A COLLECTION OF REPORTS AND PAPERS ON THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The Central Pediment; Forecourt; Great Court Elevations; Entrance Hall Decoration; Quadrangle Openings; Original Roof Covering

by

Roger Bowdler

Historical Analysis & Research Team
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THE BRITISH MUSEUM: THE CENTRAL PEDIMENT

The British Museum is currently considering whether to restore the coloured background of the tympanum of the central pediment on the south front of the museum. This report outlines the development of the design for the south front, the creation of the sculptural ensemble and the original use of polychromy on the building.

The Construction of the South Front

The building of the museum has been fully treated by J. Mordaunt Crook[1]. Its construction was a protracted affair, beginning with the King's Library in the east wing in 1823-28. Sir Robert Smirke (1780-1867) was responsible for the design.

Although the basic arrangement of a quadrangle was decided upon at an early stage, detailed planning of the south front was not decided upon until much later. A design by Smirke of 1822-23[2] shows that the essentials of the entrance front were decided upon at the outset. The inspiration behind the massive and monumental screen of Ionic columns, central pediment and projecting wings, it has been suggested, came from Sir Edward Lovett Pearce's Parliament House in Dublin (1729 on).

In May 1841, Smirke wrote to the Commissioners for Woods and Forests that 'the Trustees of the Museum have finally decided upon the arrangement of the Plans for the new Building about to be erected for the south front'[3]. A drawing of the south front by Smirke[4] dated July 12 1841 shows the final design, but with certain significant omissions: for one, the pediment is without sculpture. Smirke's design was finally published as a lithograph by Mackenzie in 1844. This *did* incorporate sculpture, and on a grand scale: not only was the pediment filled with it, but the pediment's three angles were capped with figures, and the massive plinths flanking the entrance stairs bore large figural groups.

Specifications for the works were sent out in July 1841, and in November 1842 Smirke was able to report that 'the walls of the new south Buildings here are now nearly raised to receive the roofs'[5]. The last remains of Montagu House, the museum's original home, were demolished in 1845-46 to enable work on the south front to continue.

Sir Robert Smirke's health was, by July 1846, giving cause for concern and he asked the museum's trustees to release him from his post as supervising architect while he recuperated in Nice; he requested that his brother Sydney be permitted to take over. Sydney Smirke (1798-1877) had assisted his elder brother on the museum since 1823.

The Addition of Sculpture to the South Front

Sir Robert's 1844 lithograph was the earliest sign that he sought to mitigate the severity of the entrance front with sculptural embellishment. It proves conclusively that such an addition was not the subsequent decision of Sydney Smirke alone, and shows that the severe neo-classicism of the original building was undergoing modification.

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1 See *The History of the Kina's Works,* VI (1973), 403-21 and *The British Museum: a case-study in architectural politics* (1972).

2 In J.M. Crook's possession; *Kinq's Works* plate 24b

3 PRO, WORKS 17/2/1, 1

4 PR0, WORKS 35/400

5 Idem., 216

On 23 July 1846 Sydney Smirke wrote to the secretary of the museum's trustees on the matter of sculpture[6]:

> Should not some more be made in respect to the sculpture in the principal front? ...Sculptors take a long time in making preliminary designs in clay: & the execution of the stone figures in the pedestal alone would occupy probably a year... You are aware that the sculpture forms no part of the original Estimate: therefore a special application to the Government will be necessary.

Smirke followed this up in a letter of 15 August 1846[7]. Three positions on the entrance front were suitable to receive sculpture: the tympanum of the pediment, the acroteria on the ridge and base of the pediment, the pedestals flanking the steps. He wrote:

> It is unnecessary for me to make any suggestion as to the subjects for this sculpture; the figures in the tympanum ought to be round, and detached from the face of the masonry.

It was later felt that the south front of the British Museum would have looked even better had all of Smirke's proposals for sculpture been executed. Speaking before the RIBA after Smirke's youngest brother Edward had delivered an obituary address in 1867, Prof. Donaldson remarked that he could not

> recollect ever having seen any building which impressed him with such grand ideas of a public building as the British Museum. There was a grand idea of magnificence: there was ample space; the building was conceived on a noble scale of idea: and if it had been permitted to him to carry out the sculptural decorations which his mind embraced and his taste designed to grace those four pediments in front, it would be one of the finest compositions of modern times[8].

A subcommittee on buildings, consisting of the Éárl of Aberdeen, Earl Cawdor, Lord Ashburton, the prime minister Sir Robert Peel, Sir Robert Inglis and William Hamilton met in mid-May 1847. The minutes of the meeting reported that

> The subcommittee entertained some doubts as to the effect of sculpture in the tympanum of the pediment. The secretary was directed to ask Mr Smirke, whether he could mention any ancient example of an Ionic building having a sculptured pediment without a sculptural frieze[9].

Smirke responded by getting his elder brother involved. The subcommittee minutes accordingly reported a letter from Sydney Smirke, which stated that

> .. his brother fully concurred with him in the opinion that the introduction of sculpture in the tympanum of the portico would be of the highest advantage in the effect of the building, that so extensive a facade required the variety of effect, which would be produced by the partial introduction of sculpture, and that there was no part of it where such embellishment would come with so much propriety as at the centre[10].

This was enough for the subcommittee. They accordingly agreed to recommend to the Trustees that there should be sculpture in the pediment, 'that some one sculptor of eminence should be selected to give a design for

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6 British Museum archives, *Original Letters & Papers XXXV* (1846), 6938.

7 B.M. Committee of Trustees, *Original Letters and Papers XXXV* (1846), 15 August 1846.

8 *Sessional Papers of the RIBA 1866-67* 206

9 BM, *Minutes of Sub-Committees I* (1828-49), 369.

10 Idem., 374.

this sculpture and execute it; and that Sir Richard Westmacott be such a sculptor'[11]. Westmacott thus obtained this prominent commission - the museum was, with the Houses of Parliament, the largest and most prominent public project of the day as well as being the largest neo-classical building anywhere - without undergoing any competition. Westmacott agreed to undertake the commission and expressed his gratitude at being given so important an undertaking. This was, after all, the largest secular building in the largest capital city in the world.

The trustees decided in favour of placing sculpture in the pediment at a meeting in June 1847[12] and accordingly applied to the Treasury for extra funds to enable this. Smirke calculated that the cost would be £5,800 for the entire programme of sculptural enrichment. The pediment alone would cost £2,900, and the *Estimate for New Buildings in Progress at the British Museum*[13] dated December 1846 included this amount.

A contract for the execution of the sculpture was signed on 4 August 1848[14]. The sculpture was to be completed and in position by the end of June 1852. Westmacott was to be paid f4,500. An outline drawing similar (but smaller) to the coloured drawing mentioned below is now attached to it.

The Design of the Pedimental Sculpture

Westmacott was given a fairly free hand in designing the sculptural programme. A model of the sculpture was shown to the trustees on 4 December 1847 and discussed a week later; a drawing was requested to be prepared, showing the design incorporating the suggested modifications[15]. The amended drawing (presumably the coloured drawing now in the BM prints and drawings dept.m no. 1887-5-2-1) was presented on 12 February 1848, and a special subcommittee consisting of the Earl of Aberdeen, Sir Robert Peel and the Dean of Westminster was formed to resolve upon a final design at a meeting at Peel's house with Westmacott[16].

Westmacott explained the symbolism of the pedimental group in a letter to Sir Henry Ellis, principal librarian, in a letter of 23 May 1851[17]:

> Considering the Museum established or the propagation of science, literature, and Arts - I have adopted as the subject of my composition for the Pediment 'the Progress of Civilization', typical of its designs -
>
> Commencing at the eastern end, or angle of the Pediment, Man is represented emerging from a rude savage state through the influence of Religion - He is next personified as a Hunter, and a Tiller of the Earth, and labouring for his subsistence - Patriarchal simplicity then becomes invaded, and the worship of the true God defiled - Paganism prevails, and becomes diffused by means of the Arts - The worship of heavenly bodies & their supposed influence led the Egyptians Chaldeans and other nations to study Astronomy, typified by the Centre Statues; the key stone to the composition -
>
> Civilization is now presumed to have made considerable progress. Descending towards the western angle of the pediment, is Mathematics; in allusion to science being now pursued on known sound principles - the Drama, Poetry, and Music balance the group of the Fine Arts on the eastern side, the

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11 Idem., 375.

12 BM Trustees, *Minutes of General Meetings* VII (1844-52), 1941.

13 PR0, WORKS 17/2/1, 416.

14 BL. Add. MS 56,068.

15 BM, *General Meetina of Trustees Minutes VII* (1844-52), 1977, 1984.

16 idem., 1988.

17 BL. Add. MS 38,626 f.198-198v. This description was printed *verbatim* in the *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* (1852), 11, footnote.

whole composition terminating with Natural History in which such objects or specimens only are represented as could be made most objective in sculpture -

Should you see anything which may be improved in this description of my work, pray addit- I have a horror of appearing in print.

The oddest thing about this description is the negative light in which Westmacott viewed classical art: one of England's foremost neo-classical sculptors, he sought to decorate the front of the nation's repository of classical art with a scheme which actually condemned classical art as the art of paganism and the defilement of true religion. Unsurprisingly, Ellis amended the description. When asked by Westmacott to supply a newspaper with a written description of the pediment, Ellis shed the section about the defilement of true religion and the arts being used to diffuse paganism, and replaced it with this:

.. his next employment is to express his thoughts & ideas by painting and carving - & he then builds himself a home to protect him from the sun and rain this is depicted by three females representing Painting, Sculpture and Architecture[18].

This is a significant alteration of meaning.

Westmacott's design consisted of fifteen figures, seated and standing, as well as delectable natural history additions, such as the crocodile head in the extreme left-hand corner, the turtle on the right and the banana tree and Giant's Causeway basalt shafts beside it. Westmacott's last and largest work (he had effectively retired from sculpture by 1840), It is an under-appreciated work which Westmacott was proud of: he included a cast of the figure representing 'A Savage' among the specimens of his work that he presented to the Ashmolean[19]. In a letter accompanying the bequest Westmacott stated that the ideal viewing position of the pediment was 130 feet away from it, that is, slightly inside the entrance gates.

The ensemble includes a number of sculptural quotations from antique sculptures within the museum, particularly from the Parthenon.

There are very few sculptural pediments upon English neoclassical buildings of the period: Sir Charles Eastlake designed that of the Fitzwilliam Museum, which depicts the Nine Muses, in 1837 and it was completed in 1843-44; Westmacott's son Richard executed that of the Royal Exchange in 1842; Cockerell's Ashmolean Museum of 1841-45 has a decorative acanthus scheme. That of the British Museum is the most prominent and ultimately the most important.

The Installation of the Pediment Sculpture

The Builder for 15 February 1851 noted that 'the scaffolding has been put up for raising the sculpture which is prepared for the tympanum of the portico, so that gradually we may get some life into the exterior of the building'. The same magazine, in its leader of 26 April 1851, declared that

Westmacott's sculpture for the tympanum of the portico will probably not be completed by the lst óf May, but very soon after. They were hoisting 'Mathematics' when we were there, a sitting figure of seven or eight tons weight. The central statue, standing, is 'Astronomy', and is about twelve feet high. These are all of Portland stone, and are boldly and effectively sculpted.

The 1852 edition of the *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* was able to report that 'the tympanum of

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[18] BL, Add. MS 38,626, f.202-202v: rough note in Ellis's handwriting, in response to a letter from Westmacott dated 28 May 1851.

[19] See N. Penny, *Catalogue of European Sculpture in the Ashmolean Museum 1540 to the Present Day. Vol III, British Sculpture* (1992), 35.

the portico has recently been enriched with allegorical sculpture '[20], while *Pictorial Half-Hours of London Topography*, published by Charles Knight, went into more detail:

> In the course of 1851 the boarding will be pulled down which now encloses the courtyard in front of the building, and an elegant lofty railing will be exposed to view. The massive stone piers and pillars which are now (September 1851) fixed and a large portion of the railing is complete. The sculptures on the pediment are the work of Sir R. Westmacott; they consist of several figures, emblematic of the arts and sciences, some standing and some reclining; the ground of the pediment behind the sculptures is coloured blue, and some of the emblems held by the figures are gilt[21].

The last sentence is important: it is the earliest reference known to me which demonstrably confirms that the tympanum *was* coloured blue.

I have not found any documentary confirmation of this fact, however, but I regard the above-cited passage as conclusive.

The Use of Architectural Polychromy

The south front of the British Museum was being completed at a crucial time in the development of attitudes towards architectural polychromy[22]. In 1851, the influential architect and theorist Gottfried Semper (then living in England as a political exile, and author of the important book *The Use of Colour in Architecture and Sculpture* of 1836) presented the British Library with a copy of his pamphlet *On the Study of Polychromy, and its Revival,* which concluded that

> Monumental polychromy must now, therefore, be considered in a new light. It is no longer the enthusiastic speculation of a few artists or antiquaries, but the historian, the scholar, the antiquary and the artist, all unite to support its evidence with their authority; and at length it commences to be appreciated by the public, who are becoming weary of naked architecture[23].

Sir Robert Smirke's original conception of the museum may well have been characterised as 'naked architecture', but by the 1840s the austere chasteness of early and high neo-classicism was on the wane.

The introduction of sculpture onto the entrance front was one aspect of the increasing desire for architectural embellishment. The tinting of the tympanum and gilding of the statues' attributes were other signs. Sir Robert Smirke, in an undated essay on architecture (of *c.*1815-25), had remarked that 'an excess of ornament is in all cases a symptom of a vulgar or degenerate taste'[24]. Such architectural severity was on the wane by the time the tympanum was being completed in 1851.

Whether Westmacott had himself been responsible for initiating the tinting of the tympanum is unclear. He did, however, give the background of the pediment a blue wash in his presentation drawing of the pedimental sculpture.

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20 op. cit. , 11.

21 op. cit., 191.

22 On which see Ian Jenkins, *Archaeologists and Aesthetes in the Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum 1800-1939* (1992), passim., Clive Wainwright, 'Polychromatic Decoration as applied to Buildings of the 19th Century' in M. Aldrich ed., *The Craces: Royal Decorators 1768-1899* (Brighton, 1990), esp. 158-59.

23 op. cit., 233-34.

24 Quoted in J.M. Crook, *The British Museum*, 97.

Architectural polychromy was relatively new to London. One of the earliest instances of it was the Athenaeum club by Decimus Burton of 1828-30: its gilded statue of Athena and parthenaic frieze with a blue ground still surprise one with their brightness. Nash's Cumberland Terrace, Regent's Park (executed by James Thomson from 1826) now has a pediment with a blue background, but it seems unlikely that this was original.

As Ian Jenkins has shown, the great testing place for theories of classical polychromy was in the classical sculpture galleries of the British Museum[25]. Sydney Smirke was reputedly keener on internal polychromy than external[26], but it seems that he was prepared to admit it within the pediment of the south front.

The earliest illustration of the front I have found is a photograph taken by Roger Fenton in 1857[27]: although hard to make out clearly, it is evident that Westmacott's sculptures were already dirty from London's soot-ridden atmosphere, and that the background of the pediment accordingly did *not* stand out in stark contrast to the statues. A clearer photograph in the NMR of c.1870 reinforces this impression.

Roger Bowdler
London Region

13 May 1993.

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25 See *Archaeologists and Aesthetes,* 48 ff.

26 Idem. , 49.

27 See *Roger Fenton* Hayward Gallery exhibition cat. (1988), no.l9.

THE BRITISH MUSEUM: FORECOURT

The entrance forecourt to the British Museum provides the setting for one of Britain's grandest public buildings. Its neutral, unassertive space is the foil for the mighty Ionic screen that shields the nation's storehouse of antiquities. Visitors are funnelled through the narrow iron gateway beside the western entrance lodge, and approach the great steps along a central way which is utterly straight and regular, save for a slope that rises gently, flanked by smooth lawns. The forecourt was designed by Sydney Smirke, and was one of the final elements of the new building to be finished. It has changed little since its completion in the early 1850s.

The predecessor: Montagu House and its courtyard

The British Museum was founded in 1753 by Act of Prliament. Montagu House was purchased to house the nation's new collections for £10,500, and underwent some conversion prior to being opened to the public in 1759. Montagu House had been built for Ralph Montagu, 1st Duke of Montagu (1638-1709), to the designs of Robert Hooke: Evelyn described the result as `a fine palace, built after the French pavilion way'. A fire in 1686 resulted in extensive internal rebuilding. The main plan (**fig. 1**) was derived from that of a Parisian *hotel*, with an entrance gateway known as the `Montagu Great Gate' leading into a quadrangle. As shown in an engraving of 1714 (**fig. 2**), this court was paved and -save for roows of posts- was completely bare; some of the enclosed ground may have been grassed (**fig. 3**). The cupola-capped gateway was connected to the side ranges by means of a colonnade; behind the side ranges were smaller outer courtyards. This gateway survived until about 1850, and was drawn before being demolished (**fig. 4**).

Thus, the present method of entry to the museum, by means of a narrow entrance off Great Russell Street into a broad and empty quadrangle, emulates the late 17th century approach to Montagu House.

The new museum

Sir Robert Smirke's museum was built in stages. The East Wing was the first to go up, in 1823-26. The west wing followed in 1831-34, followed by the north range in 1833-38. The south, entrance front was the last to be constructed. Work began in 1842, and the central hall was opened in 1847. Work was still being carried out on the pediment sculpture in 1851.

Sir Robert Smirke asked to be released from his post as architect to the museum's trustees in 1846, and was duly succeeded by his brother Sydney. The latter had been working with Sir Robert on the museum for a long time. To him fell the task of designing the museum's setting: the forecourt.

Early designs for the forecourt

Sydney Smirke began to work on aspects of the forecourt in 1847. In that year he surveyed the extant wall along Great Russell Street (BM Archives, drawings vol. 4/251). A plan of the proposed forecourt dated 4 March 1848 (BM, vol. 4/258) included a pair of square entrance lodges but left the forecourt completely bare. Smirke produced a number of variant designs for entrance gateways and lodges during 1848, including one fine drawing (vol. 4/268) which showed a pair of heavy Doric lodges, each with a giant slumbering lion on top; an alternative design had the lions sitting erect (vol. 4/267), while a different version replaced the lions with allegorical women (vol. 4/257). Smirke was evidently reluctant to drop the seated female idea: an 1850 drawing for the front railings (vol. 4/287) still included them, placed upon gatepiers.

