



## **National Museums in Britain**

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### **Summary**

National museums in London, England, (with sub branches elsewhere), are specifically designed as museums for Britain as a whole and are funded by the British national government in Westminster, having been established by Act of Parliament. Trustees at arm's length run them from direct ministerial control. Occasionally, a Select Parliamentary Committee is set up to investigate a particular national museum and make recommendations, but this is rare. Most British museums have survived for long periods in the past on benign governmental neglect, as well as support from particular individuals and sponsors who shape them to their interests. Thus throughout their history, national museums have had a great deal of independence. Traditionally, governments show an interest in them when they can see a practical instrumental use for them, such as in the mid - late nineteenth century, when museums were seen as tools for educating the general public in a liberal education of the arts and as a means of tempting the working man and woman from the public house.

National museums in Britain have complex histories and there is no single foundation pattern. It is unusual in Britain for national museums to be established by a government as part of the state making process. There are a few exceptions such as the Imperial War Museum set up during the First World War as a memorial to the suffering of the ordinary civilian and combatant, not as a celebration of victory. However, many national museums owe their origins and developments to wealthy aristocrats and members of the middle classes who donated their collections to the state, thus coercing the government of the time into funding an institution in which to display them. The Tate, the Wallace Collection and the British Museum all fall into this category and are the result of the persistence of a few well-connected benefactors. The state accepted these donations for a variety of reasons, which will be discussed in the case studies. The role of the nation in promoting the arts was slow to be established.

This paper will focus on the following key institutions: The British Museum, the V&A (Victoria & Albert), the Imperial War Museum, the National Gallery and the Tate. The earliest national museum is the British Museum. Irish physician Sir Hans Sloane left his collection to the nation provided his heirs were reimbursed with £20,000. An Act of Parliament in 1753 led to the opening of the Museum in 1759. For most commentators, the British Museum is an Enlightenment project, designed to preserve and promote knowledge of the world. The V&A was the product of the enthusiasm of one or two individuals, supported by Prince Albert, and of the Great Exhibition that funded its establishment. Here, the motivation was an educational one and a desire to improve the quality of the design of Britain's manufacturing industries.

Britain's vast empire enabled her to acquire an unparalleled collection of material from around the globe and much of this was deposited over time in national museums. However, we should be wary of reading all such material as entirely or mainly the result of a desire to own and regulate

the world. Individual explorers and connoisseurs interested in the pursuit of knowledge and the appreciation of fine and decorative arts acquired much of it. National museums such as the National Maritime Museum now tend to avoid any attempt to boast about the Empire, preferring to focus on trade and exploration and the horrors of the slave trade.

Britain's identity was firmly attached to the idea of itself as a democratic nation (even when most people did not have the vote) and thus national museums were part of the notion of an open civic society. Over time, the idea that everyone could and should have access to culture developed as the franchise was extended.

After a relatively long period of stagnation and neglect in the twentieth century caused by economic depression and two world wars, as well as government indifference, in the last fifteen years national museums have undergone something of a revival in the UK. Many have secured large capital projects partly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which includes new buildings and sites such as the Imperial War Museum North and new displays such as the British Galleries at the V&A. They have established outreach programmes and promoted educational activities. Many of them regard themselves as international rather than British and look to the rest of the world for comparators rather than to Europe. Some, like Tate Modern, represent a confident Britain, punching above its weight in international cultural affairs, enjoying cultural capital and expanding it. Others such as the British Museum promote world cultures rather than national ones partly as an attempt to avoid disputes over ownership of material that could be understood to have national significance for other countries.

National museums and galleries in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are governed by their respective devolved parliamentary institutions and are dealt with in separate reports. There are no specifically English national museums, nor has there been any attempt to establish one. Research by Watson (2006) suggests that some members of the English community resent what they see as their icons (here Nelson) being interpreted as British rather than English. Surveys of attitudes to national identities in Britain 'suggest that if anything the decline in adherence to Britishness over the last decade has been more marked in England than it has been in either Scotland or Wales' (Heath et al 2007: 11). Gordon Brown, anxious about a perceived lack of national unity and the rise of Islamic extremism, briefly promoted the idea of setting up a museum of Britishness but this received little support from national museums and academic consultants, and was abandoned before Labour lost the election in 2010. Thus, existing British national museums currently do not promote an overt comprehensive narrative of British history, culture and values, though individual institutions deal with some aspects of this.

Post colonial immigration and global migration has affected the ethnic makeup of Britain and has led to lively debates about the nature of Britishness and whether it can encompass loyalties to other peoples and places. The Labour government of 1997 – 2010 promoted Britishness as an all-encompassing umbrella under which a multicultural nation could enjoy separate cultural identities. National Museums in London have promoted this idea in a range of ways, foregrounding ethnic minority contributions to the state and encouraging the idea that minority groups have lived in Britain for centuries. Such exhibitions are as much a result of liberal professional enthusiasm for multiculturalism as of direct national government influence.

## Summary table, Britain

| Name                       | Inaugurated | Initiated | Actors  | Ownership                            | Type  | Values         | Temporal reach                               | Style Location  |
|----------------------------|-------------|-----------|---|--------------------------------------|---|----------------|--|---|
| The British Museum         | 1759        | 1753      | Sir Hans Sloane, Parliament Aristocrats   | Parliament and Trustees              | World Cultures: Archaeology, Natural History, Art, History, Ethnography, Sculpture, books and manuscripts | Universal      | Creation of the earth to the present day     | Originally Montague House, 17 <sup>th</sup> c. French style house., since 1852 in classical building. Both in same location Bloomsbury, London.   |
| The National Gallery       | 1824        | 1823      | John Julius Angerstein, merchant, Sir George Beaumont, Parliament                             | Parliament through Board of Trustees | Art   | Western Europe | From 13 <sup>th</sup> to 19 <sup>th</sup> c. | First established in Angerstein's town house in Pall Mall, London). Moved to purpose built gallery (1838) in the classical style, dominating one side of Trafalgar Square, central London.  |
| Victoria and Albert Museum | 1852        | 1851      | Prince Albert, Sir Henry Cole and the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, Parliament | As above                             | Design, Art, Sculpture  | Universal      | The last two thousand years                  | Originally 'Museum of Manufactures' in Marlborough House, Pall Mall, London. Moved to temporary built iron building 'the Brompton Boilers' (1856–1861). A variety of buildings in the Italian style were constructed to house the V&A that consists of galleries and courtyards. Located in the Museums area of South Kensington, London. |

|                     |      |      |                   |          |  |                                 |                         |  |
|---------------------|------|------|-------------------|----------|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Imperial War Museum | 1920 | 1917 | The War Cabinet   | As above | Social and military history relating to conflicts in the 20 <sup>th</sup> c. | British Empire and Commonwealth | 1914 to the present day | Originally housed in the Crystal Palace, in affluent suburb of London. Housed (1924-1935) in two galleries adjoining the former Imperial Institute, South Kensington. Moved (1936) into the central portion of Bethlem Royal Hospital a former psychiatric hospital with an imposing central dome and classical facade. Located in Lambeth, marginal area of London. |
| Tate Britain        | 2000 | 1992 | The Tate Trustees | As above | Art  | National                        | 1500 to present day     | Classical building, purpose built on the Thames at Millbank with several later extensions.   |
| Tate Modern         | 2000 | 1992 | The Tate Trustees | As above | Art  | Universal                       | Contemporary            | Former converted power station and part of the South Bank regeneration project. Overlooks Thames River, Bankside, London.  |

## **Introduction: The making of the British state**

Any study of the United Kingdom and its museums requires some background knowledge of the relationship between the notion of Great Britain (founded in 1707 with the Act of Union between Scotland on the one hand and England and Wales on the other), and the conflation of Britain with England. It also needs to take account of the complex relationship between the Union states and Ireland. English colonisation of Ireland over the centuries before this date meant that Ireland, by 1707, was to all intents and purposes part of this union, though this was only formalised by Act of Parliament in 1800 when the Irish lost their Parliament and sent their representatives to Westminster.

According to Colley whose seminal work in 1992 *Britons; Forging the Nation 1707 - 1837*, has remained largely unchallenged, Britishness was constructed and contested after 1707 largely in response to overseas events. Between 1775 and 1783, Britain lost its North American empire, and the mainly Catholic countries of Europe, particularly Spain and France, became the threat against which Protestant Britain re-imagined itself as the champion of European freedoms both religious and political. At the same time, the growth of a second empire in the nineteenth century re-enforced the sense of exotic otherness against which Britishness could be compared. Other factors encouraging this sense of British identity include pride in trade, a sense of British survival against the odds (repeated right up to the Second World War and drawn upon during the Falklands War, 1982), and the importance of Parliament, of which the British were inordinately proud. A key tenet of Colley's thesis is that Protestantism was a major factor in British identity. At its simplest, Protestants were good, Roman Catholics bad. Ireland does not, however, fit into this thesis.

