The British Library at St Pancras
Building the future
In January this year we published our new strategy, Living Knowledge, 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 to users 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 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 collections 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 now a Grade I listed building – 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 Comics, Propaganda, Gothic literature and Magna Carta highlights a growing public appetite for engaging with our collections – if we could only expose a greater proportion of them, whether on-site and online.

Over the same period, 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 mile’s radius of the Euston Road.

This brochure introduces our vision to reorient and expand this 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 the right partners, create a technologically enabled civic space that combines creativity, versatility and commercial sustainability. Whether you are a user, a neighbour or a potential partner I hope you find something here to inspire you to explore further.

Roly Keating
Chief Executive
An opportunity for partnership

To achieve our Living Knowledge goal of transforming the British Library at St Pancras we are seeking a commercial partner to develop 2.8 acres at the northern end of our estate, adjacent to The Francis Crick Institute, opposite the Midland Road entrance to St Pancras Station.

At the heart of this development will be new spaces of exceptional architectural quality and distinction, which will support the Library’s purposes in research, culture, learning and business support, as well as a brand new headquarters for our partners at the Alan Turing Institute, the UK’s major new centre for ‘big data’ research.

Our partner, who will be selected through a competitive dialogue tender over the course of the next few months, will take a long-term lease on the development, with the opportunity to design and build major new spaces for commercial uses that align with the Library’s purposes and values, and those of the Camden community.

We seek a partner that can make our vision for the St Pancras site a reality, helping us to consolidate the Library’s position as a global centre for knowledge, enterprise and creativity, where there will always be a new opportunity for research and exploration, performance, debate and collaboration.

Along with commercial partners, this development is also an opportunity for philanthropic partners, trusts and foundations to contribute or work with us to transform our spaces and open up our collections. Support from a variety of different sources will be 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 world city, makes this one of the most exciting development opportunities in a generation.

Right: Aerial photograph showing the British Library in relation to, from left, Euston Station, Somers Town, St Pancras International Station and King’s Cross Station.
Opposite: Aerial photograph illustrating the 2.8 acres of land available for development. Photos by Ian Hay.
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, magazine and newspaper 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 11 Reading Rooms, and in recent years we’ve seen remarkable growth in use of our public areas, as we have evolved them to suit new patterns of study, business and collaborative research.

A world-class resource

The British Library at St Pancras. Photo by Tony Antoniou; Right: The National Newspaper Building in Boston Spa. Photo by Katie Betts.
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 expose only a tiny fraction of our vast collections. We need creative spaces that will enable deeper engagement with many more of the global cultural and intellectual treasures we hold, and a new generation of versatile educational spaces to cope with growing demand from learners of all ages.

- Business users have become a core part of the Library’s audience, with increasing needs not just for up-to-date information and advice but also for the spaces that allow them to develop their ideas and grow their enterprises.

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

- 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 selection of shops and places to eat and drink, that fit with the unique atmosphere of the Library.

- 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.

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The new development will extend and complement one of the UK's greatest public buildings, so must reflect the existing architecture's commitment to excellence, practicality 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, something like it had been seen in Britain since the construction of St Paul's Cathedral.

The recent Grade I listing of the building 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 the Euston Road, offering a space for rendezvous and relaxation: in the winter, a venue for brightly-lit markets, in summer, for live performances and outdoor meetings.

In grand interior is flooded with ambient natural light and fitted out for a design life of centuries, rather than decades: natural materials that are, in Sandy Wilson's words, "responsive to human presence and touch – leather, marble, bronze, wood." At the heart of the front hall is the spectacular King's Library, a seven storey tower of glass and bronze, housing the beautifully bound library of George III.

The British Library is one of England's finest modern public buildings. Colin St John Wilson's stately yet accessible design incorporates fine materials and a generous display of public art. The Library's dramatic and carefully considered interiors achieve its ultimate goal: of creating a space to inspire thought and learning.