It seems that Smirke only got to grips with the detailed planning of the forecourt in 1850. In April of that year he produced several differnet designs for the area. One, dated 12 April (vol. 4/275), showed a pair of small entrance lodges placed well to the side of the main front; behind them was a curved carriage sweep running in front of the entrance portico. Another design with the same date (vol. 4//274) had a central arched gateway in the middle of the Great Russell Street frontage; low walls, rectangular in plan, ran back from the gateway which framed a central route while running parallel to Great Russell Street. This version contained the germ

of the eventual built version. Another 1850 design kept the semi-circular carriage sweep idea, but enriched the centre of the courtyard with a fountain of group of statuary in its centre (vol. 4/273).

The final design

In 1851 Smirke designed what was to be the final version of the forecourt. Evidently all idea of a grand archway (no doubt inspired by the prominent Montagu Great Gate, which was finally taken down in 1850: **fig. 4**), and of scuptural embellishment for the entrance forecourt, had been dropped and a more austere foreground for the great Ionic screen of the museum's south front decided upon. Sydney Smirke's richer Italianate taste could only find an outlet in his designs for the sumptuous cast iron railings (cast by John Walker & Co.) along Great Russell Street.

The 1851 `Plan of the fore-court shewing the proposd terrace and slopes' (vol. 4/307) was the first design to include the sloping central carriageway. This was worked up in an 1852 drawing (vol. 5/318) which showed the sloped central approach flanked with a dwarf wall which was enlivened with plinths, upon which lamps were to be installed. Other 1852 drawings for the final scheme are held at the PRO, Kew (WORK 33/1049-1052).

A very early photograph (**fig. 5**) of the museum's forecourt, taken from the south west, shows the terrace, dwarf walls and corner plinths, each capped by elaborate cast-iron lamp standards; these latter differ from their present-day counterparts in one aspect only: the present examples have three glass globes while the 19th century versions had only one.

Subsequent history

By 1853, then, the entrance to the museum was completed, and completed in a manner that is little altered today. The 1871 OS map depicted the forecourt in detail, and shows how austere Smirke's design was. The two dominant principles are shown to be the primacy of a central axis of approach, and a desire to keep people at a distance from the facade: visitors are channelled along the central route and must approach the dominating central portico from the front, while the dwarf walls and the lawns they enclose serve to make onlookers of the southern facade stand back and register Smirke's wall of mighty Ionic columns from a distance.

Changes have been few. Some trees were planted during the 1960s as an attempt to soften the awesomeness of Smirke's front; they have not survived. The forecourt now contains many benches and has become one of London's principal school party assembly points. In summer months, ice cream kiosks spring up; within recent years a scheme for a Chinese pavilion, based on that at Boughton which was formerly associated with Montagu House, even reached the LAC. Otherwise the forecourt remains in the final configuration of Sydney Smirke's design of 1851-52.

Roger Bowdler
London & South East Region
25 October 1995

SOURCES

J.M. Crook, The British Museum (1973).

Ian Dunlop, `First Home of the British Museum', Country Life Sept. 14, 1951, 812-14.

British Museum Archives.

National Monuments Record.

Crace Collection.

Figure 1 Plan from Britton and Pugin *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London* 1825

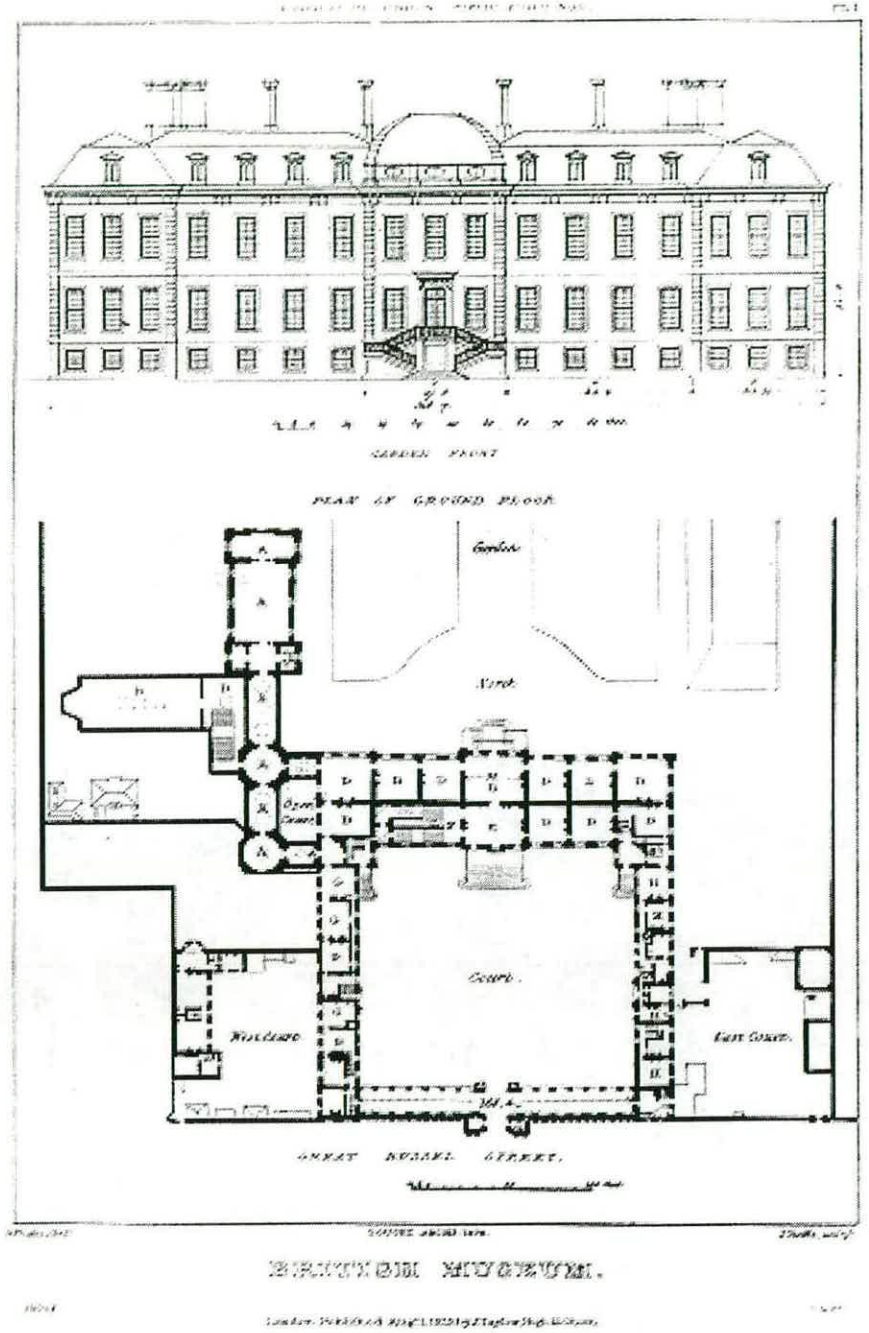


Figure 2 Engraving of 1714

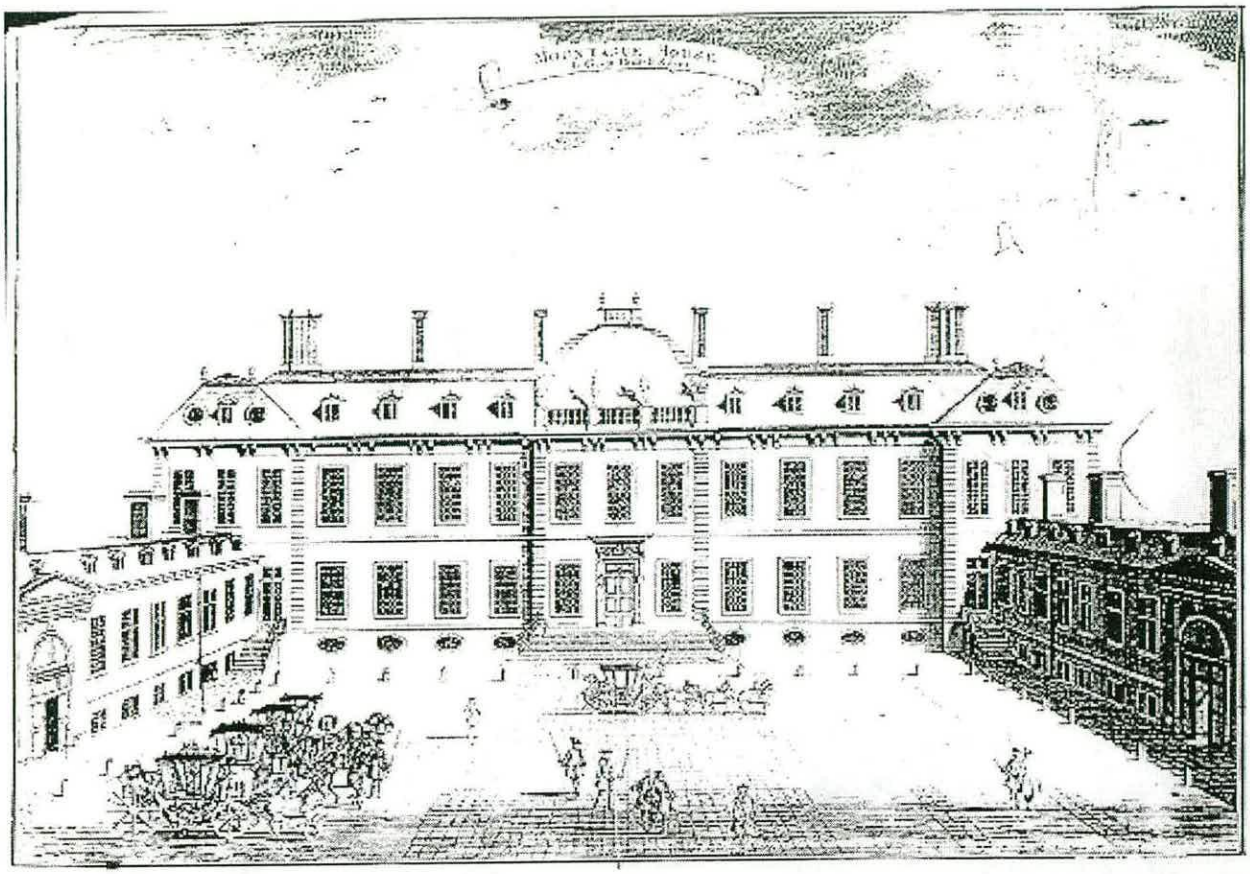


Figure 3 View by JC Buckler

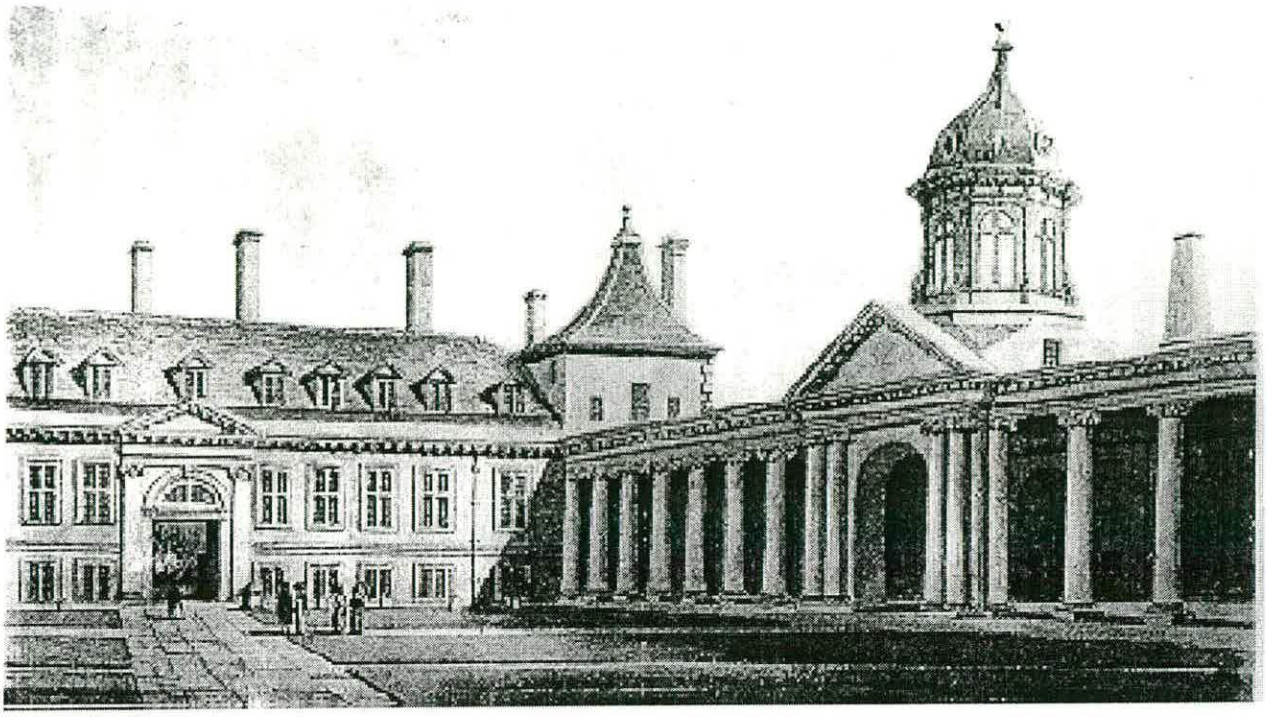


Figure 4 *The last view of the front screen of the Old British Museum*, watercolour by Findlay, 1850

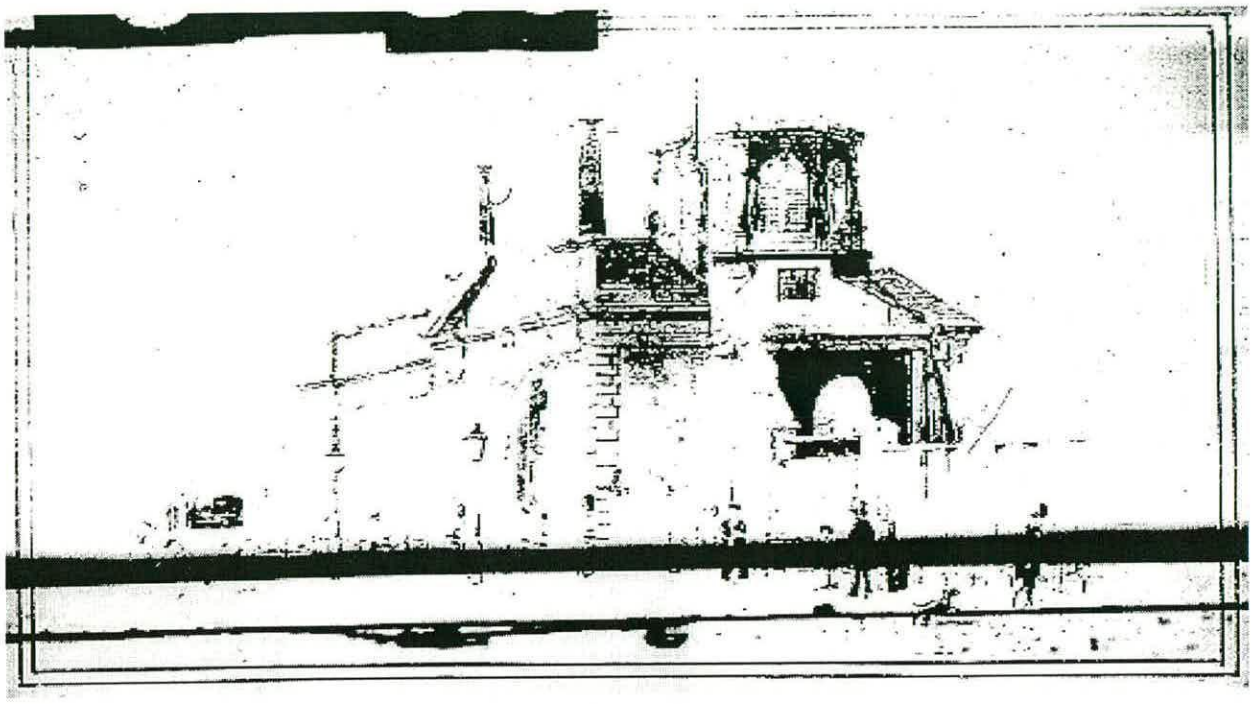
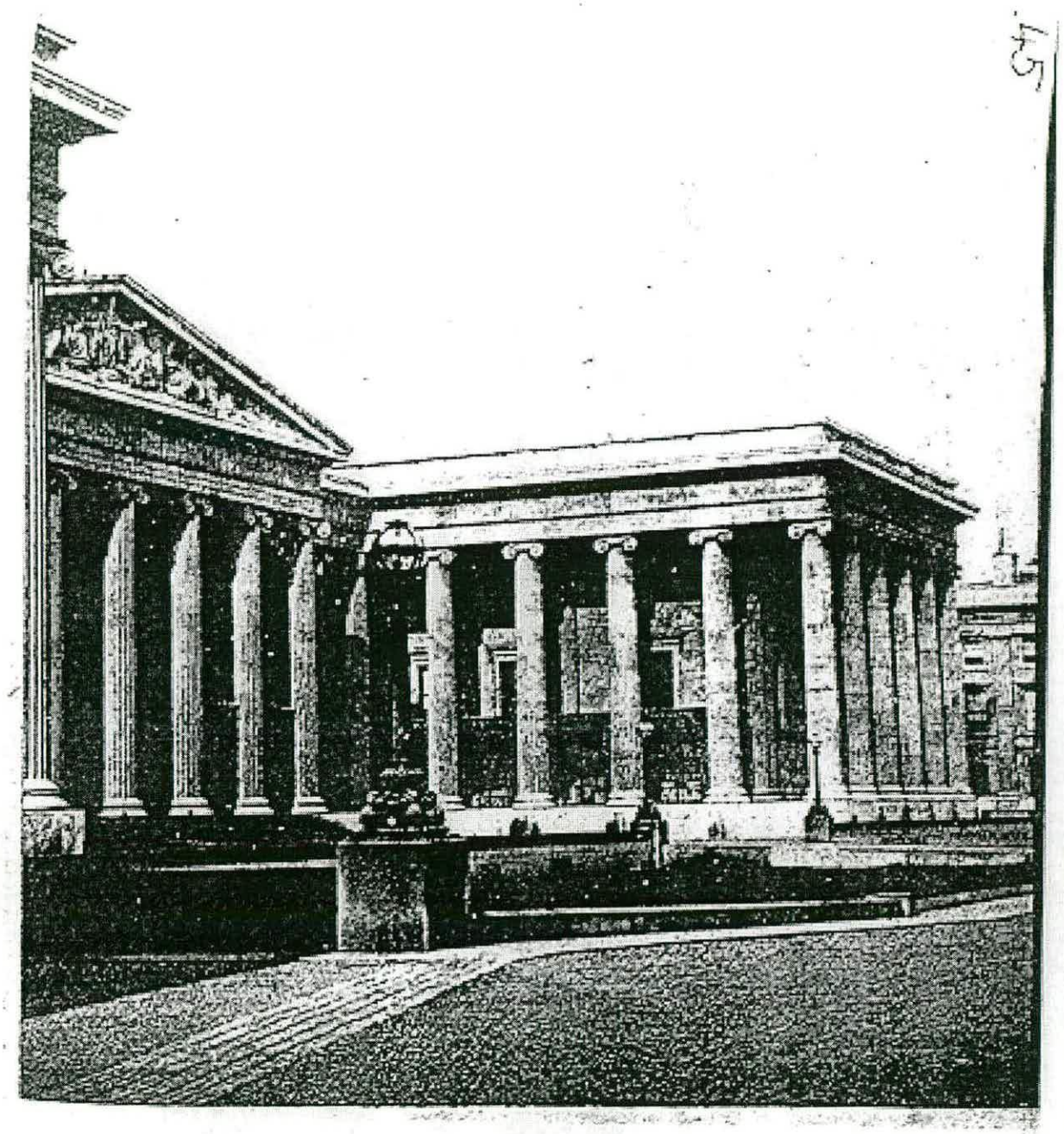


Figure 5 An early photograph of the forecourt from the south-west



THE BRITISH MUSEUM: GREAT COURT ELEVATIONS

The current Proposals by Sir Norman Foster to open up the inner courtyard once again to the public has raised the issue of the openings leading into the Great Court from the entrance hall. This report considers the question of doors within porticoes, of the adaptation of classical precedents in the context of Neoclassical secular buildings, and of comparable instances elsewhere in the buildings of Sir Robert Smirke.

