

INTRODUCTION

This outline heritage statement has been prepared to accompany the Listed Building Consent application to retain for a further five year period the two ticket and audio guide desks in the Great Court of the British Museum. Permission was given for these desks in August 2007 (Application Reference 2007/2934/L). This application was in conjunction with the temporary permission to install a false floor in the Reading Room to allow this to be used as a temporary exhibition gallery. The permission given was temporary and was extended in July 2008 (Application Reference 2008/1376/L) and again in April 2011 (Application Reference 2011/0605/L).

This statement should be read in conjunction with the Design & Access Statement which shows the locations of the desks, includes photographs of them and sets out the reasons why they are needed for a further period of time. The desks are located in a public area of the British Museum and can be seen at any time during the normal opening hours of 0900 – 1800.

HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The British Museum is a Grade I listed building on Great Russell Street in the Bloomsbury area of London. The Great Court is a recent contribution to the Museum. Designed by Sir Norman Foster and completed for the millennium the Great Court opened in 2000 and is now the principal circulation space of the Museum. The centrepiece of the newly created space is the Reading Room which is located at the heart of the Museum. The British Museum was, when built and up until the recent separation composed of the Museum and Library. The original building designed by Robert Smirke accommodated both the Museum and the Library itself. The building as originally designed had an open courtyard. The Museum building was completed in stages between 1823 and 49 and the four elevations onto the Great Court are still more or less as designed by Robert Smirke – though they have been much altered over the years. The Library, now a separate institution “The British Library”, is obliged to accept a copy of all books printed in the United Kingdom and has always suffered from a lack of space. In 1852 it was agreed that the open courtyard at the centre of the building be filled in to form the Reading Room. This was proposed by Panizzi the Principal Librarian and his original idea was refined by Sydney Smirke (Robert’s brother, Robert having retired from the practice). Work on the Reading Room and the surrounding book stacks was started in 1854 and completed in 1857. The stacks were altered on several occasions to create more storage space and the masonry of Smirke’s original elevations was disturbed accordingly. This was particularly the case in the north wing where mezzanine floors were added to create more space.

The Reading Room served as the British Library until the late 20th Century when it was moved to the new purpose built building at St Pancras designed by the architect St John Wilson. Norman Foster and Partners won an international design competition in 1994 that proposed the removal of outer bookstacks from the perimeter of the Reading Room, and a new glass and steel roof over the Great Court. This project was carried out between 1998 and 2000. The Reading Room itself was refaced in a new Portland stone skin and sweeping stairs to the east and west sides lead up to the first floor level. New spaces have been created on the north side of the Reading Room which house a shop at the main floor level and a restaurant at first floor level and a temporary exhibition space at the mezzanine level.

The Great Court has, since it opened in 2000, become the principal circulation space through the Museum. When the British Library occupied part of the building the circulation was convoluted. There was no complete circuit of the Museum at the ground floor level and the route from the principal entrance to the northern galleries required the visitor to go up to the first floor. The Great Court has transformed the way that the visitor experiences the Museum. It is the primary space that visitors use for orientation and it contains the majority of the visitor facilities, lavatories, shop and cafeteria, as well as a place to sit down. The Great Court is listed at Grade I by virtue of its location in the centre of the Museum. It does contain the highly significant Reading Room – though its exterior is completely refaced. The surrounding walls are as designed by Robert Smirke – those these too have been substantially refaced in places. The roof is entirely new as is the floor. The original courtyard was approximately one metre below the present level with steps up to the principal floor level. The decision was made when the Foster scheme was implemented to bring the courtyard up to the principal floor level to avoid the difficulty that would be created by steps at this point.

IMPACT ON HISTORIC FABRIC

The two desks for which a new application is being made have been in place in the Great Court since 2008. These two desks are freestanding on the stone floor and do not touch the walls. The only physical connection with the building is the electrical and data cabling. The desks are quite large, as is necessary to serve the purpose for ticket sales (East side) and the hiring of audio-guides (West side). However, the desks are small in the scale of the general space of the Great Court and are comparable in scale to the information desks which have stood in the space since it was first opened and is similar in scale to the exhibits in this area.

The reasons for the application for the continuing use of the desks in this space are described in full in the Design & Access Statement. The desks have become an essential part of the service to visitors and it is difficult to see how this service (ticketing and audio guides) could conveniently be provided to visitors anywhere else in the building. The Great Court has become the start of practically every visitor's experience of the Museum and this is the place where, at present, the ticketing and distribution of audio-guides needs to take place.

The temporary installations were first consented on 08 August 2007 Reference 2007/2934/L, renewed on 22 July 2008 Reference 2008/1376/L and Varied on 04 April 2011 Reference 2011/0605/P. This application simply seeks to renew this expired consent.

There will be no effect of any kind on the historic fabric of the Great Court. The desks do have some impact on the appearance of the space – but this is minimal in terms of the scale of the desks and the overall scale of the space. The installations are temporary and it is the long term intention that they will be removed as the whole visitor experience and the visitor facilities are reordered. When this takes place the desks can be removed and there will be no remaining traces on the stone floor and no lasting impact on the heritage significance of the space.