

Chapter III

The Trustees and Officers of the British Museum: Their Attitudes and Practices During the Eighteenth Century

At one of their first meetings (14 January 1754), the trustees of the British Museum formed a committee¹ to frame rules for the public inspection of Sir Hans Sloane's collection according to the Act of Parliament of 1753. From the beginning the trustees recognized the necessity of making the Museum available to the public and were not initially slack in the attempt to determine how it should be done. This meeting was one of many that considered the basic question: "Who shall enter and how?" When the Principal Trustees (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Speaker of the House of Commons, and the Lord Chancellor) hired employees, as the collections increased, and as more people requested tickets, the trustees and officers reevaluated and changed the rules for entrance. Just as important, the trustees' and the officers' attitudes and policies were questioned and opposed by both the public and themselves.

Substantial thought and time went into the policies. The trustees considered the foundation and functions of the Museum, the public and the trustees' obligations to serve them, the protection of the collection, and the importance of museum rules. By the nineteenth century access at the British Museum bore little resemblance to Kenneth Hudson's description of an eighteenth-century museum or the British Museum of 1759, while attitudes concerning access remained virtually unchanged.

In April 1754 the trustees had agreed to purchase Montagu House, and the Committee for establishing statutes and rules began drawing up rules for visiting the Museum. In 'Rules proposed for the custody and use of the British Museum' [1754] the Committee considered the

¹Duke of Argyle, Earl of Macclesfield, Earl of Northumberland, Lord Charles Cavendish, Lord Willoughby, Philip Yorke, Sir George Lyttleton, William Sotheby, Charles Grey, Dr Thomas Birch, Dr John Ward, William Watson, Duke of Portland, Earl of Oxford, Lord Cadogan, Hans Stanley, William Sloane, Samuel Burroughs, Thomas Hart, James West, Nicholas Harding. *General Meetings, Minutes* 1 (14 January 1754): 9-10.

practices of the Bodleian, Cambridge University, and Sion College Libraries, and the Ashmolean Museum. Strategies for access varied. The Bodleian was free for all graduates of the university upon taking an oath not to purloin or damage the books. Undergraduates and others could use the books 'by leave of a congregation' and paying a small fee. All persons could transcribe from printed books or manuscripts, but no book could be removed from the library. Books had to be consulted and used there. The library was open during vacation time as well as during term, except on holy days, from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., and between Lady Day and Michaelmas from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and from Michaelmas to Lady Day from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

The library at the University of Cambridge was open to none below the degree of Master of Arts, except fellow commoners. The former took an oath not to abuse the liberty of using the library, "out of which they are permitted to borrow any book, under an obligation of returning it within a month."² In reality, the conditions at Cambridge were slightly different from the statement in the trustees' report. The library regulations were a set of measures passed in 1748 and stated "that no Person be allowed the use of the Library but members of the University Senate, and Batchelors of Law and Physick." No undergraduates could use the library. Books were lent on a quarterly, not a monthly basis and had to be returned on or before the next of the four following days: Michaelmas-day, St Thomas-day, Lady-day, and Midsummer-day.³

The Sion College library was designed chiefly for the use of the clergy of London but was not confined to them. Any person, either clergy or laity, was permitted to study there by a recommendation from a minister of a church in London, upon payment of an admission fee of six shillings. The library was open from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. and from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Books were not to be lent, "but under the hand of a Governor; with the time expressed, when it

²Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 53-54.

³David McKitterick, Cambridge University Library: A History, the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), p. 222-23, 608-09.

was lent, and when it is to be returned, which is not to exceed one month: Nor is this grant to be made upon any common occasion; or beyond the limits where the Governors live, that is, the city and suburbs of London."⁴

The Committee wrote an analysis of the Ashmolean Museum in a separate paper, and while the paper cannot be found, the Ashmolean was examined for similar criteria, and based on R.F. Ovenell's history of the Museum, the rules can be listed. There was a fee for a single person of a shilling, while all others, irrespective of the size of the party, paid six pence each. The Museum kept the same hours as the Bodleian. The keepers attended to the visitor, and if the stay lasted more than two hours, the keeper could demand double fees. Persons who wanted to use the Museum library had to submit an Order signed by the Visitors [trustees], and for as long as he continued at the university, paid the keeper five shillings, and twelve pence to the sub-librarian. No member of the university under the degree of Bachelor of Arts was allowed to use the Museum library, nor were books to be lent.⁵

The Committee concluded that because the British Museum was "of a more general and extensive nature, than any other hitherto established for public use" that it needed particular rules for its management. The report had nineteen recommendations, six of which have a direct bearing on this study. The books and manuscripts were not to be lent or taken out, but transcripts could be taken, there was to be a catalog of the books and manuscripts, the collection was to be locked in cases and drawers with glass or wire over them, the British Museum was to be closed on holidays, one week after Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide, and during August and September, and the Museum was to be open from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. between Lady Day and Michaelmas, and from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. between Michaelmas and Lady Day. The

⁴Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 53-54.

⁵R.F. Ovenell, The Ashmolean Museum, 1683-1894 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 88-89, 140-41.

Committee admitted that the plan was a sketch and needed to be perfected; nevertheless, they showed a concerted effort to be objective and thorough by studying comparable institutions and attempting to make similar and appropriate accommodations.

The Committee wanted to let people walk through the house before the official opening, even while the officers were arranging things. In 1755 they took a serious look at who should be permitted to use the British Museum and devised sets of rules. They composed 'Rules proposed to be Observed in making the Collections of proper Use to the Publick by way of Resolutions in a General Meeting of the Trustees'. The report set the criteria for determining who could have access. The introduction was the crux of the document and presented the members' biases.

