

Chapter IV

The Trustees and Officers of the British Museum: Their Attitudes and Practices During the Administration of Joseph Planta

In early 1801 the Committee asked the officers to submit a proposal for a new method of admission. It was an opportunity to redefine the public. In a draft written by Sir Joseph Banks and in the report of Messrs. Planta, Harper, Gray, and Nares, there was conflict over the idea of charging entrance fees. Banks was in favor of the idea, and his reasons were based on the quality of the visitors who came to the Museum and the Museum's financial links and obligations to the state. He believed that persons of low education visited the Museum out of idle curiosity, and because they were in a tour with people who had prepared themselves by reading, that "the senseless questions of the former continually interrupt all rational communication between the officers & the latter descriptions of persons", and the officers could not handle fragile objects because they might be damaged or destroyed by "the rude hands of those who crowd [sic] round him, claiming a right" to his attention which he could not deny.¹ At that time, there was not a synopsis of the collection for visitors, some of the objects were not labeled, and many were arranged in crowded conditions. According to Alma Wittlin and her research on the presentation of objects in collections, the crowd's behavior at the British Museum would have been typical. "Without clues to the many strange things around them . . . people would rush around from one thing to another and hunt for meaning. They lacked in most cases not only a background of specific knowledge into which the new experiences could be fitted but all general education of a literate kind."²

¹Original Letters and Papers 2 (18 May 1801): fol. 745-47.

²Alma S. Wittlin, Museums: In Search of a Usable Future (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1970), p. 71.

Banks' report provides a unique critique on the public's behavior and the trustees' and officers' expectations. According to Michael Shapiro and his research on the public and the museum, as museum directors adopted codes of conduct in the nineteenth century "to the museum, a silence fell over the exhibition galleries." Audiences learned to restrain their emotions while they viewed objects in public places. "Exhibitions thus became textbooks in public civility . . . [with the visitor] avoiding modes of speech and conduct that intruded upon another's experience."³ It was the sort of behavior that Banks, Ward, and Maty yearned for in a visitor. It was a behavior, however, that many people were not accustomed to but what they later became conditioned to. The difference was between typical behavior and proper behavior, because they could not act the way they did on the street, in a park, at a fair, in the theatre, or at home.⁴ Instead of enlightening and elevating people, Banks said that the officers spent time protecting the collections and answering idle questions. The visitors were not willfully destructive but simply did not know any better.

Banks continued the debate by disputing the long term claim that because the people paid for the Museum they were entitled to a free use of it. "The Royal Academy was built with Money taken out of the consolidated Fund, & consequently raised by Taxes levied on the people"; however, no one thought the public had a right to free entrance but thought the Academy's expenses should be defrayed by those who visited it. On the other hand, it was lottery money, and not a tax, that purchased the British Museum, an institution "highly interesting to the learned" and "proper for the instruction not of those who learn only, but of those who teach the knowledge of" natural history.

³Michael Steven Shapiro, "The Public and the Museum," in The Museum, a Reference Guide, ed. Michael Steven Shapiro with the assistance of Louis Ward Kemp (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 236.

⁴Erving Goffman, Relations in Public, Microstudies of the Public Order (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 240.

Banks' evidence was slightly misleading. The Royal Academy had been supported by Royal munificence. Initially, it had been intended that "the Public may naturally expect the Liberty of being admitted without any Expence," [sic] and such was the members' desire, but they had to take money for admittance to prevent the exhibition rooms from being filled with improper persons to the "exclusion of those for whom the Exhibition is apparently intended."⁵ By separating the lower classes from the rest of society, the Royal Academy had done what Banks hoped to accomplish. The receipts from admittance paid the expenses, and the king made up the differences until the Academy was self-sufficient. Banks might argue that people's taxes paid the king's salary, and therefore, they were paying for the support of the Royal Academy, but taxes supported it in a very indirect way. He concluded that because taxes maintained the Museum, if another means could be found, it was to the advantage of the public to charge those who wanted to satisfy their curiosity with a visit to the Museum. He firmly reassured the trustees that no charge should be levied on those who used the Reading Room or who had need to consult the collection more closely.⁶

Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) was a botanist who had studied natural history at Oxford. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in May 1766, and in that summer he went with his friend, Lieutenant Phipps, to Newfoundland to collect plants. Banks obtained permission to accompany Cook's expedition around the world on the Endeavour in 1768 and returned to England in 1771. Banks collected many botanical, zoological, and other specimens from the lands they explored. In 1772 he made a voyage to Iceland where he collected further specimens and manuscripts. He was chosen to succeed Sir John Pringle as President of the Royal Society in 1778, and he served in that capacity for forty-two years, longer than anyone else. As President

⁵Royal Academy of Arts, The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, MDCCCLXIX. The First, "Advertisement."

