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# THE MUSEUM

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

**RUPERT SMITH**

Foreword by  
**NEIL MACGREGOR**

Accompanies the TV Series

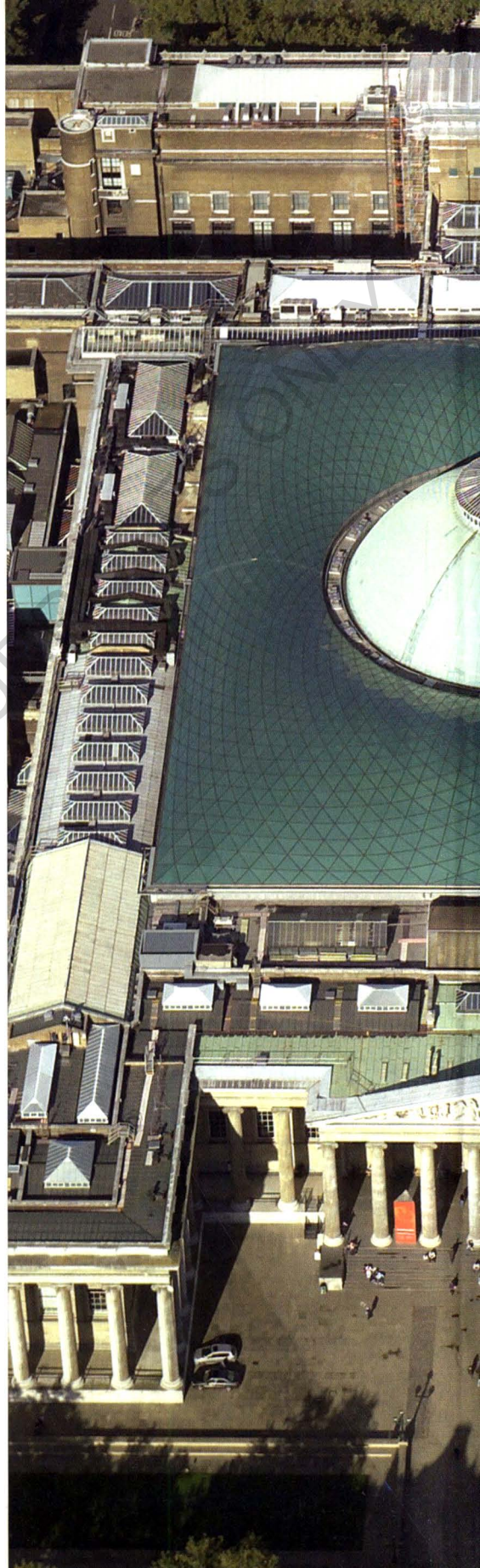


Egyptian mummies, Michelangelo's drawings, sculptures from Greece and Rome, exquisite porcelain from China, bronze masterpieces from Africa, the remarkable finds from Sutton Hoo – these are just some of the awe-inspiring objects in the British Museum's famous collections. But the Museum is more than just a treasure house: it is a London landmark, a tourist magnet, a national and international resource – a museum of the world for the world.

