered from the same sort of frustration that affected those people who were not prepared, and based on Moritz's account, the visitors would have hovered around anyone who could provide information about the objects they saw.

There were few references from students about access to the library or private studies with the collections. Richard Gough wrote in the preface to British Topography that access to

the library was 'on the most liberal plan',³⁵ and Thomas Pennant wrote in the preface to Synopsis of Quadrupeds that from the British Museum "placed as it is under the direction of Gentlemen as much distinguished for their politeness as their love of science, my access to its contents, has been rendered, at all fit times, so easy, as to put this Work under singular obligations to them."³⁶ The evidence, though, indicates that readers, like visitors to the Museum, were more concerned with service than with procedures, and the biggest problem was truancy among staff. In 1774 and in 1778 readers complained of the superintendent's non-attendance. The trustees devised a plan and divided the time spent in the room between the superintendent and the three assistant librarians.³⁷ In spite of what was a good attempt, in 1790 Isaac D'Israeli did not think the service was so good. "I often sate [sic] between the Abbé de la Rue and Pinkerton, between Norman antiquity and Scottish history. There we were, little attended to, musing in silence and oblivion; for sometimes we had to wait a day or two till the volumes, so eagerly demanded, slowly appeared."³⁸ There was general dissatisfaction from the librarians over the system, because the time spent in the library diminished the time spent with the collections. When non-attendance of the librarians was brought to the attention of the trustees in 1801, the problem eventually came to a solution when the Board adopted Planta's idea of hiring three attendants to help the librarians in the Reading Room.³⁹

³⁵Richard Gough, British Topography, 2 vols. (London: T. Payne and Son, and J. Nichols, 1780), 1: xlvii.

³⁶Thomas Pennant, Synopsis of Quadrupeds (Chester: J. Monk, 1771), p. x.

³⁷Committee Minutes 5 (4 February 1774): 1400, 6 (15 May 1778): 1614; Original Letters and Papers 1 (18 February 1774): fol. 281.

³⁸Isaac D'Israeli, The Illustrator Illustrated (London: Edward Moxon, 1838), p. 5.

³⁹General Meetings, Minutes 4 (3 June 1801): 949; Committee Minutes 8 (12 June 1801): 2212. The attendants were hired with the statute changes in 1803.

There was one service for readers that the trustees rendered that was in stark contrast to the difficulty that visitors encountered when they visited the Museum. Based on the British Museum Act (1753) and a rule enacted by the trustees in 1757,⁴⁰ the Museum did not permit the removal of the collection for personal use, except in court cases, and visitors and students had to examine the material on the premises. Yet, there were petitions to remove books and manuscripts, and the trustees were not consistent in adhering to policy. In 1763 Dr. Benjamin Kennicot of Oxford, a reader at the Museum since 1759, submitted a request to borrow small portions of Hebrew manuscripts, because the men helping him collate could not come to London. The University of Aberdeen and three colleges at Cambridge had lent manuscripts, and Kennicot was willing to place a security. The trustees granted the request on a £500 bond for one year. He made similar requests in 1765 and 1767, and the trustees permitted him to take twelve manuscripts, six at a time for two years under bonds of £500. In 1773 he borrowed the Samaritan Pentateuch Manuscript from the Cotton Library.⁴¹ There were other cases of readers⁴² who had borrowed material, but not all requests were granted, and by the 1790s the trustees adopted a stricter practice and began denying everyone the privilege to remove material. In view of this double standard for readers and the general public and the privilege of borrowing, and in light of the fact that when the general public was caught in acts of theft, they were prosecuted while the readers were not, the trustees defined the museum public and Reading Room public by the treatment they received.

⁴⁰Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 24.

⁴¹General Meetings, Minutes 2 (26 February 1763): 444-48; 3 (30 September 1773): 705, 3 (4 December 1773): 707; British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Charles Morton, Diary, Add. MS 45871, fol. 50-51, 58-59.

⁴²Dr Hunt borrowed twenty five manuscripts of Dr Hyde, Dr Charles Burney borrowed Dr. Indway's Collection of English Church Music, and Dr Robert Holmes borrowed manuscripts of the Psalms and the Arundelian and Pachomian Manuscripts. Committee Minutes 5 (18 January 1771): 1282, 7 (23 December 1785): 1919; General Meetings, Minutes 4 (22 May 1790): 896.

