

The British Museum – A Fam. Trip report

Way back when the world was young and there were only three black and white television channels, your author was often on school trips to the British Museum for visits on, at various times, The Ancient Mesopotamians; The Greeks; The Romans; The Stone Age and The Bronze Age. My Mother still has some of the resulting projects; all attached to coloured sugar paper and bound with treasury tags. What I remember most was feeling car-sick from the coach-trip; the fact that you had eaten all your lunch and it was only 9.30; and the strange sensation that as you approached the museum your legs began to feel like lead and all you wanted to do was sit or even lie down on the floor, forever! Even now I can be afflicted with the 'leaden-foot' syndrome when walking towards large and imposing entrance gates.

The British Museum, which is currently celebrating its 250th anniversary, has changed however. Originally made up of the collection bequeathed to the nation by Sir Hans Sloane (inventor of milky drinking chocolate) in 1753, it was housed in Montagu House, where the present museum now stands. Interestingly, Buckingham House (now Buckingham Palace) was also considered but was thought of as too expensive and the location un-suitable. The museum opened to the public on the 15th January 1759. Over the following 200 years or so, the building has expanded to its present size to accommodate the ever-increasing collection. In 1857 the round reading room designed by Sydney Smirke, opened with the circular dome being then the second widest dome in the world (the Roman Pantheon dome in Rome is slightly larger). However, unlike the Pantheon, which is made from Roman concrete, the reading room has a steel structure covered with a type of papier-mâché. In 1997 what is now called The British Library collection was moved to its new site at St. Pancras and the central courtyard and surrounding book storage areas were re-developed to create the Great Court by the architect, Norman Foster with the original reading room now encompassed by a stunning steel and glass roof which now covers the space. This has rejuvenated what was in danger of becoming a rather moribund organisation and The British Museum is now one of the most visited attractions in London as well as being one of the largest and most important museums in the world.

The London museums have hitherto had a rather ambivalent attitude to filming in their buildings. However that is now changing and recent trips to the V&A, The Imperial War Museum and now the British Museum have shown that there is a wealth of possibilities for a wide variety of productions and dramas. Recently the museum starred in an episode of ITV's Primeval showing that they are happy to play host to the more fantastic and tongue-in-cheek type of drama though they balked at a car chase through the Egyptian Galleries for National Treasure.

Our trip started at 10.00am on a Saturday morning. This is when the main galleries open though the Great Court and exterior courtyard are open from about 9.30. It was interesting to see how busy the spaces were even this early in the museum's day and would mean that any filming in the public areas would have to be completed and cleared by 9.00am.

We met at the Information Desk and were escorted up to the Board Ante Room for coffee and croissants and to meet our guides before setting off around the museum. Before we left we were gently reminded that as we were going into both public and 'backstage' areas, to be careful not to touch or pick up any artefacts that might be left lying on tables or workspaces. It bought home just how valuable all the items in the museum are.

Our first stop was the Hartwell Room on the western side of the main entrance. This is a good-sized boardroom with walls painted in a turquoise blue colour and with views out onto the front of the museum and its courtyard. It would be a good place for a POV or arrival shot of the front steps and portico as well as being an excellent boardroom set for another location, a bank for instance.

From here we exited out onto the front of the museum and colonnade and steps. Built in 1852 by Sir Robert Smirke (brother to Sydney Smirke who designed the reading room), it is an example of Greek Revivalist Architecture. There are 44 columns with a pediment over the main entrance, which depicts "The Progress of Civilisation". The western side of the entrance has an area, which is currently being developed as a temporary garden exhibit. There is space here to record scenes even when the museum is open to the public providing they are not inconvenienced. The courtyard is large enough to facilitate fairly large-scale period filming with horses and carriages or motor vehicles during out-of-hours working.

Returning back inside we were shown some of the many differing staircases and passages, mostly lined with glass-fronted bookcases and creating great spaces for a period drama. Finally we arrived at The Old Compass Room. This is a currently unused space that was once a small library and work area. Although it has desks and some furniture it could easily be re-dressed to suit a production and because it is not a public area, would be available during a normal working day.

There are several libraries within the museum, however they are working spaces for researchers and so only available out-of-hours which mainly means overnight and in some cases a Sunday. We also looked at a couple of Viewing Rooms where artefacts and books have recently been stored. These are currently empty areas where filming is easier to arrange during normal daylight hours.