In Order to prevent as much as possible persons of Mean & low degree & rude or ill behaviour from intruding on such who were designed to have free Access to the Repository Viz. for the Sake of Learning or Curiosity tending to the Advancement & Improvement of Natural Philosophy & other Branches of Speculative knowledge & in Order to render the said Repository of such Use to the Publick as by the Act for that purpose was meant & Intended. That no person or persons whatsoever be admitted to inspect or View the Collections but by a proper Authority from the Trustees or one of them, or by their Order in General Meeting made for that purpose & under & Conformable to the further Rules hereafter mentioned.

That all Learned That & Curious persons with leave of the Trustees as hereafter mentioned have free Access to View the Collections. . . .⁶

The Committee was very explicit in categorizing people into classes and associating values to the classes and determined that one should not infringe upon the other.

What was at stake was behavior and social control. Adam Smith touched on the issue when he wrote that as soon as the laboring man came "into a great city, he is sunk in obscurity and darkness. His conduct is observed and attended to by nobody, and he is therefore very likely

⁶Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 63-65; Birch, A Collection of Papers Relating to the Establishment and Government of the British Museum, Add. MS 4449, fol. 115.

to neglect it himself, and to abandon himself to every sort of low profligacy and vice."⁷ London in the 1750s, and, indeed, throughout the century, was noted for its crime rate. Discretion, therefore, was not unreasonable. There were many articles, pamphlets, and reports on the increase in crime in the city, with robbery, house-breaking, and pickpockets the most noteworthy.⁸ The trustees were afraid of groups larger than they could manage or watch. From the same report they stipulated that no more than five persons be admitted at a time. "If more be admitted at a time the Officers Assistant cannot have a sufficient eye over them."⁹ The Board had an important charge from the government, the nation, and to the Sloane and Harley families to maintain the security of the Museum. The trustees thought that by keeping out people of 'mean and low degree' they could protect the collection from theft and the Museum's reputation from ill repute.

Any group of uncontrollable people had the potential of wreaking havoc and destruction on the Museum and the collections. Although the Licensing Act of 1751 was designed to make spirits harder to obtain, drunkenness remained a problem, and contemporaries noted it among the lower orders.¹⁰ The Museum itself was touched by the problem. The porter was severely reprimanded for being drunk on the job and failing to perform his duties and was threatened with being discharged if it happened again.¹¹ The mob or crowd presented danger on a large scale.

⁷ Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations, ed. with an introduction, notes, marginal summary and an enlarged index by Edwin Cannan, 6th ed., 2 vols. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1950), 2: 280.

⁸ George Rudé, Hanoverian London: 1714-1808 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 96-97; Christopher Hibbert, London: the Biography of a City (London: Longmans, 1969), p. 154-58.

⁹ Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 63-65.

¹⁰ Henry Fielding, The Works of Henry Fielding, Esq., vol. 10: An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers, &c. with some Proposals for Remedying this Growing Evil, ed. James P. Browne, a new ed. (London: Bickers and Sons, 1871); John Shebbeare, Letters on the English Nation, trans. from the original Italian, 2nd ed. with corrections, 2 vols. (London: 1756), 2: 6; Richard Phillips, Modern London: Being the History and Present State of the British Metropolis (London: C. Mercier and Co., 1804), p. 136; George Rudé, Paris and London in the 18th century (London: Wm. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 29.

¹¹ British Museum, Board of Trustees, Committee Minutes 6 (1 April 1779): 1651.

The Trustees in trying to envisage how the lower classes might use the British Museum looked to the behavior of the people at the theatre, and thus they saw only riot and mayhem. The crowds were unruly and insulting to the performers and orchestra, and some theatres "had iron spikes along the front of the stage as a barrier against hostile spectators."¹² There had been riots at the Haymarket Theatre in 1738, the Drury Lane in 1744 and 1755, and the Covent Garden in 1763, and the damage was expensive. In his objections over admitting common people to the Museum, John Ward, a trustee, alluded to the turbulence at theatres when he said that a constable or a guard "such as one as usually attends at the Playhouse" would be necessary.¹³

Protests and uproars erupted over many issues, and while damage to property was the usual result, injury and loss of life was not unusual. A small gathering of the 'wrong sort' might lead to chaos and leave the Museum in ruins. The trustees singled out people from the inferior orders as potential trouble makers. In spite of the prejudices, such a view was hard to dismiss. Throughout the eighteenth century it was not uncommon for protesters to attack members of Parliament and other persons of authority or wealth and their property during times of social and industrial unrest. During the Gordon Riots Lord Sandwich sent a regiment of 600 soldiers to protect the Museum and for the defense of that part of the city.¹⁴ The Museum was not touched, but rioters destroyed churches, carriages, and homes with valuable contents, books, furniture, and paintings. The house of Lord Mansfield, a former trustee, in nearby Bloomsbury Square was burned to the ground, and Charles Townley, a Roman Catholic and a future trustee, almost lost

¹² Rudé, *Hanoverian London*, p. 185. See also George Winchester Stone, Jr, *The London Stage, 1747-1776, A Critical Introduction* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. clxxxiv-clxxxvii; Hibbert, *London*, p. 174-76.

¹³ Ward, *Papers Relating to the British Museum*, Add. MS 6179, fol. 61-62.

