

**SOME OBSERVATIONS UPON THE
RECENT ADDITION OF A READING
ROOM TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM;
WITH PLANS, SECTIONS, AND
OTHER ILLUSTRATIVE DOCUMENTS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649296101

Some observations upon the recent addition of a reading room to the British museum; with plans, sections, and other illustrative documents by William Hosking

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

WILLIAM HOSKING

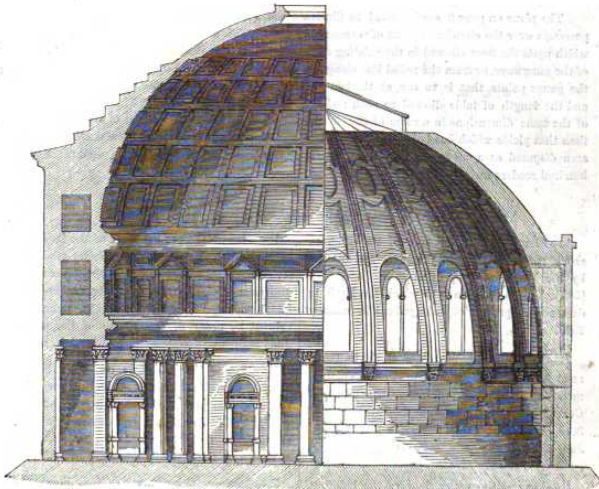
**SOME OBSERVATIONS UPON THE
RECENT ADDITION OF A READING
ROOM TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM;
WITH PLANS, SECTIONS, AND
OTHER ILLUSTRATIVE DOCUMENTS**

SOME OBSERVATIONS
UPON
THE RECENT ADDITION OF A READING ROOM
TO
THE BRITISH MUSEUM;

With Plans, Sections, and other Illustrative Documents.

BY
WILLIAM HOSKING,
Architect and Civil Engineer.

Professor of Architecture and of Engineering Constructions, at King's College, London.



x 70 Feet. x 70 Feet. x
THE PANTHEON AT ROME. THE READING ROOM BRIT. MUS.
Quadrantal Section of each, at the same Scale, and of the Diameter of the latter—
140 Feet.

LONDON:
EDWARD STANFORD, 6, CHARING CROSS.

1858.

CONTENTS.

| | Page. |
|---|-------|
| Part I.—The Recent Addition of a Reading Room to the British Museum | 5 |
| „ II.—The matter specially in Question | 14 |
| „ III.—What ought not, and what ought, to be done now | 24 |
| Appendix [1] to [12] | 27 |

ILLUSTRATIONS.

The wood-cut on the title page is, perhaps, sufficiently described by the inscription under it, and by the statement upon the page next following this; but it may be proper to observe, that nothing more is aimed at than the illustration of the effect of recesses upon the general form, in contrast. The Section of the Pantheon is drawn at less than its full size, that it may have no advantage over the Museum Reading Room from its greater diameter, and the greater height consequent thereon, the object being to show by the contrast established, that, striking as the Reading Room may be as a Saloon, how much would be gained of grandeur, dignity, and beauty, by more fitting proportions. This is further illustrated by the contrasted half-sections Nos. 1 and 3 on the appended lithographed drawing F.

The plans on page 9 are intended to illustrate the advantage which the square form *in plan* possesses over the circular in point of economy, for the special purposes of a Reading Room. The width upon the floor allowed in the existing circular room to each reading table with its proportion of the gangways, or from the radial line along the middle of one table to that of the next to it, is, at the gang points, that is to say, at the two ends where the tables come nearest together, 11 feet, and the length of table allowed to each reader at the ordinary tables, is 4 ft. 3 in. No application of the same dimensions in a room of the circular form will give a larger amount of accommodation than that-yields which has been applied; whilst the same dimensions applied to the same superficial area disposed as a rectangle, yields, as shown by the diagrams, one-third more;—seats for four hundred readers instead of three hundred.

LITHOGRAPHED PLANS AND SECTIONS APPENDED.

