The British Library at St Pancras
Building the future

Second Edition
In 2015 we published Living Knowledge, our eight-year strategy which has at its heart a vision of the British Library becoming the most open, creative and innovative institution of its kind in the world by the time of our 50th anniversary in 2023. Our ambitions for our St Pancras site are central to achieving that vision.

Since we opened our doors on Monday 24 November 1997, the British Library at St Pancras has become an icon of the information age. The architect of this remarkable building, the late Sir Colin St John Wilson (Sandy, as he was widely known) devoted 37 years of his illustrious career to its design and construction. He described how a great library ‘is like a coral reef whose exquisite structure as it grows proliferates a living network of connections.’

We aim to fulfil Sandy Wilson’s vision, increasing our ability to share our collection for research, inspiration and enjoyment, while retaining the Library’s distinctive character – the feeling of being a city within a city, with its unmistakable ambience of purposeful industry and exploration.

We want the Library – one of the great public buildings of the 20th century and Grade I listed – to evolve into one of the world’s great knowledge hubs for the 21st century. Our physical spaces are now reaching capacity and our exhibition galleries are able to display only a fraction of the treasures that we hold. The huge success of recent exhibitions on Magna Carta, 20th Century Maps, the Russian Revolution and Harry Potter highlights a growing public appetite for engaging with our collection – if we could only expose a greater proportion of it, whether on-site or online.

In the two decades since the building opened, our surrounding neighbourhood has undergone a transformation of its own: with the opening of the Eurostar terminal at St Pancras; the ongoing redevelopment of King’s Cross; and the emerging cluster of world-class knowledge and research institutions dubbed the Knowledge Quarter within a one mile radius of the Euston Road.

This brochure shares our vision to reorient and expand our magnificent building’s capabilities so that we are better able to anticipate and meet the needs of our users, our local community and the wider national and international network of libraries. Working in tandem with our other major facility at Boston Spa in Yorkshire, we want St Pancras to drive the next stage of the British Library’s evolution as a global player in the knowledge economy.

It’s a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the way we use the site and, with the involvement of our development partner, Stanhope plc and architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (RSHP), create a technologically enabled civic space that combines creativity, versatility and commercial sustainability. Whether you are a user, a neighbour or a supporter of the Library, I hope you find something here to inspire you to explore further.

Roly Keating
Chief Executive
The British Library is one of the world’s greatest research libraries. Our mission is to make our intellectual heritage accessible to everyone for research, inspiration and enjoyment.

Famously, we collect a copy of every book, journal, newspaper and magazine published in the UK, and since 2013 we have archived every .uk domain website, along with hundreds of thousands of e-journal articles, e-books and other digital publications.

The Library therefore plays an integral role in the UK’s research infrastructure. Researchers consult more than a million collection items a year in our eleven Reading Rooms and we’ve seen remarkable growth in use of our public areas, particularly since we introduced free WiFi and, more recently, increased the amount of seating, powerpoints and lighting.

A world-class resource

More than 170 million items in multiple formats
Annual growth – physical: 550,000 new items (8 kilometres)
Annual growth – digital: 100 terabytes
Over 10 billion pages of UK web content
More than 1.5 million site visits each year
Over 16,000 people use the collection each day (on-site and online)
On-site space for over 1,200 Readers
Around 400,000 people visit our Reading Rooms each year
Economic value of £419 million – £5 returned for every £1 invested in the Library
Sites at St Pancras, London and Boston Spa, West Yorkshire

Adapting to a fast-changing world

Our vision for St Pancras is driven by a number of interrelated trends:

• Research is changing. Alongside our traditional Reading Rooms, where registered users can access our physical collections, there is increasing demand for more flexible spaces, where researchers can collaborate and interact with others.

• The public appetite for culture is at an all-time high, yet our existing gallery spaces allow us to display only a tiny fraction of our vast collection – we need creative spaces that will enable deeper engagement with many more of the global cultural and intellectual treasures we hold.

• Demand is growing for working space and seating in the public areas around our iconic King’s Library.