¹⁴ British Museum, Central Archives, *Original Letters and Papers* 1 (8 June 1780): fol. 578; *Committee Minutes* 7 (9 June 1780): 1714-15.

his collection of classical sculpture to the hands of the mob.¹⁵ After the third reading of the Corn Bill on 6 March 1815, crowds attacked the houses of known supporters of the bill including Lord Eldon and Lord Ellenborough, who were Museum trustees.¹⁶ On 7 March Henry Ellis wrote in his diary that he had "heard that the Lord Chancellor's House [a Principal Trustee] had been assailed by a mob, on account of the passing of the Corn Bill." He also noted that Mr. Meux's foreman's house on Great Russell Street had windows broken, and that the mob attacked Sir Joseph Banks' house. (Banks was an ex officio trustee.) As a result of the impending danger Lord Sidmouth sent fifty infantrymen that day to protect the Museum and requested measures for their accommodation.¹⁷ Over the years the trustees gained personal experience with people of 'rude or ill behaviour', and tending to generalize from one member of a class to the other members, it confirmed the pre-conceived notion that the lower classes could be dangerous and were not suited for the Museum.

After defining who should not have access, the Committee proceeded to consider who should. They maintained a policy that Sloane himself started, and their recommendations bore a strong resemblance to Sloane's will. They determined that the qualified applicant should be learned and curious and have the recommendation of a trustee. Sloane's desire had been that the collection should manifest the glory of God, confute atheism, be for "the use and improvement of physic, and other arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind", and that it "may be rendered as useful as possible, as well towards satisfying the desire of the curious, as for the improvement, knowledge and information of all persons. . . ."¹⁸ The practice of permitting scholars and people

¹⁵Thomas Holcroft, Thomas Holcroft's a Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Gordon Riots London, 1780, ed. Garland Garvey Smith (Atlanta: Emory University Press, 1944), p. 26; Ann Hopley, "How They Buit the BM," The British Museum Society Bulletin no. 28 (July 1978): 17.

¹⁶John Stevenson, Popular Disturbances in England: 1700-1870 (London: Longman, 1979), p. 191.

¹⁷British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Sir Henry Ellis, Diaries and memoranda, no. 1, Add. MS 36,653, fol. 31-33.

¹⁸Sloane, The Will of Sir Hans Sloane, p. 3, 28-29.

of rank to examine and use the collection and library demonstrated that he wanted the Museum to be used by people who could benefit and appreciate it.

Another aspect of the introduction that related to the intellect of the individual was the phrase, 'on such who were designed to have free Access'. The description applied to the people for whom the Museum was designed. Access to the British Museum was never based on a person's wealth, property ownership, or religion which were qualifications to the country's other privileges and institutions. The trustees hoped that scholars and other intelligent people would be the ones to apply. One's level of intelligence was not questioned, and there was never an examination one had to pass. A good education required wealth, and 'the intelligent' were those members of the upper and middle classes, because formal education "was more a consequence than a precondition of a social status, which in turn was primarily determined by one's title to property. The educated strata were also the property owning ones."¹⁹ People from the lower orders may have learned to read, but their backgrounds usually precluded an opportunity to become men of letters or science.

To use the collection one had to get permission from a trustee. If the curious person did not know a trustee, he attempted access through a friend who did. In a letter dated 2 January 1758 to Dr. Birch, William Martyn requested a ticket for a minister friend, and from Martyn's subsequent letters to Birch, networking became an effective means of getting a ticket.²⁰ In fact, using friends to request access to the departmental libraries and special collections became a customary practice, although circumventing the rules was not a blank check. The Board members took their position and power seriously, and those unfortunate applicants who neither knew a trustee or had a friend who knew a trustee received letters similar to the one Lord

¹⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 85.

²⁰ British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Thomas Birch, *Letters*, Add. MS 4313, fol. 234.

Grenville sent to W.H. Hone (18 Oct. 1818) who wrote that he did not think himself "at liberty to exercise the privilege of personal recommendation, except in the cases of those individuals of whom I had, more or less directly, some personal knowledge, and this is the answer which I have felt myself compelled to make on former occasions, as on the present."²¹ The plight of many applicants and the strictness of the system were demonstrated a year and a half later when Mr. Planta, the Principal Librarian, submitted to the trustees a letter from Mr. Hone requesting permission to consult the library. They ordered that a letter be written stating "that whenever he shall have procured a Recommendation in conformity to the General Rules of the Establishment he will receive a Ticket of Admission to the Museum Reading Room."²² Hone got a Reading Room ticket sixteen days later by having submitted a recommendation from a Dr. Latham.²³

While the officers arranged the collection and worked on the catalogs, there was a flurry of activity to frame the rules before the official opening. By 19 March 1757 the Committee announced that they had finished the plan for the Statutes and Rules and submitted them at the General Meeting, 7 May. The STATUTES and RULES to be observed in the MANAGEMENT and USE OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, By order of the TRUSTEES was a detailed account of the hours, manner of admission, and a host of other statements for the supervision of the Museum. In the preamble the trustees expressed the Museum's priorities.

This Museum being of a more general and extensive nature, than any other before established, may require some particular rules and restrictions for its management and security, suited to the manner of its institution. . . . For altho it [British Museum] was chiefly designed for the use of learned and studious men, both natives and foreigners, in their researches into the several parts of knowledge; yet being founded at the expence [*sic*] of the public, it may be judged

²¹British Library, Department of Manuscripts, William Hone, Correspondence, Add. MS 40,120, fol. 106.

²²Committee Minutes 10 (13 May 1820): 2755.