The Great Court: design and evolution

Sir Robert Smirke opted for a quadrangular plan for the new British Museum at an early stage in the museum's rebuilding. Such a plan had practical advantages, both in terms of the available site and in terms of an ongoing building programme (one range could be built at a time). It was also suited to gallery design, providing long and narrow top-lit ranges with obvious advantages in terms of circulation. Besides, it provided the museum with a large inner courtyard. Quite what this courtyard was to be used for, however, was never resolved. As a result, the Great Court languished as a barren, semi-lit enclosed space used by the building contractors and by the children of the keepers, and described by Thomas Grenville as `the finest mason's yard in Europe'[1]. The futility and waste of this space was all too apparent, and this unsatisfactory state of affairs was only ended with the erection of Sydney Smirke's Round Reading Room in 1854-7.

Openings within the BM porticoes

Sir Robert Smirke drew his principal inspiration for the overall design of the BM was the Ionic temple of Athena Polias at Priene in Asia Minor, built in c.335 BC. This temple had been published by the Dilettanti Society in their 1769 volume of *Ionian Antiquities*, and examples of mouldings and architectural features from that temple were contained within the BM's own collections. That temple differed vastly from the massive structure of the BM and only offered partial guidance for the architect: it was a single celled structure, constrained by the conventions of temple architecture. The museum building was a very different proposition which inevitably differed from its stylistic inspiration. It needed to be far larger, and occupied a much broader site. The temple of Athena Polias could thus only be a starting point. Besides, Smirke even made alterations in the BM design to the details of the Ionic order employed at Priene, the one thing to which he could have remained faithful had he so wished[2]. Smirke's attitude to classical precedent was thus a pragmatic one.

The principal portico of the BM (**fig.1**) followed that of Athena Polias in having one single doorway. This was a fitting arrangement for an institution such as the BM which needed to control the entrance and present a front that suggested security, sanctity and solemnity. The temple front of Athena Polias consists of a peripteral hexastyle portico; that of the BM is a projecting octastyle portico, within which the inner wall runs along its entire length. The doorway thus takes up far less of the wall space than was the case at Priene, and is augmented by the six tall window openings that flank the doorway and which illuminate the grand entrance hall.

The inner porticoes of the Great Court

The inner faces of the Great Court on the north and south sides also originally sported porticoes. Early designs by Smirke (**fig. 2**) included a portico but one without any ground level openings. His designs for the inner elevations of the courtyard (**fig. 3**) have been compromised by later work and have long since ceased to be visible. His original plans (**fig. 4**) reveal that the portico on the north side of the south range of the courtyard -the portico leading into the Great Court- consisted of four engaged three-quarter columns set between antae. The central doorway was flanked by windows, aligned with and identical to those running

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[1] *Quarterly Review* CLXXV, 153 quoted in Edward Miller, *That Noble Cabinet. A History of the British Museum* (1973), 185.

[2] J.M. Crook, *The British Museum. A case-study in architectural politics* (1973), 120.

along the south side of the quadrangle. This arrangement was not followed on the north side of the courtyard, curiously enough: there, a tetrastyle portico, broader than its southern opposite, fronted the North Library which occupied that range. The east and west sides of the court were graced with slightly projecting porticoes than resembled that of the south range, but without doors.

These inner porticoes did not last long. The construction of the Round Reading Room in the 1850s required a link between it and the entrance hall: the 1871 Ordnance Survey map (**fig. 5**) indicates that this projected in front of the south inner portico. Wartime photographs in the NMR (**fig. 6**) show them to have been cruelly compromised by lower in-filling related to the book storage crisis of the library, which totally obscured the lower parts of each portico. Since they were, however, invisible to the museum visitor this mutilation was regarded as acceptable. What is currently under discussion has long been lost to sight

Other porticoes in the public architecture of Sir Robert Smirke

The most comparable building to the BM by Smirke was his General Post Office Building at St Martin's le Grand in the City, built in 1824-9 and demolished in 1912 (**fig.7**). This was described and illustrated in W.H. Leeds' 1837 supplement to Britton and Brayley's *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*: `no modern public work has been more successful', it declared, and observed that the source for this building's gigantic hexastyle portico was the Ionic Temple of Athena Polias at Priene, the same source that Smirke was of course to turn to when designing the BM[3].

Close comparisons can thus be made between the GPO and the BM buildings. At the GPO Smirke came up with a different arrangement. An even larger central doorcase than that of the BM filled the central bay, which was flanked by pilasters and then by a pair of much smaller doors within shouldered pylon frames. These lesser doors were not used for entry, however, since they only served porters' or door-keepers' rooms.

Another of Smirke's public buildings in London had a hexastyle Ionic portico. The one in question was the building on the west side of Trafalgar Square, now known as Canada House, that was built to house both the Royal College of Physicians and the Union Club in 1822-5 (**fig 8**). The portico stands on the north side, looking onto the National Gallery. There is one central door, flanked by windows of a similar height that reach nearly to the ground, and above each of which is another tall window flanked with niches within the end bays. So many openings were required in order to allow as much light as possible to enter the College which, like the BM portico in question, was north-facing.

The Covent Garden Theatre of 1808-9 (which burnt down in 1856) was one of Smirke's very first large-scale commissions (**fig. 9**). It was London's first building in the pure Doric style, and was dominated by a four-columned portico on Bow Street based upon the Temple of Athena on the Acropolis[4]. This portico marked the entrance to the boxes, the most prestigious accommodation within the theatre: it was itself monumental, and led into an imposing stair lined by Ionic columns, of a magnificence that Smirke was to return to in the entrance hall and stairs of the BM. The Covent Garden portico had three frameless doors of equal size set between the columns, and above each was a window of slightly greater height.

Sir Robert Smirke also designed a number of Grecian churches which shed interesting light on his varying employment of openings within porticoes: they are considered in the following section below.

Classical precedent and portico openings

The great majority of classical temples had but one opening within the portico. According to Vitruvius, however, the inner sanctum or cella might be entered via an indeterminate number of openings: `the width of the temple is usually made equal to half the length: the cella, including the wall in which the door-ways [NB

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[3] Op. cit. I, 35. Leeds called the building the Temple of Minerva.

[4] Brayley and Pugin, *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London* I (1825), 216 and plate 4.

plural] are made, should be a fourth part larger than its width'[5]. Single entrances remained the most common arrangement for temples: Palladio's *Fourth Book of Architecture* was devoted to temple design, and only one of the 26 examples he cited had more than a single entrance[6]. However, other classical public buildings such as propylaea (or monumental entrances) could sport a variety of doorway arrangements. One of the most curious was that of the propylaeum at Eleusis, which was engraved in the Society of Dilettanti's *Unedited Antiquities of Attica* in 1817 from drawings prepared by Francis Bedford and J.P. Gandy Deering. This propylaeum contained no fewer than five doorways, each set within shouldered pylon frames, and which were of three different heights, the central opening being tallest and the side-most lowest[7].

This suggests the relative freedom of choice that Neo-classical architects enjoyed when designing their openings within porticoes. By far the most common building type grand enough to justify so lavish an architectural element as a portico was that of the church. The British Museum was designed at a time of considerable church building, even if the greatest phase of neo-classical church architecture had been supplanted by the Gothic Revival by the time of the erection of the BM's south range.

The briefest comparison of portico openings occurring within London churches of the early 19th century indicates how variable were the options in this area. The traditional tripartite nave and aisles arrangement of parish churches encouraged the employment of triple doors. This was the arrangement employed by the pioneering Greek Revivalist Willey Reveley at the church of All Saints, Southampton of 1792-95 (destroyed 1941), which had three arched doors of equal height set behind its tetrastyle Ionic portico[8] Another notable Grecian, Henry Inwood, also followed this tripartite arrangement at St Pancras New Church of 1819-22. There, the central doorway was slightly taller than its neighbours but this was a later modification of his initial proposals which had each doorway of an equal height[9]. That Inwood could make such a change reveals how fluid the conventions in this area were. Francis Bedford's unsuccessful 1818 designs for the same building also had a hexastyle portico, but Inwood's three openings were replaced with five openings, the centre-most being taller than the rest[10]. Bedford's designs for St John's, Waterloo were realised in 1823-4: there, he returned to the idea of five openings placed between the six Doric columns, but made them each of an equal height[11].

Smirke himself was responsible for a number of Grecian churches. That of Markham Clinton, Notts. of 1833 reinterpreted the Doric portico used by him at Covent Garden Theatre: here, however, the sanctity of the church and the less pressing consideration of circulation enabled him to emulate Greek precedent and employ one single central opening[12]. St George's, Brandon Hill in Bristol of 1821-3, by contrast, had three equally sized doorcases set behind a similar portico[13].

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[5] William Wilkins, *The Civil Architecture of Vitruvius* (1812), 77.

[6] That was the Temple of Peace in Rome. Isaac Ware, *The Four Books of Andrea Palladio's Architecture* (1738) 86 and pl. 1.

[7] J.M. Crook, *The Greek Revival* (1968), 6.

[8] Marcus Whiffen, *Stuart and Georgian Churches* (1948), 56.

[9] Idem., 31.

[10] Idem., 30.

[11] John Summerson, *Georgian London* (1988 ed.), 229.

[12] M. Whiffen, op. cit., pl. 105.

[13] Idem., pl. 101. Compare James Green's St David, Exeter (1816; dem. 1897) for a similar arrangement: ibid., pl. 109.

Of London secular buildings with hexastyle Ionic porticoes known to Smirke, perhaps the most celebrated was Richard Jupp's re-fronting of East India House in Leadenhall Street, commenced in 1799 and completed after Jupp's death in that year by Henry Holland[14]. This portico had even more openings that Smirke's Royal College of Physicians: the central ground floor bay had a pedimented doorcase and each other bay on ground and first floor level sported a window, those on the ground floor being arched and set within rusticated surrounds. Similar, if more Smirkean, was John Foster's Custom House at Liverpool, commenced in 1828 (and destroyed in 1941), which featured a mighty octastyle Ionic portico with two tiers of door and window openings. Francis Goodwin's Manchester Town Hall of 1822-4 (demolished in 1912) had a tetrastyle Ionic portico in antis, with a similar deployment of regular openings[15]. Examples could be cited at even greater length.

Wall and portico: inter-relationship of openings

Smirke connected the wall and portico of the south range within the Great Court by continuing the size and height of wall openings inside the outer two bays of the portico, as he had done upon the entrance front. His drawings indicate that the opening of the central door within the courtyard portico was lower than the flanking windows, whereas it had been of equal height upon the entrance front. There are no directly comparable porticoes upon public buildings by Sir Robert Smirke and the mid-wall height of the windows along the inner walls of the Great Court are encountered nowhere else.

It is thus apparent that there were no hard and fast rules for the number and deployment of openings within porticoes. For compositional grounds, the arrangement of windows within facades beyond the porticoes upon large public buildings was a crucial consideration; churches, being cellular like temples, did not have this problem of broad fronts and wall-portico inter-relationships. One or two storeys of windows upon the flanking walls suggested one or two levels of openings within the portico, as had long been the practice in country house design. Public buildings such as the BM presented a more complicated problem. The single rows of windows were placed high up within the lofty flanking walls: this provided high level illumination and a window-free background for the contents within the galleries, and also provided the exterior of the museum (as seen both from within the great Court and from the streets) with a secure and almost daunting architectural presence.

Roger Bowdler
Historical Analysis and Research Team
14 April 1997.

(edited Richard Lea 12/2/99)

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[14] J. Britton and A. Pugin, *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London* II (1828), 77ff..

[15] Both buildings are illustrated in Summerson's *Architecture in Britain* (ed. cit.), 480-1.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 Sir Robert Smirke: drawing for main south portico of The British Museum entrance front

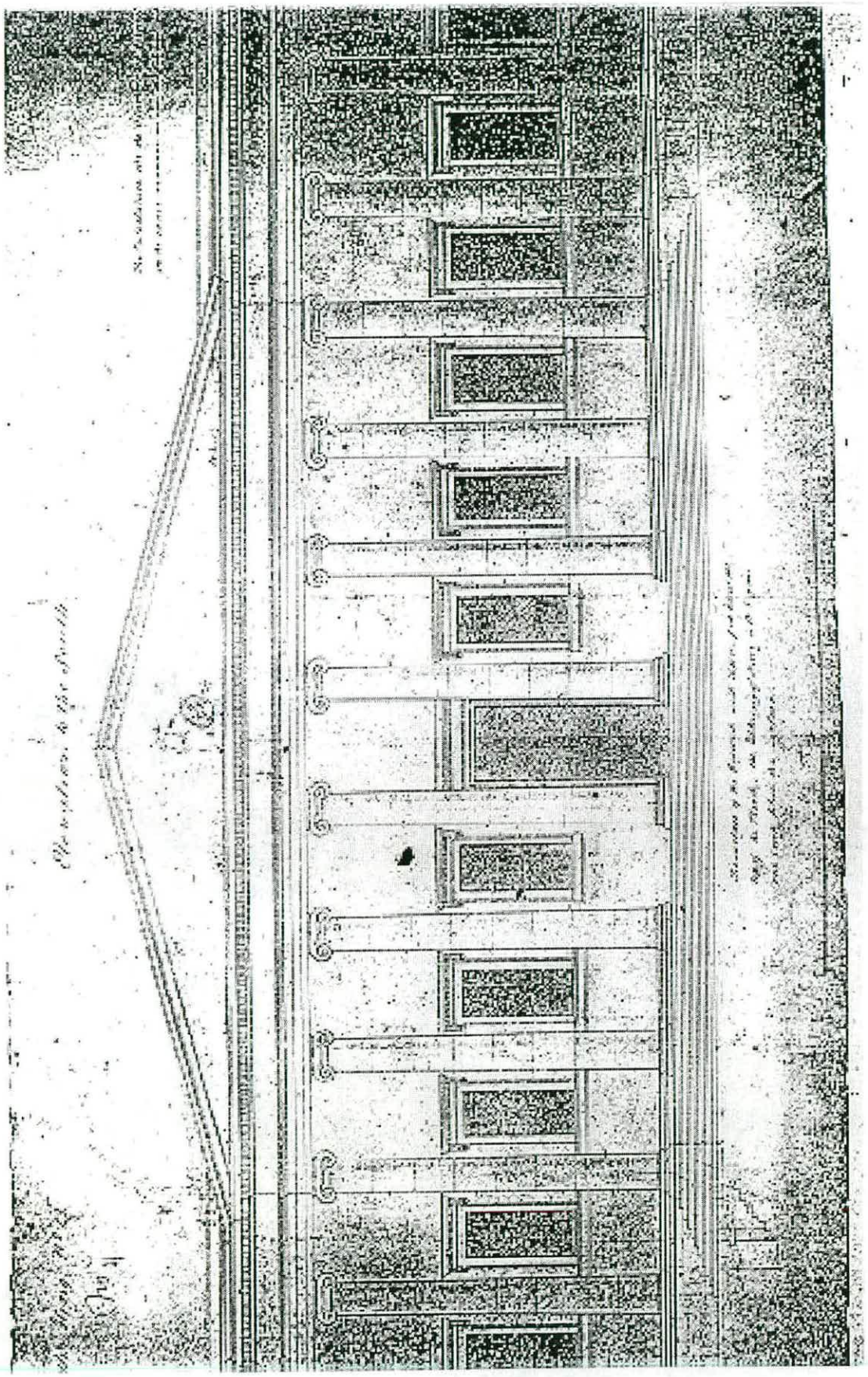


Figure 2 Sir Robert Smirke: early design for interior of courtyard (unexecuted), 1823