⁶Original Letters and Papers 2 (18 May 1801): fol. 745-47.

of the Royal Society, he was an ex officio trustee and was a generous donor and an active member of the Board, especially on matters concerning the Natural History Department. It is not surprising that such a man should have studied the visitors and the manner of the tours and to have been irritated by factors that distorted the prime function of the Museum. He also may have taken note of the staff's complaints that work was interrupted by the tours.

The trustees showed Banks' draft to Planta and the under-librarians, who responded with a statement on it. The British Museum's access policies were liberal compared to other institutions. Very few foreign museums⁷ established by public authority charged a tax for entrance, and if the British Museum adopted the plan, its reputation would suffer. The officers did not counter Banks' plan with an alternative, because they could not devise any better mode than the one in practice. Should the Board accept Banks' plan, the officers suggested that it be publicly declared that the new mode was introduced to remove the great difficulty in the present method of obtaining admission and that the collected money would pay for additional attendants.⁸

As in previous cases concerning the statutes, the trustees did not make an immediate decision. They did not want to offend an influential member, and they were without an alternative plan. It was the dilemma of the British Museum - how to be open to the public but let students and librarians be free from interruption. In May 1801 the trustees began considering several measures for improving the Museum and in March 1802 asked Planta to make a plan of changes or additions he thought were necessary. This time, Planta was prepared and submitted a report that called for a simplification of the application procedures and an increase in the number

⁷ see Helmut Selig, "The Genesis of the Museum," The Architectural Review 141 (February 1967): 103-14 for a list of foreign museums and their admission policies. The opening hours were clearly not as liberal as the British Museum's.

⁸ Original Letters and Papers 2 (22 May 1801): fol. 749-50.

of visitors. These two key elements were the agenda for Planta's reform movement throughout the decade.

The report called for three attendants, as proposed at the General Meeting of 3 June 1801, to help the officers with attending the tours. Planta claimed that living habits had altered since the establishment of the Museum; therefore, it would be more accommodating to the public to change the opening hours from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. to 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and to discontinue opening the Museum on Monday and Friday afternoons during the summer. Finally, selling tickets might alleviate the inconveniences of the present system, but many people might think it was derogatory to the dignity of the Museum. Planta suggested a middle course "to allow persons to take, gratis, on their first application, such of the vacant tickets as may suit them; the list they produce being first inspected, and signed, by the principal Librarian, or in his absence, by the Secretary, or the Officer in waiting."⁹

Under the rules of 1759, visitors had to apply for tickets on one day and pick them up on another. When demand was excessive, and the Principal Librarian fell behind in examining the lists, the visitors witnessed a backlog in issued tickets, as demonstrated in the spring and summer of the mid-1770s. The new procedure greatly simplified access by eliminating the necessity of making two trips to the Museum, because people could apply and receive tickets on the same day. Before, in the case of Ward, the Board was faced with a trustee who attempted to limit access. In that case they compromised. In Banks' case, the Board said, 'No' to limiting access and agreed with Planta's plan and adopted it into resolution.

The printed rules as they appeared in January 1803 were, with a few modifications, identical to Planta's report. There were, however, two additions. Visitors were to apply at the Office for Issuing Tickets and to submit the name of each person, not exceeding twelve with

⁹General Meetings, Minutes 4 (8 May 1802): 955-56.

descriptions and place of abode. Previously, it had been part of the statutes that each applicant apply directly for a ticket. Under the new procedure, one person could apply on behalf of up to a dozen people. The trustees had redefined the public, because the alteration permitted more illiterate people to see the Museum, as it required only one educated member in the group who could complete the list for everyone.

It was an important change in attitudes, but considering the Museum's emphasis on knowledge and learning and Banks' critical remarks, the procedure was tempered by a sobering fact. There was a warning meant to satisfy those members of the Board and staff who might have thought that the new rules would invite the wrong sorts. "It is expected that Persons who visit the Museum be decent and orderly in their Appearance and Behaviour; the officers being instructed to refuse Admission to, or to cause to withdraw, any one who shall disregard this Caution.--Past Experience has shown the Necessity of this Injunction."¹⁰ It was nothing new to print statements on the public's behavior, former copies of the statutes had similar statements, but a thorough examination of the trustees' minutes, original letters and papers, diaries, and manuscripts failed to produce any evidence that would indicate what, if anything, the public had done to warrant the injunction.