• Our digital, sound and vision collection has expanded massively over the past decade; we need purpose-built spaces in which people can explore, work with and enjoy this collection.

• King’s Cross St Pancras is one of the fastest-growing areas in Europe right now. We need to reconfigure our site to meet the demands of a large and diverse audience of potential users.

• We want to broaden the spectrum of experiences and facilities available to visitors, with a wider curated selection of shops and places to eat and drink.

• We also want to engage more deeply with the communities of Camden and Somers Town, attracting more local people into the building and enhancing the lives of people of all ages and backgrounds in our immediate neighbourhood.

The British Library's purposes

1 Custodianship
We build, curate and preserve the UK’s national collection of published, written and digital content.

2 Research
We support and stimulate research of all kinds.

3 Business
We help businesses to innovate and grow.

4 Culture
We engage everyone with memorable cultural experiences.

5 Learning
We inspire young people and learners of all ages.

6 International
We work with partners around the world to advance knowledge and mutual understanding.
Our ambitions for St Pancras

To achieve our Living Knowledge goal of transforming the British Library at St Pancras we have selected a consortium led by Stanhope as our preferred partner, working with architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (RSHP), to develop a 2.8 acre site at the northern end of our estate.

At the heart of the development will be 100,000 sq ft of new spaces for the British Library and the Alan Turing Institute, including:

- More exhibition spaces, increasing public access to the Library’s vast world-class collections
- New facilities for learners of all ages, with expanded programmes for schools, colleges, families, adult learners and local communities
- Improved public areas and accessibility, with more places to sit and study
- An enhanced offering for business users, building on the success of the Library’s Business & IP Centre
- A new northern entrance close to The Francis Crick Institute, the main St Pancras Station concourse and our local community in Somers Town
- A permanent home for the Alan Turing Institute, the UK’s national centre for data science
- Environmental improvements including enhanced East-West connectivity for local people walking between Somers Town and St Pancras
- Extensive, flexible commercial accommodation for companies, institutions and research organisations seeking to locate and work in the Knowledge Quarter – especially life sciences, data science and artificial intelligence.

Stanhope has 30 years’ experience of working with partners developing complex central London projects, such as Broadgate, Paternoster Square as well as cultural projects including Tate Modern, Royal Opera House, and, most recently, the regeneration of White City, including the transformation of former BBC premises at Television Centre and White City Place.

RSHP are well-known for buildings such as the Grade I Listed Lloyds Building and the recent British Museum extension. They are currently working on the International Spy Museum in Washington DC, and a new conservation centre for the Musée du Louvre at Lievin. Lead architect of the British Library project will be Graham Stirk.

The development is also an opportunity for philanthropic partners, trusts and foundations to contribute or work with us to fit out our new galleries and learning spaces, improve our existing facilities and open up our collection. Support from a variety of different sources is vital to the success of this ambitious vision, and we are keen to engage potential supporters and donors from the start.

Our position at the heart of the Knowledge Quarter, in one of the fastest-growing areas in this great city, makes this one of the most exciting development opportunities in a generation.

Rajesh Agrawal, Deputy Mayor for Business, Greater London Authority
The new development will extend and complement one of the UK’s greatest public buildings, and will reflect the existing architect’s commitment to excellence, pragmatism and longevity.

Sir Colin St John Wilson described the design and construction of his masterpiece, the British Library, as ‘my Thirty Years War’. It was the largest UK public building project of the 20th century and, in terms of the length of time it took to build and the controversy surrounding its creation, nothing like it had been seen in Britain since the construction of St Paul’s Cathedral.

The Grade I listing of the building in August 2015 was seen by many as a vindication of Sandy Wilson’s courageous and visionary design. Writing in The Times, Jonathan Morrison described it as ‘an overwhelming success with the people it was designed for – the readers,’ praising its fusion of a Victorian public-service ethos with the democratic Scandinavian influence of Alvar Aalto, and observing that the Library ‘embodies a quiet brilliance that speaks volumes.’