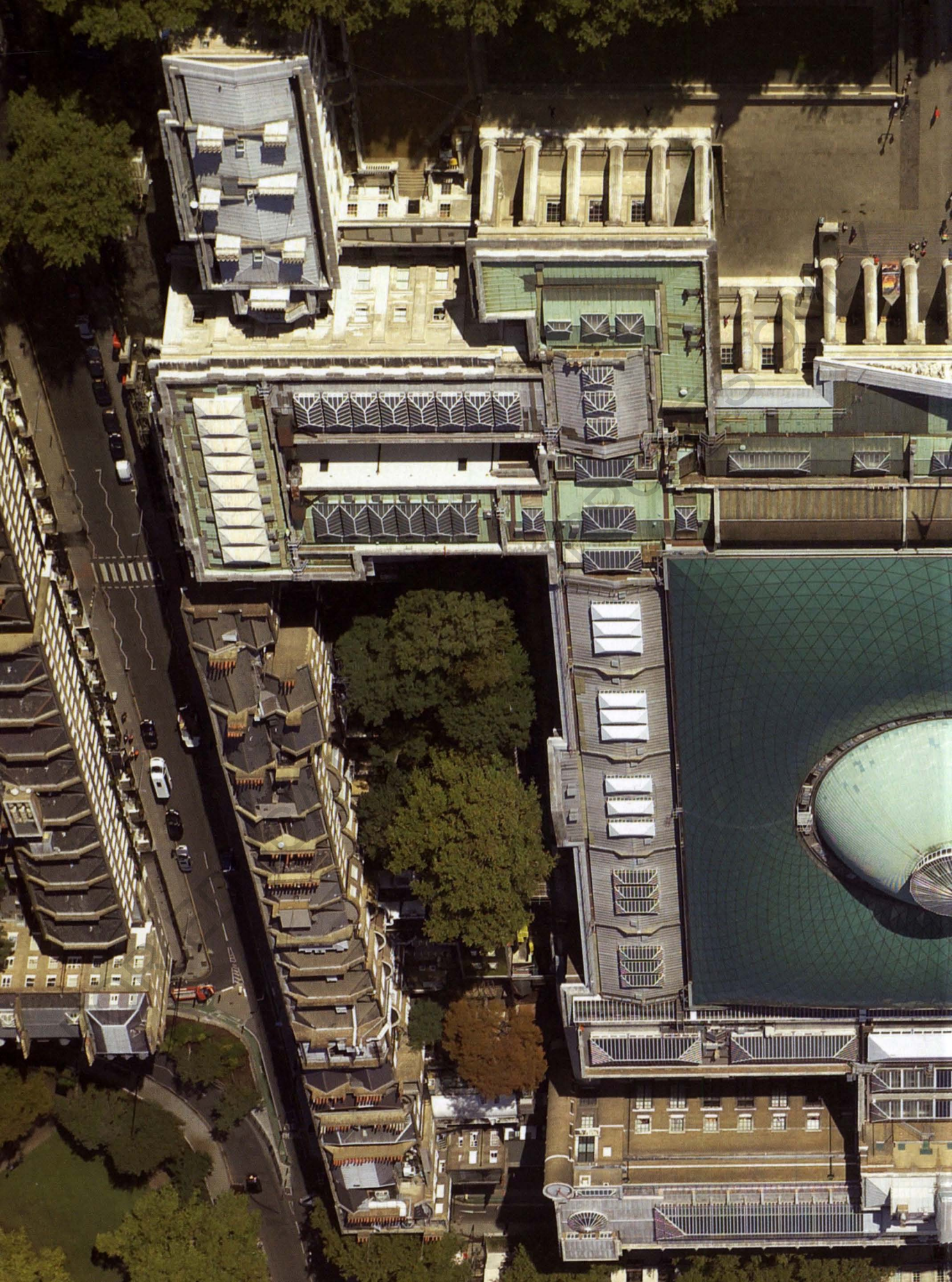
Keeping this remarkable institution running is a team of 1000 staff who supervise the galleries, plan major exhibitions and manage a flow of nearly 5 million visitors a year. Rupert Smith has been granted special access to the huge variety of people who work in the Museum, including expert curators, conservators, heavy-object handlers and the people who clean the fabulous new glass roof of the Great Court.

Accompanying a major ten-part BBC television series, *The Museum* takes us behind the scenes for the first time to see how this amazing place works. Illustrated with over 120 colour photographs, and with a foreword by the Museum's director, Neil MacGregor, this fascinating book is a celebration of the British Museum and the many dedicated people who work there.

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# THE MUSEUM

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# THE MUSEUM

Behind the scenes at the British Museum



RUPERT SMITH



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**T**he British Museum exists to tell the story of mankind. It is where our history can be traced from the earliest artefacts made in Africa nearly 2 million years ago to the most contemporary work produced around the globe; where the world's cultural heritage has been collected, conserved, investigated and debated since the Museum was founded by Parliament in 1753; and where an increasing number and variety of people have come to visit ever since.