To what extent did these developments lead to a loss of regional and national identities within Great Britain? Hechter (1999) suggests that, although subsequent industrialization did result in some decline in regional linguistic differences, Celtic identities remained strong. Colley also argues that British identity did not mean the involuntary loss of separate national identities within the British Isles. While proud to be British we can assume that most people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also conscious of their own local, regional and national identities within this construct. Individuals moved easily between different senses of self and history. Key players, such as the monarch, Parliament and London (capital city of England) took on a strong British identity. Museums, like all institutions of the time, could be several things to people at once. They moved, particularly in the nineteenth century, between different functions, and people had no difficulty in holding apparently contradictory views on museum representation of national identities that were both separate (Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England) and conjoined simultaneously (British). For those who lived during this period the identification with these different complementary and competing senses of nation were implicit in much of what they did and how they imagined themselves.

The Empire in the nineteenth century helped to support the notion of Britishness (Peers 2004: 53). Its existence and the wealth it generated enabled British citizens to acquire vast collections of material culture from all around the world, much of which found its way into national museums in London. Many of these collections were private ones, donated by individual explorers and

wealthy aristocrats who wished to endow the nation with the fruits of a lifetime's study and hobbies.

Southern Ireland broke away from Britain after the radical Sinn Féin party's electoral victory in 1918, followed by war with the British and civil war. As the Irish Free State (1922-37), later Éire/Republic of Ireland, it is a completely independent country and its national museums tell a story of Irish distinctiveness. The remainder of Britain remained relatively united and the Second World War provided the British state with a sense of a war well fought and won, one from which it emerged poorer and less powerful but with a strong sense of moral superiority and pride. As the memories of the war have faded, and the Empire mostly disbanded, the idea of Britain has seen less attractive to some parts of the United Kingdom. Scotland obtained its own parliament established by the Scotland Act of 1998, following a referendum on devolution. Wales gained a National Assembly for Wales established by the Government of Wales Act in 1998. The relationships between the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the UK's Westminster Parliament (where all four parts of the UK are represented) vary in detail. However, national museums and galleries in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are governed by their respective institutions. There are no English national museums, but national museums in England are British ones and are governed by Westminster albeit at arms length.

## **National museums and cultural policy in Britain**

### **Definitions of national museums in the UK**

The Department of Culture Media and Sport, the government department responsible for museums in the UK, defines the national museums for which the Westminster Parliament is responsible as consisting of the following (as of 26 October 2010), and listed in the order in which they appear in the website:

- British Museum founded in 1759  
Houses a collection representative of world cultures
- Imperial War Museum 1920  
Covers conflicts, especially those involving Britain and the Commonwealth, from the First World War to the present day. The Museum comprises:
  - IWM London 1920
  - IWM Duxford 1976
  - Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms 1984/2005
  - HMS Belfast 1978
  - IWM North Manchester 2002
- National Gallery 1824  
Houses the national collection of Western European painting from the 13th to the 19th centuries.
- National Maritime Museum 1937  
Illustrates the importance of the sea, ships, time and the stars. The Museum comprises three sites:
  - the Maritime Galleries 1937

- the Royal Observatory founded in 1675. Transferred to the National Maritime Museum in 1960
  - the Queen's House Acquired in 1934
- National Museums Liverpool
 

England's only national collection based entirely outside London. Eight venues cover art, history, archaeology, natural history, geology, maritime collections

  - World Museum Liverpool 1860/1 – became national in 1986
  - Walker Art Gallery 1843/1852
  - Merseyside Maritime Museum 1992
  - International Slavery Museum 2007
  - National Conservation Centre 1996
  - Lady Lever Art Gallery 1922
  - Sudley House 1944
  - Museum of Liverpool
- National Museum of Science & Industry 1857 founded as part of the South Kensington Museum
 

Cares for the national collections of science, technology, industry, transport and medicine. It incorporates:

  - the Science Museum, London Gained independence in 1909
  - the National Railway Museum at York and Shildon 1975
  - the National Media Museum at Bradford 1983
  - the Science Museum Swindon, storage facility 1979
- National Portrait Gallery 1856 Founded in 1856 to collect and display portraits of eminent British men and women
- Natural History Museum 1851 (formerly part of the British Museum)
 

The UK's national museum of nature, and a centre of scientific excellence in taxonomy and biodiversity. It incorporates:

  - Natural History Museum, South Kensington opened in South Kensington in 1881. The collections were not finally declared a museum in their own right until 1963. Natural History Museum, Tring 1937
- Royal Armouries claims to be the UK's oldest museum – Tower of London admitting visitors in the sixteenth century
 

Cares for the national collection of arms and armour. Its outstations are:

  - Royal Armouries in Leeds 1996
  - Royal Armouries, Fort Nelson 2004
  - Royal Armouries at the Tower of London. Sixteenth century or earlier
- Sir John Soane's Museum 1837
 

Displays the antiquities, furniture and paintings collected by the architect Sir John Soane in the house he designed for his private residence in Lincoln's Inn Fields.
- The Tate 1897
 

Houses the national collection of British art from the 16th century and the national collection of international modern art. Tate is a family of galleries, comprising:

  - Tate Britain 2000

- Tate Modern 2000
- Tate Liverpool 1988
- Tate St Ives 1993 (including the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden)
- Victoria and Albert Museum 1852
 

Housing one of the greatest collections of decorative arts in the world, the V&A displays everything from fashion, textiles, theatrical collections, through to toys, furniture and paintings. The V&A includes:

  - V&A in South Kensington 1852
  - V&A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green 1872
- Wallace Collection 1897
 

Among its treasures are one of the best collections of French 18th century pictures, porcelain and furniture in the world, a remarkable array of 17th century paintings and a superb armoury. (DCMS 2010)

These museums are sponsored museums. They receive funding from the government. However, this alone is not enough to secure the title ‘national’. Only museums founded by Act of Parliament are defined as national museums. Other museums funded by the state without such a foundation, such as the People’s History Museum, are not deemed to be national museums, despite their sponsorship by the state. For the purpose of this paper we have chosen to study only those museums defined by the government in this way as national museums. This is not to deny that others fulfil the similar functions and represent important aspects of the nation to itself. Our research has revealed how serendipitous has been the foundation of British national museums (mainly in London) and we recognise that there is further study to be done on British national museums that do not have this Parliamentary foundational moment.

### **The major foundational restructuring moments of the museum system**

National museums in Britain were established for a variety of reasons over a long period of time, beginning with the founding of the British Museum in 1753 by Act of Parliament. Unlike their counterparts in Europe the monarch was not the main patron of those museums, which are now deemed to be national. Royal collecting came to an abrupt end with the execution of Charles I in 1649 when royal collections were sold. In the eighteenth century the formal role of the state in Britain in supporting the arts was very limited. Society fostered individualism and it was only through the influence and patronage of leading figures in society that notions of what we would now regard as culture and heritage gained a foothold. Without strong civic government, individuals from the wealthy middle classes drove the founding of successive waves of learned societies, which often formed their own collections.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was assumed that ‘the quality ...of a nation’s art collections and the taste of her *connoisseurs* helped define her state of civilization and her international prestige’ (Hoock 2003: 255 own italics). For most of this period it was accepted that private patronage should support the arts and not the state (Brewer 1997). The British Museum (whose collections included art and whose antiquities were displayed in an aesthetic manner), was free and open, in theory, to all, and is thus exceptional and an unusual foundation in Britain at

this time. Its popularity undermined these exclusivist assumptions of the polite world. During the next hundred years British opinion shifted from viewing the idea of taste as something that could only be cultivated by a few to the concept that it could be something more widely understood (Hooock 2003: 256). This shift engendered a debate about the role of the state in fostering and making available the arts to the public, and marked the beginning of a change in attitude towards the democratisation of art, science and knowledge generally, helping to pave the way towards an expansion of the national museum system. It also marks the beginning of Parliamentary interest in the arts generally.

Traditional views of the British government (and here we are referring to Parliamentary democracy and not the personal patronage of the King), and its relationship to the arts and culture during the second half of the eighteenth century, have depicted Parliament as uninterested in the promotion of the arts and unable to support them financially to the extent certain absolute monarchs elsewhere in Europe were able to do (Hooock 2005: 227 – 230). This interpretation is in part influenced by Parliament's lack of enthusiasm for a National Gallery. Thus, according to these interpretations, the British government in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries limited its interests to war, trade and a narrow domestic field.

Hooock challenges this and argues that not only could the British state afford the arts, it saw them during this period as an extension of its war efforts. For many people of the political class the war was not only waged between armies and economies but was also extended to cultural rivalry. In other words the Napoleonic Wars encouraged the promotion of patriotic art (the English/British School) and the acquisition of antiquities from abroad (for the British Museum) in direct attempts to rival French cultural developments.