The examination of a person's character was the domain of the Principal Librarian or attending officer, and once inside the Museum the officers had the responsibility of policing the visitors. The wording of the new dictum gave the officers more criteria by which to judge the public. Persons had to be decent in appearance and behavior. The trustees did not define 'appearance', but assumed that, based on the instructions, people would come to the British Museum in an appropriate fashion according to the dignity of the institution. Under the old system the applicant had two opportunities to become acquainted with how the trustees expected

¹⁰Original Letters and Papers 2 (14 January 1803): fol. 760.

him to dress when he applied and when he picked up the ticket. He could have seen people entering and leaving, and the porter might have advised him, especially if he were dressed inappropriately. Under the new procedure, the warning was necessary, because the public included visitors who were from the lower classes, and the opportunity to prepare for proper dress had been abolished now that people could enter on the spot. Cleanliness and the suitability of one's attire were paramount. Although soldiers and sailors had little difficulty entering, an individual dressed in livery was denied entrance.¹¹

The dictum that the visitor must be decent in appearance is a prime example of how the trustees molded museum behavior. There were certain standards of appearance for the museum visitor that the trustees intended to create and enforce. With the exception of the Ashmolean, the trustees had few comparable guidelines, and they could have settled for any state of apparel. The statement was vague, and although it did not advocate formal dressing, as Planta later put it, no one "would be pleased to find himself seated near the filth & Rags of St Giles's. . . ." ¹² The work clothes of the soldiers and sailors could transcend the work place and enable them to merge into gatherings at the Museum.¹³ There were certain clothes and appearances, albeit not clearly defined, that suited the demands of the occasion of a visit to the Museum, and the clothes for the man in livery downgraded the dignity of the Museum.

A hiccup developed in the system when the trustees discovered that certain people were monopolizing the tickets. Over the next two-and-a-half years the trustees initiated revisions to solve the problem and at the same time to let more people enter. The Museum was to be open on

¹¹The Times (1 March 1832), p. 5b. For a description of the importance of dress in English society, see J.H. Plumb, gen. ed., The Pelican History of Britain (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1982), English Society in the Eighteenth Century, by Roy Porter, p. 166.

¹²Original Letters and Papers 3, fol. 1160-61.

¹³Erving Goffman, Behavior in Public Places, Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 205.

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and people were to apply by signing one's name and residence. Five companies of no more than fifteen people were to be admitted every hour on the hour between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Should more than fifteen people apply at any particular hour, the late comers up to a maximum of fifteen, would be allowed to write their names for an extra tour for the same day at 2:00 p.m.¹⁴ For any additional people the directing officer would give them tickets for Tuesday or Thursday for one of three extra tours.¹⁵ Children under ten years of age were not admitted. It was a most notable change, for before 1804 people under eighteen were not permitted, except into the garden. Lowering the age of admission reflected a change of attitude towards youth and the perceptions of the Museum. The trustees voted to make the revisions of 1804 and 1805 permanent at a meeting on 3 June 1805.¹⁶

At first glance the new statutes might seem less accommodating to the public than the ones for 1803. The trustees had reduced the number of open days to three, but in reality they increased the number of people who could visit the museum by increasing the number of tours. The increase came in the form of a second tour at 2:00 and three additional ones each on Tuesday and Thursday should the need arise. By these modifications the trustees raised the maximum number who could visit in a week from 180 in 1803 to 360 in 1805, an increase of 100 per cent.

The trustees intended to have more visitors on the open days, but it made the Museum more crowded, and the public interfered with students who had come to work with the officers and the collections more closely. The trustees continued to see the research side of the

¹⁴Great Britain, Parliament, Parliamentary Papers (Commons), 1805, vol. 3, "Papers Respecting the Admission to the British Museum, &c.," p. 343.

¹⁵Great Britain, Parliament, Parliamentary Papers (Commons), 1807, vol. 2, "Regulations of the British Museum: With an Account of the Number of Persons Admitted to View the Museum, in the Years 1805, 1806, and 1807."

¹⁶General Meetings, Minutes 4 (3 June 1805): 976.

institution, and a potentially free day from visitors on Tuesday and Thursday provided the officers with more time to work on the catalogs and arranging the collections, and it allowed the students to use the collections without distraction.

As the trustees stated, they wanted to stop tickets from being monopolized. Anyone could apply for up to a dozen tickets by simply providing the names and addresses of twelve people. Very quickly, a few people could have the Museum perpetually booked, and if they were dishonest, they could sell the tickets to people who could not come at another time. To check the practices, the trustees reintroduced the policy of having people signing for themselves.

Up to this time the statutes for the Reading Room had remained intact. An applicant submitted a recommendation from a trustee or an officer where it would be considered at the next Board meeting. The Sub-Committee modified the rule in 1804 to make access to the Reading Room easier for more people. Applicants had to "specify their descriptions and places of abode; and as it might be dangerous, in so populous a metropolis as London, to admit perfect strangers, it is expected that every one who applies, if not known to any trustee or officer, should produce a recommendation from some person of known and approved character."¹⁷ The British Museum library had been accessible to natives and foreigners upon submission of an endorsed recommendation. Even so, it was a restricted library, for people had to know one of the 8 officers or 42 trustees, and it must have been very difficult, if not impossible, for people to become acquainted well enough with one who could have recommended them. Rev. G. G. Stonestreet was irritated that although "I had a brother-in-law residing in Bedford-square, and I was myself residing in Gower-street, although a clergyman, a graduate of the University of

¹⁷ "Papers Respecting the Admission to the British Museum, &c.," p. 346; British Museum, Acts and Votes of Parliament, Statutes and Rules, and Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum (London: Cox, Son, and Baylis, 1808), p. 117.