Today the British Museum is no longer just a building in Bloomsbury. It has both a real and a virtual presence the world over, reaching a new international audience that stretches from Bristol to Beijing, from Newcastle to Nairobi, from Wrexham to Ramallah. The purpose of communicating with this global community is to provide access to our collections, of course. But through and beyond this is the desire to foster dialogue, collaboration and understanding of the world's cultural interconnectedness.

This world community consists of any number of local communities, starting with the body of people who comprise the trustees, staff and volunteers of the British Museum itself. They come from many different backgrounds and places of origin, bringing a wealth of experience – personal, cultural and linguistic – to place at the service of our many different audiences. Their commitment to the care of the collection and to putting it to work for public benefit results in a vitality that speaks through the voices and activities contained within this book.

Parliament's purpose in establishing the Museum in 1753 was to facilitate public understanding of the complexity and unity of human cultural achievements. Vital to this endeavour are not only the scholarship of the Museum's expert staff, but what the Museum's visitors and users the world over can contribute. For it is above all through their constant re-engagement with the Museum that new meanings and understandings are generated, and the collection is made new for each successive generation.

*Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum*



and let thy feet  
be set in midst of know

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



1

'For the use  
and benefit of  
the publick'

hence  
edge

Tennyson





**T**he British Museum was founded in 1753 with a simple mission statement: to preserve its collection 'for the use and benefit of the publick, who may have free access to view and peruse the same'. Not only that – it aimed also to present a universal collection, drawing on all categories of human history, culture and knowledge.

It sounds obvious enough, but those basic founding principles of universality and free access made the British Museum unique in its time and now, half way through its third century, one of the most famous and revered institutions in the world. Various pressures – of funding, maintenance, ethics, politics, war – have shaped the direction that the Museum has taken over the years, but it remains true to those 'fundamental principles from which the Trustees do not think they can in Honor or conscience depart'. Principles forged in the intellectual heat of the Enlightenment are just as challenging in the twenty-first century, and, while the details change, the underlying ideas remain as solid as marble.

The collection has its roots in the intellectual curiosity of one man, Sir Hans Sloane, an Irish doctor who began collecting during a posting to Jamaica as the governor's personal physician. Returning to London in 1687, he built up a successful and extremely lucrative medical practice – his patients included the diarist Samuel Pepys and Queen Anne – and poured his excess income into his collection. Before long, his house in Bloomsbury Place was crammed full of 'plants, fossils, minerals, zoological, anatomical and pathological specimens, antiquities ... prints, drawings and coins, books and manuscripts'. The collection overflowed its premises, so Sloane was obliged to buy the house next door as well – and when that was full, he moved lock, stock and barrel to a manor house in Chelsea. Visitors flocked to view Sloane's curiosities, and long before his death in 1753 the collection had become one of the must-see attractions of London.

Although the marvellous and the bizarre were to be found among Sloane's collection, such as a landscape painted on a spider's web or monstrous stones taken from the bladders of horses, he planned his acquisitions with care, especially with regard to natural history. He was conscious of collecting not just for himself, but for the scholarly world at large as well, working through a network of contacts who sent him material from far and wide. When Sloane died, an Act of Parliament was passed to acquire his

Below: Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), physician and collector, whose bequest of books, manuscripts, pictures, coins and curiosities formed the basis of the British Museum.



Opposite: The Queen Elizabeth II Great Court, the largest covered square in Europe. Its tessellated glass roof was designed by Foster & Partners.







collection of 80,000 objects for the sum of £20,000, according to the terms of his will, and vest it in a board of trustees who would be responsible for maintaining the collection 'intire without the least diminution or separation' and making it publicly accessible. The British Museum Act 1753 laid down those guiding principles, which, with minor alterations, continue to govern the management of the collection.

The trustees' first task was to find a home not just for the Sloane collection but also for a priceless collection of manuscripts that had been established as a public collection by Parliament in 1700. The Cottonian Library, assembled by the family of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, included the Lindisfarne Gospels, a manuscript of Beowulf and two copies of Magna Carta. But, despite its inestimable value, the collection had languished in damp and decaying houses for 50 years and narrowly escaped being entirely destroyed by fire. The government, seeing an opportunity to take care of an embarrassing legacy, added the Cottonian Library and some other, smaller collections to the British Museum's charge.