However, despite this enthusiasm to acquire trophies of war and to outdo the French in the acquisition of classical and Near Eastern antiquities, the state (here we mean Parliament as opposed to the King) remained resolutely uninterested for a long time in formal sponsorship of museums in Britain, once the British Museum had been established. Indeed the foundation of this institution provided a convenient repository for all sorts of material offered to the monarch (as representative of the nation) or to Parliament itself, thus conveniently negated the need for any other museum in Britain. However, there was one particular field of collecting where individuals regarded the British state as deficient in support – art – particularly old masters and contemporary fine art, despite the fact that the British Museum had art collections. Looking abroad to the rest of Europe there was a growing concern in the eighteenth century that the British lagged behind other powers in its sponsorship of fine art. Old masters, in particular, were considered important to facilitate and encourage the development of an English school through the imitation of past styles. At the same time there were concerns that artists needed encouragement to create an English school of art, to rival those in Europe. It was the monarch rather than the state as expressed through Parliament that sponsored such a school.

Private collecting was popular amongst the wealthy middle classes and the aristocracy and it was their influence upon Parliament and their private generosity and personal enthusiasms that led to the foundation of several key national museums in Britain, such as the British Museum, the National Gallery and the Tate in the nineteenth century.

## **The nineteenth century**

In the nineteenth century learned societies provided the foundations for a pervasive museum culture in Britain, but they should not be understood simply as vehicles for the development of Enlightenment knowledge; they were frequently regarded as independent ‘parliaments’ which brought together new blood with blue blood in a period of weak national and corrupt local government (Knell 2000; 2007). The contrast between Britain and France – the latter having undergone a publicly funded cultural revolution in the sciences and arts after the Revolution in 1789 (Taquet 2009) – was profound. Throughout the early nineteenth century, some British intellectuals bemoaned their government’s reluctance to commit public monies to the sciences and to museums. The development of museums by provincial learned societies was a means to make up for this failing and to defend the intellectual identity of Britain against the French.

In January 1823 John Julius Angerstein died and this brought the issue of a national gallery to a head. Before his death he had been eager for Parliament to buy his collection for a National Gallery and there were fears that this collection would be sold and taken abroad. The Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, was persuaded that the time had come for a National Gallery in order to improve public taste and the standard of painting in England. Speeches made in parliament at the time suggest that MPs were very aware that the Louvre set a standard that no art gallery in Britain had yet matched and that the Gallery would enhance the nation’s standing. Thus the tide had turned. With this creation Parliament acknowledged its role as a provider of educational opportunities for artists and all those interested in high culture, as well as recognising the cultural significance to the nation’s standing in Europe of the possession of a great art gallery.

The National Gallery opened to the public in 1824 in a town house in Pall Mall in London. This marks a gradual shift in national policy towards the arts with the state acknowledging a responsibility for the purchase and exhibiting of key Old Master paintings for the benefit of the public as a whole; entry was free without tickets. The Gallery was the result of the efforts of a few individuals, rather than a distinctive policy established by Parliament, and was motivated by the lack of a British school of art. A study of old masters such as to be found in a national gallery was considered one of the best ways of promoting such a school.

Government control of the National Gallery, like all national museums then and now, functioned at ‘arms length’ from the government of the time and was governed by a Board of Trustees independent of direct parliamentary control, though several of them were originally members of the government. The director (or keeper as he was called at the time of the founding of the Gallery) reported to the Trustees. Such Trustees of national museums in the UK had, and still have, considerable powers. They appointed the directors and oversaw all expenditure in the museum, approved all major developments and usually showed an interest in the displays and museum programmes. Relationships between Trustees and directors have been, on occasion, fraught.

From the mid 1830s, British governments were forced to respond to the social and political consequences of the industrial revolution that created large cities with urban proletariats working in poor conditions, and had seen a middle class drive for a wider franchise. Periodically, the government set up select Parliamentary Committees to investigate the state of culture and the government’s role in supporting it. The Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures of 1835-6 was headed by radicals and it wanted not only to support manufacturing

but it also saw museums and galleries as tools of social improvement, good for the nation as a whole (Prior 2002: 84). During this period, Mechanics' Institutes in the provinces were established to provide educational opportunities for the skilled working classes and arranged exhibitions. The great success of these organisations and their exhibitions helped counter some views that working class people did not appreciate educational opportunities. At the same time Britain, as the greatest manufacturing nation in the world, wished to retain her advantageous position. Thus there was great interest in ways in which all those engaged in manufacturing, from designers to artisans, could improve their knowledge particularly of design. It was this that drove much of the subsequent move towards regional and national museums in third, fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century. In some areas middle class interest in antiquities and archaeology led to the growth of specialist societies and the founding of local museums.

It has been suggested that British concerns about social control and the needs of an educated workforce, together with concerns about poverty and unemployment in Ireland, prompted efforts to educate the wider population in the nineteenth century and museums were understood to be places where the working classes could go to be 'civilised.' Bennett (2002: 19) argues that by the mid-nineteenth century, the 'governmentalisation of culture' was aimed precisely at the modification of the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of the wider populace. From the eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century, these ideas, in some form or another, are influential in Britain although, as Knell (2007) points out, it is only after the mid nineteenth century (several decades after the development of museum culture) that the State shifted its attitude towards education and museums became sites of learning for all.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 was a seminal moment in British cultural development in the nineteenth century. The profit of £186,000 was used to found the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum, which were all built in the area to the south of the exhibition, nicknamed Albertopolis. As far as Henry Cole (1808-82) was concerned, (one of the key players, whose influence in these developments cannot be overestimated), the purpose of the Victoria and Albert Museum was to improve the taste and knowledge of those who were concerned with manufacturing in the United Kingdom. Prince Albert's support for the original Exhibition and for subsequent museums was also extremely important. The mid-Victorian period saw a great upsurge in the founding or development of provincial museums. Civic pride and rivalry between cities, along with a desire to follow where London led and to promote manufacturing everywhere, resulted in a wave of museum building and development throughout the UK. Municipal museums imitated national ones in their collecting policies, acquiring material from across the world, often as a result of bequests, but sometimes as a result of organising expeditions abroad. In Wales, Ireland and Scotland museums that were to become national imitated these London initiatives.

The nearest national museum to a national history museum is the National Portrait Gallery established in 1856 with the criteria that the Gallery was to be about history, not art, and about the status of the sitter, rather than the quality or character of a particular image considered as a work of art. These criteria are still used by the Gallery, which was the idea of biographers and historians and some politicians, not the government of the day. Philip Henry Stanhope, 5th Earl Stanhope (1805-75) Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59) and Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) were the originators of the idea. Stanhope first introduced the idea to the House of Commons in

1846; he tried again in 1852 and, after he took his seat in the House of Lords, he tried for a third time in 1856. Queen Victoria supported the Gallery.

However, following Albert's death in 1861, Mandler argues that 'the court's contribution to the patronage of the fine arts was nearly nil' (Mandler 2006: 119), due in part, no doubt, by Victoria's long period of mourning. Nevertheless the state, as represented by Parliament, continued to support the national museums it had already created and focussed on issues of access rather than expansion. Only when wealthy collectors such as Sir Henry Tate (who offered to build a national art gallery subsequently and whose Gallery, the Tate was founded in 1897) or Lady Wallace, who bequeathed the house and art collection of the Herford family to the nation, offered their collections to the nation along with buildings in which to house them, only then were new national museums founded. Private, rather than state patronage was the characteristic of the last forty years of Victoria's reign and in the period leading up to 1914.

### **1914 and after**

During the First World War many museum members of staff were called up and the work of the national museums appeared irrelevant to the war effort. The Government's Committee on Retrenchment (1916) issued a White Paper on 1 February recommending that, with the possible exception of the reading room of the British Museum, all museums, national and local, should close. National Museums at this time cost about £300,000 a year and generated income of only £3000. Their closure would be a valuable object lesson in economy and the buildings could be redeployed. Despite strong lobbying the Government implemented this plan, but a few national museums remained partially open. The impetus for closure was thus economic. That said, with the threat of Zeppelin raids from 1915 onwards, institutions took steps to store their most treasured possessions outside London or below ground.

Without any government department to take a lead on the development of national museums the government commissioned periodic reports on aspects of museum work in the UK. The Curzon Report (1914-16) proposed a rationalisation of collecting policies pursued by the Tate, the National Gallery, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the British Museum with regard to British art (Spalding 1998: 42). Such a committee indicates that even in wartime certain cultural issues were important. However, the greatest long-term impact on national museums by the war was the decision taken by the Cabinet in 1917 to establish a national museum to collect and display material relating to the Great War (the Imperial War Museum). The Imperial War Museum, formally established by Act of Parliament in 1920, opened in 1920 in the Crystal Palace. It forms a case study below. It was the most important of a number of military museums set up after the war.