A.—Plan of the ground floor of the building, as laid before the House of Commons, and ordered by the House to be printed, 30th June, 1838 [545]. This is the plan upon which Mr. Hosking designed his project of enlargement in January 1848.

R.—Plan of the ground floor of the building, as at A, with Mr. Hosking's project of enlargement, by building in the inner Quadrangular Court;—as communicated to the Trustees, Nov. 30th, 1849,—and as published in the *Builder*, June 22nd, 1850.

C.—Plan of the upper floor of the building, raised upon the ground plan at A, with Mr. Hosking's project of enlargement as it affects the upper story of the building.

D.—Plan of the ground floor of the building, as at A, with Mr. Panizzi's "original proposal" for building a Reading Room in the inner Quadrangular Court, as revised by Mr. Smirke, and laid before the Trustees, June 6th, 1852, and printed by order of the House of Commons, June 30th, 1852 [557].

E.—Plan of the ground floor of the building, as at A, with Mr. Panizzi's second proposal, as produced one year and three-quarters after the receipt by Mr. Panizzi of Mr. Hosking's project, as published in the *Builder*, June 22nd, 1850, and as shown on the appended Plan B.

F.—Sections (longitudinal) from South to North, exhibiting the several designs by Mr. Hosking and Mr. Panizzi respectively, in contrast.





ADVERTISEMENT.

No great INTERIOR that I ever saw impressed me with admiration so strong and enduring as that of the Pantheon at Rome;—not for its adventitious decorations,—its columns, pilasters, cornices, and other *materia architectonica*;—but for the combination of grandeur, dignity, and beauty, produced by the proportions employed in effecting the union of height and breadth in a vast saloon. There are other interiors of vastitude, but none, that I know of, approaching the same size, and of the same simple form, which present like proportions.

Ever since the first time I stepped inside the Pantheon,—now nearly 35 years ago,—I have earnestly wished to see it, that is to say its interior, repeated in London; and it has been more particularly an object of ambition with me to be charged with the duty of executing its counterpart at home,—a worthy occasion presenting itself. The Royal Exchange presented an admirable opportunity, but not to me;—that is no *opportunity* to any man who has attained to years of discretion, and is possessed of a sense of self-respect, which presents itself in an advertisement, or in the, even more impertinent, personally addressed circular. At length another apt occasion presented itself;—the British Museum, hardly finished in 1847, was already bursting its sides for room, with nearly an acre and three quarters of void space within its actual site. I had often looked at that site, and had wondered that it should remain unoccupied, and had thought how admirably a replica of the Roman Pantheon upon it would compose with the new building and give it the magnificence it did not, and does not, possess, and add space for its special purposes, and afford facilities for internal circulation which also it sadly wanted, and continues to want. I found, upon considering the plan of the Museum and the height of the main building, that a full-sized copy of the Pantheon could not be placed upon the site,—that known as the inner quadrangular court,—without rising so high above the surrounding building as to overpower it,—an effect that would have been bad in itself, and would have been injurious to the architect of that building; a result to be avoided as carefully, at least, and as determinately, as the erection of anything configured like the Pantheon, but not bearing its proportions. Now the proportions of the interior of the Pantheon are those which arise from a hemisphere raised upon, and resting on, a cylinder of the same diameter, and of the height of the radius or semi-diameter. Thus, the diameter of the floor of the Pantheon being 143 feet, the whole internal height from the surface of the floor to the summit of the concave is 143 feet;—that is to say, up to half the full height it is a vertical cylinder, and the upper half of the height is an inverted hemisphere: the different effect produced by the proportion thus established, and as exhibited in the Pantheon and in my study from it, and that produced by the stunted variety at the British Museum, are illustrated by the vignette on the title page. And it was upon these considerations that I designed the appended plan B, as it exhibits itself in section

at No. 1 on F, and thus obtained the form and distribution of the interior of the Pantheon, of its full superficial area or extent upon the floor, though of less diameter, and consequently, of less height under the concave, but so that the model should be complete in every essential particular, and most especially in respect of proportion,—the true key to the beauty of the interior,—without rising above so as to overpower Sir Robert Smirke's work. This I devised and submitted, first to Lord Ellesmere's Commission, and then to the Trustees of the British Museum, and afterwards to the public, in the manner, and under the circumstances, and with the result hereinafter described,—this last being, in short, that my project was misprized, misused, and abused.