The red brick exterior – chosen because it is the only material in our climate that improves with age – echoes the spires of neighbouring St Pancras, while the bricks themselves came from the same source in Leicestershire. The Piazza is a haven from the noise and bustle of Euston Road, offering a space for rendezvous and relaxation. In the winter, it is a venue for brightly-lit markets, in summer, for live performances and outdoor meetings.

The grand interior is flooded with ambient natural light and fitted out for a design life of centuries, rather than decades with natural materials that are, in Sandy Wilson’s words, “responsive to human presence and touch – leather, marble, bronze, wood.” At the heart of the Entrance Hall is the spectacular King’s Library, a six storey tower of glass and bronze, housing the beautifully bound library of King George III.

The ambience of purposeful industry that characterises the Reading Rooms is something we wish to preserve and complement, rather than replace. We want to enable the next stage in the building’s evolution, keeping faith with Sandy Wilson’s vision of a great national library – like the English language, demonstrating the greatest capacity for change, yet remaining whole.

An iconic building

RSHP is proud to be part of the team assisting the Library to achieve its vision of creating an exciting and evolving international centre of knowledge in the heart of London. The British Library is one of England’s most celebrated modern public buildings and RSHP will seek to complement the Grade I Listed original in a contemporary yet respectful manner.

Graham Stirk, Senior Partner and Project Lead, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners
Our site is at the heart of one of the most diverse areas in the western world, and we want the local communities that surround us, and of which we are a part, to benefit fully from the expansion of our public programmes and improvements to the building.

Across maps, manuscripts, books, newspapers and sound recordings, the British Library's collection is drawn from all over the globe and represents almost every written language. We want to connect people living locally with the intellectual and cultural heritage this collection represents, and to involve them in the future development of the Library as a museum, a meeting place and a destination.

Since 2016 the Library has had a full-time Community Engagement team, building relationships with community groups across Camden, Somers Town and King's Cross and encouraging local people to explore what the Library can offer them — in many cases paying their first ever visit. Our vision is to be a good neighbour to the people living nearby, both during this development and well beyond, working together with local forums to play a greater role in the life of the community.

Working in parallel with our well-established Learning team, which facilitates visits and workshops involving more than 33,000 young learners every year, our community engagement team organises a rolling programme of events and visits tailored to the needs and interests of local communities, including tours, show-and-tell presentations by curators and private views of exhibitions.

Recent events for local people have tied in with British Library exhibitions on Harry Potter, Ethiopian manuscripts and the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush. The team promotes the full range of the Library’s services to local people, encouraging local small businesses to use our Business & Intellectual Property Centre, supporting people to sign up for Reader Passes, and referring families and young people to our Learning programmes. And outside of the Library, we participate in a number of community-led festivals across Camden, showcasing our support and promoting the services that local people can access here at the Library.

As the St Pancras building expands and evolves, we will build and further develop our role as a unique local resource, expanding the opportunities available to the communities around us and connecting people from any and every background with the treasures we hold that enrich all languages and all cultures. We will be engaging fully with the local community in this design — including potential outcomes use of the site for community benefit — and the future services offered by the Library to ensure we can achieve our goal of being a good neighbour to our local community.
This development will be at the very centre of one of the most dynamic and rapidly-changing parts of London – the area around King’s Cross, Euston and Bloomsbury.

Next door to the Library is The Francis Crick Institute which, since opening in 2016, has established itself as one of the world’s leading centres of biomedical research. Just across the road from our site, the Eurostar terminal at St Pancras carries ten million passengers a year to and from the continent – travellers, tourists and business people pouring through what has become one of Europe’s major transport hubs.

These two developments are outriders for a much wider trend. The Library now finds itself at the heart of one of the greatest concentrations of knowledge-based activity and expertise anywhere in the world.

Launched in 2014, the Knowledge Quarter is a partnership of over 80 academic, cultural, research, scientific and media organisations – all based within a one-mile radius of Euston Road. Google, the Wellcome Trust, the University of the Arts London, Sadler’s Wells, the British Museum and the Royal College of Physicians are just a few of the diverse organisations involved, working together to promote and further develop our shared neighbourhood, exploring new opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

The transformed Library will act as a gateway into this evolving network for researchers, spin-out firms and industry – we are now at the beating heart of the Knowledge Quarter and our site needs to open up to new possibilities for meeting, collaborative working, creativity, research and partnership.