The interwar years were a time of recovery from the First World War, followed by a period of severe economic recession during the 1930s and preparations for the next war. According to Lewis (1989) we can see these years as a time when the foundations were laid for developments after World War Two. The Royal Commission on National Museums and Galleries was appointed in 1927 to investigate the state of national collections in London and Edinburgh. Reporting in 1929 it had a significant impact on museums and galleries in the UK. It found that compared with the development of other services and the expenditure on them, the growth of national museums had been checked. Proposals were made for extensions or upgrading of six

national museums: The British Museum, the British Museum (National History), the Museum of Practical Geology,<sup>1</sup> the National Portrait Gallery, the Science Museum and the Royal Scottish Museum. Key problems identified by the Commissioners were 'the passive attitude of the State to museums and the individualistic growth of the national museums themselves' (Lewis 1989: 41). It also recommended the establishment of a National Folk Museum (which was not acted on). It called for far closer collaboration between local and national museums, for national museums to show a far greater awareness of the needs of their visitors, to improve their displays in extend their contact with schools. Its impact can be seen in the development of the following:

1. The Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) was originally established as the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries in 1931, in accordance with the recommendations of the Final Report of the Royal Commission on National Museums and Galleries (Cmd. 3401) of 1929.
2. The National Museum Director's Conference was founded in 1929, in anticipation of a Royal Commission recommendation that the national collections should 'coordinate their work and discuss matters of mutual concern'. It currently has twenty-eight members with institutions based in around one hundred locations.
3. The Museum Association launched a Diploma in 1930, including a balance between curatorial and museum administration skills, in response to the Commission.

The founding of the National Maritime Museum in 1934, when Act of Parliament in Greenwich established it, illustrates the ad hoc nature of government interest in national museums. Once again a national museum was established not so much as a result of government policy but as a response to individual initiatives and the work of independent interest societies. The origins of the museum go back to before the First World War and the foundation in 1910 of the Society for Nautical Research (SNR), which independently developed the aim of founding a 'national naval and nautical museum'. In 1927–28, following a public appeal organised by the Society, one of its wealthy members, Sir James Caird (1864–1954), purchased several maritime collections and this impetus encouraged the government to incorporate the Museum by Act of Parliament.

### **National museums in wartime 1939 – 1945**

National museums in the Second World War continued to sustain the cultural life of the nation during wartime. Initially they closed and their collections were put into store often a long way from the capital. Many members of staff were drafted into the armed forces. However, public pressure led to the reopening of museums soon after war broke out. The V&A, for example, reopened on 13 November 1939 and continued its programme of exhibitions throughout the war on artists such as Van Dyke and Holbein. At the same time it housed about 350 children and staff evacuated from Gibraltar and became the RAF's canteen. The National Gallery's picture of the month scheme begun in 1942, by which one Old Master at a time was brought out of safe storage and exhibited, along with its programme of lunchtime concerts and recitals, was used in various propaganda films and documentaries to illustrate not only the importance of maintaining a cultural offering in a civilized society, but also the 'spirit of Britain' at war (Bosman 2008, Crookham 2009). Damage to national museums by bombing was considerable. Both the British

Museum and the National Gallery suffered substantial structural damage and, in the post war austerity of the 1950s, repairs were difficult to justify when so many people lived in temporary housing. In the case of some museums, such as the British Museum, full repairs were not completed until the 1980s.

### **1945 and the post-war consensus**

With the coming of a Labour government in 1964 Ministers began to take a greater interest in public access to the arts generally. The 1964 Robbins Report recommended that national galleries, museums, universities and learned societies should be placed under a new Minister for the Arts and Education (giving them a voice in Cabinet). This was a major shift in policy. Wilson, the Labour Prime Minister, chose Jennie Lee, who held the post from 1964 to 1970. If the arts had been the leisure pursuit of the metropolitan upper classes in the past, her February 1965 white paper, *A Policy for the Arts, the First Steps*, set a different tone, and encouraged wider participation. Funding for the arts in general was significantly increased.

Following the 1979 election, Thatcher's government marked the end of the post-war consensus. Funding for National Museums was reduced, and Schubert uses the V&A as an example of what happened to the national museums in these circumstances. She describes it locked in a downward spiral, lurching from crisis to crisis, losing its position as one of the great European museums (Schubert 2000: 68). On the other hand, the Museums and Galleries Act 1992 gave the National Gallery, the Tate, the National Portrait Gallery and the Wallace Collection much more independence and control of their own buildings, and the National Gallery and the Tate at least succeeded in attracting large quantities of private sponsorship.

These pressures also brought about a culture change in national museums. They became more focussed on income generation. For example it was at this time that the Natural History Museum took on consultancy work, museum shops, trading and marketing divisions became core functions, and catering improved and became more expensive. For many staff this was a difficult time as they thought these pressures took them away from their research and collections focussed priorities. Redundancies were made and posts were not filled. It was also during this time (1986) that the National Museums Liverpool was established as part of an attempt to regenerate a former industrial area through cultural developments. These were essentially local civic museums with excellent collections.

In September 1981 the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, established in 1931, was renamed the Museums and Galleries Commission and given new functions. It was a registered charity and was incorporated under a Royal Charter, which came into effect on 1 January 1987. Its aims included promoting the interests of museums and galleries (national or otherwise), advising institutions, developing agreed standards of good practice and encouraging the adoption of these standards, and raising standards through the administration of grant schemes. Currently known as MLA, the Council of Museums, Libraries and Archives, it is due to be wound up in 2012. Throughout this period the UK Government adopted an 'arm's length' approach to museums, and National Museums were left to the devices of individual directors and trustees.

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) – a state lottery established by the National Lottery Act of December 1992 (an initiative of John Major's Conservative government) brought about a

renaissance in local and national museums and provided match funding for a range of projects both capital and revenue that revolutionised the way national museums could plan their developments.

While the impact of the Labour Party government ('New Labour', 1997-2010) has yet to be fully assessed, there can be no doubt that this ushered in a decade or more of growth and development for the national museums in the UK. Labour harnessed provincial museums to its social inclusion agenda by directing national funding to the Renaissance programme that set these museums targets for audiences with specific emphasis on increasing working class and Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) visits. The period also saw disputes over entrance fees to national museums and free entry was introduced in 2001.

The decline of national government funding of core services and the linkage by New Labour of agendas to funding resulted in national museums becoming more interested in their audiences. Large visitor numbers gave them a stronger argument for more funding, both government and sponsor-led. HLF also demanded evidence of improved intellectual and social as well as physical access for all the museums it supported. As the case studies show, philanthropy, whilst always significant, has enabled, or provided, the majority of the funding, for some of the most important new investments. In the past high culture needed no defence, but now museums were encouraged to think about their social purpose.

Encouraged by the government to think beyond the confines of London, and to consider audiences in the regions, some museums expanded physically with branches elsewhere, for example the Imperial War Museum North (IWMN) in Manchester in 2002. Such expansions were usually linked to regeneration projects in deprived areas. In this case the IWMN was part of the Salford Quays regeneration. Art in particular underwent an extraordinary boom time with British artists such as Damien Hurst and Tracey Emin being exhibited in Tate Modern and collected around the world. It can be said that national museums during this period focussed on a brand and image that reflected their role not just as national museums but as international ones. This fitted in well with the Blair administration's encouragement of the arts as a symbol of 'Cool Britannia' and the desire to position Britain on the world stage. It was during the period 1997 – 2010 that British national museums exhibited more confidence and innovation than at any time since the 1850s, reflecting a nation undergoing an economic boom.

## **Funding**

Direct governmental funding arrangements for national museums in the UK have changed over time. The Treasury funded most national museums until 1963, when the Standing Commission for Museums and Galleries was given responsibility for 'grant in aid'. In 1965, responsibility for funding was placed with the Department for Education & Science. Then, in 1992, the Conservative Government created the Department of National Heritage (DNH) to cover arts, culture and sport. In 1997 an incoming Labour government renamed this the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Note that DCMS had a very wide remit including (for example) organisations such as the BBC, the national lottery, and the 2012 Olympic Games.

DCMS is only responsible for national museums in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland museums are the responsibility of the Scottish Museums Council, the National Assembly for Wales' Department of Heritage, and Northern Ireland's Department of Culture, Arts and

Leisure. The exceptions are those armed services museums, which might be regarded as national in some respects, that are funded by the Ministry of Defence in whichever part of the UK they are sited.