²³British Museum, Board of Trustees, Admissions to Reading Room, 29 May 1820.

reasonable, that the advantages accruing from it should be rendered as general, as may be consistent with the several considerations above mentioned.²⁴

The Museum would be open every day, except Saturday and Sunday, Christmas day, Easter, and Whitsunday and one week after, Good Friday, and any Thanksgiving or Fast days.²⁵ The hours were 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. between September and April, and the same hours on Tuesday to Thursday from May to August, but on Monday and Friday, only from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. during those four months.²⁶

To enter the Museum, a person applied for a ticket and gave his name, condition, and place of residence and the day and hour he wished to be admitted. There were not more than ten tickets for two groups of five each hour of admittance, and tours were given at 9, 10, 11, and 12 o'clock, and for the afternoons, 4 and 5 o'clock. If a tour was booked, the applicant could name some other day and hour. They lasted three hours, an hour in each department (Printed Books, Manuscripts, and Natural History) with the group staying together under the guidance of the officer. Such a small ratio of visitors to officer provided individual attention, but at the expense of delaying a person's admission. A person could visit the Museum as often as he pleased, but he had to reapply. Entrance was free, and servants and officers were not to take fees or rewards. Admittance for study required the permission of the trustees in a General Meeting or Committee Meeting, and entrance was for no longer than half a year without reapplication.

Books, manuscripts, or other parts of the collection could not be lent, except under extraordinary circumstances. If a member of the tour wanted to see a book or other part of the collection, the officer could remove one item from the cases at a time for closer inspection.

²⁴Ward, *Papers Relating to the British Museum*, Add. MS 6179, fol. 18-25. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the Statutes and Rules are from Ward's manuscript.

²⁵Fast days were King Charles I Martyrdom, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Gun-Powder Plot, and any other day ordered by the King.

²⁶They based the days and hours they were open on the practices of the Custom House and other public offices.

Catalogs of the books, manuscripts and other parts of the collection were to be placed in the departments to which they related. Finally, any person who misbehaved and continued such behavior after being warned would be ordered to leave. His name would be placed in a book in the porters lodge with orders not to admit him in the future without permission from the trustees.

In the preamble the trustees dispelled any possible doubt concerning the Museum's intended clientele: learned and studious men. The institution was created and designed for research; therefore, the rules and restrictions were 'suited to the manner of its institution'. The people who used it for those purposes had top priority. Apparently, there was a change of thought, for up to this point there was no reference to allowing the non-studious to visit. In fact, references to the non-studious had been condescending, and the references emphasized keeping them out of the Museum. In an undated manuscript that was written about the same time as the Statutes and Rules and taken from a trustees' meeting, Gowan Knight wrote that as the foundation had been made at the public's expense "it may be thought reasonable that it's use should be made as general as possible, consistant [sic] with that principal Intention, the preservation, duration & security of the several parts of the Collection. . . ." ²⁷ The trustees recognized that the public had a right to see the Museum, because they had financed it through a lottery.

Potential visitors for the tours had to complete an application in writing, so another requirement for access was the ability to read and write. The implications of literacy are very important for assessing who could use the British Museum. According to David Vincent's studies on literacy in England from 1750 to 1914, in the 1750s about half the population was literate, with male illiteracy at 40% and female illiteracy at 60%, and half the English population could

²⁷ Birch, A Collection of Papers Relating to the Establishment and Government of the British Museum, Add. MS 4449, fol. 118-20.

not write.²⁸ In his study of illiteracy in England from 1750 to 1850 Roger Schofield created a table of illiteracy rates for a number of occupational groups from a sample of twenty three parishes. Like Vincent's research, Schofield concentrated on the ability to sign one's name. He argued that since the sixteenth century, school curricula had been phased so that reading was taught before writing and that with intermittent school attendance, large numbers of children left school having acquired some reading ability, but little or no ability to write. In the eighteenth century the number of people who could sign was fewer than the number who could read, but larger than the number who could write. As a result, Schofield said the ability to sign one's name gave a 'middle-range' measure of literacy.²⁹ In the Schofield table for the period 1754 to 1784, 0% of the gentry and professionals, and officials, and 5% of those in retail were illiterate. At the bottom of the table, 46% of husbandmen, 51% of people in construction and mining, and 59% of laborers and servants were illiterate.³⁰ As a result, the people who would have found it the most difficult to obtain a ticket would have been the lower classes, because they were not capable of completing the application form.

While the trustees excluded the illiterate and 'wrong sorts' from the library through a process of recommendations, they impeded access to the gallery section by the proposed days and hours the Museum was open. The Museum's hours were designed to suit scholars, researchers, students, and other people whose responsibilities permitted them to attend during the day. Most people were at work during those hours. Many workers in the eighteenth century still maintained the customary holidays during Christmas, New Year, Easter, Whitsun, and Wakes

²⁸ David Vincent, Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, no. 19 (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), p. 1, 53.

²⁹ Roger S. Schofield, "Dimensions of Illiteracy in England, 1750-1850," in Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader, ed. Harvey J. Graff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 203.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Week, but the Museum was closed on holidays and Saturdays.³¹ It was notorious that Saint Monday was a common observance among artisans and domestic outworkers; consequently, they could have attended as long as they could get the work done in the remaining days of the week, and if they could get a ticket for Monday.³² By the turn of the century most employers had broken the Saint Monday holiday and had established a regular working week.³³ The trustees argued that the Museum needed to be closed on Saturdays for cleaning and that "no one, that can have any pretensions [sic] to come to read or consult the Books or MSS, can have any difficulty to acquire that priviledge, [sic] & none but improper persons can be excluded. . . ."³⁴ Even for the worker who had a five-day workweek, it remained difficult to find time to visit the Museum.