It will hardly be thought necessary that I should set forth the grounds upon which I claim consideration in respect of that particular feature of my design which I myself take from a work that is common property, or I had no right to touch it;—the principles upon which I claim being so well understood that no objection has been raised on that score even by those who may be considered interested in resisting it. It is not the plan of the Pantheon that I claim, but the application of its form, disposition, and proportions in a particular case, with newly devised combinations; and the plagiarism I allege is the application in the same case, of such my device, with certain of my combinations, contrary to honour and good faith.

I am sorry, indeed, to have been obliged to raise the question in this form and manner, but I have been driven to it. I might have let it fall from weariness and disgust, if it had not been that one of the foremost men of the country and nation,—a man whose word may make or mar a reputation,—had not been deceived into attributing not only the merit of the suggestion, but the origination of the idea of such a work to the very plagiarist himself,—to the man who would appear to have led the Trustees of the Museum to misapply the space they had at their disposal for the enlargement of the Museum for its special purposes, and to waste the public money in building what was not wanted, and after a fashion which they were in honour bound to regard as not theirs to adopt. The necessity was thus forced upon me of asking for a re-assignment of my own; and the reason given me why it was not conceded compels me thus, in publishing the case, to make the correspondence public. I have the gratification, certainly, of finding that my design is rightly appreciated upon its merits by Lord John Russell, and I cannot forbear the further gratification of making such appreciation known. If Lord John Russell could have been, and had been, at the same time Prime Minister and an acting, as he was an official, Trustee of the British Museum in 1849 and 1850, I should not, I believe, have now thus to set forth either the injury done to the public in the mistaken course pursued by the Trustees in the conduct of the economics of the Museum since that period, or the wrong done to me as an individual.

CHAMBERS,
31, Parliament Street, Westminster,
April 1868.

PART I.

THE RECENT ADDITION OF A READING ROOM TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

AN Exhibition of a new kind was opened to the curious public in the Exhibition season of the year 1857.

The British Museum had from year to year for many years presented itself in a state of transmutation, from gay old Montague House, with its gardens behind, and its paved court-yard, flanked by ranges of domestic offices, and inclosed by a lofty wall, with close carriage-gates, in front, into a quasi counterpart of the Post Office in St. Martin's-le-Grand, and like the Post Office expanding laterally as occasion seemed to demand, and as space permitted. But the building was never obtrusive. It sought no admiration for itself, and obtained none. Its sole object seemed to be, modestly to perform its duty as a storehouse and conservatory of matters having intrinsic value, and possessing qualities which gave them interest, alike to the student and to the common observer, to whom the doors of the Museum were, and are, freely opened for the purposes of study and observation.

On the occasion now referred to, however, the British Museum threw open its doors to exhibit, and to claim admiration for, a something that had grown up within itself, but yet not belonging to it,—a bit of finery out of place! A cupola-covered saloon had been built within the bowels of the Museum, for the purposes of study and research by those whose objects require strict seclusion, and from whose place of study the general student,—the common observer—must, therefore, be for the future excluded. Common observers were invited, once for all, to admire that from which they were to be ever after shut out; and to make the lesson which a walk through the saloon was intended to produce the more impressive, there was provided for sale, and sold for a penny, in the Entrance Hall of the building, a small pamphlet, which bears strong internal evidence of having emanated from the innermost recesses of the Museum, and must consequently be received as an authority. It contains a plan of the gaily-painted and rib-gilded saloon, and gives particulars from which the observer may learn not only to admire and to wonder, but to be grateful. And that there may be no mistake as to the proper object of gratitude, a portrait bust—not of the Illustrious Lady who so gracefully and graciously does the honours for Mr. John Bull, the Proprietor and Paymaster,—but—of Mr. Antonio Panizzi, the Concoctor and Custodian of the work—exhibits itself in a niche over the entrance door to the great saloon,—the saloon itself being for a Reading Room to the Library of the Museum.