Potential premises in the Palace of Westminster and Buckingham House (now Buckingham Palace) were rejected as too costly, and the trustees finally bought Montagu House, a seventeenth-century mansion in Bloomsbury with seven and a half acres of grounds, for £10,000. After an extensive programme of renovations, the new museum opened for business in 1759 – and it has remained open on the same spot ever since. Nothing remains of the original Montagu House, gradually demolished and replaced in a series of additions and rebuildings in the nineteenth century, but the front railings on Great Russell Street mark the site of its old outer wall.

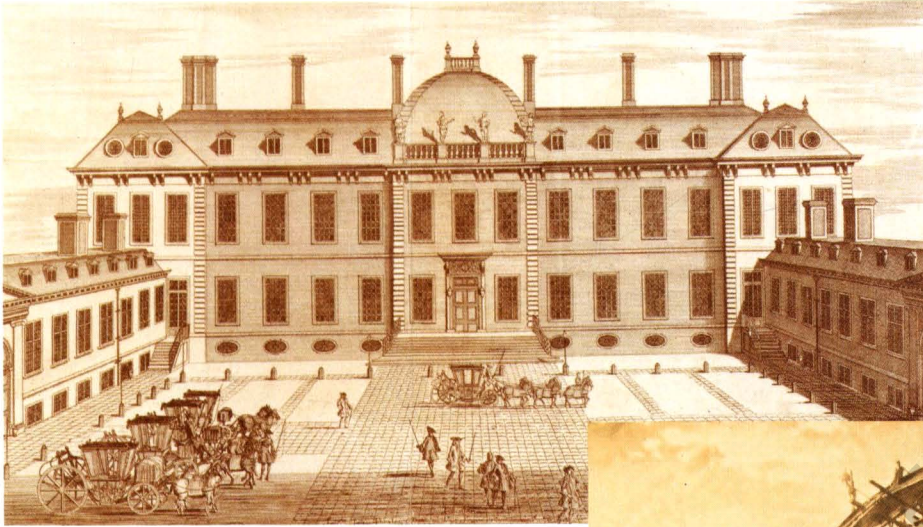
No sooner was the British Museum established than it started to attract more objects for the collection. The first Egyptian mummy was bequeathed in 1756, and the following year the king (George II) donated the old Royal Library,

a collection of 12,000 books dating back to the fifteenth century. From 1800, the great and the good were falling over themselves to give or sell their collections to the nation. The Museum's reputation was sealed in 1802 by the arrival of a 'pierre de granite noir chargée de trois bandes de caractères' – the Rosetta stone – discovered by Napoleon's troops in Egypt and surrendered to the

British under the Treaty of Alexandria. The stone became an instant focus of interest, both public and academic, and remains a BM icon.

As the collections grew, and with them public interest, it became clear that

**The Rosetta stone ...  
became an instant focus  
of interest ... and  
remains a BM icon**



Left: Montagu House, first home of the collection.  
Below: The construction of the Reading Room, which was completed in 1857.

Montagu House was no longer big enough for the job. It had already cost tens of thousands of pounds to renovate and could no longer sustain the number of objects or the rate of footfall required of it, so the trustees appointed architect Sir Robert Smirke to oversee the gradual demolition of the old building and the creation of new, purpose-built museum premises. His plans were approved in 1827, and substantial building works continued until 1857 when the completion of the Reading Room gave us, essentially, the core of the Museum building that we know today.

Changes continued throughout the nineteenth century as more collections arrived in Bloomsbury, but despite the constant enlargement of the building, something had to give. The first major demarcation of the collections came with the departure of the botanical and zoological objects to the newly established Natural History Museum, which opened in 1881, leaving space for the display of larger items, such as the Mausoleum at Halikarnassus. Further space was acquired by the purchase of 69 houses surrounding the Museum in 1895, turning it into something resembling a small town within a town, bordered by Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury Street, Montague Place and Montague Street.