Laborers and office workers could have come in the evening, but Sir Hans Sloane did not permit lit fires in the rooms of the collection, and the trustees continued the practice. Fire was a frequent occurrence in London, and many of the early trustee minutes contained discussions on precautions, the proper implementation of stoves, and an adequate supply of water. As a result, with no provisions for artificial lighting in the public apartments, the Museum could stay open no later than 4:00 p.m. during the winter.

John Ward was against appointing days for admitting everyone without distinction. As he saw it, the Museum was not for the lower classes. "I find nothing in the Act of Parliament, which countenances public days." The collections and the library were "for public use", but it was "explained by saying, that free access shall be given to this Repository to all studious and

³¹Hugh Cunningham, Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, c. 1780-c. 1880 (New York: St Martin's Press, 1980), p. 57.

³²Robert W. Malcolmson, Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850 (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), p. 94-95.

³³Cunningham, Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, p. 58.

³⁴Birch, A Collection of Papers Relating to the Establishment and Government of the British Museum, Add. MS 4449, fol. 118-20.

curious persons, . . . as the Trustees shall think fit."³⁵ Ward argued that there were too few librarians to control people who could not "be kept within bounds" and who would insult the librarians and treat "with contempt & set at nought" any rules or directions given to them. If there were an open day, "no persons of superiour degree will care to come . . . so that this low Class with the lowest of all the Mobb, will make the Museum that day a place of division." Once the common people experienced this liberty, Ward feared it would be very difficult afterwards to deprive them of it. If, in spite of the warning, the Board permitted an open day, then there should be "a Committee of themselves attending with at least two Justices of the Peace, & the Constables of . . . Bloomsbury & . . . a Guard, Such as one as usually attends at the Playhouse & even after all this many Accidents must & will happen."³⁶ With the exception of one occasion in 1764 when several persons got into the Museum and forced their way through the rooms despite the officers' endeavors to stop the intrusion, Ward's predictions of an unruly body of people were not fulfilled.³⁷

Kenneth Hudson in A Social History of Museums briefly discussed the public that was suitable for access to an eighteenth-century museum, and like Mr. Ward's criteria, class and behavior were the basis for his definition. Dr. Mead of Great Ormond Street allowed students to copy his pictures every morning, and the doctor opened his house to members of the nobility, scientists, and philosophers for free, but Hudson said that there was no evidence that Mead considered admitting the public at large. Sir Ashton Lever placed a notice in newspapers that because he was "tired out with the insolence of the common People" who had visited his museum he would refuse "admittance to the lower class except they come provided with a ticket

³⁵Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 8.

³⁶*Ibid.*, fol. 61-62.

³⁷Committee Minutes 4 (3 February 1764): 906-07.

from some Gentleman or Lady of my acquaintance." In addition people of the lower class would not be admitted "during the time of Gentlemen and Ladies being in the Museum." Based on these two examples Hudson concluded that the lowest level for a museum public would have included the lower middle class, shopkeepers, clerks, minor civil servants, and aspiring and respectable artisans, because they would be literate and could be trusted to behave themselves.³⁸

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere Jürgen Habermas provided another sociological interpretation of the public. When the authorities addressed their promulgations to the public (all subjects), they usually did not reach the 'common man', but at best to the 'educated classes', whom Habermas identified as the 'bourgeois'. The 'bourgeois' were a reading public who occupied a central position within the public between the authorities and the common man. Habermas identified these educated people in the public as jurists, doctors, pastors, officers, professors, scholars, schoolteachers, scribes, merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers.³⁹

Ward's strategy of exclusion had to give way for compromises in which access on the 'public days' passed under greater scrutiny. The Museum aimed at controlling behavior by filtering the public. After the trustees examined the Statutes and Rules, the Earl of Macclesfield⁴⁰ made alterations, so that when the Museum opened, they had the statutes reprinted. Ward had successfully persuaded the Board to his point of view, for while the new rules were the same, there was one noticeable exception. Visitors had to give the application to the porter before 9:00 a.m. or between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. on some preceding day. He put the names in a register and gave it to the Principal Librarian every night, or an Under-Librarian

³⁸Hudson, A Social History of Museums, p. 25-26.

³⁹Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 22-23.

⁴⁰Ward, Papers Relating to the British Museum, Add. MS 6179, fol. 59.

in his absence, to determine if they were proper for admittance. If the librarian found no objections, he instructed the porter to deliver tickets to them when they returned a second time.⁴¹ The new rule made it even harder to gain entrance, for persons went under a character check and had to make two trips to receive a ticket.

This final amendment was an attempt to calm Ward's fear of unknown people congregating at the Museum, and it gave another dimension to the trustees' definition of the 'public'. Raymond Williams examined the writing profession in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and based on comments from Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth about the public or the crowd, writers did not know most of their readers, and Williams concluded that the public were individuals who 'seemed largely impersonal' or were unknown.⁴²

In The Fall of Public Man Richard Sennett looked at the shifts in the term, 'the public'. In the seventeenth century the public referred to the theatrical audience in France and consisted of an elite group of people associated with court life and a small group of people whose origins were non-aristocratic and mercantile. By the eighteenth century in Paris and London 'the public' came to include bourgeois people, and because there were so many bourgeois in both cities, the public encompassed family and close friends, acquaintances and strangers. Sennett went on to say that as cities grew, coffeehouses, cafes, urban parks, and other places where strangers might regularly meet developed.⁴³

The trustees had spent a great deal of time determining who should have access to the Museum. From the British Museum Act, Ward's critical remarks, and the final statutes, a general definition of the 'public' emerged. Like Habermas' public, the trustees intended their public to

⁴¹ British Museum, Abstract of the Statutes and Rules Relating to the Inspection and Use of the British Museum (London: 1758); British Museum, Statutes and Rules, Relating to the Inspection and Use of the British Museum (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759), p. 9-10.