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On 4 December 2014, at the official launch of the Knowledge Quarter, the news that the Alan Turing Institute – the UK’s national institute for data science and artificial intelligence – would be based at the British Library at St Pancras was announced by the then Chancellor, George Osborne. At present, the Institute’s staff are mainly based on the first floor of the existing Library building, but a key element of the programme to transform the St Pancras site will be to build a permanent home for the Alan Turing Institute as part of the development of our campus. Named in honour of the pioneering mathematician and code-breaker, the purpose of the Institute is to drive forward world-class research and apply it to real-world problems, for the benefit of science, society and the economy. As a national institute, the Institute also has an important goal to train the leaders of the future and to lead the public conversation around data and algorithms as they increasingly transform our lives.

The Institute has grown considerably in scope and scale in the three years since it has been operational. In 2017, as a result of a government recommendation, the Institute became the national institute for artificial intelligence (AI), as well as data science, in recognition of the strong links between these sciences. The Institute has also expanded its network of university partners to thirteen, welcoming eight new partners in addition to the five founding universities who jointly started up the Institute with government in 2015. Over 250 researchers from around the UK and the world are affiliated with the Institute, collaborating under the shared goal to build a data and AI enriched world for the benefit of all. More than 10,000 people have taken part in Institute events and activities at the British Library headquarters.

The location of the Institute reinforces the importance of the Knowledge Quarter, and cements the British Library’s status as a vital element of the UK’s knowledge infrastructure. The Library and the Institute have also committed to collaborating on research to bring data science and AI expertise to the nation’s digital collections.

The opportunities to make connections, advance knowledge and achieve breakthroughs are immense.
By adapting and expanding the British Library at
St Pancras, we want to transform our ability to
meet and anticipate the needs of a range of growing
audiences.

For research – we will provide versatile and
technologically enabled spaces which connect
researchers with our own collection and the wider
national and international network of resources.
The headquarters of the Alan Turing Institute will
be part of this development, embedding world-class
data research on-site at the Library for the first time.

For learning – we want to be able to always
say yes to school groups of every size, age and
background, creating spaces that enable an inspiring
first encounter with their cultural and intellectual
heritage, generating an appetite for self-directed
research and debate. Our ambition is to transform
not just this building but the whole way we serve the
researchers, visitors and communities of the future.

For business – the value and power of an open
and free library reaches far beyond the traditional
research audience. We will build on more than a
decade of success for our Business & IP Centre,
expanding and developing our offer to entrepreneurs
and SMEs, and becoming an incubator space
for start-ups as well as assisting them to the
information and guidance vital to fledgling businesses.

For culture – visitors will be able to experience more
of our collection than ever before, in spaces that
also encourage debate, performance and curatorial
interpretation. Our collection is as multicultural and
multilingual as the city and communities around us,
and we want our visitors to be every bit as diverse
as the collection we care for. We also want to offer
individuals and families a full day’s worth of activity
and inspiration, consolidating the Library’s position
as one of the great UK visitor destinations and
enabling people to connect with a universe of written
and recorded heritage, whatever their background.

A British Library for the future

Want to know more?
If you are an interested party, please contact
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Cover image: photo montage of Sir Colin St John Wilson’s
c.1991 drawing of the new building from Ossulston Street,
and a view of the St Pancras building in July 2015.
Photo by Tony Antoniou.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A school tour of our
Harry Potter: A History of Magic
exhibition. Photo by Richard Eaton;
The Last Poets perform at Late at the Library:
Superjam, May 2018. Photo by Paul Hampartsoumian; Users of our public spaces near the
King’s Library at St Pancras. Photo by Tony Antoniou; Dr Anne-Marie
Imafidon in conversation with Jack Dorsey at an
Inspiring Entrepreneurs
event, March 2018. Photo by Sam Lane Photography.