And so the British Museum entered the twentieth century, surviving two world wars, despite a number of direct hits during the Blitz of 1940, continually







Above: The Museum's team of specialist cleaners set about cleaning the 1656 pairs of glass panes that make up the roof of the Great Court.

expanding its collections and widening the scope of its academic ambition. The last great split came in 1972 with the British Library Act, which established the British Library as a separate institutional entity partially sharing its premises with the Museum. After a long planning period, a purpose-built library on London's Euston Road opened in 1998, not only leaving room in the Museum for extra gallery space where books were once stored, but also paving the way for the development of the Great Court. This final, iconic addition to the Museum, with its billowing Norman Foster roof, was opened in 2000, ushering in a new era of public access and confirming the British Museum's status as one of the world's most important cultural institutions.

Throughout two and a half centuries of change and growth, the British Museum has remained close to its eighteenth-century intellectual roots. 'The idea of universal access to an encyclopedic collection is there in the





founding act,' says BM director Neil MacGregor. 'We maintain a collection of things from the whole world that will be freely accessible to the people of the whole world. We try to reinterpret those principles for each new generation, but however much the details change, we remain true to the basic Enlightenment ideals. Funnily enough, the newspapers tend to refer to the concept of universal access as being "politically correct" – but if that is the case, it's been politically correct for over 250 years.'

The British Museum collection is unique in being housed entirely under one roof. The building in Bloomsbury is an important London landmark, celebrated in popular song, a magnet for tourists and a resource for local people. 'It's always been one of the great sights of London,' says MacGregor. 'Ever since the late eighteenth century, tourists have been coming

**... a collection from the  
whole world ... freely  
accessible to the people  
of the whole world**



## NEIL MACGREGOR

Director of the  
British Museum

I CAME HERE FROM THE NATIONAL GALLERY, where I was director until 2002. I knew that my predecessor, Robert Anderson, was retiring, and this seemed to me to be by far the most challenging museum job in the world – for the simple reason that there is no other museum like it in the world. If you're interested in public engagement with cultural history, this is the place to be.

The scale and diversity of the collection is the most striking thing about the British Museum. Whereas at the National Gallery you're dealing with the paintings of Europe, here you're dealing with the cultures of the world. The National Gallery is one type of object – paintings on canvas – and one discipline, art history. The British Museum has all kinds of objects and therefore needs much wider skills: archaeology, art history, connoisseurship, anthropology, science, conservation, cataloguing; the list goes on. It's a bit like being the head of a university, rather than the head of just one department. My job is to balance resources and engagement across a range of very disparate areas, in most of which I have no knowledge, let alone expertise. But the director has to have a view and has to inform himself about the background to the issues – so I listen to a lot of colleagues and do a great deal of reading!

I arrived at the Museum at a time of considerable financial crisis, when the funding was absolutely static, but the costs had risen, and it was quite clear that we couldn't go on as we were. The first thing to do was to stabilize the finance, and that meant, unfortunately, losing a lot of staff. I had to reduce the staff by 10 per cent, which was a brutal thing to do, especially to people who had been here all their working lives. But everyone knew that the financial position was very bad and that redundancies were inevitable. The experience was traumatic for the staff, but we are now able to focus on building a better future.

This is by far the most demanding job I've ever had, in terms of time and everything else. I used to write a lot when I was at the National Gallery and make television programmes, but there's very little opportunity for that sort of thing now. My working day is organized around a series of set meetings with colleagues, but after that it's entirely demand-led. A good deal of the job is representational – we receive important visitors from the UK and abroad, government officials or heads of state. It could be the Prime Minister of Mongolia or the Queen of Denmark and so on. There's a good deal of travel too: about a fifth of my year is taken up with travel, which gives me a lot of time to do all that reading. One of the best things about the job is visiting other collections around the UK, but I also make a lot of long-haul journeys all over the world; to places such as Cairo, Beijing, Nairobi and Tehran.

The job of the director is to address the balance of the safety of the collection, research on the collection and public benefit. Those three things are often in conflict. For instance, we'd like to have part of the drawings collection permanently on show or permanently travelling, but that would destroy it for future generations.