### **The structural interface between cultural policy and national museums**

As we have seen, the UK's national museums are run 'at arm's length' from politicians, in other words, in theory, governments cannot tell museums what they should exhibit. However, some have argued (Babbidge 2000: 8; Anderson 2005) that the 1997 Labour Government marked a shift to closer control of the cultural sector, including national museums. Under this administration (1997-2010), DCMS funding for national museums has been based on funding agreements that are negotiated with the museums. They typically last for several years. They normally cover the aims, and the strategic priorities of the museum, in fairly general terms. They also indicate the 'Key Performance Indicators' by which the museum's success will be judged. They may specify that some proportion of the funding is 'ring fenced' for specific projects. The current agreements last until 2011.

For example, the 2003-2006 funding agreement between DCMS and NMSI (the National Museum of Science and Industry) set one target related to the demographic classification of the British public. This used a classification system known as NRS ('National Readership Survey') after the organisation that developed it, and results in a loose division of British society along these lines:

|    |   |
|----|---|
| A  | upper middle class                        |
| B  | middle class                              |
| C1 | lower middle class                        |
| C2 | skilled working class                     |
| D  | Semi and unskilled manual workers         |
| E  | Those at the lowest levels of subsistence |

The 2003-2006 funding agreement with the NMSI required an 8% increase in the number of C2DE visitors over the 2002-03 baseline (DCMS 2003: 5). National Museums under Labour were also expected to promote diversity and multiculturalism, as well as attracting larger numbers of visitors from lower socio economic backgrounds.

In the UK the government, (Her Majesty's Treasury), undertakes a 'Comprehensive Spending Review' (CSR) from time to time, which sets firm expenditure limits for Departments (such as DCMS). 'CSR07' (carried out in 2007) ran until 2011; given the 2007 financial crisis, and the change of government in May 2010, CSR10 brought major changes, including a 15 per cent cut over 4 years to national museum funding, and the closing of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). Some of MLA's responsibilities will be shifted to the Arts Council.

### **Analysis**

The case studies demonstrate that the role of philanthropy has been critical in the creation and development of national museums in Britain, and government action in relation to museums has generally been 'ad-hoc' and reactive, with the interest shown by the Labour government in the function of national museums being the exception rather than the rule.

Today national museums in England have different narratives. The British Museum presents itself as a 'museum of the world, for the world' (British Museum 2010). This, along with its Enlightenment and universal museum claims, has been criticised as a ploy to legitimise ownership of collections of international provenance. The Imperial War Museum claims to tell a national story, but with strong Commonwealth representation. It aims 'to be the world's premier museum of modern conflict' (DCMS 2008: 1). The National Gallery's collection 'belongs to the nation' and it 'serves a wide and diverse range of visitors from the UK and overseas' (National Gallery 2010: 10). The V&A stresses its role as a museum of art and design, with an international status, and as a supporter of the UK's creative economy by inspiring the appreciation and implementation of good design. Although two other major nationals, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum are not considered here, both possess an international outlook. To some extent their subjects, popularly perceived as 'factual' mean that in terms of narrative they can present an 'objective' story with a generically 'Western' interpretation (the Enlightenment project and progress, and Darwinism and evolution). In contrast Tate Britain and the National Portrait Gallery present national narratives through art exhibitions.

The formal role of museums in state making is not easily mapped, since the government has traditionally kept at 'arm's length', its strategies have been ad hoc or at best limited by the length of any given administration's time in office and, in practice, philanthropic initiatives have often driven the agenda. Their role has also changed over the centuries. As far as maintaining or encouraging national identity is concerned currently, it is questionable whether London-based national museums promote Englishness at all. Rather, they position themselves in an international space and assume a kind of distant Britishness that includes all groups currently residing in the UK and a British interest in cultures all over the world. This can be contrasted with museums in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, dealt with in separate reports. British national museums in London adopt an international approach to their collections and galleries, and are mindful of perceptions of British imperial power in the past. For example, the National Maritime Museum's Atlantic Galleries are positioned not as a story of British dominance of the Atlantic but thus:

This gallery is about the movement of people, goods and ideas across and around the Atlantic Ocean from the 17th century to the 19th century. The connections created by these movements changed the lives of people on three continents, profoundly affecting their cultures and societies and shaping the world we live in today. (National Maritime Museum, 2008)

Even the Imperial War Museum, which tells a national story about war in the twentieth and early twenty first century, positions this story within an Empire and Commonwealth experience. Thus national museums in London do not display a coherent narrative of the nation in the same way as, for example does the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin.

## **Case studies in chronological order**

### **Basis of selection**

DCMS directly sponsors twenty-one museums, although only thirteen of these are regarded as national. The museums selected for case studies are, in chronological order of their founding:

- The British Museum
- The National Gallery (later, the National Gallery and the Tate, later Tate Modern and Tate Britain)
- The Victoria & Albert Museum
- The Imperial War Museum

Some of these institutions cover a very broad range of topics and, moreover, their subject specialisms have changed over time. This is dealt with in the individual studies. The British Museum contains ethnographic collections, archaeology and antiquities but much else besides, and in its first 130 years it also held the national natural history collection and until recently a great library. The National Gallery's focus is on paintings, whilst the Tate focuses on British art and modern art and more recently contemporary art. The Victoria and Albert Museum is a design museum and has a large and varied collection reflecting this. The Imperial War museum holds artefacts of war (including a warship) and represents Britain and its dominions and now its commonwealth at war in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They have been selected because they have all been influential not only in Britain but also in Europe and throughout the world. The British Museum and the V&A are widely imitated and, although Britain copied other national art galleries, its reputation in the field of contemporary art is high. Britain has long defined itself by the wars it has (mainly) won and the Imperial War Museum helps define the way the nation has imagined itself in the past and continues to see itself today.

### **The British Museum**

The British Museum is not only the oldest national museum in Britain but it retains its position as the premier museum in London. The breadth and quality of collections and its international significance ranks it as one of the most important museums in the world. Although some of its collections are now sought after by other nations who seek restitution of material culture originating in their territories the museum at present shows little interest in returning these. It positions itself as an international museum of knowledge and as the world comes to London so it reflects back to the world the story of its cultures.

The British Museum was founded in 1753, around the collections of Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), an Ulster-Scots physician and collector. Sloane left his collection to the nation in a bequest (Caygill 1981). It first opened its doors to the public in 1759 in Montagu House Bloomsbury, formerly the London home of the Duke of Montagu, purchased by the Trustees for the purpose of housing the museum. The Museum is often understood as an Enlightenment enterprise, almost outside politics (Conlin 2006: 47, Wilson 1989: 115. Note Wilson was a former director of the Museum and promoted the idea of museum as a universal museum of all cultures).

The history of the Museum in its first fifty years or more suggests that Parliament, having founded it, was unsure what to do with it and certainly had little idea of how to promote its development. It was undoubtedly invested with a great deal of national pride (Jenkins 1992: 13) and was a convenient repository of collections secured for the nation in competition with the French. However, Jenkins argues that 'the material culture of the great civilizations of antiquity was not gathered out of any sustained motive for national self-aggrandisement, but rather through a series of remarkable accidents' (Jenkins 1992: 13). There was no collecting policy as

such and early acquisitions of antiquities were nearly always the result of the endeavours of particular individuals such as Lord Elgin, the Paduan engineer and explorer Giovanni Belzoni for the Egyptian sculptures, and Austen Laynard for the Assyrian sculptures. Yet, behind these efforts to secure such treasures of antiquity lay the strength of the Royal Navy and the diplomacy of the Foreign Office. Without this support few of the great collections of antiquity would have been secured.

### ***The British Museum and the public in the eighteenth-century***

The British Museum is sometimes seen as a democratic institution, as entry was free. It was the first public museum in Europe intended 'not only for the inspection and entertainment of the learned and the curious, but for the general use and benefit of the public' (Altick 1978: 25; cited Porter 2001:39). However, the 'public' in 1759, the year it first opened its doors to visitors, having been founded in 1753, was understood to be the educated middle class. Gaining entry was difficult with the need to obtain a ticket for timed entry, which severely limited the numbers who could visit at any one time, ten per hour at first (Shelley 1911: 59). However, within two years of the museum opening the idea of timed entry was abandoned in order to allow access to 'all persons of decent appearance without limitation of numbers' (Caygill and Date 1999: 14), although a ticket was still required and some of these exchanged hands on the black market. The Museum appears to have been visited mainly by the wealthy and educated. Larger numbers of visitors required extra space and a series of building projects were initiated. One of the first, indicating the importance given to the library, was to do with the re-housing of the library of George III, and the King's Library opened in 1827. The main museum building, designed by Sir Robert Smirke opened in 1852.

