

## British Museum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

### Aims

- To provide students with visual encounters with key areas of the British Museum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- To provide teachers with an opportunity to teach about local history in London and historical changes to a specific built environment over time.

### Description

- A sequence of 7 slides

### Teaching ideas

- Compare and contrast the views of Montagu House with the same locations nowadays around the current British Museum building.
- Introduce vocabulary associated with architecture such as staircase, courtyard, wings and garden.
- Consider the types of graphic evidence available at this time (pre-development of photography). Introduce vocabulary associated with source of evidence representation such as drawing, etching and print.
- Write a first person account of a visit to the Museum in the 18<sup>th</sup> century taking into account the information about layout and content shown in the images and information about visitor access to the building in the timeline below.

### Notes on the pictures

There is also a brief information note within the notes section of each individual slide on the PowerPoint.

### Montagu House, around AD 1714

This engraving shows Montagu House before it became the British Museum.

**North side of Montagu House, around AD 1715**

This watercolour shows the North side of Montagu House and the gardens around 1715. It was painted by James Simon. The house had been rebuilt for Ralph Montagu following a disastrous fire. It was designed with grand gardens in the French style, with formal terracing and gravel walks adorned with a fountain and statues.

**Plan of Montagu House, AD 1709**

This ground plan was drawn by the architect Pierre Pouget in 1709. It shows the original layout of the second Montagu House with the gateway entrance to the courtyard at the bottom and the three surrounding domestic wings. When the British Museum acquired the building in 1755, the collections were initially displayed inside the original domestic layout before the Victorian rebuild of a purpose designed Museum building which continues to stand on the site today.

**Montague House on Rocque's map of London, AD 1749**

This detail from Rocques' map of London, drawn in 1747, shows Montagu house immediately before it was acquired to house the British Museum collections. The formal gardens can be seen laid out directly behind the house whilst beyond this are open fields. Directly in front of the house runs Great Russell Street on the same alignment as nowadays.

**Garden side of Montagu House, AD 1778**

This engraving shows Montagu House from the garden on the east side of the house in 1788.

**Gateway of Montagu House, AD 1778**

This watercolour was painted by Michael Angelo Rooke in 1778. It shows a view looking east along Great Russell Street, with the gateway of Montagu House to the left, a coach coming along the road, a sedan chair on the left hand pavement, and children at a fruit-stall against the wall with other figures in the street.

**Encampment outside Montagu House, AD 1780**

This engraving shows a view (from a high point) overlooking the gardens towards the East. The picture shows the encampment of the York Regiment in the garden behind Montagu House following the Gordon Riots (29 May - 8 June 1780). That camp and the others in St James's Park, Hyde Park and Blackheath remained for two months. The garden has since been built over, the part shown in the drawing now being occupied by the Edward VII Galleries. To the East beyond the camp can be seen, from right to left, houses in Southampton Row and Queen Square, the Foundling Hospital, Sadler's Wells, and a recently built terrace in Gray's Inn Road.

## Background information

### 1660s

Thomas Wriothesley, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Southampton, Lord High Chancellor to King Charles II (1660-1685), builds Southampton (later Bedford) House and the adjoining Southampton Square (nowadays known as Bloomsbury Square) which quickly becomes a centre for the fashionable in London. During the reign of Queen Anne (1702-1714) the Square was home to several nobles and government ministers.

### 1675-9

Ralph Montagu, 1st Duke of Montagu (a great favourite of King Charles II) buys 7 acres of land backing onto open fields in fashionable Bloomsbury. Between 1675 and 1679 a domestic residence is built at the front of the site adjoining the road. The residence is designed by the English architect and scientist Robert Hooke, whose style was influenced by French planning and Dutch detailing. The house has a central block and two service blocks flanking a large courtyard and features murals by the Italian artist Antonio Verrio. The main gardens lie directly behind the central block.

### 1686

In January 1686 the first Montagu House is destroyed by fire (started by airing fabric hangings too close to an open fireplace), though the service wings survive. Over the next two years the central block is rebuilt.

### 1709

A surviving document from 1709 shows the ground plan for the second Montagu House built on the Bloomsbury site which was designed by the French architect Pierre Pouget. This Montagu House was deemed the grandest private residence constructed in London at the time. The main façade had 17 bays, with a projecting three bay centre and a similar three bay projection at each end where the new building abutted the surviving service wings of the first mansion. The house had two main floors, plus a basement and a prominent mansard roof with a dome over the centre. The plan reflected the usual French layout of the time, with state (formal) apartments leading from a central saloon. The interiors, which were decorated by French artists, were admired by Horace Walpole and were probably similar to the surviving state apartments at Boughton House which were built for the Duke at the same time in Northamptonshire.

### 1731

During the early 1700s Bloomsbury begins to decline from a fashionable aristocratic district to a more middle class area. As a consequence John, 2nd Duke of Montagu decides to abandon his father's house and move to Whitehall. He purchases building land alongside the River Thames and the new Montagu House has been constructed here by April 1733, leaving the old Montagu House in Bloomsbury empty.

**1753**

Sir Hans Sloane dies. His private collection of objects forms the basis of the British Museum collection.

The British Museum Act is passed in Parliament to establish a new national Museum.

The board of Museum Trustees held their first meeting in Whitehall.

Funding for the new Museum is raised by holding a public lottery.

**1754**

Negotiations begin to buy Montagu House in Bloomsbury to house the new Museum. The Trustees had previously rejected Buckingham House, on the site now occupied by Buckingham Palace, on the grounds of cost and the unsuitability of its location. The sale of Montagu House is finally agreed in 1755 with a purchase price of £20,000. Immediately following the sale about £30,000 was spent on repairs and minor modifications to reflect the building's new function as a museum.

**1756**

Appointment of the first members of Museum staff: a librarian, six curators, a porter, a messenger, two watchmen and four maids.

The first Egyptian mummy and coffin arrives at the Museum.

**1757**

King George II gives the 'Old Royal Library' to the Museum together with the privilege of receiving a free copy of every newly published book (a right nowadays held by the British Library).

The Museum gardens are opened to the public. Entrance is by ticket only.

**1759**

British Museum opens to the public on 15 January 1759. Small groups only are admitted for a conducted tour. A Reading Room is available for scholars wishing to study the Museum's collection of printed material (most of which is nowadays held at the British Library).

**1762**

The Thomason Collection of Civil War Tracts is purchased for £300 on behalf of King George III who donates the collection to the British Museum. The collection contains more than 22,000 pamphlets, broadsides, manuscripts, books, and news sheets, most of which were printed and distributed in London from 1640 to 1661. The collection is housed nowadays at the British Library.

**1772**

The Museum buys the classical antiquities collection belonging to Sir William Hamilton. These are the first major Greek and Roman classical antiquities to become part of the Museum collection.

**1775**

Captain James Cook gives the Museum a collection of objects from the South Seas. A room to display them opens in 1778.

**1799**

The Museum receives a collection of books, prints and drawings, coins and medals, gems and minerals left to the Museum by Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode in his will.