⁴² Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 33.

⁴³ Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 16-17.

be educated, or, at least, literate. Both Sennett and Habermas referred to the ‘public’ as the bourgeois, and Hudson and Habermas listed bourgeois occupations for their ‘public’. With the Museum open short periods of time and closed in the evenings and on Saturdays, it would have been difficult for all but those people who were self-employed or in professional occupations to visit the Museum. Finally, the British Museum public was one that lay somewhere between the unknown publics in Williams’s and Sennett’s definitions and the public who visited Mead’s and Lever’s museums. The Principal Librarian did not have to know personally the applicants. He checked the lists for names of people who should not be granted access because of their behavior.

After the British Museum opened, the trustees encouraged the officers to offer opinions and improvements on the procedures for showing it. Knight wrote to the trustees that some people could not wait until the next Committee meeting for a ticket to the Reading Room, and that the Principal Librarian should have permission to grant leave in such cases.⁴⁴ At this time the Committee met fortnightly, while the trustees in a General Meeting met four times a year. The Committee backed Knight's request and recommended it at the General Meeting of 21 June, where it was deferred while the trustees studied the number of people who applied for and used the Reading Room. In the following year, on 19 June 1760, the trustees announced that the number of readers had not created any inconvenience and gave the Principal Librarian the authority to grant admission to the Reading Room when a Committee meeting had been cancelled, or if people were in the city for a short period or had a sudden need to consult material and it would be inconvenient to wait.⁴⁵ The reader could use the Reading Room until the next meeting of the Committee, whereby he had to go through the normal procedure of submitting a request for a ticket.

⁴⁴Original Letters and Papers 1 (4 April 1759): fol. 84.

⁴⁵General Meetings, Minutes 2 (19 June 1760): 328.

Dr. Maty recognized that there were inconveniences in guiding the tours and drew up a proposal dated 13 April, which was submitted to a General Meeting in June. He suggested that fifteen tickets be granted for the hours of 9:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., and that the tours should last two hours but without any fixed time in any of the Departments. He stated that the advantages of the scheme were many. The number of visitors would be greater by five every day in the morning and by ten in the afternoon. Furthermore, the two hours wasted by patrons among "books or manuscripts which few care for, and most are highly disgusted with, will be for the greater part employed in seeing things, which are the chief, if not the only object of their curiosity." As a result, there would be fewer people who would be tempted to see the Museum two or three times, the officers would have more time for the business of the departments, and "the intermediate hours of ten or twelve may be given to Foreigners of eminence not at leisure to stay. . . ."⁴⁶ The plan was double edged, for it increased the number of visitors, and it cut down the work the officers had to spend on the public.

The trustees were not so receptive and accepted Maty's proposal under consideration. They were looking at the statutes already in practice to determine if any alterations were necessary, and it took them two years to come to a decision. It was not until 30 March 1761 that they put the plan under a trial basis. Although the plan proved favorable, the trustees did not make it permanent until 26 June 1762. The Board was a body that would not be rushed, and any changes to policies would be a tedious drawn out affair.

At the same time that the trustees had received Knight's and Maty's proposals, the Committee drew up an article to grant leave of proper persons to consult with the officers out of their usual touring hours to have a closer inspection of the collection.⁴⁷ The following year the

⁴⁶Ibid., 2 (21 June 1759): 263-66.

⁴⁷Ibid., 2 (7 April 1759): 256.

trustees approved of the plan, at first according the privilege to foreigners but within a few days of printing the rules, amending the policy to allow natives to see the Museum out of ordinary times.⁴⁸

Up to the time that the Museum opened, the statutes had not been tested, and no one could be sure of their practicality. Once the Museum opened, theory became practice, and the trustees and officers had to apply rules in the face of day-to-day operations. The trustees had established that readers could use one book or manuscript a day, and they had to make the request the day before. In less than a month after the Museum opened, Dr. Templeman, Keeper of the Reading Room, told the Committee that he may have gone against the letter of the statutes by sending for more books and manuscripts at once, if requested, but had not gone against the spirit thereof. His explanation bore the regard he held for service to the students. The reason for "acting thus was this, that it would have been very tedious to Gentlemen to have gone on in a different method agreeable to the Letter of the Statute." He listed seven manuscripts Dr. Lowth ordered for one day and stated that "it would have required as many days as there were Manuscripts to have proceeded according to the printed Statute." The readers must have been aware of Templeman's favors, for he concluded, "If the Committee shall approve his continuing to send for more than one Manuscript or Book in a day for each Gentleman, Yet he begs that they will limit the number, for otherwise it will be impossible to contain them . . . or for the Messenger to carry them. . . ." ⁴⁹ The Committee changed the rule from one to two books or manuscripts. Without shelfmarks the librarians had to familiarize themselves with the location of the material, which made retrieval a slow process. The Museum was already in debt and

⁴⁸The General Meetings, Minutes for 23 May 1760, p. 322 state that they had finished the rules. In Thomas Birch's manuscripts, Add. MS 4449, fol. 155 there is a copy of the printed rules with a penned notation, 'received 16 June 1760'. Three days later the General Meetings, Minutes for 19 June 1760, p. 331-332 state the approval for the admission of natives.