### ***The British Museum and collections***

The British Museum currently positions itself as a repository of world cultures. Its collections range in diversity from archaeology to art, from coins and medals to books and manuscripts. The Sloane material certainly set the precedent for such diverse collecting but a brief study of the history of the main collections of the Museum suggests that over time certain disciplines were regarded more favourably than others. During the early years of the Museum the most important collections were natural history specimens, manuscripts and books. For the first fifty or so years the antiquities such as the Egyptian ones were valued as curiosities rather than for their aesthetic or historical importance (Moser 2006: 43), although Egyptian antiquities were frequently donated and became one of the Museum's most important attractions to the general public. At the top of the hierarchy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were the classical collections. Simultaneous to the acquisition of this material from Greece and Rome were the donations of material culture relating to ancient civilizations in the Near East because of biblical associations. Aristocrats and the middle classes, many of whom donated collections to the museum, collected near Eastern antiquities and classical materials widely.

### ***Governance of the museum in the eighteenth century***

The nature of the relationship between the state and the Museum was unsurprisingly close in the early years following the Museum's foundation. The Trustees were independent of government but the very nature of their composition, (including amongst their number the Lord Chancellor

and the Speaker of the House of Commons), inevitably meant that they could draw on funds and support from Parliament at very short notice. Over time, however, the relationship between the Museum and the government of the time weakened. The work of the Trustees became less 'hands on' and the principal librarians and curators managed things as they thought best.

The Museum gained some independence from parliament when the Trustees secured for it a regular grant in aid at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Up until this point the Museum relied on income invested from the Lottery funds it received upon its foundation and from funds voted by Parliament on a case-by-case basis.

### ***British Museum architecture***

As we have seen the first building to house the British Museum was the rather ramshackle Montagu House, formerly the home of the Duke of Montagu. It was possibly styled by Puget in the French fashion and constituted three sides of a quadrangle (Caygill 1981: 9). The fourth side consisted of a large colonnade with Ionic columns. Erected in 1677 in Bloomsbury, a fashionable residential area of London, it had gardens, a grand entrance, sweeping staircase and great reception rooms. Thus the first Museum in Britain was an aristocrat's residence, a place where objects could be displayed as a man of letters and connoisseurship might have done. The House faced onto Great Russell Street, which, despite its name, was not a fine thoroughfare but quite a mean one. There were no other civic buildings nearby, and only with the foundation of the University College London in the nineteenth century did the area become one of learning and culture. Thus, by accident of a suitable property being available in this area did the Museum begin its long association with Bloomsbury, which continues to this day.

Montagu House was not large enough to house the increasing number of objects being bequeathed to the Museum and in 1808 a new gallery, the Townley Gallery, built near the north-west corner of Montagu House, was opened. There followed a series of extensions to the museum until in 1847 the House was demolished to make way for a grand new building designed by Robert Smirke and completed by his brother Sydney Smirke. The new British Museum opened to the public in 1852 and it is this building in which the Museum is housed today (with later extensions). It has a neo-classical facade with a grand principal entrance. It illustrates the fascination with Greek architecture in Britain at the time. The round reading room was opened in 1857.

### ***The British Museum in the nineteenth century***

It was during the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century that the British Museum came under the influence of other museums in Europe (Wilson 2002). Until this time the British Museum's curators and librarians had focussed on non-national collections. However, throughout Europe new national museums recast the notion of what a national museum should be, encouraging staff at the British Museum to value British collections more highly than before. The Louvre continued to expand and the British, ever mindful of their greatest rivals, the French, were loathe to fall behind in museum development.

Edward Hawkins, Keeper of Antiquities, 1825 – 60, and Augustus Wollaston Franks, Keeper of the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities from 1866 to 1896, (Caygill 1997) were two of the key players in establishing national collections (as in belonging to the nation). Throughout the nineteenth century the British Museum continued to expand its collections,

depending on the enthusiasm of curators and keepers who often led collecting excavations abroad, particularly in the Near and Middle East, and on the benevolence of donors. Principal Librarians (as the directors were called) allowed a great deal of autonomy to senior members of staff who pursued their own interests. The influence of the Trustees was occasional and they relied very much on the advice of those who worked in the Museum.

In 1883, the British Museum opened a branch in South Kensington to which it sent its mineralogical, geological and botanical collections. This Natural History Museum remained under the control of the Trustees until 1963. The aim appears to have been to free up space for antiquities and to remove from the British Museum the large numbers of children who came to see the animals, many of whom were considered to be too boisterous (Caygill 1981: 40). This move indicates how natural history no longer remained some of the most important specimens as they had been in the eighteenth century but classical and other antiquities now were perceived to be the most important collections in the Museum.

The values espoused by the Museum and its collections were complex. On the one hand there is no doubt that the Museum represented the way the British understood themselves in the world – as explorers, disseminators of ideas, traders and adventurers as well as imperialists and governors. These values were, however, implicit. Britain's wealth and influence facilitated the growth of the collections and many were acquired through donation or through the personal interest of the Principal Librarians or individual keepers. The government had very little influence on the museum and its development although it provided most of its running costs.

### ***The British Museum in the twentieth century***

Lack of government interest continued throughout the twentieth century. Indeed the Royal Commission on National Museums and Galleries, reporting in 1929, identified that one of the key problems with national museums was the passive attitude of the State to museums and the individualistic growth of the national museums themselves. Two World Wars and a recession in the 1930s led to damage to buildings and a lack of investment in the future.

After the Second World War the British Museum struggled to accommodate all the collections on its site in Bloomsbury and, despite several additions, it was cramped. By the end of the 1960s one solution to the department's lack of space was found, when space in London's Burlington Gardens became available and was turned into the Museum of Mankind, the department's exhibition area and administrative centre. Here the Department of Ethnography hosted seventy-five exhibitions between 1970 and 1997. In 2004 the Department of Ethnography moved back into the main building in Bloomsbury. The removal of the collections and their return can be interpreted as a sign of changing attitudes towards ethnography. Previously the 'exotic other', less valued than 'antiquities', these collections are now part of world cultures, allocating them the same 'values' as antiquities from Greece and Rome.

In 1963 a new British Museum Act replaced the 1753 Act. The Board of Trustees was slimmed down from fifty-one to twenty five. The Sovereign continues to appoint one trustee, fifteen are nominated by the Prime Minister and one each are nominated by the British Academy, the Royal Academy, the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries. Members are no longer appointed for life. The British Museum (Natural History) was formally separated. The Museum was now given powers to lend material abroad without an Act of Parliament. It was also decided

to move the library from the museum into a different building to provide additional space and a new library opened in 1997 along the Euston Road, separating the Museum from its manuscript and printed material for the first time since 1753.

### ***The British Museum: Conclusion***

The Museum has become one of the cultural institutions against which all others are measured but it has developed into a world-class museum as much by accident as by design. While we can argue that it contributed to state making because it became the exemplar of an Enlightenment museum and reflected power and prestige of the state to the British public and to rivals and allies abroad, no government actively sought to dictate to or manage the museum until the last decade of the twentieth century. To describe the Museum as an imperial venture is to simplify it and to misunderstand many of the myriad motives that drove the individuals who worked in it and donated their collections. Certainly patriotic pride played its part but so did the quest for knowledge. Governmental interference has been intermittent and relatively ineffectual. Directors and Trustees have wielded enormous power and individual librarians, keepers and curators have all forged their own idea of the Museum, collecting and developing its exhibitions following their own particular interests. Donors have created whole sections of the Museum by their legacies and individuals have pursued excavations and expeditions that have added enormously to the Museum's collections. Politically, as we have seen, it positions itself as an international museum of the world for the world rather than a national institution.

### **The Victoria & Albert Museum**

The founding and early history of the V&A is particularly complex. It grew out of concerns about education and social control. The successful Great Exhibition of 1851 played an important role in demonstrating the popularity of exhibitions of this nature and providing a surplus to pay for the new exhibition. It also sought to improve British art and design. This, Burton (1999) argues, was an 'Albertian vision', that is, it owed much to the views of the Prince Consort and those of his circle; they believed, for example, that the museum could help overcome shortcomings in British design. To achieve this practical end, Saumarez Smith (1997) suggests that 'part of the spirit of South Kensington lay in an oppositional view of what are normally regarded as the constituent elements of mid-Victorian culture' that is, the museum was intended to be: not academic, but popular; not dominated by the scholarly ideals of Oxford and Cambridge, but by a belief that the state should be actively engaged in public education; and not focussed on classical antiquity as represented by the British Museum, nor in masterpieces of Western European art as at the National Gallery, but in the products of contemporary British industry, in genre painting, and in new technologies, such as photography.

The South Kensington Museum opened in 1857 and by 1869, had over one million visitors per year. Entry was free on some days of the week, whilst on others, visitors had to pay (this was to keep numbers down so that students could work).