By the beginning of the first decade of the nineteenth century Joseph Planta under the trustees' blessing embarked on an era of reform. For almost fifteen years he altered the statutes to make the institution more accessible and to eliminate the difficulties of the older system. At the same time it was no coincidence that people began asserting a public right of access to the British Museum. In 1810 the nation had been at war with France for almost twenty years, and the financial burden had been heavy. Higher taxes and a greater expenditure on the Museum emphasized to the people that they supported the institution. During the truce with France in 1802 numerous tourists flocked to Paris and returned to tell how one did not need a ticket to enter the Louvre and that one could remain all day. Inquilinus wrote, "Surely the people of England have a right to expect, that their access to a collection to which they have paid for and support, should not be clogged with difficulties which the French do not experience in surveying the treasures which their Emperor has stolen."⁴³

In 1805 Parliament voted to buy the Townley sculptures for £20,000, and the expense induced a citizen to criticize access at the Museum. 'Acastus', as he signed himself, wrote a well-structured letter to The Times in which he chastised the government for burying its head in the sand on the issue of greater access for the public. Acastus believed that the government should wield more influence and use money as a lever to force the Museum to be more open. Acastus, though, heaped a large portion of the blame on the government. They had spent £20,000 for the Townley sculptures without considering the benefit to anyone. The British Museum placed "the curiosities in a situation where the public, whose undoubted property they then become, can seldom obtain a sight of them, and then attended with unpleasant circumstances." It astonished him that Parliament thought its obligations ended by placing the objects inside the Museum. He wanted more action and greater interest in the institution's

⁴³The Monthly Magazine 30 (1 Oct. 1810): 238.

affairs. For too long the government had rubber stamped the petitions without asking for greater facility in return. He proposed some changes that would render "the British Museum what it originally was designed to be -- an institution both honourable and useful to the country at large."⁴⁴

While Planta was modernizing the statutes, the costs for operating the institution were beginning to rise. Throughout the eighteenth century Parliament had provided biannual grants of £2,000 to £3,500, and until the nineteenth century M.P.s' opinions were hardly mentioned. According to Nicholas Pearson in The State and the Visual Arts, the British Museum was ambiguously related to Parliament and the Crown. "It was an official body, a national authority, it had a public role and public functions," but it was not recognized as a full government-funded body. It had no regular budget from the government, and employees were not government employees.⁴⁵ Originally, the British Museum had a forty-two member Board of Trustees, and nineteen were on the Board by virtue of their office as bishops or members of the Cabinet. In addition, the Board had fifteen elected trustees, and some were members of Parliament. By virtue of this fact M.P.s had the opportunity to question the government and trustees about access and to demand an accounting of the Museum's practices.

In the earliest recorded sessions that have references to access, when the government discussed the subject, access had not been the original subject of the debate. The intent of the topic had been money or finances. In 1777 the trustees submitted a petition for a grant but before it was sent to the Committee of Supply, John Wilkes offered a long discourse on the Museum. According to him it was expedient that the trustees should adequately fulfill and

⁴⁴The Times (8 July 1805), p. 3a.

⁴⁵Nicholas M. Pearson, The State and the Visual Arts: A Discussion of State Intervention in the Visual Arts in Britain, 1760-1981 (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1982), p. 10.

extend the purposes of the institution. "It is a general complaint, that the British Museum is not sufficiently accessible to the public. This must necessarily happen from the deficiency of their revenues. The Trustees cannot pay a proper number of officers and attendants." As the Committee of Supply planned to consider this topic of finances, Wilkes expounded on an enlarged idea to incorporate paintings in the Museum and to enlarge the library. The Vatican and the French King's library had immense collections and were "both open at stated times, with every proper accommodation, to all strangers," but London had no large public library. As for art, "The kings of France and Spain permit their subjects and strangers the view of all the pictures in their collections," but the Raphael cartoons which were purchased with public money and put on view to the public since King William's reign, were now "secreted from the public eye." They were a national treasure, not private property. Wilkes proposed that an art gallery should be built at the British Museum, that Parliament buy the Walpole Collection and grant a sum for the Museum to buy valuable editions for the library, and that the copyright act be strengthened.⁴⁶ When Edmund Burke attempted to amend Sir Grey Cooper's motion from a grant of £3,000 to £5,000 as a trial and thus permit the trustees to make the Museum more accessible, the motion failed to pass, 74 to 60.

Wilkes' debate is interesting, for throughout the rest of the period to 1836, he was one of the few in Parliament who recognized that the Museum's budget was not sufficient to make the institution more accessible. Future M.P.s examined the submitted petitions and assumed there was always enough for the Museum to be more accessible or to be open longer hours. Wilkes did not look at it this way, and by understanding the Museum's state of accounts, recognized that more money had to be forthcoming if anything radical were to be expected. Wilkes used

⁴⁶Parliamentary History of England, From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803 19 (28 April 1777): 189-92.

nationalism and the notion that a public museum was financed by the taxpayer for a defense of his design. The Vatican, France, and Spain had libraries and art galleries whereby natives and foreigners had permission to see and use them. Because the king had an income of a million a year, Wilkes thought that George III's Raphael cartoons at Hampton Court should be reopened to the public. Later, the public and the government applied the same logic to the British Museum with the cries, 'It is public because the citizens paid for it' and 'It is against the spirit of the nation to keep a public museum exclusive.'