⁴⁹Original Letters and Papers 1 (13 February 1759): 76-77.

could not consider hiring more employees. This incident demonstrated how unprepared the trustees were when they framed the rules and considered the students' needs. Although the rules were placed on the walls of the Museum, the students took advantage of the librarian's liberality. Templeman recognized the inconvenience of the rules and attempted to help the students, but the trustees perceived the results of unbridled book fetching and kept the number under check.

For the rest of the century the statutes and rules on access remained virtually unchanged. Entrance remained free, and it was a unique feature to people accustomed to paying to enter exhibitions. Count Frederick Kielmansegge, who had come to England to attend George III's coronation, wrote, "Everybody can obtain a ticket, and receive permission to enter the Museum daily for some time to look over the books, and no servant or warder, etc., is allowed to receive a penny under penalty of dismissal."⁵⁰ Twenty-five years later Sophie von La Roche was even more ecstatic. ". . . Just think of seeing so many useful things without its putting the connoisseur or the merely curious to the least expense, for all gratuities are strictly prohibited."⁵¹ Sylas Neville visited the Museum in April 1769 and wrote that it was "the property of the people of England, and to all the citizens who can be entertained by it. What a shame it is that other collections (also public property) are not equally accessible!"⁵² The Tower of London charged an entrance fee, and many English country houses were open to the public, and even when there was not a charge, it was frequently obligatory to tip the servants who showed the guests around. The Museum authorities occasionally published the rules in the press and magazines and included a notice that the establishment was free. Even so, authors and editors embraced the notion with enthusiasm. In A New History of London (1773) John Noorthouck extolled the

⁵⁰Count Frederick Kielmansegge, Diary of a Journey to England in the Years 1761-1762, trans. Countess Kielmansegge (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p. 173.

⁵¹La Roche, Sophie in London, p. 110.

⁵²Sylas Neville, The Diary of Sylas Neville, 1767-1788, ed. Basil Cozens-Hardy (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 68.

institution for not charging the public, and in one case said that the British Museum is "for the free inspection of all curious and studious persons. . . ."53 The novelty of free access lingered for many years, for when The Times published a snippet about it, the Museum had been open for almost thirty years. ". . . The British Museum, the first cabinet of curiosities in the world, is free to the public, and not one farthing exacted for seeing all that it contains."54

There were, however, two serious instances when free access came into question, and the trustees had to consider charging people an entrance fee. The British Museum was never well-endowed, and since 1762 the trustees had petitioned Parliament biannually for grants. On 10 February 1774 a Mr. Harris presented to the House of Commons a petition from the British Museum requesting more funds. Mr. Turner and Sir Edward Astley objected to the way the Museum showed the curiosities, but Harris argued that it admitted as many people as conveniently could be allowed. General Conway proposed charging the public which would raise a fund for the Museum. A debate ensued, and Astley proposed that a committee should examine a more proper method of admitting persons.⁵⁵

Three months later General Conway reported from the committee to the House. Dr. Maty, the Principal Librarian, informed the committee at the time he gave the evidence, that all the tickets were engaged for a week to come, and 300 more people were waiting. In the previous summer 2,000 people waited for admission and were not admitted within three months of the applications, and since 1759 there had not been one vacant day. There were seven officers to attend the tours, and according to the bye-laws, two officers attended each group. Maty cited

⁵³ John Noorthouck, *A New History of London, Including Westminster and Southwark* (London: R. Baldwin, 1773), p. 379. See also p. 744 for his other comments.

⁵⁴ The Times (30 September 1788), p. 2a, b.

⁵⁵ Sir Frederic Madden, [A Collection of Newspaper Cuttings, Views, etc. Relating to the British Museum, 1755-1870.] 4 vols., General History, fol. 21; The Craftsman; or SAY's Weekly Journal no. 810 (12 February 1774): 3; Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, Journal 34 (1772-74): 448-49.

numerous abuses to the system. The number of applications was considerable and caused delays, and many tickets were useless because people could not use them on the day they were intended. Combining persons of different ranks and interests in the tours was often disagreeable. The officers found it very difficult to attend to some of the 'lower Kind of people' who in many cases, had behaved improperly. The officers were subjected to abuse by the large number of applicants who had to wait for tickets and accused them of partiality.

The committee concluded that the problems arose from the length of time many persons were obliged to wait for admission on account of the great number of applications and the admittance of persons for free. They resolved that the trustees be permitted to charge admission on certain days of the week with some days and hours still allotted for admitting persons for free. While it was not necessarily a recommendation to keep people out, the plan was not intended to let everyone in as easily as before. The resolution failed by a vote of 53 to 56.⁵⁶ Although the government did not pass an alternative means of access or financing, it compensated the Museum by increasing the grant from £2,000 to £3,000 in the following year.

It was unfortunate for the hundreds who waited for tickets that Parliament did not seriously tackle the problem. The government barely financed the Museum's maintenance. There was not enough money for collection development or to consider permitting more people to enter. The trustees did not like asking for assistance, and it was with skill and strategy that they often timed their petition for the best chances of getting money from Parliament. The financial insecurity drove the trustees on 6 December 1783 to consider changing the mode of showing the Museum by charging and introducing the plan to Parliament.⁵⁷ They examined the assets and expenditures and the number and quality of the persons who were admitted for the

⁵⁶ House of Commons, Journal 34 (1772-74): 738-40.