### ***Influence of South Kensington***

It is important to note the reach of the Department and the South Kensington Museum during the tenure of the first director Sir Henry Cole. Besides supervising the regional Schools, Cole drove through a takeover of collections in Dublin, which eventually formed part of the National

Museum of Ireland. In Edinburgh, in response to ‘representations from Scottish notabilities’ (Burton 1999: 106) an Industrial Museum was established in temporary premises. This eventually became the Royal Scottish Museum in 1904. The Museum opened a branch in Bethnal Green in east London, and is now the Museum of Childhood, which is still part of the V&A.

### ***The late nineteenth century***

The retirement of Cole in 1873, and the organisational changes that were carried out then coincided with an economic downturn (the ‘Long Depression’ or ‘Great Depression’ experienced in Europe and north America, conventionally dated to 1873-96), all hampered further development. Another significant change was the renaming of the science collection as the Science Museum in 1885, with the remainder becoming the Art Museum. There had been ongoing discussion over the name for the emerging art museum but from 1899 it was formally the Victoria and Albert Museum (Art), until 1909 when, on the opening of the impressive façade along the Cromwell Road, it became simply the Victoria and Albert Museum.

### ***The V&A in the twentieth century***

The V&A in the twentieth century developed according to sponsorship and the whim of the directors. It relies heavily on external funding for redisplay schemes. It attracts little government interest but its foundation is an interesting example of state sponsorship of design for educational purposes rather than fine art for aesthetic ones.

## **The National Gallery**

### ***Foundation: the British Institution for Promoting Fine Arts in the United Kingdom***

The early nineteenth century witnessed increased Parliamentary interest in the arts in Britain and a greater enthusiasm by the educated, politically influential and wealthy in society for more public access to fine art. People also saw the need for a national gallery in London – motivated not just by national pride but also by the aspiration that such a gallery would help improve British design and help British manufacturing as well as supporting the development of artists in Britain (Crookham 2009: 7).

A series of happy co-incidences brought about the foundation of the National Gallery collections and the establishment of the National Gallery itself. In 1823 Sir George Beaumont, a wealthy amateur artist, Tory landowner, Trustee of the British Museum and Member of Parliament, offered to give his own collection of pictures to the nation, provided they were housed in appropriate surroundings. In 1824 John Julius Angerstein, a merchant and Lloyd’s underwriter, who had 38 paintings of extremely high quality, died and there was anxiety that his pictures would go abroad. In 1824 the British Government purchased Angerstein’s collection for £60,000 along with his house in Pall Mall where the paintings were first displayed to the public. At first these were left displayed there.

### ***The public and the National Gallery***

The Gallery was at first very much private, lodged in Pall Mall near the gentlemen’s clubs. Only 200 visitors could be admitted at one time (though one wonders how they all fitted in to a medium size domestic residence). Nevertheless the Gallery was popular with 24,000 people between May and November 1824 (Hooek 2003: 261). With the decision to build a purpose built

National Gallery building in Trafalgar Square the idea of the social purpose of the Gallery became apparent.

The first purpose built National Gallery building was completed in 1837 by William Wilkins and opened to the public in 1838. There had been discussions about removing the Gallery from the centre of London where it suffered from pollution. However, it was understood that the reason for a new Gallery was to increase the space in which visitors could stand so they could see the paintings, as well as increase the hanging and storage space of the institution. Removal of the Gallery to the suburbs was considered to be a barrier to access by the working classes and there was increasing interest in the idea that art could be for all, not just those who had a high level of formal instruction in its appreciation.

For Whitehead this interest in the education of the lower orders of society led the curators to develop a historical hang in the gallery. Art was to be shown as a 'link in a great train, which receives an influence from the one preceding it, and imparts an influence to the one following. Each work is thus illustrated and made intelligible, while instruction is combined with enjoyment' (Waagen 1857: 234, cited Whitehead 2005: 27).

Thus the scene was set for the expansion of the public art institution in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was driven by the idea that art was somehow ennobling and would spiritually enrich visitors, as well as keeping them away from less desirable occupations.

### ***The National Gallery in the twentieth century***

The Gallery remained open during the First World War but during the Second World War the collections were dispersed for safety, finally ending up in a disused slate quarry in Wales. The significance of the collection was recognised by Churchill who, upon being asked should the collection be shipped abroad for safety, responded that Britain should 'hide them in caves and cellars, but not one picture shall leave this island' (quoted in Crookham 2009: 96 – 100). The National Gallery proved to be a significant and iconic institution in wartime. Despite the fact that its collections had been dispersed it held concerts and its director, Kenneth Clark, instituted a popular Picture of the Month scheme with paintings brought out of store. Every night the month's picture was placed in a special basement store to shelter it from bombing. So important was this scheme to public morale that the Gallery and the government were determined to continue it despite the risks of bombing raids. By December 1945 the collections were back in the Gallery.

The new Sainsbury wing opened in 1991 and coincided with a time when the Gallery was undergoing refurbishment.

### **The Tate**

As late as the 1890s, British painting was poorly represented at the National Gallery, although it was well represented in some private collections, and there were several examples of private individuals collecting, exhibiting, and sometimes bequeathing British art to the nation in the nineteenth-century. The original Tate Gallery, at Millbank in London, opened in 1897 to rectify this deficiency. Its official name was the National Gallery of British Art, but it became popularly known as the Tate Gallery after its founder Sir Henry Tate, a sugar refiner and factory owner who offered his collection to the nation and paid for a building to house them. The Tate Gallery became its official name in 1932. (The summary here, up to the mid-1990s, draws heavily on the

work of Spalding's *The Tate: A History*, 1998, unless otherwise stated). The National Gallery, at Trafalgar Square, was the parent organisation to the new National Gallery for British Art. In addition, the collection was subject to the Royal Academy, and to some extent Tate himself, for the remainder of his life. A constant theme running through the early history of the Tate is its difficult relationship with the National Gallery, and controversies surrounding way in which the Chantrey Bequest, a fund for the purchase of art, was administered by the Royal Academy.

### ***The Tate in the twentieth century***

The First World War saw important developments at the Tate, in particular the Curzon Report (1914-16). This proposed the rationalisation of collecting policies pursued by the Tate, the National Gallery, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the British Museum with regard to British art, and its recommendations eventually formed the basis of its constitution. The Tate benefited from the establishment of its own Board of Trustees, though finances and collecting remained the remit of the National Gallery. Its mission was also expanded when in 1917 gallery was also made responsible for the national collection of international modern.

The Tate finally re-opened in 1921, being delayed by the departure of the Department of Pensions, which was quartered in one part of the Gallery during the First World War. During the Second World War, the buildings were badly damaged during air raids, but the collections had been moved to safer quarters in 1939. The gallery continued to make acquisitions, thanks to generous bequests. Following the war, it took some time to restore the buildings, and the Tate was not able to open fully until 24 February 1949. During the twentieth century a succession of Directors developed the professional expertise of the Gallery. The Museums and Galleries Act of 1992, and a final break with the Civil Service in 1996, resulted in the Tate gaining almost complete responsibility for its affairs.

### ***Tate Modern***

Stevenson, as Chairman of the Tate Board, announced in December 1992 that the Tate planned to redefine the collection as a Tate Gallery of British Art and a Tate Gallery of Modern Art, and acknowledged that new buildings would be needed. Nicolas Serota, as director of Tate, drove through an ambitious expansion policy, which illustrates the importance of the director. Without any government backing, he acquired the Bankside Power Station for a new modern art gallery and a £50 million grant from the National Lottery fund towards the costs, reckoned at around £134 million. "New Labour, as a symbol of cool Britannia, adopted this new museum that developed entirely independently of government guidance and outside its policy.

### **The Imperial War Museum**

The Imperial War Museum is unusual because it was founded as a result of a government initiative as a direct result of the impact of the First World War on Britain and a desire not only to remember the dead but also to support domestic morale. It was designed to collect material from the Dominions and India, and was concerned with the experiences of ordinary soldiers and civilians as much as the technology and tactics of war. The Treasury funded it from the start and collection started before the war's end. An Act of Parliament established the museum in 1920 and it was opened at the Crystal Palace on 9 June. The King's words on the opening have often been quoted since:

it stands, not for a group of trophies won from a beaten enemy, nor for a symbol of pride in victory, but as an embodiment of and a lasting memorial of common effort and common sacrifice through which, under the Guidance of Divine Providence, Liberty and Right were preserved. (George V, 1920, quoted in Condell 2002: 31)

Thus this was not a triumphalist monument to victory but a sober memorial to suffering and death. In 1930 it was proposed to move the museum to The Royal Bethlehem Hospital (sometimes known as 'Bedlam'), in Southwark. The museum opened there in 1936.

In 1940, its remit was extended to cover the new conflict, and it started collecting immediately. Following the Second World War, the museum re-opened, and an Act of Parliament in 1953 extended its collecting policy to include all conflicts in which Britain and the Commonwealth had been engaged since 1914. Since 1976 the museum has opened four other branches. These are: Imperial War Museum Duxford, HMS *Belfast*, Imperial War Museum North, Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms (since 2010, the Churchill Museum).