The next recorded debate on access occurred in 1804, and once again it was finances that sparked the affair. After the king donated the antiquities taken from the defeated French armies in Egypt, the trustees petitioned Parliament for £16,000 to house appropriately the collection which was stored in a shed. George Rose,⁴⁷ M.P. for Christchurch, introduced the petition, and during the discussions on how the money should be spent, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the Whig M.P. who paid special attention to finance, squeezed in a comment about access. Though not opposed to the grant he "thought, that if such a liberal grant were afforded, the public ought in return to have greater facility of access to the curiosities which the museum contained."⁴⁸ No one made a remark, but on the following day, Rose, who had obviously done some homework, stood to defend the Museum's policies and silence the critics. The trustees had done everything possible to accommodate the public, and Rose rattled off a list of the rules to back the claim. He added, "that 75 persons might be admitted per day and that even those who applied in the morning might be admitted in the course of the same day."⁴⁹ As far as he was concerned, the

⁴⁷As an intimate friend and faithful follower of William Pitt, Rose was among a small group of colleagues and experts in the ranks of government on whom Pitt called regularly or intermittently. For the other men Pitt sought out see John Erhman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim* (London: Constable, 1969), p. 324.

⁴⁸*Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time* 2 (2 July 1804): 902.

⁴⁹Not everyone was as fortunate. Benjamin Silliman's first visit was 12 June 1805 and after repeated attempts to see the Museum again, he was not successful until 31 July.

Museum appeared adequate to satisfy the public.⁵⁰ It was a brilliant response to refute the charge with impressive statistics. Two years earlier forty-five people a day saw the Museum, but now it could boast of seventy-five people a day. Five years earlier Desenfans had also claimed that it took a month to get a ticket. The opportunity to apply and enter the same day was certainly an improvement and something to be proud of. For the next twenty-five years increasing attendance figures were the trustees' defense against criticism about access.

Rose's pat comeback to Sheridan rankled some members of the House, for six days later when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Pitt, moved that £8,000 be granted to the trustees for the building, the opposition counterattacked. George Johnstone, M.P. for Hedon, accused Rose of not being thoroughly honest and withholding the date that the regulations had been introduced, 8 June, a month earlier. Rose denied the accusation and claimed that he had stated when the new regulations had taken place.⁵¹ Before the advent of modern shorthand, dictation was subject to a higher degree of error. Sometimes the speaker himself provided the printer or clerk with the actual words, and even then what he wrote may not be what he uttered.⁵² The Parliamentary Debates did not record Rose's having said a date, and the coverage in The Times was even smaller. Whether Rose provided a date was not important, for the issue at hand was whether the Museum had made the alterations in order to get the money. The Speaker, Charles Abbot, interceded and put the matter to rest. By virtue of his office, he was a trustee, and as far back as two years, the Board had been attentive to the question of better access and agreed that more employees should be hired and greater facility given to the public. The new statutes were

⁵⁰Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time 2 (3 July 1804): 933-34.

⁵¹Ibid., 2 (9 July 1804): 965.

⁵²D. Nichol Smith, "The Newspaper," in Johnson's England: An Account of the Life & Manners of his Age, ed. A.S. Turberville, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 353.

not measures suddenly adopted but ones that had been exceedingly deliberated.⁵³ The Museum survived the criticism unscathed, because it had proved that it was changing for the public's benefit.

The following year Rose submitted another petition from the trustees praying for more aid to complete the extension of the building for the Egyptian antiquities. Henry Bankes, M.P. for Corfe Castle, stated that because the topic had been introduced, he would make some necessary comments. He thought the Museum should "be made more what it was originally intended it should be. . . ." He provided an interpretation of how the Museum should function when he added that it was "purely for national purposes, and for the benefit and instruction of the public at large, by ready and uninterrupted access to the valuable matter it contained."⁵⁴ Wilkes had looked at the state of the Museum and projected ideas where it should move. Bankes' speech was the first that offered an M.P.'s opinion on where the Museum should already be. It was a subtle but important difference. Bankes' suggestions were measures he believed were in line with the original Act and intentions. With Wilkes the idea was to move the Museum into a new direction; with Bankes the British Museum had gone off course, and it needed to be guided back to the proper direction for 'the public at large'. The trustees regarded the British Museum as an institution for scholars to conduct research. Bankes said the Museum was for national purposes. He did not elaborate on the meaning of 'national', but from the context he meant anything that would have benefited the country as a whole. The Royal Society catered for science and philosophy, and the Royal Academy encouraged and fostered art, but the British Museum was not intended for one discipline.