Cambridge, and resident upon the spot, still all those circumstances did not prevail against the rule of the Museum," and he had to procure a recommendation from a trustee or an officer.¹⁸

The potential for access to the Reading Room under the new procedure was much greater, because it eliminated the necessity of direct acquaintance and introduced third party recommendations. The officers took advantage of the opportunities and helped applicants whenever they could. In response to John Burke who did not have a recommendation, Henry Ellis wrote, "In Your Case there is a Gentleman residing at Brompton whom you probably know, Mr. Jordan the Editor of the Literary Gazette, whose testimonial will be satisfactory."¹⁹ It did not eliminate the need for a recommendation, and the trustees remained strict on that point. In 1806 and again in 1809 the Board issued orders to the officers that applications must be accompanied by letters of recommendation, and the Board had the officers advise all persons of the regulations on that point.²⁰

Upon the completion of the Gallery of Antiquities, the trustees introduced a set of regulations for the admission to view them. In February 1807 the trustees formed a Sub-Committee to create a draft of regulations for the gallery.²¹ Until the gallery was completed there had been no hurry to formulate anything. By the following February the trustees asked the Sub-Committee to begin meeting and to have Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy, attend to contribute on the most convenient regulations and times. Concurrently, the trustees

¹⁸Great Britain, Parliament, Parliamentary Papers (Commons), 1836, vol. 10, "Report from the Select Committee appointed in the following Season to consider the same subject," par. 5170.

¹⁹British Museum, Central Archives, Officers' Reports 14 (11 June 1831): fol. 2896.

²⁰Committee Minutes 8 (26 June 1806): 2286; General Meetings, Minutes 5 (13 May 1809): 1063.

²¹The Earl of Hardwicke, Lord St Helens, the Speaker of the House of Commons, Hans Sloane, Mr Rose, the Marquis of Stafford, Sir Joseph Banks, Sir George Cornwall, and Francis Annesley, General Meetings, Minutes 5 (28 February 1807): 1009.

asked Planta to come up with a plan to encompass the admission of visitors and artists to the gallery and to comment on the arrangement for admission to the Museum.

Within five days Planta finished the plan. Although it was highly likely that he had been thinking about alterations to the statutes, it was a testimony to his diligence and dedication that he finished so quickly. The trustees usually took a year or longer to create plans and reports. Planta was sensitive to the public and recognized the failures in the current mode of access, and the report indicated the Principal Librarian's sincere efforts to make the Museum more accessible.

The demand for tickets and the inconvenience of obtaining them, as well as, events at French museums prompted a change to the statutes, and Planta tailored the report to address and solve the problems. To ensure the plan's successful implementation, he interspersed the report with examples of the current system's faults, and built up the advantages of the proposals, and if adopted, how they could be implemented. The introduction alluded to the public's demands for easier access with the phrase, "the public will be satisfied with nothing short of immediate free admission such as they are told is allowed at Paris".²² There had been grievances about the difficulty of access to the British Museum compared to museums in Paris. M.P.s had debated the differences, and critics had noted the situation in Paris and complained about the procedure at the British Museum in publications.²³ During the Peace of Amiens tourists went to the Louvre, and when they returned to England, they told impressive accounts of the large crowds that attended and that visitors did not need to apply for a ticket. Under the current mode at the British Museum, if a person wanted to be assured of a ticket for the day, he had to apply "at so early an

²²Original Letters and Papers 2 (18 February 1808): fol. 865-68, and unless otherwise noted, all references to Planta's report are from this citation.

²³Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time 3 (12 February 1805): 410; The Times (13 February 1805), p. 1a, (8 July 1805), p. 3a; The Monthly Magazine 30 (1 Oct. 1810): 238.

hour as 10 in the morning, the Book being often filled in less than half an hour." Planta hoped to alleviate the problem in two ways. Daily attendance could be increased from 360 to 480, and by arranging simultaneously conducted tours, the waiting period for visitors to go on tour would be reduced from as long as four hours, to fewer than two.