The Museum has several offices of all sorts of shapes and sizes, from individual period looking cubicles to more open-plan spaces with shelving and file storage. Again these are working spaces so filming would be by arrangement and out of normal working hours. As with all the spaces it is best to discuss all requirements with the Broadcast Unit.

Passing through a small door, we suddenly found ourselves back in the public area, in The Enlightenment Gallery. This area was originally called The Kings Library after the donation of the Old Royal Library by King George II and is housed in the oldest part of the building. Careful restoration work has revived the gallery to its previous glory with the original oak and mahogany flooring and dark mahogany bookcases surmounted by the gilded balcony that runs around the room. Here original artefacts that chart the history of civilisation are exhibited, including a copy of the Roseta Stone (the original is elsewhere in the museum) and notebooks belonging to both Jean-Francois Champollion and the physicist Thomas Young who worked to decipher the Egyptian Hieroglyphics using the Roseta stone as a crib. The floor is precious and needs to be well protected from equipment and the balcony is not available for lighting equipment, however the layout of the space is pretty much as it was in the 1750's and would make a great location.

Having admired the Great Court, we went down underneath the Reading Room. Here in spaces where books were formally stored, Norman Foster Associates have created a fine Education area with two lecture theatres, seating 323 and 124 people respectively and large reception and exhibition spaces. Nearby was the Ford education area, made possible by a donation from the Ford Motor Company. This is an area used by visiting schools and contains lockers, toilets and tables and seating areas. While filming in the Great Court, this would make a good base for catering and extras etc.

From this underground area we explored the tunnels that run under and around the Great Court. These are used to access storage areas and offices and are not open to the public. For this reason, they are possibly available during normal working hours. There is no natural light here so they could be used in day-for-night filming sequences. The look is bright and clean and both contemporary and Victorian looking though they all tend to have modern services, pipes and cables running along their roofs and walls.



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Next we went to the Prints and Drawings Room. This is a real treat. Part of the original buildings built in about 1840; this large room has a high ceiling with skylights that give perfect natural light. There are wooden desks and a higher balcony passing around the room and dark wooden bookshelves surrounding the walls. This is an area that could easily be dressed for either period or a modern scene. The room is used by Museum staff and the public and is therefore only available after 1600hrs, Monday – Friday or at weekends.

Passing through another staff only door, we ended up in the Egyptian Galleries, where there is a unique atmosphere. The imposing stone bust of the Pharaoh Ramesses II, bought back to the UK by the Italian one-time circus strongman and later archaeologist, Giovanni Belzoni as part of the Henry Salt collection, dominates the room. It would be very clear that a scene set in this space is in a museum. This is where the Primeval actors battled with Egyptian artefacts. A popular public space, this gallery is not available during opening hours.

It was most unfortunate that we were unable to get access to another of the older rooms, The Arched Room. Built in 1837, the room was used as book storage for the British Library until 1997 and is now part of the Department of the Middle East. Students use the space for study and also for storage of part of the museum's collection of cuneiform writing tablets. As a consequence filming is only permitted after 1600hrs Monday – Friday. Because of the value of the items in the room, any film lights must be cold-lamp/low level type.

By now leaden foot syndrome had afflicted us all and so we made our way back to the Great Court to say our farewells.

As an extra treat, the museum had complimentary admission to the current Shah 'Abbas exhibition in the reading room, which some of us took advantage of. The Shah 'Abbas ruled Iran between 1587 and 1629. He was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I and was known to Shakespeare who mentions him in *Twelfth Night* when Sir Toby Belch likens an adversary to one who had been "*fencer to the Sophy*" (Act III; Scene iv) and therefore a fearsome foe. The Shah was responsible for the opening out of Iran to the Western world and strengthened relationships with both Europe and Asia. Iran was ideally placed in the middle between China and Europe and became an important crossroads of ideas and trade. The exhibition has some wonderful examples of the incredibly high quality of workmanship of textiles, carpets and gold and silverwork as well as writings and calligraphy.

A huge thank-you to the members of the Broadcast Unit who gave up their Saturday to show us around: Rosalind Winton, Rosie Wheetcham, Patricia Wheatley and James Peachey.

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