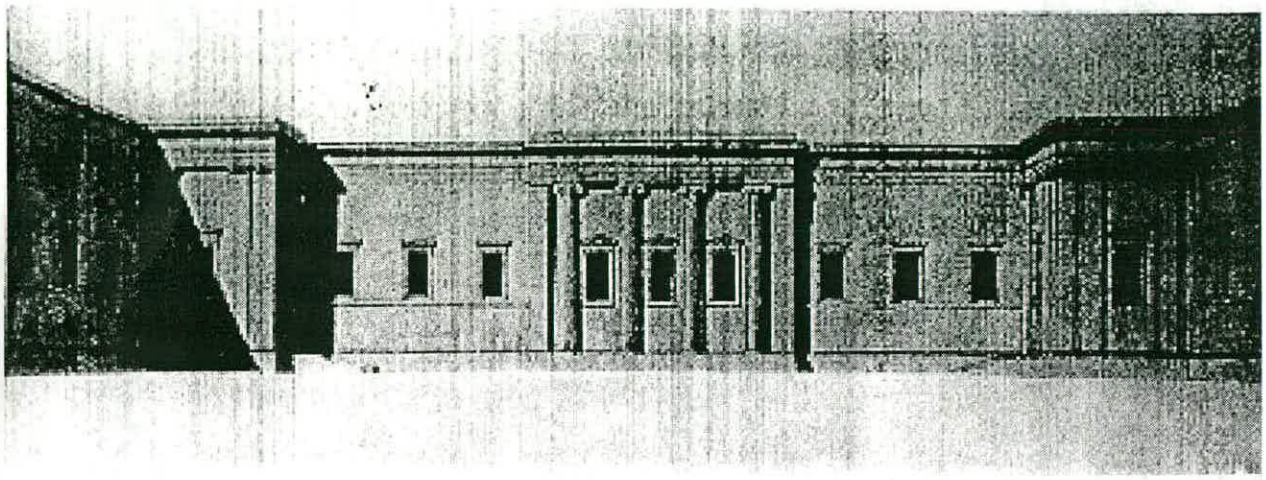


Figure 3 Sir Robert Smirke: drawing for portico of inner (courtyard) elevation of south range, 1841 (BM)

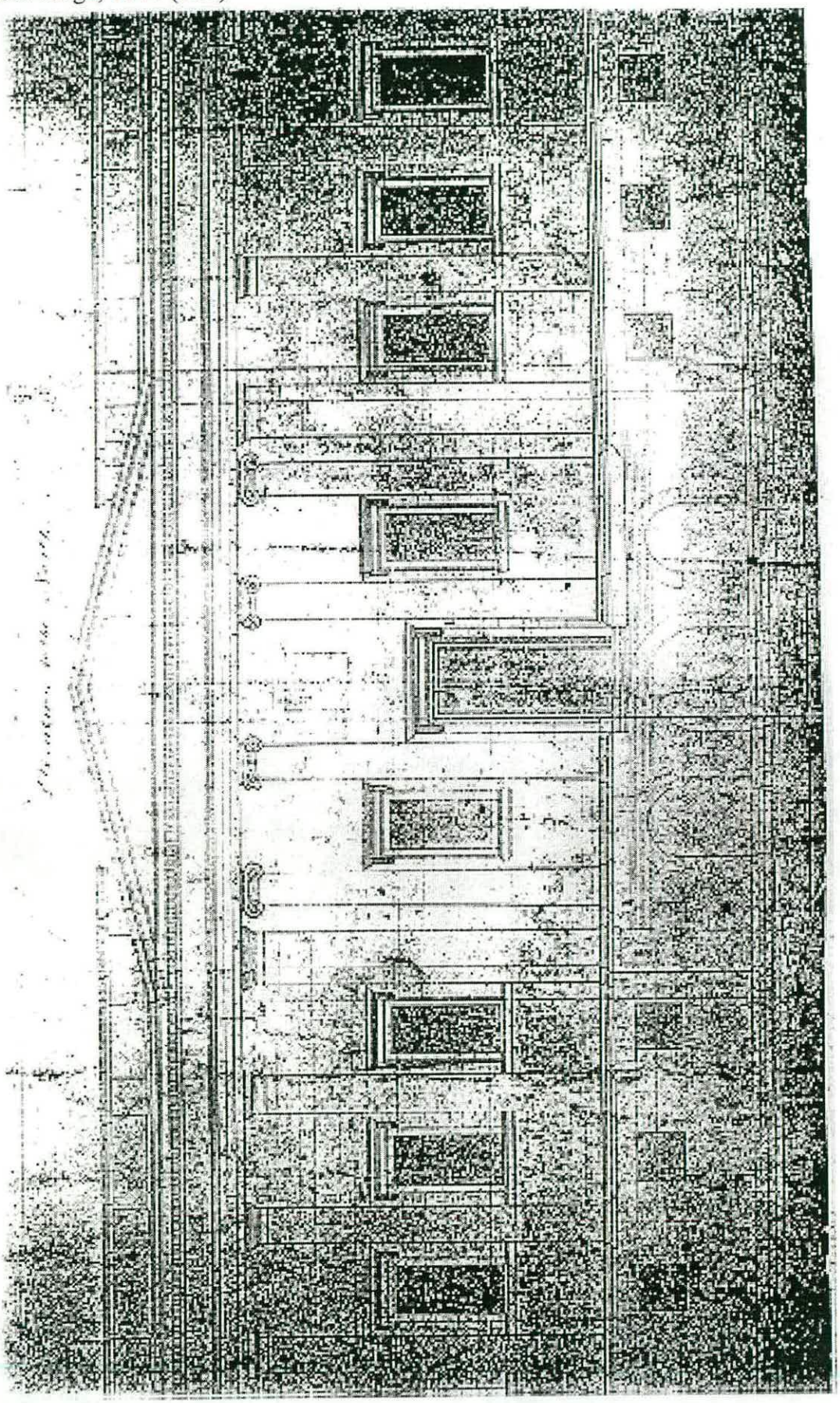


Figure 4 Sir Robert Smirke: ground plan of central entrance hall, porticoetc., 1841

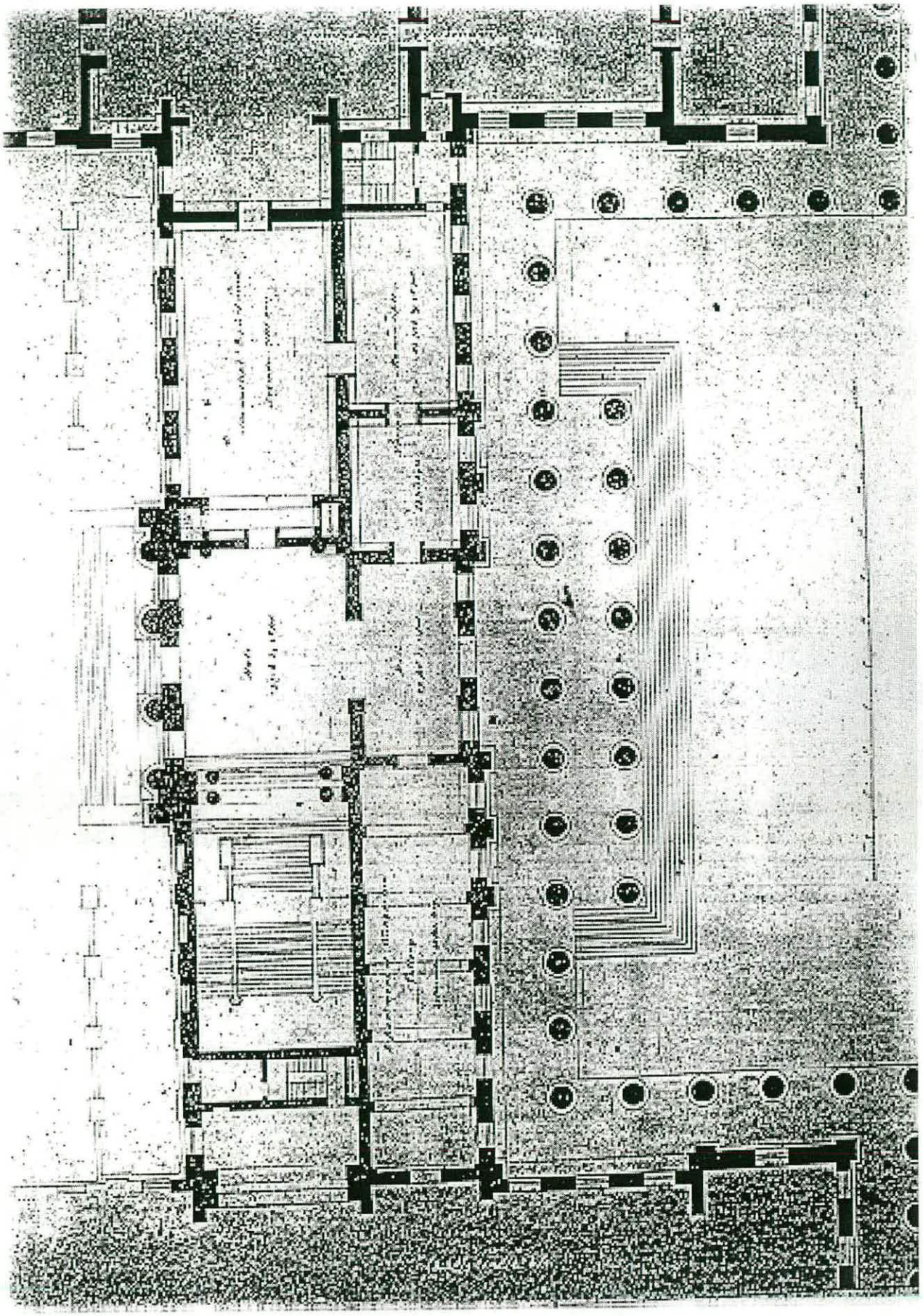


Figure 5 Extract from 1871 OS map showing new Reading Room within courtyard

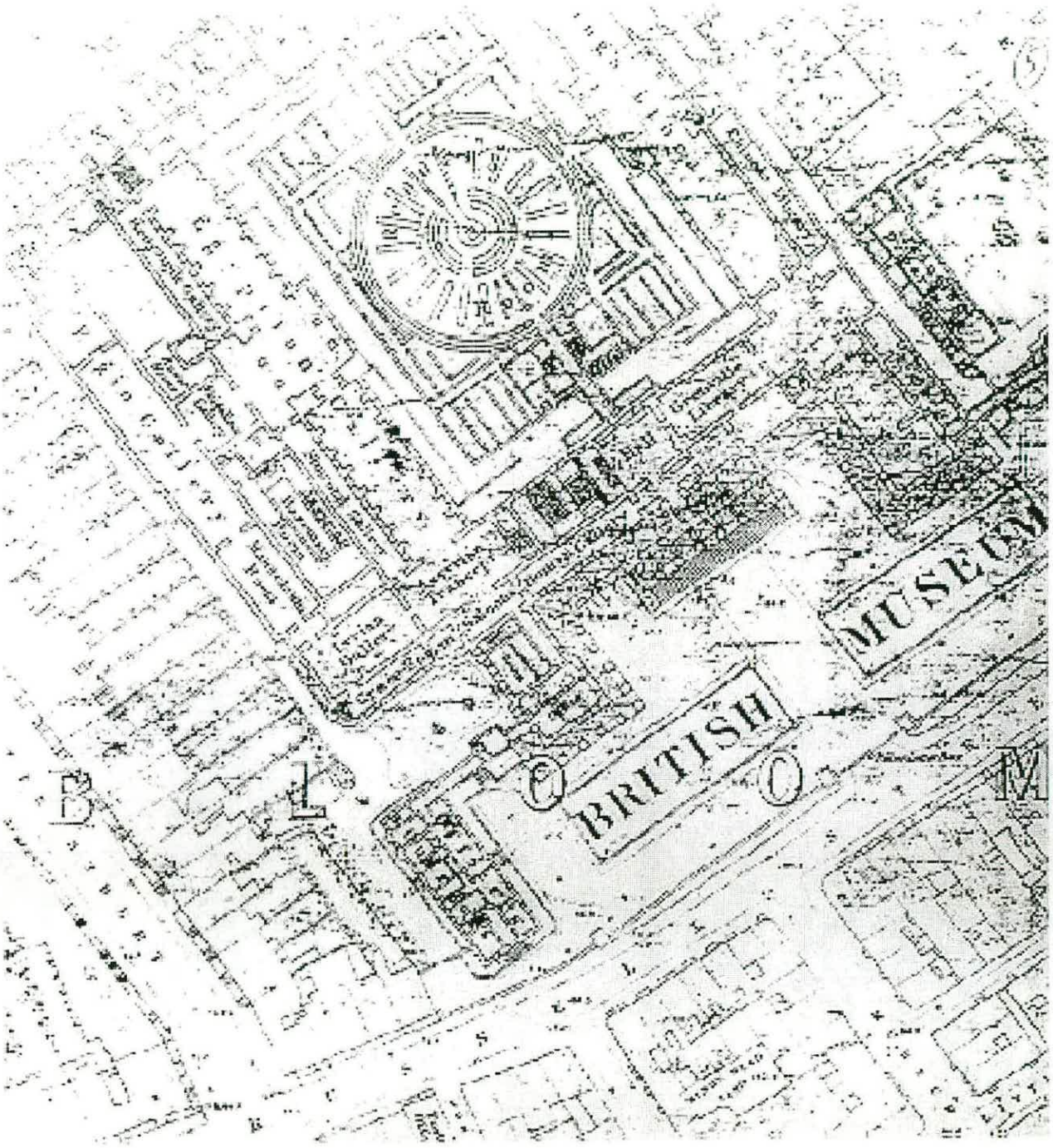


Figure 6 1943 photograph showing interior of Great Court with later infillling around portico

Figure 7 Sir Robert Smirke: General Post Office, St Martin's le Grand (1824-9) from Britton and Brayley's *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*

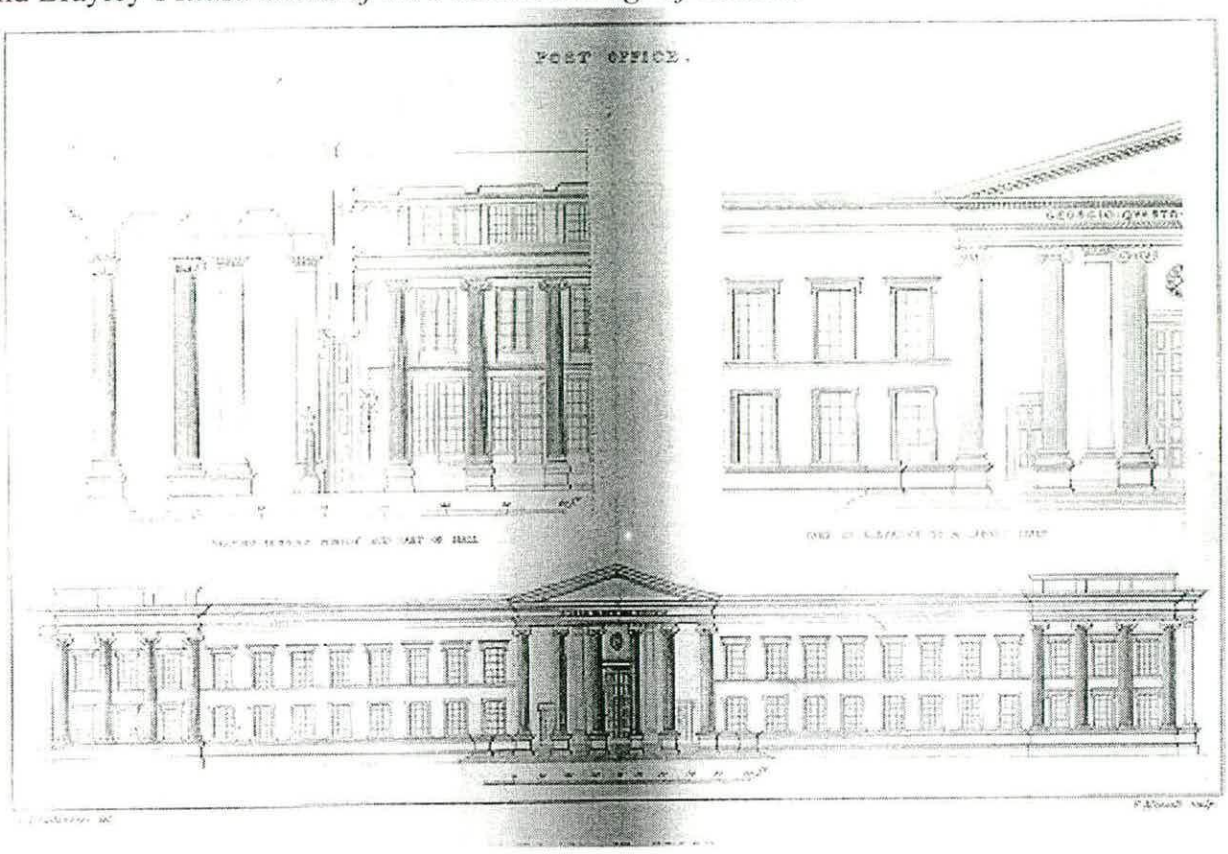


Figure 8 Sir Robert Smirke: Royal College of Physicians (1822-5) from Britton and Brayley