The Reading Room is circular in plan, or as the little pamphlet chooses more curtly, but less correctly, to express it—"The Reading Room is circular;" (p. 9.) Its vertical inclosures purport to form a hollow cylinder, 140 feet in diameter internally, to the height from the floor of 36 feet, at which height a hemispherical cupola springs, and this is closed in at the summit, at the whole height of 106 feet, by a glazed skylight; whilst upright windows stand round upon the imposts of the cupola, into the structure of which their heads appear to be bastard groined. The result is a very noble chamber, which in itself well deserves much of the admiration it has obtained,—the gilding upon the ribs of the concave ceiling relieving, in some degree, the stunted height and squat proportions which the relative dimensions indicate. This will appear most clearly upon reference to the vignette upon the title-page of this pamphlet, where a quadrantal section of the work now referred to is contrasted with a similar section at the same scale, and of the same semi-diameter, or radius rather, of the great and world-admired interior—the Pantheon at Rome—upon which the original design for building

on the now site of the Reading Room was studied, as shown in plan on the appended general plans of the building B and C, and in section at No. 1 upon F.

The superficial contents of the floor of this circular chamber are, in round numbers, 15,400 feet, and the chamber is set out with tables in such manner as to seat, at the rate of accommodation afforded to each, about 300 persons as readers, who are all, by the arrangement of the tables upon lines radiating from the centre of the room (the most economical arrangement, nevertheless, wasteful as it is, of which the form of the chamber is capable), brought under the eye of the Superintendent, who ostensibly, and according to the little pamphlet, (p. 15,) is placed at the centre to assist readers in their researches. Around the officer so established, there are catalogue tables, and around and about the circular chamber itself to the extent of about three times its area, low sheds have been set up for the shelving of books. "Within three years," the little pamphlet adds, with the characteristic warmth of a showman—"the vast structure has been completed at the cost of £150,000."

Now, what if it should appear that in procuring the erection of this work the Trustees of the British Museum have shown themselves, as a public Board, exercising a most important trust, unworthy—so far at least as regards economy—of the trust reposed in them?—What if it appear that the site absorbed by the New Reading Room, and the circumjacent book-sheds, was of priceless value as affording the means, and the only possible means, of extending the galleries of the Museum for its special purposes as a museum, within its own area, and rendering the building more commodious to the public, and more efficient in itself, in a manner otherwise unattainable?—What if it appear that the sacrifice of a site, which no money can replace, has been attended by an expenditure of nearly three times the sum which the Trustees had asked of the Treasury for even greater accommodation than that they have obtained by the greater outlay;—that in doing what they have done, and supposing it to be otherwise right, (though it was, in its initiation, against their own better judgment to build a Reading Room where they have built it,) they have sacrificed the public interests by an unadvised, or ill-advised, application of the space absorbed by the principal compartment of the interpolated buildings,—and that they have, moreover, obtained the means of building, and have built, a new and costly Reading Room, upon the wrongful allegation, (made indeed with reference to another site, and some time before,) that they had already "availed themselves of every resource which the existing buildings were capable of affording?"*

And what, again, if it appear that the Trustees have conveyed,† and, in conveying, mutilated,‡ the only worthy feature of the "vast structure" with which they have encumbered the site, and upon which they have wasted the public money in producing what was not wanted?

But such is, in truth, the case.

The British Museum had been designed and built about what will be best understood as a hollow square; the space inclosed by the building being, as shown in the appended plan A, an indented parallelogram, 317 feet from south to north, by 238 from west to east, comprising very nearly an acre and three-quarters; being, by a quarter of an acre, greater than the great quadrangle inclosed by the buildings of Somerset House, and only half an acre less than the garden of St. James's Square. It seems that when the design for the Museum was made, it was thought that the building to be erected would be found large enough to answer every purpose for many years to come; but the collections grew so fast, that before the original design was completed, additions had been made to the

* Letter to the Treasury, July 25, 1851, page 17, of the Return [557] to an order of the House of Commons, dated 22nd June, 1852. As most of the references hereunder are to this paper, its number and the page only are stated when such reference is intended.