The report called for the Museum's being open every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Wednesdays were reserved for select groups, either brought by a trustee or admitted by an order of the Principal Librarian. Planta increased the number of daily tours to eight with no more than fifteen persons in each. The first tour started at 11:00 a.m., and the others followed in succession as fast as there were attendants to conduct them, leaving a sufficient interval for the preceding tour to clear the first two rooms. With tours on their heels, it must have been an assembly line with the guides working to get the job completed as fast as possible. An American, Louis Simond, was vitriolic and did not like the arrangement. "We had no time allowed to examine any thing; our conductor, pushed on without minding questions. . . ."24

Seven years earlier Banks had submitted the idea of charging people in order to keep the poorly educated out of the Museum, because their conduct irritated him. Also, with numerous groups, there was apprehension over theft and damage to the collections. Planta was confronted with a dilemma. How could he create greater access for an unknown public, some of whom would be of the rude and mean sorts, and at the same time monitor their behavior and protect the collection and stifle any criticism or fear among the trustees? He recommended that five men, 'who may be called Warders' should be stationed in different parts of the Museum to prevent loitering and mischief. He thought that they should be chosen from among the Chelsea pensioners, especially non-commissioned officers, because they were well trained to discipline

²⁴Louis Simond, *An American in Regency England: The Journal of a Tour in 1810-1811*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Christopher Hibbert (London: Robert Maxwell, 1968), p. 44.

and order. Their uniforms and their veteran appearance would give them a degree of respectability, and even the loss of a limb would not disqualify them for the position. He had put the proposals under scrutiny, considered any objections, and answered them with a solution, so that the report could stand the best chances of approval.

While the trustees had time to consider the report, the Sub-Committee met from February through May and with the Council of the Royal Academy devised regulations for the Gallery of Antiquities. The Sub-Committee agreed with the Council's recommendations and made some minor alterations and additions. Students would be admitted by a ticket from the President and Council of the Royal Academy every day in August and September except on Wednesday and Saturday. A maximum of twenty students could attend the gallery at a time, and the members of the Royal Academy could have access to the gallery at all admissible times, "upon application to the principal Librarian or to the Senior Under Librarian in Residence."²⁵

The trustees had turned the Gallery of Antiquities into a setting for a very small public. Whereas people could hope to get a Reading Room ticket through their own or a friend's acquaintance with a trustee or officer, access to the Gallery was confined to Royal Academy members and students. It was the difference between a position that anyone could theoretically strive to achieve and one that contained a finite number of participants. Neither the trustees nor the Academicians gave any thought to artists or students who were not Academy members. The one advantage all artists had over readers was that the Gallery was open to everyone on the public days, which silenced criticism among artists and other visitors.

After all the time and work to formulate the statutes, it was ironic that the procedures should fall into abeyance soon after approval. Planta wrote that the Royal Academicians had not

²⁵Committee Minutes 9 (27 February 1808): 2359-60; Royal Academy of Arts, Council, Minutes 4 (16 March 1808): 51-52; 4 (10 May 1808): 56-57.

availed themselves of the regulation in favor of their pupils, and many students had sent applications directly to the Principal Librarian. Planta proposed that the artists be admitted in the same manner as in the Reading Room, and the trustees approved.²⁶

Because it was necessary to alter the statutes for the Gallery, at the following General Meeting (10 February 1810) the trustees asked Planta to report on the effects of the current rules for admission and whether the regulations could be improved. The result was the most revolutionary to date, and it resulted in statutes which, with minor variations, remained in effect throughout the rest of the period under study. The report called for the Museum to be open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, except Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun weeks, on Thanksgiving and Fast Days, and during August and September. It also stated "that all persons of decent appearance without limitation of numbers," could apply on those days between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., and after signing their names and place of residence, "be immediately admitted into the first Room of the Upper Floor." All the rooms, except for the Reading Rooms, were 'thrown open', and visitors were allowed to tarry in them and in the Gallery of Antiquities for any length of time. Tuesdays and Thursdays were for 'select companies' of the trustees or the Principal Librarian, but they had to be accompanied by an officer or an attendant. Eight persons were appointed as extra-attendants, and the officers in waiting, at least twice a day, were to walk through the rooms to see that the attendants were at their proper station and that order was maintained.²⁷

Planta did away with the ticket system and virtually redefined the public, because he opened the Museum to anyone. It was on this foundation that the Museum, different from the

²⁶Officers' Reports 1 (11 November 1809): fol. 226; General Meetings, Minutes 5 (9 December 1809): 1067-69.

²⁷Committee Minutes 9 (10 March 1810): 2439-40; General Meetings, Minutes 5 (24 March 1810): 1074-76.

Museum of the eighteenth century, struggled toward a new interpretation of access. A difference between the two was that the new rules presupposed and fostered a diffusion of the classes and greater trust in the public's conduct. As he did not suggest that the officers examine the list of names before permitting entrance, the evidence suggests that it was possible for illiterate people to see the Museum, if they had someone who could sign for them. (By the early 1830s the procedure had become even simpler, and people gave one name from their party and the number in the party.²⁸) The lists were used more for statistics, but should an incident arise, the staff would have the perpetrator's name and address.

Formerly, the tours had lasted two hours, and the group was under the supervision of an attendant who guided them through a labyrinth from which there was no deviation. Visitors now had up to six hours, and they could come and go throughout the building on their own as they pleased. They could even see the institution more than once in the same day as long as they arrived before 2:00 p.m. It was a significant change of view from the 1760s when visitors who ran about the rooms incurred the fear and a warning from the trustees. By 1810 the 480 daily visitors had demonstrated that the public had adopted a suitable conduct, and the clusters of visitors in the rooms had not resulted in chaos. The trustees had backed away from mistrusting the public as a mob. Since 1801 the Board had moved in direct contradiction to Banks' proposal and supported and encouraged Planta's goals.