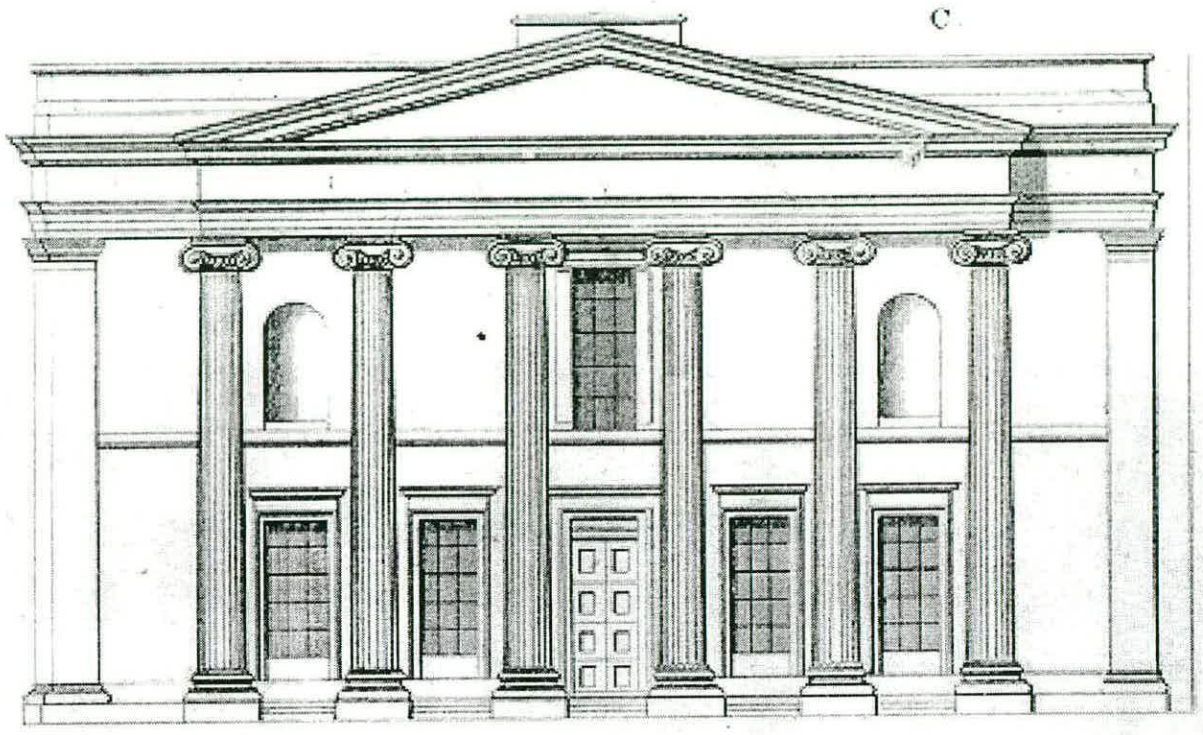
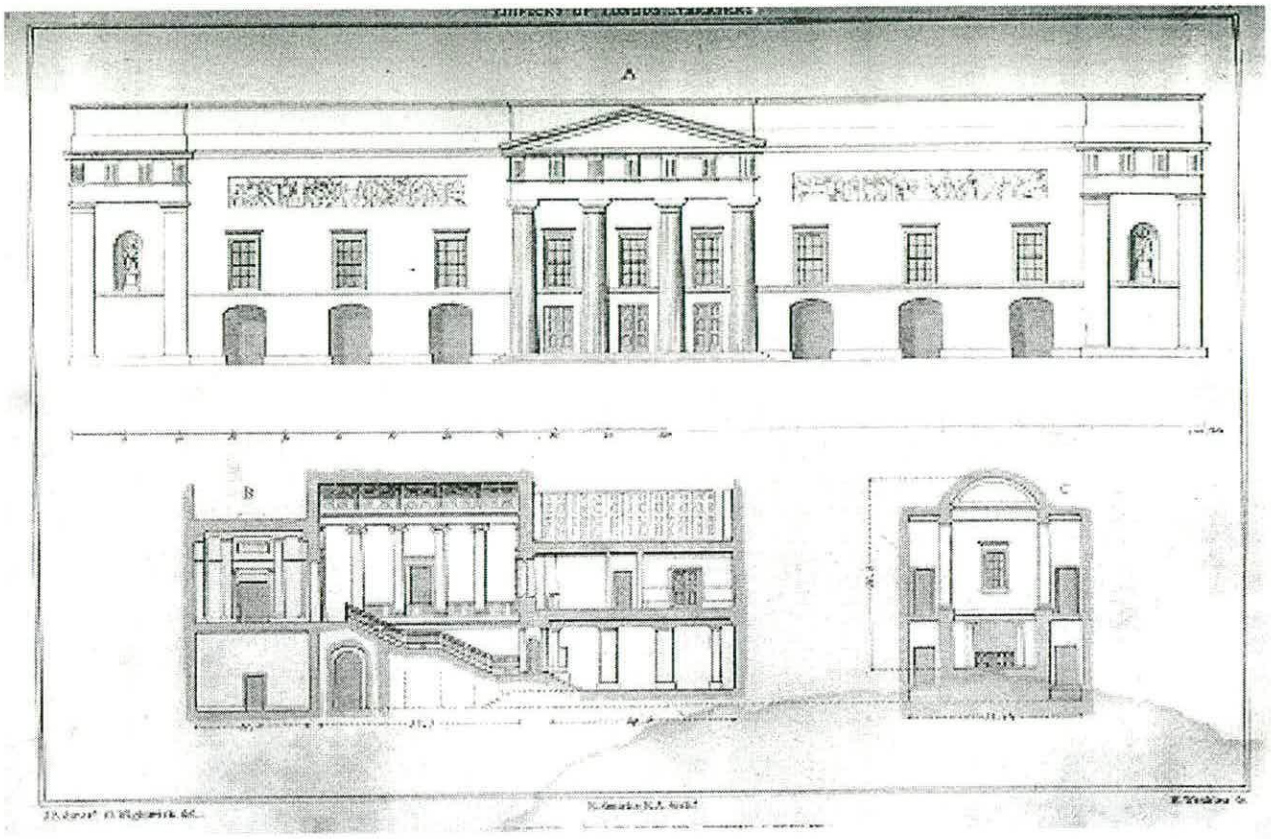


Figure 9 Sir Robert Smirke: Covent Garden Theatre (1808-9) from Britton and Brayley



THE BRITISH MUSEUM: ENTRANCE HALL DECORATION

The Entrance Hall: Background

The south range of the BM was the last part of Sir Robert Smirke's quadrangular design to be completed. Smirke's health had been declining during the 1840s and his younger brother Sydney had taken on an increasing amount of responsibility for detailed design work at the museum prior to the final retirement of his brother in early 1846. The entrance and stairs had however been designed by Sir Robert[1] . The scaffolding in these grand spaces was taken down in December 1846, and the walls and ceiling plain-painted. Sydney Smirke, now responsible for the completion of the building and its decoration, felt that the interiors were in need of enrichment, and wrote to the Museum Secretary on 19th December to this effect: `now that the new Hall and Staircase are cleared from scaffolding and other obstruction, the great extent of plain surface on the ceilings and walls appears to me to require relief'.

The Decision to Decorate

Painted decoration offered the solution, `if done sparingly and cautiously, in strict conformity with ancient examples, and confined chiefly to the mouldings'[2]. The Trustees decided, since cost implications were not significant, to leave the matter of decoration to Smirke, so long as no figural decoration was proposed[3]. Smirke accordingly commissioned Leonard Collmann (1816-81) of the firm of Collmann and Davis to prepare a decorative scheme for the entrance hall. Collmann was a specialist in architectural decoration, exhibiting several such designs at the Royal Academy in the 1840s; his unsuccessful design for the Nelson monument in Trafalgar Square (now in the V & A) suggests that he was rather more than a decorative painter alone. His proposals for the BM's entrance hall evidently found favour with Sydney Smirke, who may well have been personally involved with the design of the decorative scheme[4].

Work must have proceeded rapidly in order to be ready for the grand public opening in April 1847: the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Smirke building has thus recently passed, a fact that may strengthen the cause of a return to the original decoration. Collmann and Davis subsequently worked on a number of major government commissions, including the decoration of the interior of Burlington House in the mid-1860s. It is evident that Collmann was an important decorator in his day, and that the BM entrance hall scheme was among the most prominent of all his commissions.

The original decoration of the entrance hall and stairs

Collmann's scheme was evidently very much in the spirit of Sydney Smirke's preference for rich classicism. It is known through three sources: an 1847 watercolour by Collmann in the BM's prints and drawings department[5]; from early photographs and descriptions; and from recent investigation of the scheme underneath more recent paint schemes.

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[1] Jenkins (1992), 45.

[2] Ibid., quoting from the BM Archives, Original Papers vol. XXXVI.

[3] BM Archives, *Minutes of Trustees' Standing Committee*, 19 December 1846, 7113.

[4] Ian Jenkins of the BM's Greek and Roman Department has made this suggestion, which seems highly plausible.

[5] BM ref. PD 1902-1-29-1.

It is unclear whether the 1847 watercolour was of an intended scheme or a record of a fait accompli. It depicts the northern part of the hall, looking up from the entrance to the Department of Manuscripts towards the first flight of the great stairs, which was framed by paired Doric columns. The spacious and severe interior was enriched through picking out mouldings and decorating the coffered ceilings with star motifs, while the principal divisions between the ceiling panels were decorated with strips of fretwork. Greys and creams predominated, but were enriched with red, blue and gilt decoration. The fullest account is to be found in the *Illustrated London News* for 24 April 1847, p.269, which also contained an engraving of the entrance hall:

> After passing beneath the Portico, the visitor, by a lofty doorway, of carved oak, enters the Hall, a noble apartment 62 feet by 51 feet, and 30 feet high, and of the Grecian-Doric order. The ceiling is trabeated (cross-beamed), deeply coffered, and enriched with Greek frets, and other ornaments, painted in encaustic, in various colours, most harmoniously blended: the large gold star upon a blue background, in the centre of each coffer, has a superb effect. The floor is laid with large squares of Portland stone, and small grey marble diamonds at their angles.

Most of the contemporary accounts of the scheme make mention primarily of the colours of the coffered ceiling, of the gilt or possibly ochre-coloured[6] stars on a blue background. That was evidently the richest and most striking aspect of the decorative scheme. Otherwise, the red, blue and white enrichment of the mouldings was restrained and readily justifiable with classical precedent.

In addition to the painted decoration, the entrance hall was also enhanced by the presence of two distinguished statues: Roubiliac's figure of Shakespeare, and Chantrey's Sir Joseph Banks. A scheme to decorate the hall with modern busts of worthies after the manner of the Walhalla at Regensburg, first raised in May 1847 with the Trustees, was not proceeded with. Similarly, an early plan to place bas reliefs upon the walls of the stairs, raised by the Trustees in May 1848, was dropped.

The great staircase formed the other major element of this final phase of Smirke's grand design. Like the entrance hall, it aimed for a monumental effect and achieved it through a combination of scale, materials, colour and detailing. The stairs were also described by the *ILN*:

> At the Western extremity of the Hall is the Principal Staircase. The centre flight is 17 feet wide, and is flanked by pedestals of grey Aberdeen granite, upon which will be placed colossal sculpture[7]. On the first landing are two beautiful vases, on pedestals, of Huddlestone stone[8]; and the balustrades are of the same material. The walls and ceiling are painted in oil, and in encaustic colours; and the ceiling is trabeated, coffered, and decorated to harmonise with the Entrance Hall.

Public reaction appears to have been favourable: as well as the *ILN*'s response, quoted above, one might cite that of a correspondent to *The Builder* for 15 February 1851, 99: `the general effect... when the walls are completed will be satisfactory as to colour; at all events far superior to the blank white walls and ceilings formerly in vogue'. Smirke was prompted to build on the success of the entrance hall scheme, and petition the Trustees in a letter of 8 June 1850 to suggest `the introduction to a very moderate extent of colour, not only upon the walls and ceiling of the new portion, but through the whole of the west wing'[9]. This was ultimately carried out.

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[6] The investigations undertaken in 1984 found no trace of gold leaf having been used in the scheme.

[7] The Collmann watercolour shows a pair of recumbent lions upon these pedestals. presumably added shortly after the ILN's article appeared.

[8] This magnesian limestone from Sherburn-in-Elmet, Yorks. had been used in London for the construction of Westminster Hall and parts of Henry VII's Chapel.

[9] Committee Minutes XXIV (1848-50), c.8008.

The decorative scheme was analyzed by Ian Bristow for the BM in 1984. The encaustic paint scheme (i.e. with a wax- or resin-based, as opposed to an oil-based, paint) was protected by a final layer of varnish[10].

With the completion of the south front, the decoration of the hall and the installation of the grand stairs, the British Museum was finally complete. Having long occupied the cramped and unsuited quarters of Montagu House, the museum's collections were for the first time wholly displayed within a bespoke and sumptuous public building. This was no mean achievement. The government had spent more on the museum than on any other public building in London ever before. The museum's rich internal decoration was part of this expression of great national pride in its Temple of the Arts, and served as a fitting starting point for all visits to the country's own collection of antiquities.

The mid-century taste for polychromy

The decoration of the entrance hall has to be seen as part of the continuing story of the Greek Revival in England. So long was the British Museum in building that it included several different flavours of the Grecian taste. Sir Robert Smirke's exterior and a number of the galleries displayed the archaeologically precise, chaste and chromatically neutral character of the early phases of such taste, while the decoration of the entrance hall and the inclusion of sculpture within the main pediment (not to mention the proposal to place monumental groups of statuary either side of the entrance to the forecourt) were all manifestations of a later and richer, less frigid, phase.

Archaeological investigation into Greek architecture undertaken by the continental scholar-architects Hittorff and Klenze revolutionized the common perception of the appearance of temples. No longer were they interpreted as naturally coloured stone structures, but as richly polychromatic, brightly decorated buildings. Both Klenze and Schinkel drew on this discovery in their own designs for museum buildings: the former's Glypothek in Munich (1816-30) and the latter's Altes Museum, Berlin (1823-28). Colour in architecture became a heated issue with the fledgling Institute of Architects, and no less a figure than Leo von Klenze was asked by the government to pronounce upon the introduction of polychromy at the BM. External polychromy (with the important exception of the main pediment's tympanum) continued to be frowned upon, but its employment internally was strongly endorsed. Obvious parallels might be drawn with the strong and vibrant colours of the Gothic Revival that dramatically transformed ecclesiastical decoration. Both can be seen as parallel, contrasting facets of early Victorian taste.

Other public museums of the mid-19th century with important schemes of internal decoration include the National Gallery, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the Manchester City Art Gallery and the Scottish Museum of National Antiquities in Edinburgh.

Later redecoration of the entrance hall

The entrance hall, despite its height, was prone to dirt: not only did the sulphurous London air find its way inside, but the ever-swelling bands of visitors exuded considerable moisture that contributed to the soiling of the walls. Owing to the varnish finish, however, cleaning was possible. Numerous later repaintings of the walls were identified during the 1984 investigations: no fewer than ten layers of paint were found on top of the Collmann scheme.

The key date in the loss of the 1847 scheme occurred around 1930, according to the BM's archivist Christopher Date. At that time all traces of polychromy were over-painted, and the ceiling decoration in particular finally lost to view. Record photographs of the entrance hall in the BM Archives show what remained of the scheme prior to this work. It is quite likely that the slight bomb damage that the entrance hall suffered would in any case have necessitated extensive redecoration, and it is far from likely that the museum would have been able to recreate the Collmann scheme in the straitened post-war period even if the will to do so had existed.

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[10] Ian Bristow, *Architectural Colour in British Interiors 1615-1840* (1996), 215.

The entrance hall and stairs were again over-painted in a uniform pale colour. In the mid-1980s the redecoration was again considered (and prompted an article[11] in *Country Life* in 1984, urging a return to the 1847 scheme). Sir David Wilson's term as Director was characterised by the desire to modernise the museum's displays and methods of presentation: reinstatement of the Victorian paint scheme had no part to pay in this, and so was rejected.

Around 1990 the walls of the stairs were redecorated: panels were restored, and filled with lists of donors' names. This latter innovation may possibly prove a disincentive in attempts to return to the original scheme. The present director is said to be much keener on the idea than was his predecessor. Informal consultation of several curators at the BM reveals that there is a considerable majority in favour of a return to the Smirke and Collmann scheme: the stumbling block, predictably, is that of money.

Reinstatement considerations

Recent developments in paint restoration techniques have made possible the removal of later layers of paint, while preserving the desired earlier decoration. Whereas paint restoration was formerly a matter of over-painting with an entirely new scheme, paint conservation now enables the actual original scheme to be seen itself. This may well have favourable cost implications. However, the report prepared by Campbell-Smith and Jones for the PSA in 1984 highlighted the presence of modern re-plastering in some areas and the consequent total loss of the original paint. Ian Bristow's report also raised the issue of the faded pigments within the 1847 scheme.

The general pattern in museum display seems to be a return to early decorative schemes. The Manchester City Art Gallery, under the directorship of Timothy Clifford, was a pioneering institution in this area in the early 1980s: designed by Sir Charles Barry as the Royal Institution of Fine Arts and built in 1824-35, the polychrome scheme was restored to universal acclaim. The recent redecoration of the Barry rooms inside the National Gallery has also met with approval; so too has the redecoration of the hall and stairs of the National Portrait Gallery. Dulwich Picture Gallery too has benefitted from a well-researched return to original decoration, as has the other Soane-designed museum: his own, in Lincoln's Inn Fields. It is thus safe to conclude that the prevailing trend in museum presentation is towards a return to original decorative schemes.

The BM is at times inundated with visitors: numbers rise steadily, and have now reached an annual peak of six million. The entrance hall is thus a thronged space, and the wall surfaces need to be resistant to the dirt and moisture.

Roger Bowdler
Historical Analysis and Research Team
10 June 1997.

(Edited Richard Lea 12/2/99)

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[11] Alastair Laing, `Penny Plain or Tuppence Coloured? Redecoration of the British Museum's Entrance Hall and Main Staircase', *C.L.* 17 May 1984, 1382-83.

BRITISH MUSEUM QUADRANGLE: OPENINGS

The issue of Smirke, doors and windows, and the creation of new openings within porticoes was the subject of a report in April 1997. That report addressed the question of creating an opening in the portico on the north side of the south front. This present report is prompted by consideration of the British Museum's desire to create openings on the east and west sides of the quadrangle. Zoe Croad asks whether any further light can be shed on the openings into the inner quadrangle of the British Museum. Did Smirke really design doorways directly below window openings, as suggested in drawings located by Foster and Associates and advanced as a precedent?

The Building of the Quadrangle

The British Museum was always going to expand northwards, on to the area covered by the museum garden: this consisted of a long pair of lawns divided and surrounded by paths, and flanked by raised terraces, as shown on a plan of the Museum and surrounding area, prepared in c1800 (**fig. 1**). An early, undated proposal of c1810 (**fig. 2**) for two rear ranges, possibly designed by the Museum's architect George Saunders, shows the first proposal for such extensions which run northwards and form a three-sided enclosure after the manner of William Wilkins' Downing College, Cambridge of 1807-20.

Robert Smirke, architect to the Museum from 1815, began to design extensions to the north in the early 1820s: a plan of the east wing dated 1823, which was built to house the King's Library and related library rooms is described as `now building' (**fig. 3**). Smirke envisaged a quadrangle from the outset. Each range would sport a central portico with engaged columns; an early scheme, not pursued, showed the north range fronted by a grand colonnade with a projecting hexastyle portico rather along the lines of the later south front (**fig. 4**). Work on the quadrangle began with the east range, continued with the north range, and then started along the west side: a plan of the museum prepared in connection with the Parliamentary Inquiry into the building of the British Museum in 1836 (**fig. 5**) shows the extent of completed work in July of that year: two and a half of the four sides had been built, including three of the four porticoes within the quadrangle. Not until the mid-1840s was the quadrangle closed with the construction of the south front.

The Elevations of the Quadrangle

Smirke's designs for the inner sides of the quadrangle (**figs. 6 and 7**) are characterised by their uniformity and sense of impenetrability. Each range was conceived from the inside out: the provision of secure, decently lit galleries or reading rooms was more important than the creation of grandiose elevations. If there is a sense of forbiddingness about the design of each face, it is because each range was intended to be entered from each end: there was thus no need to interrupt the wall surface with openings other than windows. The shallow porticoes herald no entrance but simply articulate the centres of each side, and the lower walls below each pediment remain firmly solid and unyielding.