† "Convey, the wise it call."—*Pistol*. *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act 1. scene 3.

‡ "Qui facit per altum, facit per se."

building on its west side for the reception of new acquisitions, and of matters, the places provided for which had been otherwise disposed of. Thus, in the words of the eminent antiquary, who is Keeper of the Antiquities at the Museum, writing, in 1851—"Although the building is not yet finished, it is surrounded by inconvenient and unsightly excrescences; and it may be asserted with truth, that Europe cannot show any building so ill-adapted for its intended purpose as the British Museum." ([557] page 15.)

But the inner quadrangle—the hollow square—remained unappropriated, and it might almost be fancied to have been reserved intentionally to furnish the means of supplying what the original design was greatly deficient in—a centre of easy access from the Entrance Hall, from which a departure might be taken to the collateral galleries without traversing any of them as gangways, and be itself the means of presenting most advantageously the greatest works of ancient sculptural art possessed by the nation, and placed in the Museum which bears its name. The opportunity of effecting this great object the Trustees have thrown away, and have, in doing so, sacrificed the only possible site available for the purpose,—one for which no substitute can be had, and, therefore, no money can buy,—and applied it to a purpose for which it had no special fitness, and in respect of which the Trustees themselves had not long before declared that another site appeared to them to be far preferable for the purposes of the Library and its Reading Room, (the lesser object for which the sacrifice has been made,) and wholly without cause.

Writing on the 25th July, 1851, ([557] page 17,) by the then Principal Librarian of the Museum to the Secretary of the Treasury, the Trustees set forth for the "serious consideration of the Lords Commissioners, the present deficiency of the buildings of the British Museum," especially,—it soon appears,—in the department of printed books, where space for stowage was already found insufficient, and the Reading Room too small for the numbers who resorted to it. They proceed thus:—"Under this view of the present wants and future prospects of the Museum, the Trustees have felt it incumbent upon them to devise what appears to them the best means of procuring that additional accommodation which they deem indispensable. Of the various plans before them, that of the purchase of the land and houses to the east of the Museum, namely, twelve houses in Montague Street, and the six adjoining houses in Russell Square, as a site for a new building, appears far preferable. From the contiguity of that site to the Library, and from the facility which it will afford to the erection of a spacious reading room, with a separate access from the north or east, it offers the readiest means of meeting the more urgent and immediate want."—The Trustees thus saw plainly, in 1851, that the department of printed books, with its reading room, should be drawn away to the eastward, and have "a separate access from the north or east." They adhere to this opinion, when, on the 5th June, 1852, ([557] page 34,) they again call the attention of the Lords of the Treasury to the former letter (that last above quoted), and to the increased and increasing want of accommodation for printed books and for readers, and re-assert that the extension eastwards recommended in 1851, is, for the purpose, "preferable to every other that has been suggested." They submit, nevertheless, "a plan in many respects less desirable;" but which purported to have the great recommendation that "it would, at a cost not exceeding £56,000, provide, in the course of two years, ample accommodation for readers, and for all the printed books which are likely to be added to the Library in the course of many years." This "plan" is shown upon the plan of the Museum, D, appended, and further illustrated by the longitudinal section, on No. 2, F; these being from the "Plans" K and L, respectively appended to the Return [557] of the Session 1852. This plan, miserable in every point of view—miserable as a scheme, and miserable as a design, and destructive of a site invaluable, as before stated, to the Museum for its special objects, was not adopted; the Lords of the Treasury "did not feel themselves justified in sanctioning the proposed plan." ([557] page 35.)

But the Trustees, as if compelled by some malignant influence to act against their own better judgment, appear to have come forward again in 1854, with another plan to the same effect as that of which, in recommending it, they had