Nonetheless, no one knew for sure the outcome of introducing such latitude, and even Planta had reservations. In addition to introducing eight more attendants to keep order, to watch for theft, and to prevent damage, he had the officers patrol the rooms. If there were problems in the system, or if there were a lack of order, the officers could correct or report on it, and if the Principal Librarian could not solve the problem, he could request the trustees to modify the

²⁸Officers' Reports 15 (13 July 1833): fol. 3383.

procedures, or if necessary, revert to the guided tours. Not only were the collections on display, but so were the people who attended.

With Monday, Wednesday, and Friday designed for unlimited numbers, Tuesdays and Thursdays were reserved for friends of the trustees and important people, especially foreigners, who wanted to see the collections without the noise and crowds that were present on the open days. In addition, people who could not wait until an open day could request a tour on a Tuesday or Thursday. As the trustees pressed for the completion of the catalogs and the collection arrangements, the officers increasingly found interruptions from the private tours time consuming and a nuisance.²⁹

One of the best accounts of the increased accessibility came from Charles Shaw of the Western Literary & Scientific Institution, when in 1835 he requested a catalog of the library and wrote, "Tho' it is a digression from the material subject, I cannot but express my surprize [*sic*] in passing through the Reading Room to have seen such numbers congregated, as I recollect in 1800, or 1801, being personally introduced by Mr. Planta (to whom I was known) that from that period to the early part of 1805, we seldom met more than four or five together."³⁰ In the same year Sir Henry Ellis, the Principal Librarian, wrote to the trustees for some hall chairs. "The Crowds on some of the late hot-days have amounted to almost 5000 : and the want of a few Chairs in the Hall has been felt."³¹ It was a considerable difference from the forty-five visitors a day who entered in 1802.

²⁹For examples of when the private tours created inconveniences to the staff see Officers' Reports 4 (10 May 1817): fol. 973, 12 (20 June 1829): fol. 2489, 12 (14 November 1829): fol. 2532.

³⁰Original Letters and Papers 12 (15 April 1835).

³¹Ibid., 12 (20 June 1835).

In spite of the accomplishments in letting more people enter the Museum and the Reading Room, in 1814 the British Museum came under considerable attack from three letters to the editor in The Times.³² They criticized the closure during August and September, because it made it difficult for people, especially foreigners, who could not arrange to see the Museum another time. Furthermore, they said that the statutes for a Reading Room ticket were unreasonable, and the library should be made more accessible like the one in Paris.

Planta came to the defense of the Museum and submitted to the trustees a statement of facts to disprove the writers. According to the statutes if persons could not come during the usual times of admission, they could apply to the principal officer in residence, "and every individual belonging to the House can vouch that a great number not only of Foreigners, but also of His Majesty's subjects were admitted during the last Vacation by the means above mention'd." The library was not closed during August and September but during Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide weeks. (It had been policy since 1759 that while the Museum was closed for the two months, the library remained open.) Nor was it true that admission to the Reading Room could only be obtained by a recommendation of a trustee, for the directions clearly stated that the librarians were allowed to recommend applicants.

In the document Planta digressed and added a footnote on the procedure. "Mr. Planta cannot mention it officially, but he may intimate that he has never scrupled to recommend Applicants who, upon enquiry, appeared to him to be entitled to the privilege, but who happened not to be acquainted with any Trustee or Officer," and if the trustees checked the list of readers, "the greatest Number of Admissions Stand in his Name." Planta saw the limits of taking a literal interpretation of the statutes, and that the Reading Room public was a body who were qualified by 'need' more than by intimacy with a museum official. The trustees apparently agreed, or at

³²The Times (8 September 1814), p. 2e, (9 September 1814), p. 2b, (14 October 1814), p. 2d.

least looked the other way, because they made no objection to Planta. It was a situation, though, they did not want to make formal or to advertise.

As to the idea of an unlimited admissions policy, Planta contended that no one "would be pleased to find himself seated near the filth & Rags of St. Giles's; or the more specious appearance frequently assumed by Swindlers & perhaps even Robbers." In addition, the interior design of the Reading Room would not permit a long table down the middle of a gallery to provide a close inspection over a great number of readers; therefore, a degree of caution was necessary in the mode of admission. The lower classes in England "in the fervour of independence, pride themselves in shewing a disdain of Order, & in doing essential mischief for which we have no means of obtaining immediate redress." Planta stated that there had been three cases of minor damage to the collections within the last few months. The summer vacation was necessary for cleaning the Museum and the collections because of the sooty atmosphere, and there was a large brewery in the vicinity. The four attendants were hardly sufficient to dust, clean, and rearrange the collections in the two months.³³

