

## British Museum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

### Aims

- To provide students with visual encounters with key areas of the British Museum in the 19<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 16 slides

### Teaching ideas

- Compare and contrast the 19<sup>th</sup> century views with the same locations nowadays around the current British Museum building.
- Introduce vocabulary associated with architecture such as railings, wing, pediment and dome.
- Consider the types of graphic evidence available at this time and the early development of photography. Introduce vocabulary associated with source of evidence representation such as drawing, etching, print and photograph.
- Write a first person account of a visit to the Museum in the 19<sup>th</sup> century period 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.
- Ask the students to design their own 19<sup>th</sup> century rebuild of Montagu House.

### Notes on the pictures

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

#### **Front hall and main staircase in Montagu House, around AD 1808**

This coloured etching shows the front hall and the main staircase to the upper floor in Montagu House. The etching was made in 1808 while the original Montagu House building was still being used to house the Museum collections.

**Montagu House, Townley Gallery and Sir Robert Smirke's west wing under construction, AD 1828**

This drawing shows Montagu House, Townley Gallery and Sir Robert Smirke's west wing under construction in July 1828.

**East wing of British Museum viewed from the Museum gardens, AD 1828**

This photograph shows the East Wing of the new Smirke building from the Museum garden in 1828.

**Installing an Egyptian sculpture, AD 1834**

This drawing shows the installation of the colossal stone bust of the Egyptian king Ramesses in the Egyptian galleries in May 1834.

**Sixth Reading Room, AD 1841**

This engraving, from a watercolour by Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, shows the sixth Reading Room. It was designed by Sir Robert Smirke and completed in 1838. It was used until 1857 when the domed Round Reading Room opened. The sixth Reading Room was in fact two connected rooms, each with an iron gallery at window height. More than 10,000 books were stored on the bookshelves. Originally space was available for 168 people seated at twenty-four tables. In 1930 an extra floor was built at gallery height to increase storage space. The lower part of these two rooms has now been converted into the Mexican Gallery (Room 27) and the North American Gallery (Room 26).

**Building works at the British Museum, AD 1845**

This engraving shows the front entrance to the British Museum site from Great Russell Street.

**The Reading Room under construction, AD 1855**

This photograph shows the Reading Room being built in 1855.

**View of the Reading Room, AD 1855**

This photograph shows the partly built Reading Room in 1855.

**Interior of Reading Room, AD 1800s**

This photograph shows the interior of the Reading Room in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Porter at the entrance of Montagu House, AD 1840**

This lithograph shows William Sievier, British Museum Porter, at the gate of Montagu House in 1840. The entrance was a doorway opening off Great Russell Street and leading to a brick-paved courtyard. On the far side of the courtyard are the steps leading up to the front door of the old Museum building. William Sievier is shown wearing the 'Windsor Uniform'. In 1836 British Museum servants were given the right to wear this uniform, similar to the uniform of the servants at Windsor Castle, by King William IV. It consisted of a blue coat with scarlet collar and cuffs and gilt buttons. The Museum's Warders still wear this uniform on special occasions, for example when a member of the British royal family visits the Museum. William Sievier was paid a salary of eighty pounds a year. He was one of sixteen servants employed by the Museum's Trustees. The others were a messenger, an assistant messenger, seven housemaids, two night-watchmen and four labourers.

**South front of the British Museum, AD 1857**

This photograph shows the South Front of the British Museum. It was taken early one morning in 1857 by Roger Fenton (1819-1869), the Museum's first official photographer.

**Drinking fountains at South Front, AD 1860**

This engraving shows a group of visitors at the drinking water fountain by the front entrance to the Museum in 1860.

**Photograph of the main entrance hall and south stairs, AD 1875.**

Photograph of the main entrance hall and south stairs taken before public opening hours in AD 1875.

**King's Library, AD 1875**

This photograph shows the King's Library in 1875.