Roger Bowdler
Director of Listing at Historic England, announcing the Grade 1 listing of the St Pancras building, August 2015

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AN ICONIC BUILDING

We will achieve this vision while also protecting the magnificent building and the Reading Rooms at its heart, fulfilling the promise of Sandy Wilson’s original vision for the Library while securing its future as a viable and vibrant institution.

This page: Drawing of the new building from Ossulston Street by Colin St John Wilson © 1991. BLWA 105; Right: Architectural features of the British Library at St Pancras. Photos by Tony Antoniou.
This development will be at the very centre of one of the most dynamic and rapidly-changing parts of London – the area within a one-mile radius of King’s Cross.

Right next to the Library, The Francis Crick Institute has risen swiftly – within the next 18 months it will become 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 passing 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.

Last year we saw the launch of the Knowledge Quarter, a partnership of more than 50 academic, cultural, research, scientific and media organisations – all based within a mile’s radius of the Euston Road. Google, the Wellcome Trust, the University of the Arts London, The Guardian, the British Museum and the Royal College of Physicians are just a few of the organisations involved, and in the coming years we’ll work together to promote and further develop our shared neighbourhood, seeking out 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.

The local communities that surround us, and of which we are an important part, will also benefit as our public programmes and activities for schools and young learners expand and develop. We seek a fuller and richer engagement with the diverse communities of Camden, Somers Town and King’s Cross, connecting people from any and every background with treasures we hold that reflect all languages and all cultures.

At the heart of the Knowledge Quarter

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On 4 December 2014, at the official launch of the Knowledge Quarter, the Chancellor George Osborne also announced that the £42 million Alan Turing Institute – the UK’s national institute for data sciences – would be based at the British Library at St Pancras.

For now, staff of the Institute are based within 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 Alan Turing Institute is a joint venture between the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and five leading universities selected for their world-leading expertise and experience in the field of data science: Cambridge, Edinburgh, Oxford, University College London and Warwick.

The purpose of the Institute is to promote the development and use of advanced mathematics, computer science, algorithms and ‘big data’ for the benefit of society and the economy. 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.

For the first time, an independent body undertaking world-class research will be based within the boundaries of our site, utilising our collections and working collaboratively with our own experts, with other Knowledge Quarter members and with partners across the UK. The opportunities to make connections, advance knowledge and achieve breakthroughs will be immense.

The Alan Turing Institute

The Institute will bring benefits to the whole country through partnerships with universities and businesses across Britain, including in our great northern cities, to better understand and exploit the amazing opportunities presented by big data.

It’s a fitting tribute to Alan Turing – the father of modern computer science and a national hero – and will ensure Britain continues to lead the whole world in this important field.

Chancellor George Osborne announcing the location of the Alan Turing Institute at the British Library, December 2014.
A British Library for the future

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 collections and the wider national and international network of resources: the headquarters of the Alan Turing Institute for Data Sciences 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.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to work with the British Library to help us 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 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 connecting them to the information and guidance vital to fledgling businesses.

For culture – visitors will be able to experience more of the collection than was ever previously possible, in spaces that encourage encounters that also involve debate, performance and curatorial interpretation. Our collections are as multicultural and multilingual as the city around us, and we want our visitor audience to be every bit as diverse as the collections 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 may be.

Want to know more?

Please contact us by:

Email buildingthefuture@bl.uk

Freephone 0800 470 4593

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Cover image: photo montage of Sir Colin St John Wilson’s 1991 drawing of the new building from Ossulston Street, and a view of the St Pancras building in July 2015. Photo by Tony Antoniou

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Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A level students doing part of a workshop. Photo by Richard Eaton; Late event at the British Library as part of Propaganda season, 2013. Photo by Tom Lewis; Grace’s Coffee Rooms during the Internet Icons event, February 2014. Photo by Luca Sage; Researchers using the British Library’s public spaces. Photo and front and back cover by Tony Antoniou.