Within two weeks of the report, the Board received a request from Mr. Hargrave for the private use of a room to consult the library which was formerly his own, and which the government had purchased in 1813 for £8,000. The Board must have been severely wounded by the editorials in The Times, because Hargrave's request prompted the trustees themselves to consider the increased facilities given to the public "and directed the following Minutes to be entered upon their Proceedings." It was not the first time that adverse publicity had been voiced in a public forum. Since the beginning of the century newspapers, magazines, and M.P.s had criticized the management and procedures at the Museum. It was, though, the first time that the trustees seriously considered the accusations and were forced to respond. The trustees "have for

³³Original Letters and Papers 3, fol. 1160-61.

a long time past endeavoured to increase the facilities allowed to the Public for inspecting every part of the British Museum", and for the last four years the number of visitors had been from 25,000 to 30,000 annually. They had been restrained from allowing a general admission "by no other consideration than the security of the Collections" and "the means of paying a sufficient number of Attendants for this purpose." They claimed that they had always been desirous of giving the utmost access to persons who used the Reading Room. It was the distribution and size of the rooms that prevented the accommodation of a large number of people in one room. More reading rooms could not be provided without incurring a large expense in wiring the book-cases in the rooms that might be used for reading purposes and paying additional attendants for supplying books. The officers had executed their duties according to the trustees' intentions and had given the most liberal admission to all visitors and readers according to the rules. They concluded "that whenever it shall be the pleasure of Parliament to supply the Means requisite for affording more extensive accommodation to the Public, the Trustees will make immediate Arrangements for giving them the fullest effect."³⁴ It was an ironic conclusion, because more than half the Board members were M.P.s, most of whom were members of the cabinet.

It was an error of judgment that the trustees did not publish Planta's or their own observations to refute the charges. There was hostility against the Museum, and a clear statement of facts could have muted critics and rallied support. The trustees had never been called to account for themselves in such a concentrated (3 articles in 5 weeks) and vitriolic manner. True, ten years earlier the trustees in Parliament defended the Museum against accusations from other M.P.s, but the Museum was a national institution founded by an Act of Parliament, the budget was submitted annually, and major collection purchases and legislation concerning the disposal of items and taxes on bequests had gone through Parliament. To begin

³⁴General Meetings, Minutes 5 (10 December 1814): 1131-32.

discussing trustee meetings and policies in the press would have been unheard of. The trustees were responsible to the government and not to the public. Rebutting the editorials, when M.P.s had not asked for an accounting, would have weakened the Board's authority to control the Museum, could have forced the trustees to answer publicly future criticisms or demands, and, in spite of the damage done by the power of the editorials, it would have meant rule by public opinion. The trustees remained resolutely quiet when the press leveled charges against it. Why then, should they go to the trouble of formulating an answer that was not going to be published? If there were an enquiry, and for future reference against any additional accusations, the trustees would have a ready answer. Also, a written record would be of help to later trustees and show that they had considered the matter.

The Reading Rooms had been a topic of discontent over the years. Readers had complained of the cold, the dust, and the crowded seating. As soon as new rooms were added or walls were removed to grant more space, the seating became just as crowded. The trustees did not deny Reading Room tickets on the basis that there were too many readers. The allusion to lack of accommodation was a reference to readers having to wait for a space to sit and not to the denial of a ticket. More space would permit more readers at one time, but it would require more attendants which the Museum could not afford.

Writers to The Times had complained of the limited access, and one specifically charged that the books were not stolen from the national library in Paris, "and how much less likely are they to be solen [sic] here, where the national character is certainly not less that of decided honesty?"³⁵ It was a broad claim that with greater access, nothing was stolen from the Paris library. Planta and the trustees replied that restrictions were necessary because not everyone

³⁵The Times (14 October 1814), p. 2d. See also The Times (10 October 1823), p. 2c, (18 November 1825), p. 4a for other writers' complaints.

could be trusted. In the statutes for 1805, they stated why the references were necessary, 'as it might be dangerous, in so populous a metropolis as London, to admit perfect strangers.'

When Parliament created the British Museum, the government gave the trustees a charge to maintain the collection. It involved not only preservation, but protection from destruction and theft. From the beginning the trustees took precautions to carry out the responsibility. At least one officer had to be in residence at all times. Readers and visitors had to be approved in one form or another, and once they entered the Museum, the officers guided them on the tours and watched them while they read. Most of the collection was in glass cases, and because the tours included the Departments of Printed Books and Manuscripts, the book cases had wire casing. If the group wanted to examine a book or an object more closely, the officer could remove one item at a time. Readers were permitted no more than two books or manuscripts at a time.