⁵³*Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time* 2 (9 July 1804): 965.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 3 (12 February 1805): 409-10.

To this point Bankes and the Museum officials were in general agreement, but they diverged when the M.P. said the Museum was for the benefit and instruction of the public at large. It was an important change in attitude towards the purposes of a national museum. Although some trustees, such as Ward and Banks, held sentiments against the public, and the Board had devised statutes that restricted access, there was an acknowledgment, however condescending, that the public paid for and supported the Museum. They placed greater emphasis on meeting the needs of the scholar in the library and with the collections. Bankes did not deny such a purpose but advocated that the institution was not for a clique but for everyone with uninterrupted access.

The Times reported the debate, and although it editorialized the speeches, the newspaper came directly to the point and the spirit of Bankes' feelings. Bankes "hoped, that when Parliament was voting away the money of the public, for the support of an institution of this kind, they would require that some arrangements should be made for facilitating the access of that public to it."⁵⁵ The sarcastic tone of the quote left no doubt that a public museum was an institution that people supported and should have a right to visit, and that the public who should be allowed to visit were the tax payers.

During the debate the M.P.s Rose and Fuller defended the Museum policies. In view of Bankes' request for a museum for 'the public at large', Rose emphasized the liberal aspects, and said that "persons of every description" could visit it, and that applications were fulfilled by the next day. John Fuller, M.P. for Sussex, maintained a cautious attitude. The collection was rare and valuable and "that without proper precautions, it would be very dangerous to suffer all sorts of persons to have promiscuous access."⁵⁶ William Smith,⁵⁷ M.P. for Norwich, remarked that

⁵⁵The Times (13 February 1805), p. 1a.

⁵⁶Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time 3 (12 February 1805): 410.

he had never heard of troubles in foreign museums with valuable collections of pictures and coins, and nothing was damaged nor had disappeared. If the trustees adopted similar regulations, greater facilities might be given to the public. It was the cue for Fuller to make a brilliant reply, and he countered "that happy it was for this country it did differ from others," for if a man stole a print from a French museum, he would be imprisoned for life.⁵⁸ Fuller had extinguished for the time being any thought of using European museums as guidelines. The Museum's advocates in Parliament satisfied the opposition with statistics, the recent improvements, and witticisms, and Fuller's call for prudence calmed the rally for an easier uninterrupted access.

It was not a question of whether the British Museum was for the public, but a question of determining the public that should have access. Fuller maintained the British Museum's Ward-based 1759 principle that the public was not everyone in society, and that the people who could qualify as the public should be narrowed, so that if not everyone who entered was personally known, that the Principal Librarian should at least try to bar people whose character or reputations indicated a dishonest or destructive behavior, and the officers should closely watch the people on tour. Smith based his concept of the public on the lack of intimacy that was prevalent between the visitors and the officers and attendants at the Louvre and other French museums. On some days there were as many as five thousand visitors, including poorly dressed people, such as "common market women and persons . . . not above the rank of cobblers."⁵⁹ The Louvre had an open day whereby anyone could attend without the necessity of applying for a ticket, and people were permitted to stay all day and wander as they pleased. Smith's museum public included known and unknown people from all levels of society, and many visitors wanted

⁵⁷Smith was a dissenter who spoke often on religious questions and parliamentary reform and voted with the Whigs in debates connected with the revolution in France.

⁵⁸Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time 3 (12 February 1805): 410; The Times (13 February 1805), p. 1a.

⁵⁹Alexander, Museum Masters, p. 94; Edgeworth, Maria Edgeworth in France and Switzerland, p. 51.

this type of public too, because there was insufficient time to view everything at the Museum, and ticket application was inconvenient.

In its early years people had personal conversations in letters and diaries about the British Museum, but critics like Acastus and Inquilinus had converted these private conversations into forums of discussion in newspapers and magazines. This transformation is what Habermas believed made established institutions such as the British Museum a sphere of criticism of public authority.⁶⁰ Acastus and Inquilinus had assumed the function of publicly criticizing in unflattering terms a sphere of state and authority (the British Museum and the trustees) that to this point had been untouched by people outside the government. They wanted the trustees to make public what had been practiced in secret.

⁶⁰Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 51.