One of the mysteries of Smirke's overall design was the use of the quadrangle: for whom was it intended, and what would people have done inside it? Smirke evidently had great hopes that the quadrangle might become a thronged enclosure, in which his elevations would form the sole aspects of interest. In the event it was closed to the public, and used by the Keeper of the Museum's family for solitary exercise; the fairly crude woodcut of c1851 (**fig. 8**) showing the quadrangle thronged with visitors and gardeners seems to have been a fanciful interpretation of what was otherwise a fairly sterile enclosure, hemmed in by the stern walls of Smirke's ranges, prior to the construction of the Reading Room in the 1850. Even had the public been admitted, the long barren lengths of wall gave no concession to the stroller in the quadrangle, who would have had to walk the length of the court to gain access to the north range.

Door Openings within the Quadrangle

When the east range was constructed, Smirke did however design a ground level entrance leading in to the new east wing. This consisted of a door, reached via steps, on the western return of the new range. It was

slightly awkwardly located immediately below a window opening, forming one continuous element divided by a bracketed moulding. An engraving of 1828 by George Shepherd of the east range (**fig. 9**) shows this arrangement in situ. This opening provided a northern entrance to the King's Library.

When the north range was commenced, this opening was swept away and replaced with a very similar device in the north-east and north-west corners of the new range (**fig. 10**). Smirke's drawings for these entrance doors were prepared in August 1833 (**fig. 11**). Each showed a doorway 5'6" wide, reached via ten steps from the quadrangle and set within a plain rectangular frame inserted beneath the endmost window frames; the arrangement was similar to that of the earlier entrance to the King's Library, but the brackets were omitted from the central moulding which served both as a base to the window above and a canopy to the door opening below. Smirke revised the moulding profile of the door cases in December 1834 (**fig. 12**). The steps gave the doors greater presence than their cramped corner positions would otherwise have permitted. As finally built, these doors were reached via a short flight of steps, flanked by low walls with plinths, set at right angles to the doors, with a square landing in each corner which enabled a raised view of the quadrangle to be had (**fig. 13**).

The doors are known to have been built, judging from views (including an 1855 photograph by William Lake Price) but in practice, however, these doors were not in use: circulation was confined to within the galleries and the public were kept out of the quadrangle. An indication of the overall uncertainty of the doors' use is attested to by the amendments to Smirke's drawing: in place of (and on top of) the six-panel door has been sketched a six-pane window above a solid apron inscribed `ashlar'. This presumably refers to the blocking-up of the doors, undertaken in connection with the closure of the quadrangle and the erection of the Reading Room and subsequent book stores.

Smirke's quadrangle was a misconceived civic enterprise which only existed in its completed form from 1847 to 1854. Visible to few and accessible to even fewer, it was a thwarted attempt to give the greatly expanded museum a series of elevations that expressed the solemnity of the institution's purpose, in Smirke's characteristically reserved Grecian idiom.

Roger Bowdler
Historical Analysis and Research Team

10th March 1998.

ILLUSTRATIONS

fig. 1 Plan of the British Museum and surrounding streets, c.1800 (BM Archives, Plans vol. I, f.23).

fig. 2 Plan of proposed extensions to north, c1810 (Plans vol. I, f.22).

fig. 3 Robert Smirke, *Plan of the East Wing now building for the Museum*, 1823 (Plans vol. I, f.26).

fig. 4 Robert Smirke, Plan of British Museum with proposed colonnade to north range of quadrangle, 1827 (Plans vol. I, f.57).

fig. 5 Robert Smirke, *General Plan Proposed for the Buildings of the Museum - Upper Floor*, 1836 (Plans vol I, f.72).

fig. 6 Robert Smirke, *British Museum New East Wing. Elevation of Part of the Principal Front towards the East*, 1824 (Plans vol. I, f.37).

fig. 7 Robert Smirke, *British Museum North Wing. Elevation to South*, 1833 (Plans vol. I, f.64).

fig. 8 Anon. wood engraving of the British Museum quadrangle, to the north c.1851 (BM Archives, Illustrations of the British Museum vol. II, f.33).

fig. 9 G. Shepherd, *The East Wing of the new Building containing the Royal Library, British Museum*, engraving of 1828 (BM Archives, British Museum Cuttings and Extracts to c1862, 113).

fig.10 Robert Smirke, *Elevation proposed for the North Side of the Quadrangle - Museum*, n.d. (Plans vol. II, f.111).

fig.11 Robert Smirke, *British Museum North Wing. Entrance door way at each end of the South Front*, 1833 (PRO, WORKS 33/212).

fig.12 Robert Smirke, *British Museum North Wing. Elevation of the Steps etc at each end of the south front*, 1834 (PRO, WORKS 33/217/1).

fig.13 Sydney Smirke, *The British Museum. Plan of the Quadrangle showing the proposed sunk areas*, 1846 (location uncertain).

Figure 1 Plan of the British Museum and surrounding streets, c.1800 (BM Archives, Plans vol. I, f.23).

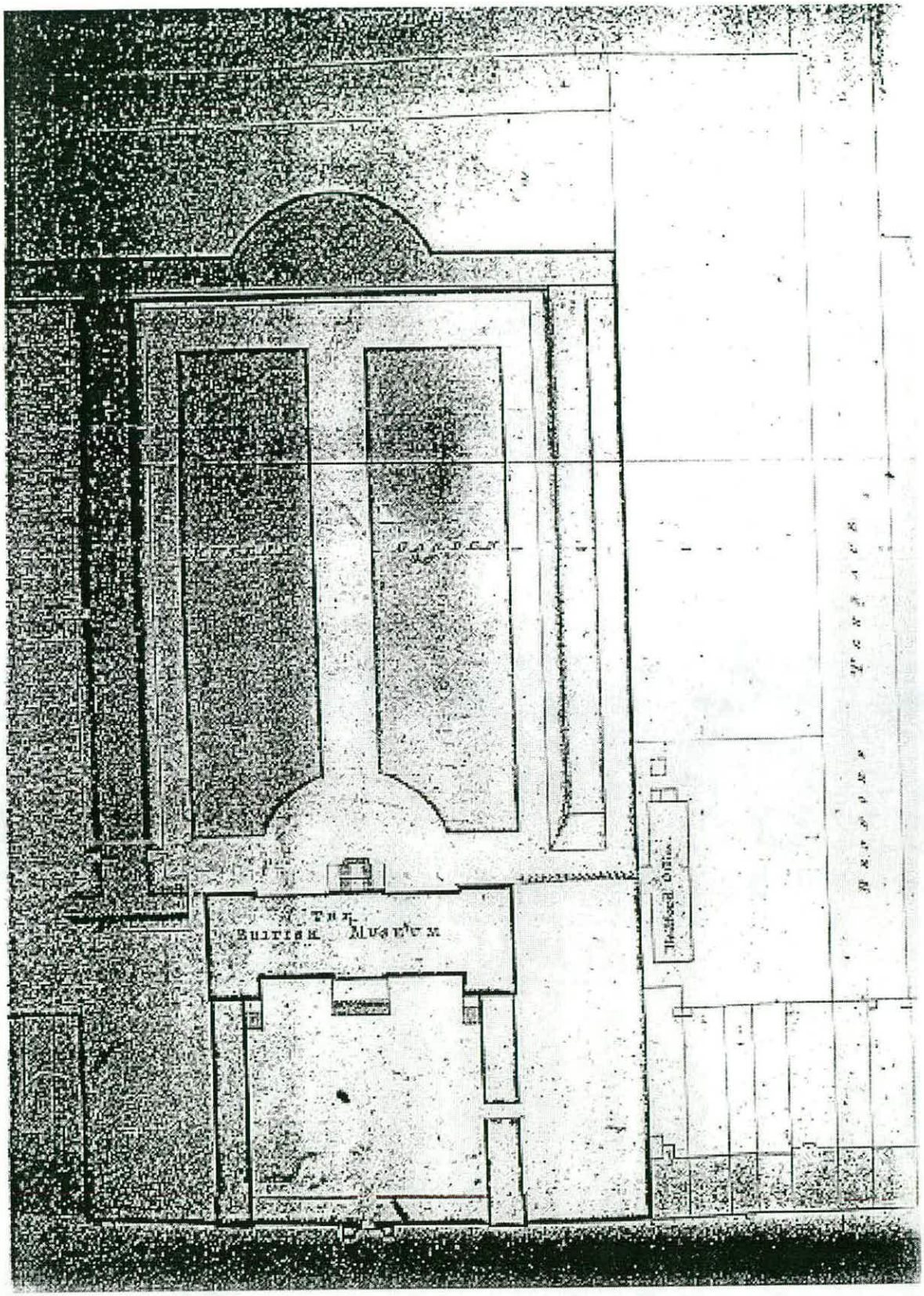
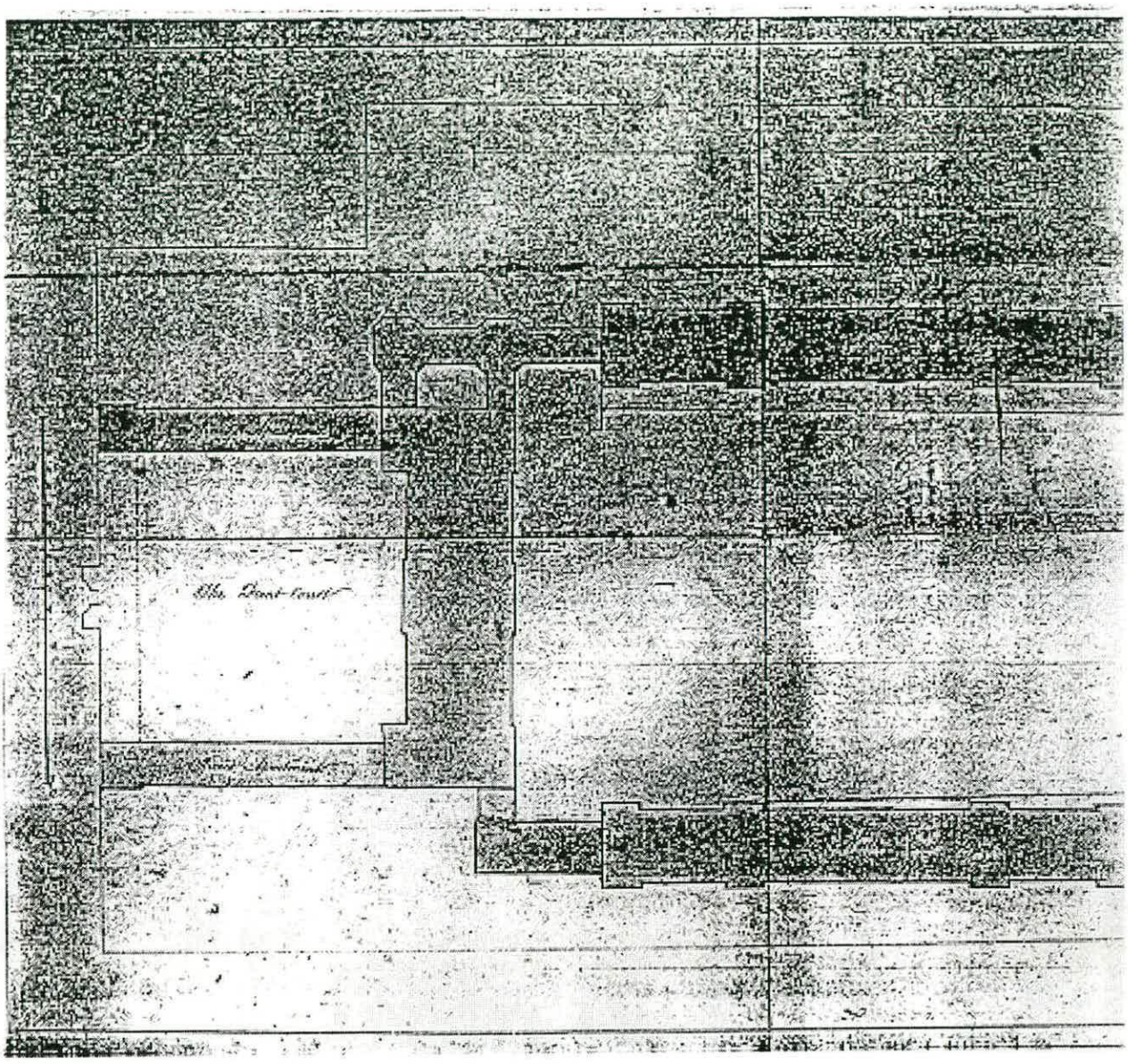


Figure 2 Plan of proposed extensions to north, c1810 (*Plans* vol. I, f.22).



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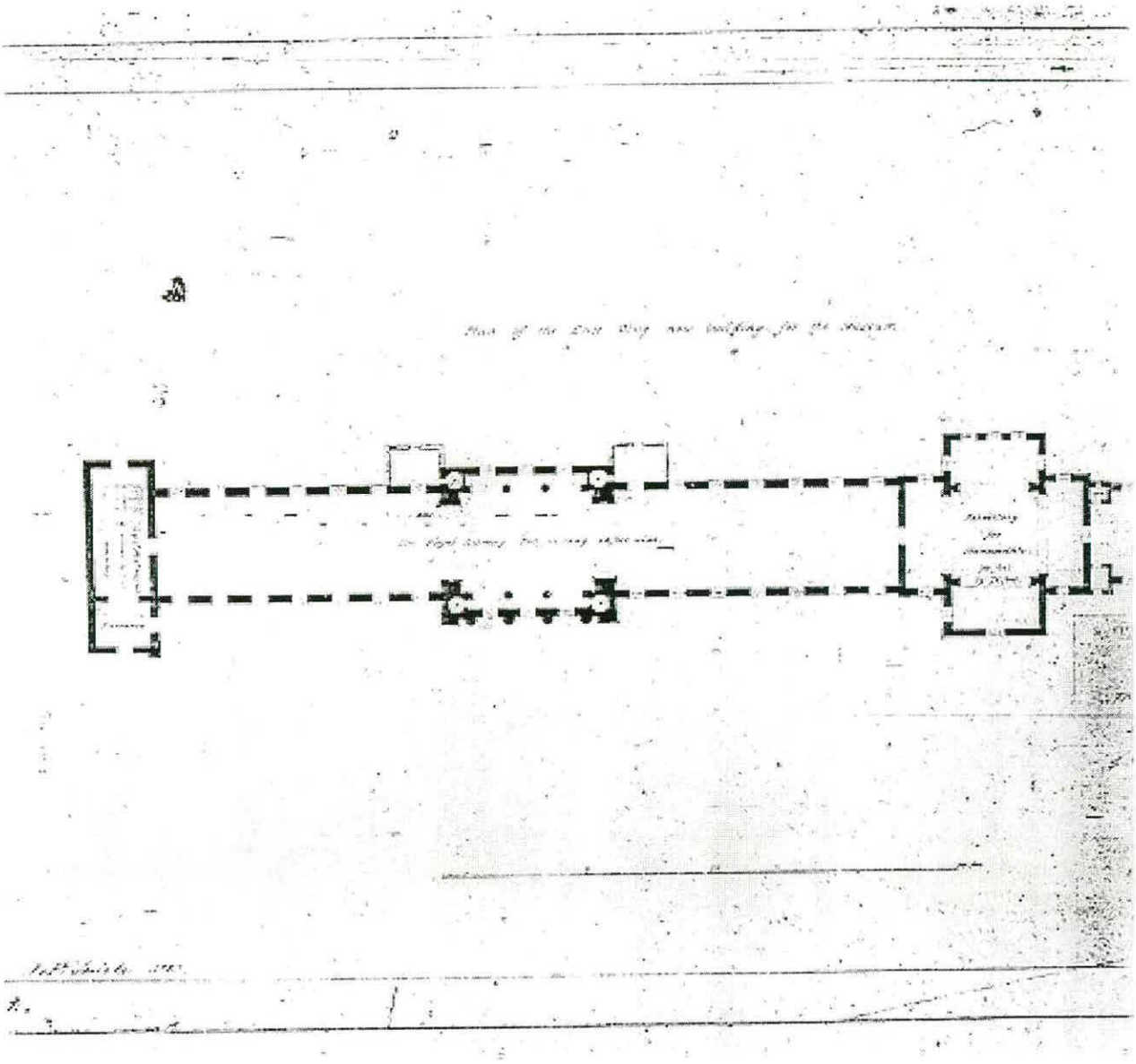

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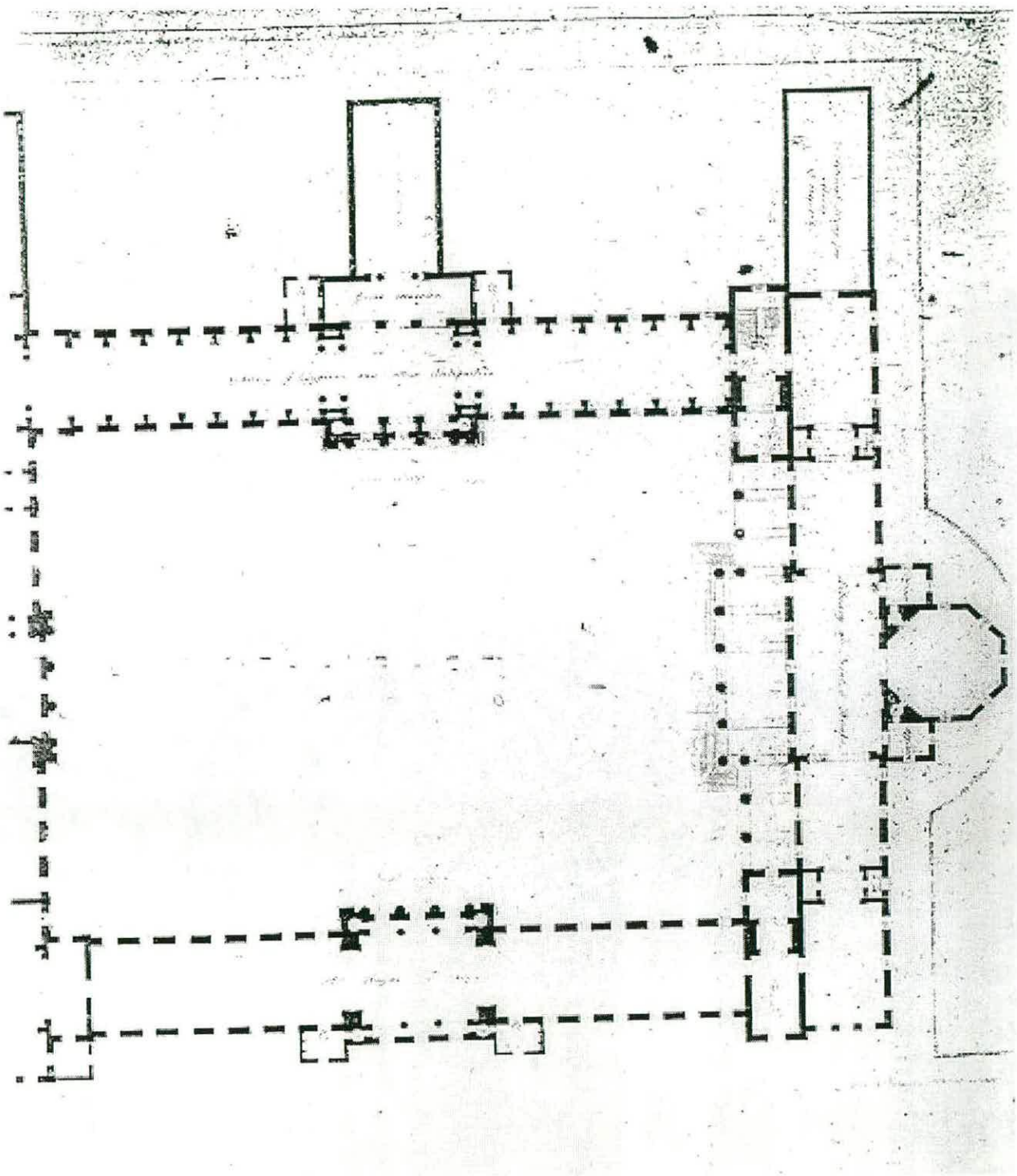