⁵⁷ General Meeting, Minutes 4 (6 December 1783): 856.

past three years. The average annual expenditure was £2,242 3s. 8d., and the deficiency came to £1,092 19s. 8d., and the number of visitors admitted "when all the Tickets that may be granted according to the subsisting regulations are taken out" was 12,000. Applications were heaviest in spring and summer, and in winter there were often too few applications to fill the slots. They also found that those who had lately been admitted "consisted chiefly of Mechanics and persons of the lower Class few of whom would probably have been at any expence [sic] to satisfy mere curiosity." It appeared that no dependence could be placed on the regularity of revenue by charging, and if the amount could be determined, it would bear but a small proportion of the deficiencies.⁵⁸ When the Committee submitted the recommendation at the General Meeting, the trustees agreed and decided not to ask Parliament for permission to charge persons.⁵⁹

The decision was based on improper analysis and incomplete data. The British Museum's expenditures were over £2,242. The Royal Academy receipts for 1780 were £3,069 1s. 0d., and the Leverian Museum earned £13,000 from February 1775 to February 1784, or about £1,300 a year, charging from 5s. 3d. to half a guinea.⁶⁰ The trustees failed to note the public demand. It was true that in the winter there were fewer people, for the nine o'clock tours had often been cancelled from lack of applicants.⁶¹ Spring and summer were a different matter. In August 1776 Mr. Harper, a librarian at the Museum, wrote in a memorandum, "The applications of the Middle of April are not yet satisfied. The Persons applying are expected to send weekly to the Porter to know how nearly They are upon the List."⁶² As their calculations

⁵⁸ Committee Minutes 7 (16 January 1784): 1856-58.

⁵⁹ General Meetings, Minutes 4 (31 January 1784): 857-59.

⁶⁰ Sidney C. Hutchison, The History of the Royal Academy: 1768-1968, with a foreward by Sir Thomas Monnington (London: Chapman & Hall, 1968), p. 67; W.H. Mullens, "Some Museums of Old London. I. The Leverian Museum," The Museums Journal 15 (1915): 126-27.

⁶¹ Committee Minutes 5 (17 June 1774): 1424-25.

⁶² British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Rev. Sir Richard Kaye, Note-Books, Add. MS 18,555, fol. 14-15.

indicated, the trustees planned to add a charge to the tickets but not to increase the number of visitors per day. If they had considered admitting an unlimited, or at least a larger number of people with the price of a ticket as the criteria for entrance, they might easily have earned enough to cover the £1,092 deficiency.

In Maty's testimony to the committee, he said that combining persons of different ranks and interests in the tours was often disagreeable. The remark was indicative of some inside and outside the Museum who thought it would be better or would have preferred to keep the classes separate or that the lower classes not have access at all. According to Hugh Cunningham who researched leisure in the industrial revolution, public space was public in the sense that it was owned and belonged to everyone. In the later eighteenth century the wealthy tried to appropriate these public spaces for their own exclusive use, while at the same time, they frowned on public gatherings of the lower classes for whatever purpose. Leisure became increasingly class-bound.⁶³ Ward had wanted to keep the lower orders out, and obviously, Maty harbored similar sentiments. Carl Philip Moritz, who visited in June 1782, noted that the Museum was for everyone but was not pleased with the company. "The visitors were of all classes and both sexes, including some of the lowest class; for, since the Museum is the property of the nation, everyone must be allowed the right of entry."⁶⁴ The procedures for access to the galleries were geared to keep the illiterate and persons of bad character from entering.

Once the trustees acknowledged that the public had a right to see the collection because they had paid for it, then, according to Cunningham, it was a domain that was subject to appropriation by the wealthy and upper classes. In spite of the wishes of Ward and Maty and the difficult procedures for access, the galleries remained open for all classes. In fact, the opposite

⁶³Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p. 76.

⁶⁴Carl Philip Moritz, *Journeys of a German in England in 1782*, trans. and ed. Reginald Nettel (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 59.

of Cunningham's claim occurred, because as the trustees acknowledged in 1784, the majority of visitors "consisted chiefly of Mechanics and persons of the lower classes."

From the beginning the ticket system had not been a thorough way of obtaining access. There were cases when people did not pick up tickets, and the officers and messengers had given them to people or relatives who had waited around for a chance, and the number of 'no-shows' was enough for the porter to sell unclaimed tickets dishonestly.⁶⁵ There were numerous citations to the officers, and especially to the porter, over letting people into the Museum contrary to procedure, and admonishing them to the point of dismissal to follow the orders. People who arrived with another person's ticket could enter, as long as they advised the officers to have the name changed, for it was their job to turn away anyone that might presume to enter 'under a fictitious Name or Character.'⁶⁶ Originally, the trustees' intentions had been to keep improper people from entering, and a system that employed tickets was a way of monitoring access. But the statistics revealed that there were many people who could complete the rigorous procedure to get a ticket, and that the Museum could not meet the demand. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, many things had changed which helped contribute to a revamping of the statutes. The last of the originally elected trustees, the Hon. Philip Yorke died in 1790. The last two original officers, Dr. Charles Morton, the Principal Librarian, died in 1799 (and was replaced by the progressive Joseph Planta), and the Rev. Samuel Harper died in 1803. Members of Parliament took note of the statutes and criticized accessibility. Finally, the public had not proven to be destructive or unruly as some of the original trustees had feared. After the Gordon Riots and during the 1790s despite the threat of revolution, the public had remained orderly at the British Museum. It was time for a change.

⁶⁵Original Letters and Papers 1 (26 June 1760): fol. 123; British Library, Department of Manuscripts, British Museum Diaries and Registers, Add. MS 45868, fol. 3; Committee Minutes 5 (19 February 1773): 1368.

⁶⁶British Museum, Directions to Such as Apply for Tickets to See the British Museum, 1784.