Because theft and destruction were in the back of the trustees' minds, emphasis lay on keeping the wrong sorts from entering the Museum to prevent harm from coming to the collection. From 1759 to the end of the century, there were numerous resolutions, orders, and warnings on the admission of people according to the statutes. People were kept out, and the numbers in the tours were kept small. Before the statutes were changed in 1803 there were fewer than 12,000 people visiting the Museum and no more than 160 using the Reading Room annually with very few cases of theft or destruction to the collection.³⁶

With the easing of restrictions in the first decade of the nineteenth century, more people entered the Museum. The trustees countered the increase with more attendants. Unfortunately for everyone concerned, with so many efforts at making the Museum more accessible, a theft of

³⁶Original Letters and Papers, "Account of the Number of Persons Admitted to a Sight of the British Museum in each Month from the 1st January 1805 inclusive to the 27th of June 1807," 2: fol. 860*-860**; Great Britain, Parliament, Parliamentary Papers (Commons), 1808, vol. 6, p. 41, "Regulations concerning the British Museum, Since the 29th of June 1807."

intense magnitude occurred that forced the officers to rethink whom they recommended for a ticket.

On 21 June 1806 Mr. Woodburn, a print seller, wrote to the trustees that over the past month to six weeks he had purchased seven prints from Mr. Deighton. Dealers had been looking at Cracherode's collection, comparing it with his catalog, and noticed the Museum did not have all of them. They thought it was possible the prints never came when the collection was bequeathed in 1799, but they were suspicious. When Woodburn showed a Mr. De Clausen the prints, he recognized them as part of the Cracherode Collection. The trustees investigated the charge, and Deighton confessed to having stolen over one hundred prints, many of which were Rembrandts, and selling them to dealers and collectors. He admitted that he met William Beloe, the Keeper of Printed Books, in 1794 under the guise of improving his profession as a print dealer and maintained the friendship to further the crime. He sold the first print in May 1795 and had stolen works from the Cracherode Collection over a period of 6 to 24 months earlier.³⁷

Deighton helped the Museum recover 112 prints of Rembrandt, 19 prints of Albert Durer, and 7 portraits. Many of the Dutch school etchings were pillaged, but a great part were recovered. The value of the recovered Rembrandts was estimated at £400 with about 30 to 40 works still missing, and Deighton spent £375 of his own money to get various articles returned.³⁸ Beloe was fired for his negligence, while Deighton was not charged. There was no up-to-date catalog, so no one could be sure how many works had been stolen in spite of Deighton's claims. The trustees had the prints methodically arranged, bound in volumes, stamped as the property of the British Museum, and hired Thomas Philipe to make a

³⁷Original Letters and Papers 2 (21 June 1806): fol. 802-07, 820-22.

³⁸Ibid., 2 (13 December 1806): fol. 841*-44.

catalogue.³⁹ Also, because Beloe had been taken in by Deighton, the trustees subsequently ordered that all applications for renewal of a ticket to the Reading Room must state when the permission was first granted and on whose recommendation.⁴⁰ [emphasis added]

Six years later (November 1812) Henry Ellis, Under Librarian of the Department of Manuscripts, reported to the Committee that a volume in the Harleian Collection had been missing for some time. A month later when he reported that it could not be found, the trustees ordered a list of the names of the persons using the Reading Room with the dates of their first admission and by whom recommended. [emphasis added] They added that until further notice no recommendations be accepted unless from a trustee or an officer.⁴¹

In the case of the manuscript and in the one of the stolen prints, the trustees considered the people who recommended the readers. When the writer to The Times grumbled about the necessity of a recommendation and the difficulty in getting permission to use the library, the complaint fell upon men who had witnessed a colleague lose a job because he had been deceived by a reader. Twenty years later, Josiah Forshall, head of the Department of Manuscripts, stated that "if a single manuscript were to be lost, through any want of care, I should have to make it good, if it could be made good, or to pay its estimated value; and therefore, for my own sake as well as for the sake of the public, I of course exercise great caution."⁴² Planta had broadened access, but the officers realized that they had to be very prudent over whom they recommended.

³⁹Ibid., 2 (3 July 1806): fol. 829-30; General Meetings, Minutes 5 (20 December 1806): 1003-04.

⁴⁰Committee Minutes 8 (14 March 1807): 2315.

⁴¹Ibid., 9 (14 November 1812): 2535; 9 (12 December 1812): 2535-36.

⁴²"Report from the Select Committee appointed in the following Season to consider the same subject," par. 4422.

As a result of Planta's alterations to access policies, he redefined the Museum public. Many more people could visit the Museum. He lowered the age of admission to ten. Because there were no applications to complete, the illiterate could visit the Museum. Banks had intended to keep the poorly educated from entering the Museum, because their conduct irritated him. The trustees rejected the idea, but the Museum adopted ways to mold museum behavior. Visitors were warned to dress appropriately for the institution. The Museum hired warders to monitor the visitors, and the officers walked through the galleries to see that all was well. As a result, Planta disproved Ward's prediction of an unruly mob creating havoc, because no destruction occurred after the visitors were permitted to roam the galleries freely.