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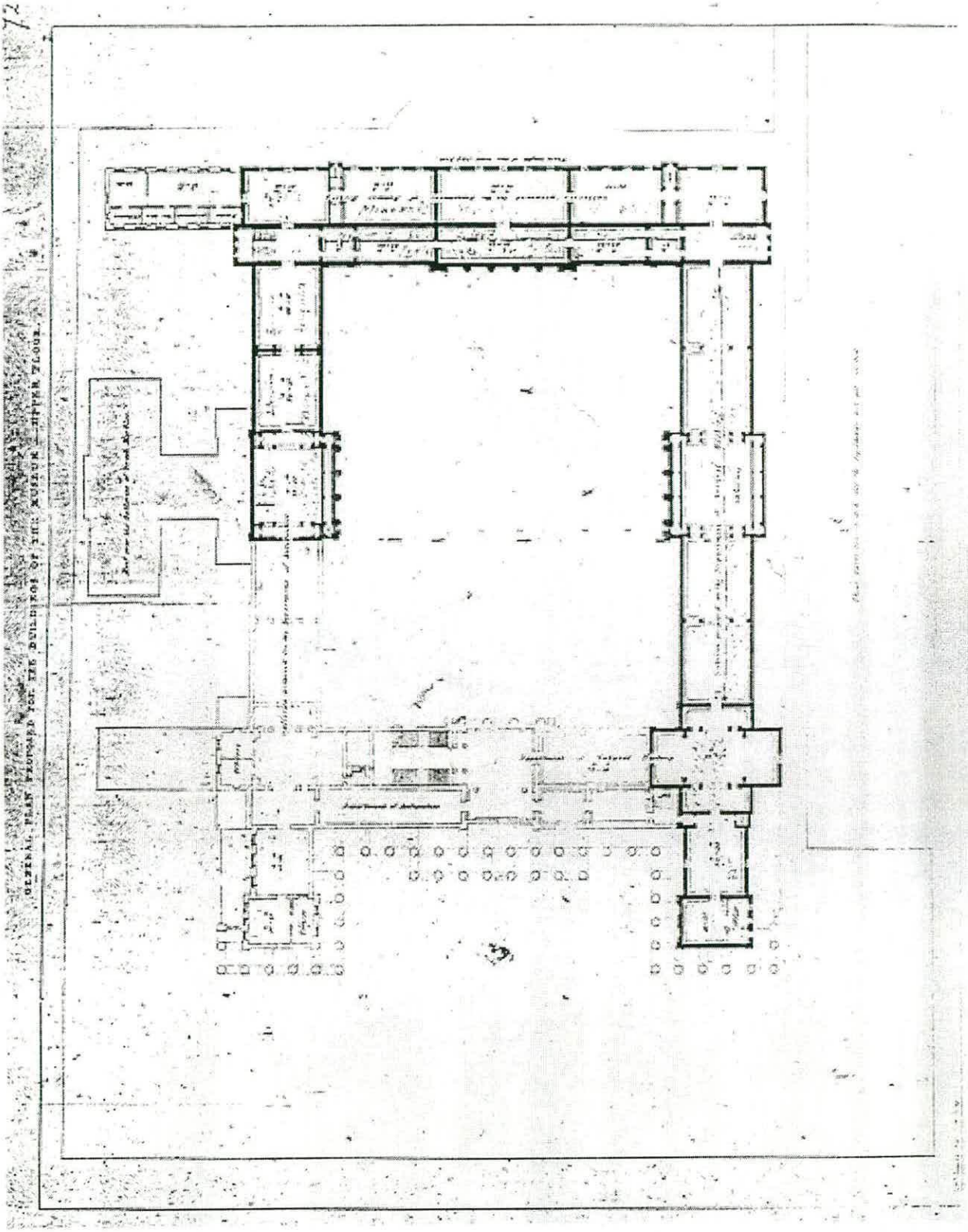


Figure 6 Robert Smirke, *British Museum New East Wing. Elevation of Part of the Principal Front towards the East*, 1824 (*Plans* vol. I, f.37).

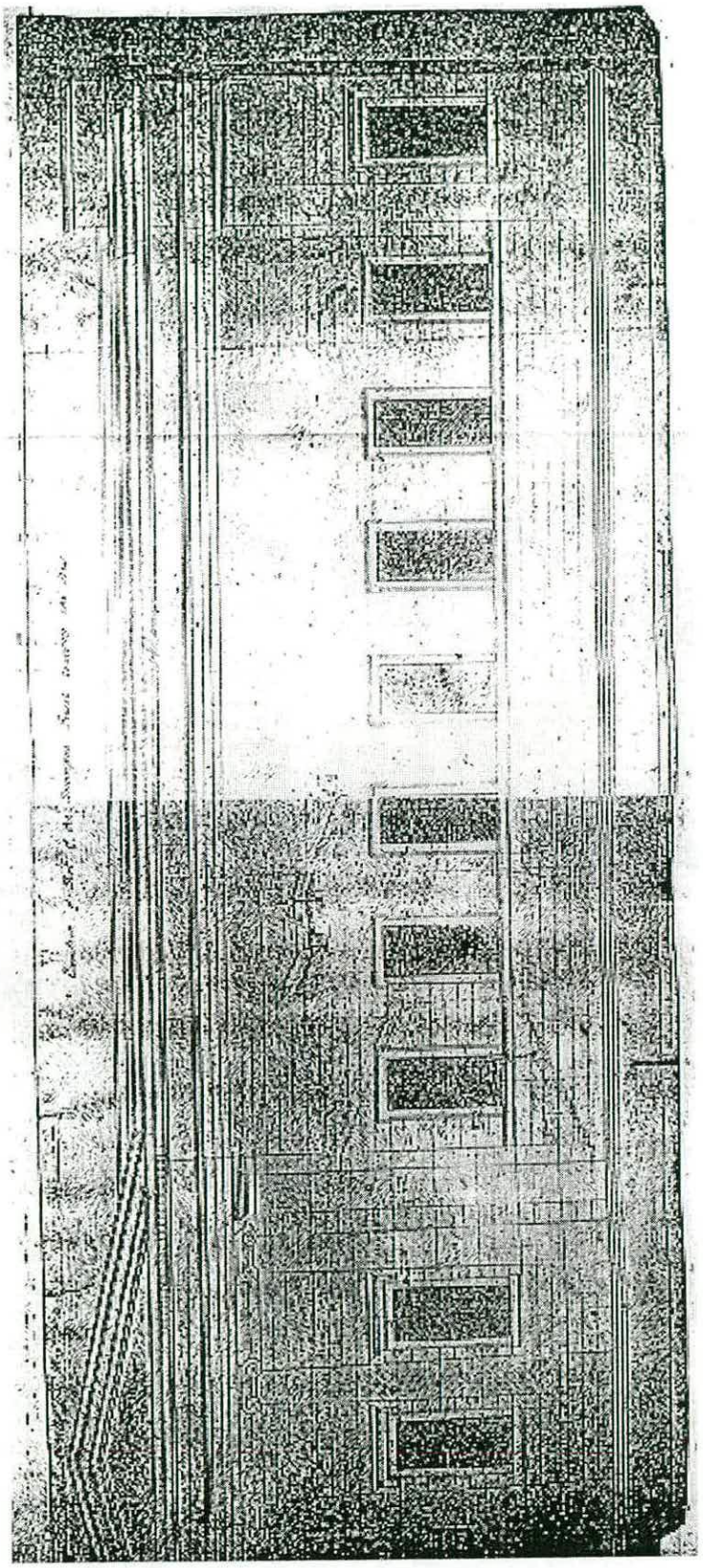


Figure 7 Robert Smirke, *British Museum North Wing. Elevation to South*, 1833 (*Plans* vol. I, f.64).

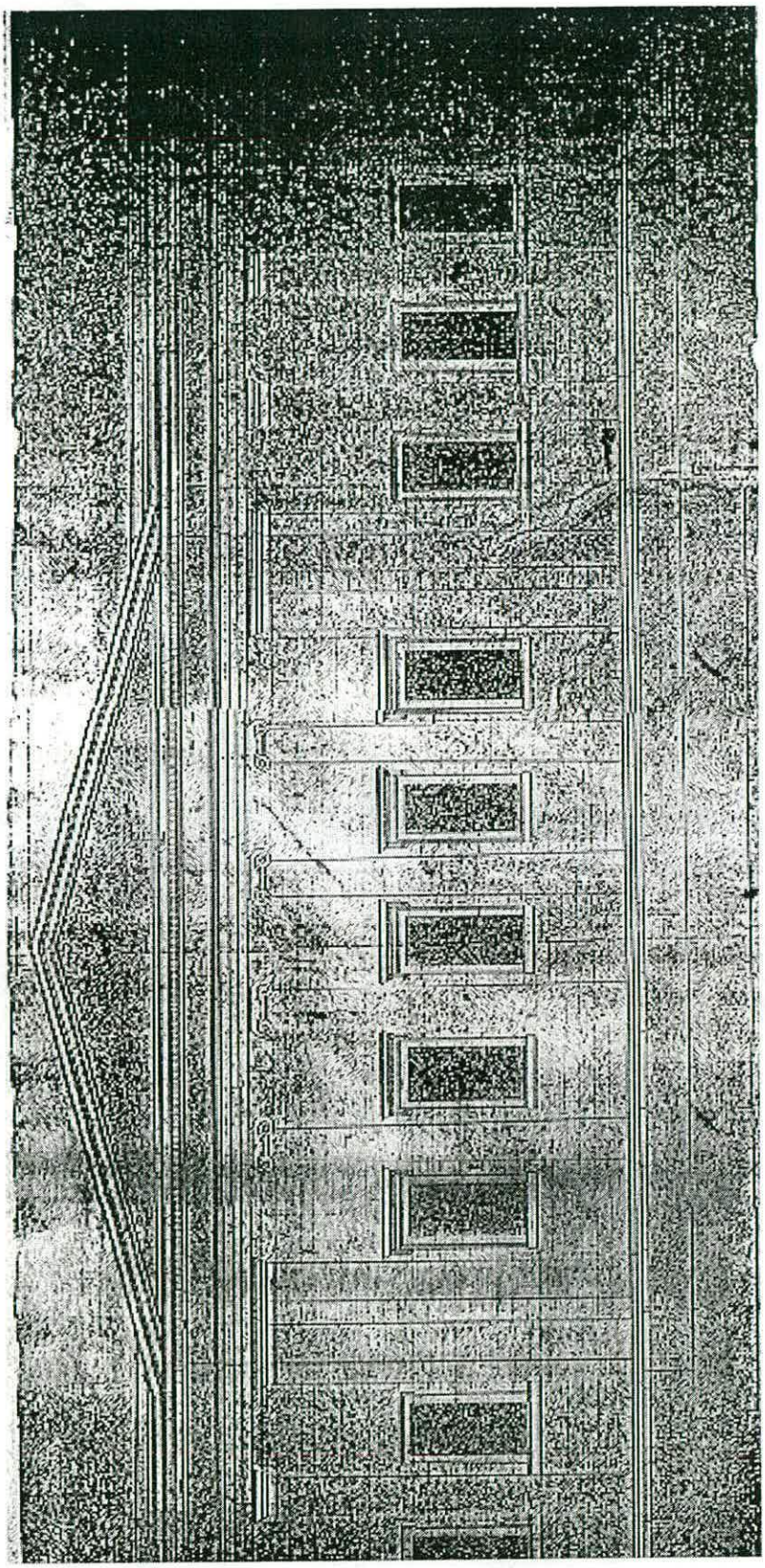
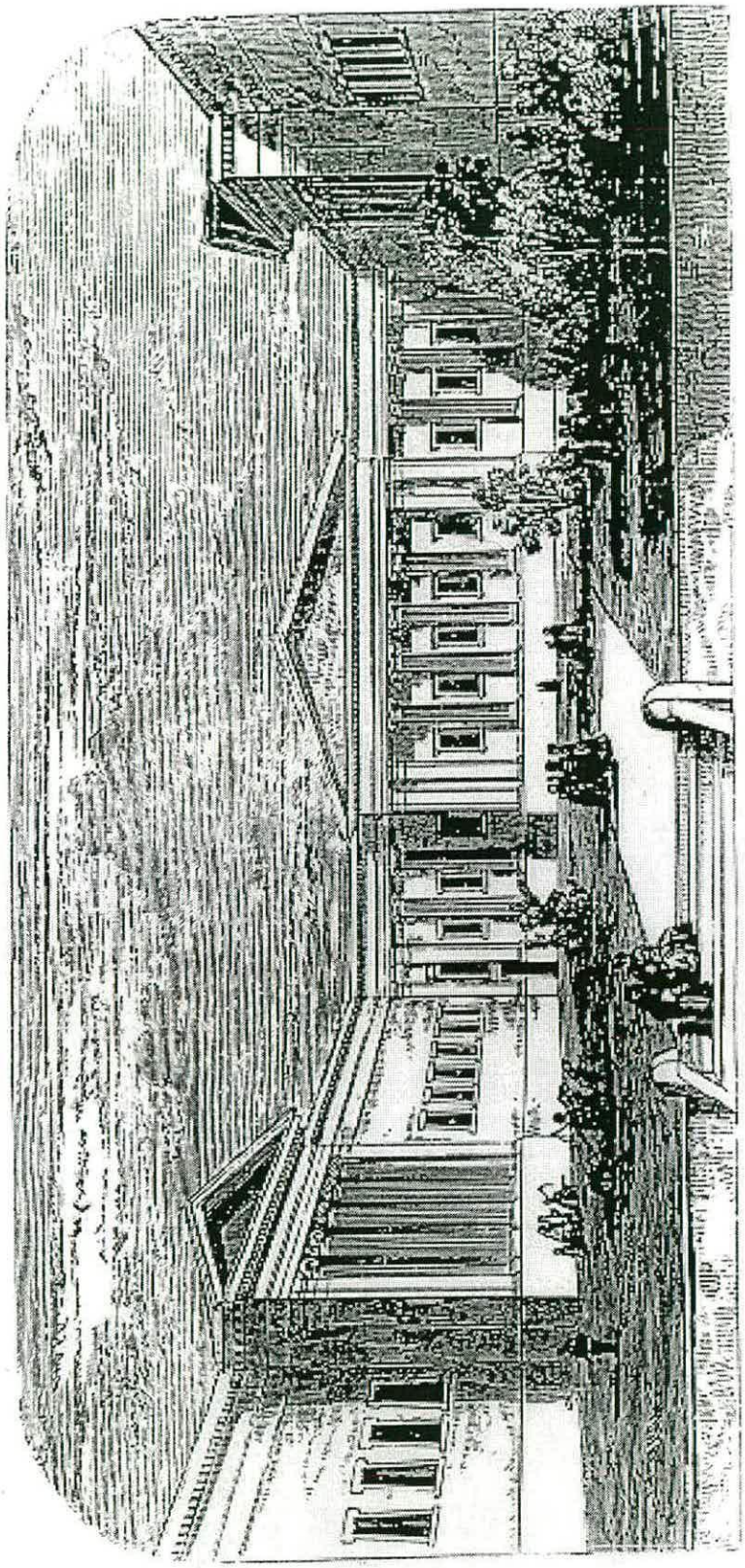


Figure 8 Anon. wood engraving of the British Museum quadrangle, to the north c.1851 (BM Archives, *Illustrations of the British Museum vol. II*, f.33).