In the case of the Imperial War Museum, its branches are specifically devoted to certain aspects of Britain and war, some of which are integral to an understanding of British national identity. For example the Cabinet War Rooms and the newly formed Churchill Museum within that site, represent and foreground some important elements of Britain's sense of identity in the twentieth century such as Britain as the champion of liberty (Watson 2010).

The museum is an executive non-departmental public body under DCMS, The Imperial War Museum Act of 1920 and other more recent legislation defines the management of the museum. A Board of Trustees was established, and the Prime Minister, the Foreign, Defence and Culture Secretaries appoint trustees; Commonwealth countries appoint seven further members, and the British monarch appoints the President of the Board.

In terms of finances, the museum gains around fifty per cent of its income from its grant from DCMS, with the remainder coming from other sources (Imperial War Museum, n.d: 10). These include the activities of its trading arm and its development trust. These figures indicate that, like other national museums in the UK, the IWM has a sophisticated approach to funding and is not entirely dependent on government funds.

## Conclusion

National Museums in the London in the twenty first century look to international comparators as much as European ones. Historically, Britain has, Janus-like, faced both ways – towards Europe and towards the rest of the world. National government control of these museums has been, and continues to be, at arm's length. Interest in them is intermittent. The result is that individual directors, keepers, curators, benefactors and donors exert a great deal of influence. Thus these museums can be seen as products of a form of enlightened capitalism, which allowed them to develop in serendipitous fashion reflecting not so much the aims and aspirations of government as the vision of individuals within cultural circles. The Labour Government of 1997 – 2009 adopted a more instrumentalist approach to culture and to museums generally. This was unusual. It remains to be seen how the new coalition government will approach this issue.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Museum of Practical Geology was established in 1835, and after several moves became part of the Natural History Museum in 1986.

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### Annex table, Britain

| Name                                   | Inaugurated              | Initiated   | Actors   | Ownership  | Type   | Values  |
|--|--------------------------|---|--|--|--|---|
| The British Museum                     | 1759                     | 1753  | Sir Hans Sloane,<br>Parliament<br>Aristocrats  | Parliament and<br>Trustees                                   | World Cultures:<br>Archaeology, Natural<br>History, Art, History,<br>Ethnography,<br>Sculpture; Books and<br>Manuscripts | Universal   |
| The Royal Armouries<br>Tower of London | Mid sixteenth<br>century | English royal<br>collection<br>from the late<br>Middle Ages | Monarch  | Crown. Now<br>Parliament<br>Governed by Board<br>of Trustees | Arms and Armour  | Mainly European with<br>focus on England and<br>Britain, but some other<br>cultures represented<br>such as Japanese.<br>Universal claims. |
| The National<br>Gallery                | 1824                     | 1823  | John Julius<br>Angerstein,<br>merchant, Sir<br>George<br>Beaumont,<br>Parliament                             | Parliament at arms<br>length through a<br>Board of Trustees  | Art  | Western Europe  |
| Sir John Soane's<br>Museum             | 1837                     | 1833  | Sir John Soane,<br>Parliament  | As above   | Art and Architecture   | Soane's personal tastes<br>– mainly Western<br>European, with<br>Egyptian and Oriental<br>collections.                                    |
| Victoria and Albert<br>Museum          | 1852                     | 1851  | Prince Albert, Sir<br>Henry Cole and<br>the Royal<br>Commission for<br>the Exhibition of<br>1851, Parliament | As above   | Design, Art,<br>Sculpture  | Universal   |

|  |   |                          |  |          |  |   |
|--|---|--------------------------|--|----------|--|---|
| National Portrait Gallery London   | 1856  | 1846                     | Philip Henry Stanhope, 5 <sup>th</sup> Earl of Stanhope, various historians such as Macaulay and Parliament. | As above | Art  | National  |
| The Natural Museum of Science and industry called the Science Museum from 1909 | 1857  | 1851                     | Prince Albert, Sir Henry Cole and the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, Parliament.               | As above | Science, Medicine, Technology  | Mainly British science, medical and engineering successes but universal principles. |
| The Wallace Collection   | 1897  | 1890s                    | Aristocracy, Lady Wallace  | As above | Art, Furniture, Armour   | Universal   |
| The Tate London  | 1897  | 1897                     | Aristocrats, Sir Henry Tate, sugar magnate   | As above | British Art and International Modern Art                                   | National and universal  |
| Imperial War Museum, London  | 1920  | 1917                     | The War Cabinet  | As above | Social and Military History relating to conflicts in the twentieth century | British, empire and Commonwealth.   |
| Museum of Childhood, Bethnal Green   | 1920s as museum with collections on childhood | 1872 as a branch of V&A. | V&A  | As above | Childhood Material   | Universal   |
| National Maritime Museum London  | 1937  | 1934                     | Royalty, aristocracy and the middle classes & shipping magnate   | As above | Maritime Collections including Fine Art and Social and Industrial History  | National but moving towards universal.  |
| The Natural History Museum London  | 1963  | 1753                     | British Museum   | As above | Natural History  | Universal   |

|  |      |       |   |          |   |                           |
|--|------|-------|---|----------|---|---------------------------|
| Royal Airforce Museum Hendon                                     | 1972 | 1960s | RAF   | As above | Aircraft  | Britain                   |
| National Railway Museum at York and Shildon                      | 1975 | 1975  | National Museum of Science and Industry   | As above | Railways  | Britain                   |
| Imperial War Museum Duxford                                      | 1976 | 1976  | Imperial War Museum (IWM)   | As above | Large Military Collections  | British and commonwealth. |
| HMS <i>Belfast</i>   | 1971 | 1967  | IWM and HMS <i>Belfast</i> Trust, retired Naval staff   | As above | Ship  | National                  |
| National Media. Museum Bradford                                  | 1983 | 1983  | National Museum of Science and Industry   | As above | Media   | Britain                   |
| World Museum Liverpool   | 1986 | 1986  | Aristocrats and middle classes as local museum 1860/61. Local and national politicians in 1986. | As above | Natural History<br>Ethnography,<br>Palaeontology,<br>Geology, Science,<br>Ancient Civilizations,<br>Archaeology | Universal                 |
| Walker Art Gallery Liverpool 'The National Gallery of the North' | 1986 | 1860  | Middle class philanthropists; local and national politicians                                    | As above | Art   | Western Art               |

|   |      |             |   |          |  |  |
|---|------|-------------|---|----------|--|--|
| Lady Lever Art Gallery Port Sunlight                              | 1986 | 1986        | Established by soap millionaire in 1922, as local museum; local and national politicians in 1986. | As above | Art, Textiles, Furniture, Ceramics, Ethnography              | Universal  |
| Sudley House, Liverpool   | 1986 | 1986        | Emma Holt Middle class philanthropist; local and national politicians                             | As above | Victorian house and contents – British, European and Chinese | Universal within a domestic British setting.                     |
| Mersey Maritime Museum  | 1986 | 1986        | Middle class enthusiasts and collectors in 1862; local and national politicians 1986              | As above | Maritime   | Liverpool Britain and the World.                                 |
| Churchill War Rooms (from Cabinet War Rooms and Churchill Museum) | 1989 | 1984        | IWM and private sponsors, mainly American   | As above | WWII, Churchill  | National   |
| Tate Liverpool  | 1988 | 1982        | Tate Trustees & Merseyside Development Corporation  | As above | Art  | Universal  |
| Tate St Ives Cornwall   | 1993 | 1960s, 1988 | Tate Trustees   | As above | Modern British and International Art                         | Modern British art movement that has international significance. |
| Royal Armouries Fort Nelson                                       | 1995 | 1995        | Royal Armouries   | As above | Fort Holding Military Collections                            | International  |

|  |      |       |   |          |   |           |
|--|------|-------|---|----------|---|-----------|
| Royal Armouries<br>Leeds   | 1996 | 1990  | Royal Armouries   | As above | Arms and Armour<br>from all over the<br>world | Universal |
| Tate Britain   | 2000 | 1992  | Tate Trustees   | As above | Art   | National  |
| Tate Modern  | 2000 | 1992  | Tate Trustees   | As above | Art   | Universal |
| Imperial War<br>Museum<br>Manchester   | 2002 | 1990s | IWM   | As above | Warfare                                       | Universal |
| Royal Armouries<br>Frazier<br>International<br>History Museum,<br>Louisville USA | 2004 |       | Royal Armouries<br>Trustees and<br>Frazier Museum<br>Trustees | As above | Armour  | Universal |
| International<br>Slavery Museum<br>Liverpool                                     | 2007 | 1994  | Trustees  | As above | Social History,<br>Ethnography                | Universal |