**First Egyptian Room, AD 1875**

This photograph, taken by Frederick York of Notting Hill, London, shows the First Egyptian Room in 1875. Along the wall above the display cases can be seen a cast of the sculptured and painted bas-relief depicting the conquest of the Egyptian king Ramesses II (reigned about 1279-1213 BC) over the Ethiopians. The cast was made from the original situated at a small temple in Beit et-wali, lower Nubia (in present day southern Egypt) in 1825. Colours were added to the cast based upon those observed on site. The cast can today be viewed in Room 65. The cases below were mainly devoted to objects associated with everyday life. The exception to this were the cases seen in the far left of the photograph, which contained religious iconography, including representations of sacred animals such as the jackal of Anubis and the Apis bull. The mummies and coffins shown in the foreground were displayed in two

rows of angled cases along the central part of the gallery. The First Egyptian Room is now the Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gallery of Egypt and Africa (Room 65).

### **Teaching in the Museum, AD 1881**

This print shows a visiting lecturer talking to adults and children about the Greek and Roman sculpture collections in 1881. Behind her, artists sketch at their easels. Beyond, visitors enjoy the Assyrian and Egyptian collections.

## **Background information**

### **1802**

Arrival of the Rosetta Stone and other antiquities ceded to the British by the French under the terms of the Treaty of Alexandria (1801).

### **1805**

The Museum buys Charles Townley's collection of classical sculpture. Townley's coin collection is acquired in 1814.

### **1807**

Establishment of the Department of Antiquities.  
Introduction of the military guard.

### **1808**

Opening of the Townley Gallery (Classical and Egyptian Antiquities) by Queen Charlotte.

### **1810**

Admission tickets are abolished. Visitors are admitted in unlimited numbers and no longer have to be escorted.

### **1816**

Parthenon Sculptures purchased by Parliament from Lord Elgin and vested 'in perpetuity in the Trustees of the British Museum'. The sculptures are initially displayed in a temporary building before moving to a permanent gallery in 1832.

### **1818**

Arrival of the head of Ramesses II from Thebes excavated by Giovanni Belzoni and donated to the Museum by Henry Salt and Jean-Louis Burckhardt.

### **1823**

Gift to the nation from George IV of George III's library ('The King's Library'). Parliament votes to provide funds to build a permanent home for the library on the Museum site. Robert Smirke's plans for a new neo-classical style Museum building is presented to the Trustees and approved. Work begins on The King's Library, the east wing of Smirke's quadrangular building.

**1827**

Work begins on the northern section of Smirke's western gallery (now the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery).

King's Library is completed and the books are installed in 1828. New Reading Rooms (now the Middle and South Rooms) opened next to the library.

**1830**

Charles Dickens obtains his first ticket of admission to the Reading Room.

**1833**

Work begins on the North Wing.

**1834**

Egyptian sculpture installed in the West Wing.

**1836**

Department of Prints and Drawings established.

**1837**

Easter Monday - first opening on a public holiday.

**1842**

Demolition of Montagu House begins, completed 1845 (apart from the wings and Great Russell Street frontage)

**1844-9**

Construction of East and West Officers' Residences.

**1845**

Portland Vase smashed. It is restored by the Museum's restorer John Doubleday.

**1850**

Karl Marx acquires his first Reading Room reader's ticket (last renewal 1877). Children admitted but 'babes in arms' still excluded.

**1851**

Appointment of Augustus Wollaston Franks as curator of the British collections. Vast expansion over the next 40 years of non-Classical antiquities and ethnography.

**1854**

Work begins on the Round Reading Room (opened 1857).

**1859**

Erection of lions' head fountains on the colonnade

**1873**

Work begins on a building for the British Museum (Natural History) at South Kensington, architect Alfred Waterhouse.

**1879**

First experiments with the use of electricity in the Reading Room.  
'Babes in arms' admitted. Museum open all day on Saturday.

**1880-83**

Removal of natural history collections to South Kensington (now the Natural History Museum) with a formal opening in 1881.

**1882**

Work begins on the White Wing, fronting Montague Street (architect Sir John Taylor); occupied from July 1885.

**1890**

Galleries fully lit by electricity.

**1894**

Purchase of properties from the Bedford Estate giving the Museum ownership of the freeholds of all surrounding properties; negotiations concluded 1895; Treasury loan finally paid off by British Museum in 1947.

**1896**

Museum starts to open on a Sunday afternoon.