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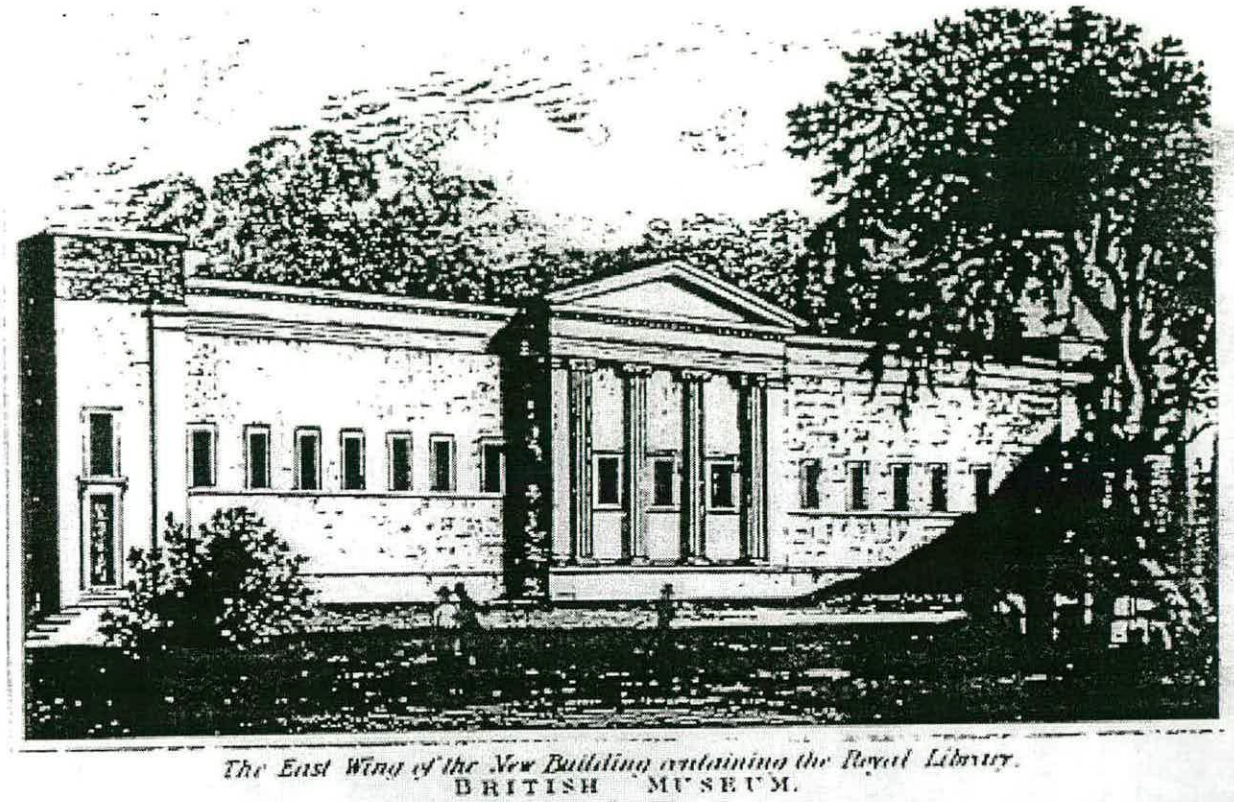
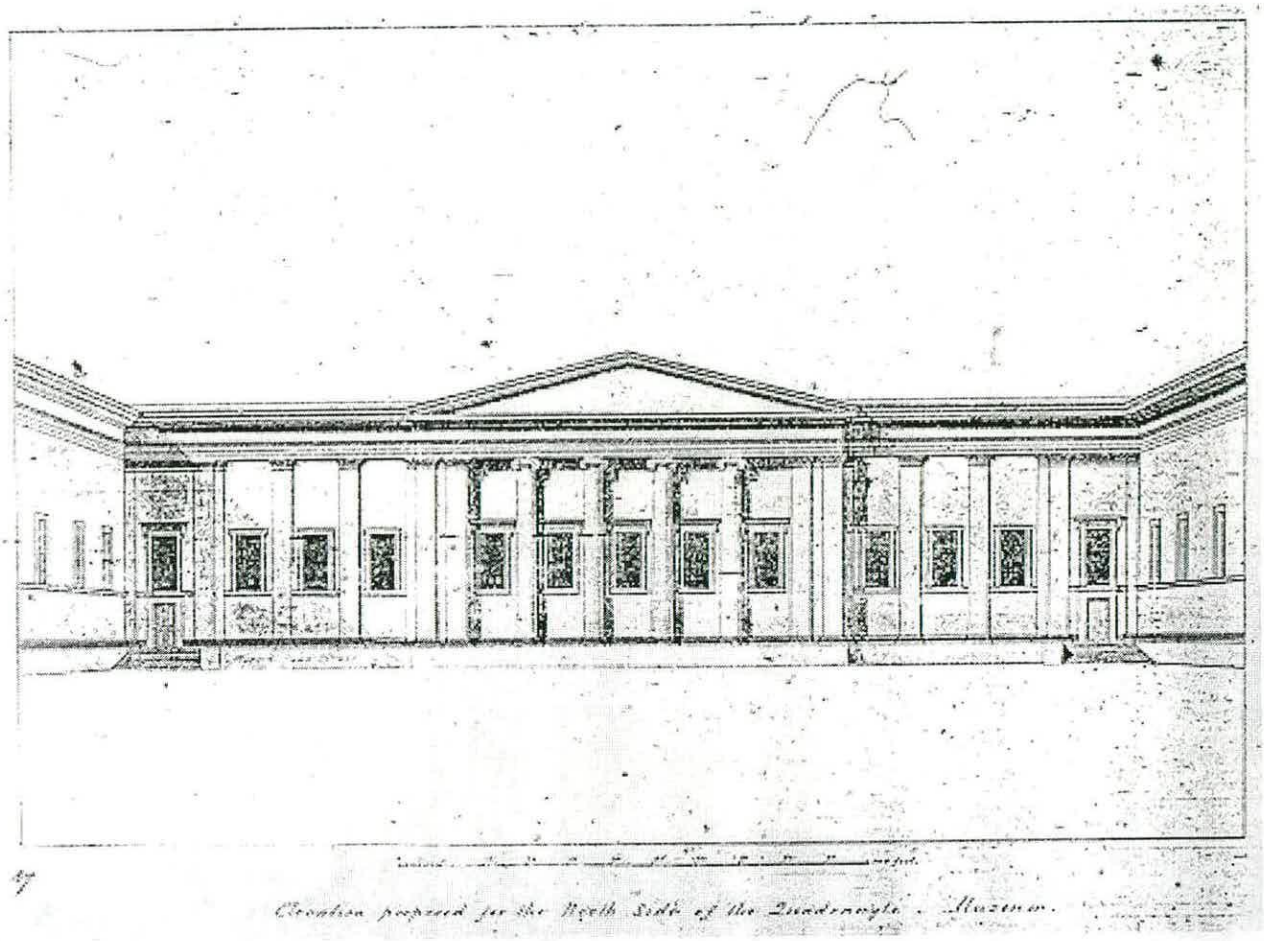


The East Wing of the New Building containing the Royal Library.
BRITISH MUSEUM.

Figure 10 Robert Smirke, *Elevation proposed for the North Side of the Quadrangle - Museum*, n.d. (*Plans* vol. II, f.111).



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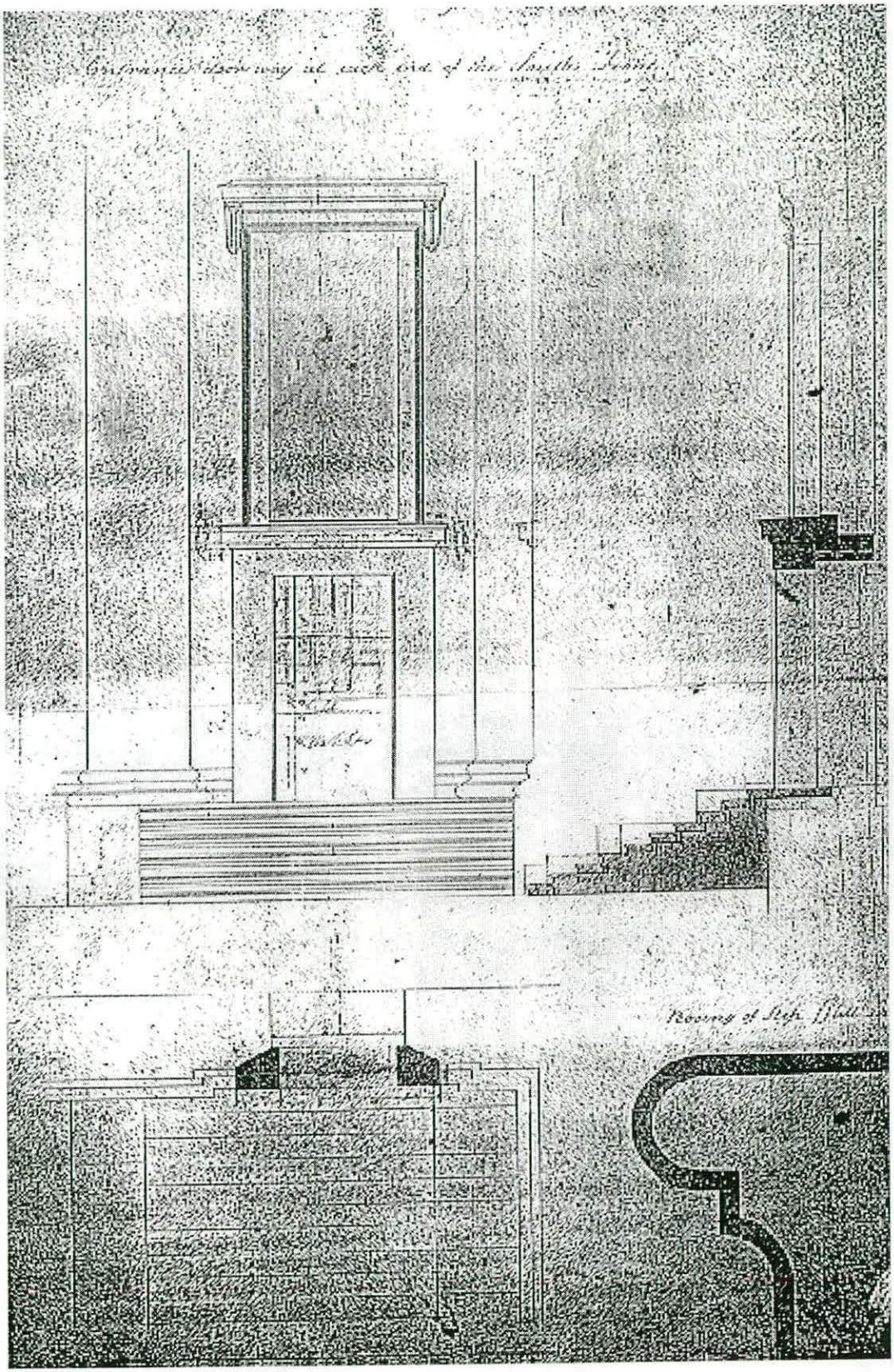


Figure 12 Robert Smirke, *British Museum North Wing. Elevation of the Steps etc at each end of the south front*, 1834 (PRO, WORKS 33/217/1).

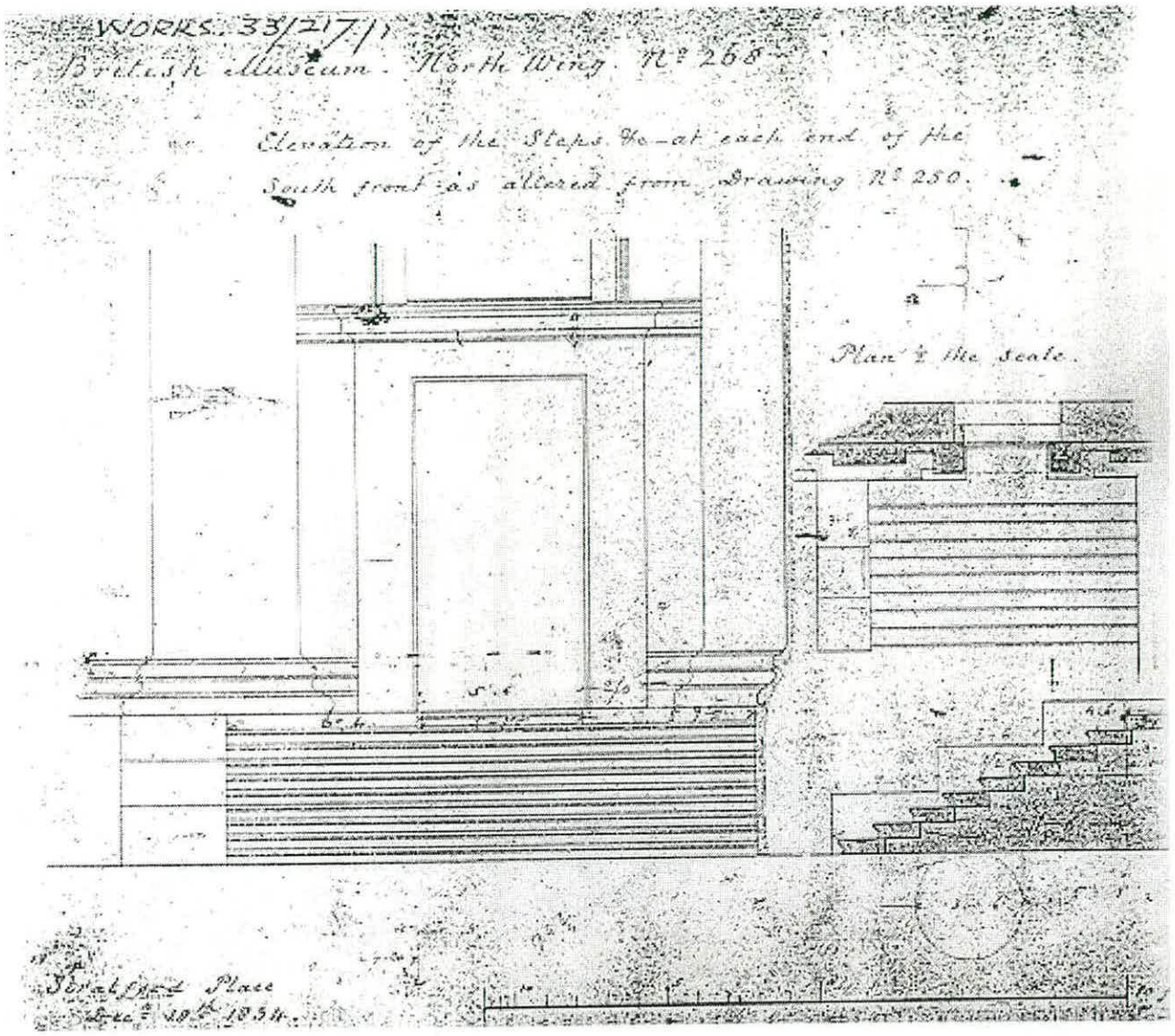
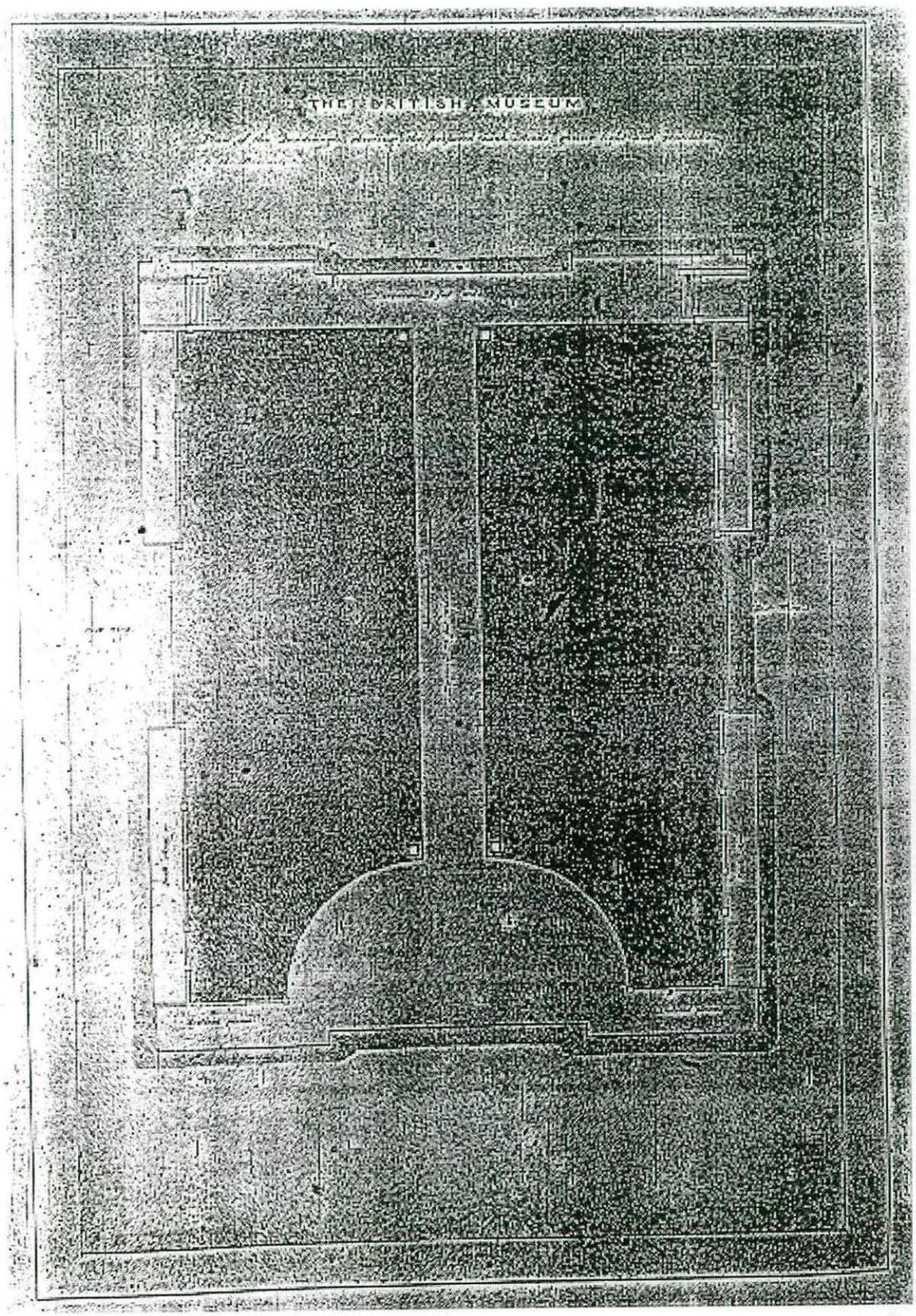


Figure 13 Sydney Smirke, *The British Museum. Plan of the Quadrangle showing the proposed sunk areas*, 1846 (location uncertain).



THE BRITISH MUSEUM: ORIGINAL ROOF COVERING

Sir Robert Smirke wrote on 11 November 1842 to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, requesting permission to extend a contract. The South Front buildings were 'now nearly raised to receive the roofs', and Smirke wished to proceed rapidly with their installation. He referred precisely to the chosen roof covering:

> I beg to inform you that all the new buildings have been covered with thick sheets of copper, and having reason to believe it is the best and most durable material that can be employed for the purpose, it is my wish to have the remaining portion of the building (now in progress) covered with the same.

He admitted that this was an unusual choice: 'is so rarely used that I do not know of any other tradesmen employed in such work except upon a very small scale', and he therefore wished Messrs. Kepp to carry out the work since they had executed the copper roof covering over the north-west part of the museum in 1839-40 at a cost of 2/7 per foot.

Incidentally, the only reference to slate being used in the construction of the south front of the museum is in a passing reference of Smirke's in a letter of 7 February 1843, which refers to its internal employment for fire resistance purposes.

Roger Bowdler
London Region

21 October 1993

Source: PRO, WORK 17-2/1, documents 216 and 222