

British Museum in the 20th century

Aims

- To provide students with visual encounters with key areas of the British Museum in the 20th 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 12 slides

Teaching ideas

- Compare and contrast the views with the same locations nowadays around the current British Museum building.
- Introduce vocabulary associated with architecture such as steps, colonnade, gallery, gates and court.
- Consider the types of graphic evidence available at this time and growing role of photography. Introduce vocabulary associated with source of evidence representation such as drawing, etching, print and photograph.
- Write a first person account of a key event in the Museum's 20th century history such as the opening of the King Edward VII wing or the day after the World War Two bombing taking into account the information about the event shown in the images and given 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.

British Museum, around AD 1900

This photograph shows the south front of the British Museum and the pavement running along the side of Great Russell Street around 1900.

British Museum security staff, AD 1902

This photograph shows the British Museum security staff on the front steps of the Museum in 1902. They include officers from the Metropolitan Police (D Division) and the London Fire Brigade (identified by their flat caps).

Reading Room, AD 1907

This drawing shows the interior of the Reading Room in May 1907.

Prints and Drawings student's room under construction, AD 1913

This photograph shows the Department of Prints and Drawings student's room under construction in 1913. The British Museum has a tradition of re-using building materials, fixtures and fittings. Here, 150 mahogany storage presses were transferred from the old Prints and Drawings accommodation. Some presses had been in use since the late eighteenth century. A team of carpenters are fitting the old presses to the walls and making new presses to match.

Opening of the King Edward VII wing, AD 1914

This photograph shows the opening of the King Edward VII wing (often referred to as the north wing and entrance) on 7 May 1914 by King George V (Edward's son) and Queen Mary.

Manuscript Saloon, AD 1922

This photograph shows the manuscript saloon on the ground floor of the East Wing (now Room 2). For more than 150 years rare manuscripts were stored in the glass-fronted book presses around the walls. Originally, this was not a public area. However, from 1857 visitors were able to see displays of important manuscripts in specially designed cases. By 1922, when this photograph was taken, the exhibition of manuscripts had filled the whole of the Manuscript Saloon and the adjacent South Room. On display were early Bible manuscripts, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Magna Carta, Royal autographs and literary manuscripts, including works by William Shakespeare, John Milton, Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens. These documents all moved to the new British Library building at St Pancras in 1998.

Front hall, AD 1929

This photograph shows the front entrance hall in 1929. During opening hours this was full of visitors. On the right, the bookstall has a selection of books and postcards and there is a replica statue of the Greek poet Sophokles on the counter.

Front steps and colonnade, about AD 1935

This photograph shows a view of the steps and colonnade of the British Museum with the stone statue of Hoa Haka Nana Ia and a wooden carved Native American totem pole displayed outside. There are people sitting on the steps of the Museum with one woman walking up. The photograph was taken in about 1935. The bay trees were introduced by the Director, Sir George Hill.

World War 2 bomb damage, AD 1940s

This photograph shows bomb damage to the British Museum which occurred in the 1940s during World War 2.

Room 2 gallery build, AD 2005

This photograph shows the gallery build for Room 2 in March 2005.

Front of Museum, AD 2005

This photograph shows the front of Museum in August 2005.

Great Court, AD 2006

This photograph shows the Great Court looking from the south entrance towards the Reading Room in 2006.

Background information

1900

The Museum acquires a Predynastic sand-dried mummy from Egypt (sometimes known as 'Ginger') currently on display in Room 64.

1902

The Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir I Lenin obtains his first reader's ticket for the British Museum Reading Room.

1914

Opening of King Edward VII's Galleries by King George V and Queen Mary.

1918

Wartime closure of the Museum and evacuation of some objects to the Postal Tube Railway at Holborn, the National Library of Wales (Aberystwyth) and a country house near Malvern.

1931

Permanent establishment of a Research Laboratory (now the oldest such establishment in continuous existence) following the opening of a temporary conservation laboratory in 1920.

Appointment of the first female curator.

1936

Work begins on the Duveen Gallery to house the Parthenon Sculptures. The gallery was damaged by bombing during World War Two and following repairs finally opened in 1962.

1939

Donation by Mrs Edith Pretty of the objects from the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon ship burial. Now on display in Room 41.

24 August – Wartime evacuation begins of the Museum collection to Boughton and Drayton Houses, Northamptonshire, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth and Aldwych Tube Tunnel.

1941

Night of 10/11 May - Incendiary bombs destroy the south-west library book stacks and a number of upper floor galleries, students' rooms and offices.

1970

Transfer of the Department of Ethnography collection to the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens, Piccadilly.

1975

Work begins on the New Wing which is formally opened in 1980.

1997

Transfer of British Library books to the new building at St Pancras begins.

1998

2 March - Work begins on the Great Court at the centre of the Museum site.

2000

6 December - Opening of the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court by The Queen.

2003

The British Museum celebrates its 250th Anniversary.