

# The Home of Geography

51°30'05"N; 0°10'30"W

Royal  
Geographical  
Society  
with IBG

Advancing geography  
and geographical learning



● **A history of Lowther Lodge** by John Price Williams

**Presidents of the Society**  
Since moving to Lowther Lodge

- 1911 Lord Curzon
- 1914 Douglas Freshfield
- 1917 Colonel Sir Thomas Holdich
- 1919 Sir Francis Younghusband
- 1922 Lord Ronaldshay
- 1925 Dr David Hogarth
- 1927 Sir Charles Close
- 1930 Admiral Sir William Goodenough
- 1933 Sir Perry Cox
- 1936 Professor Henry Balfour
- 1938 Sir Philip Chetwode
- 1941 Sir George Clerk
- 1945 Lord Rennell
- 1948 Sir Harry Lindsay
- 1951 J.M. Wordie
- 1954 General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall
- 1958 Lord Nathan

- 1961 Sir Raymond Priestley
- 1963 Professor L. Dudley Stamp
- 1966 Sir Gilbert Laithwaite
- 1969 Rear Admiral Sir Edmund Irving
- 1971 Lord Shackleton
- 1974 Sir Duncan Cumming
- 1977 Lord Hunt
- 1980 Professor Michael Wise
- 1982 Sir Vivian Fuchs
- 1984 Sir George Bishop
- 1987 Lord Chorley
- 1990 Sir Crispin Tickell
- 1993 Lord Jellicoe
- 1997 Lord Selborne
- 2000 Professor Sir Ron Cooke
- 2003 Sir Neil Cossons
- 2006 Professor Sir Gordon Conway

# The home of geography



"I love this building. It is truly the home of geography."  
**Michael Palin**  
President, 2009-2012

Lowther Lodge has been the headquarters of the Society for very nearly a century.

It's one of the finest Victorian buildings in London, an iconic Grade II\* listed building in a harmonious melange of three different eras – the grand 1874 house looking out serenely over Hyde Park and the Albert Memorial; the austere 1930s extension on the corner of Kensington Gore; and the exuberant, award-winning glass pavilion of 2004 fronting Exhibition Road, which has made the Society open and accessible.

There are a lot of things the building is – and some it is not.

It has huge archives of maps, artefacts and publications, but it is not a museum and does not house an academic institution.

It is the home to the largest and most active scholarly geographical society in the world, supporting research, education, expeditions and fieldwork, policy and promoting public engagement.

The Society's House, as it's often called, welcomes some 150,000 people a year to events and activities – and we are finding new audiences all the time as we reach out to those with increasing curiosity about the world and the way it works.

The building has a fascinating history, which reflects the way the Society has developed and changed since moving into its home in 1913.

This is its story.

**Cover**  
From Exhibition Road it is possible to see all three phases of building; the 1874 Lowther Lodge, the 1930 extension, and the latest 2004 entrance pavilion and display space.

1830  
Founded



1870  
Savile Row



1911  
Lord Curzon



James Lowther

## Lord Curzon and the 'splendid vision'...

Like many learned societies, the Royal Geographical Society began life as a gentlemen's dining club and for 40 years of its life had no permanent home of its own. For the first 10 years, from its founding in 1830 as an institution to promote the advancement of geographical science, members met in the rooms of the Horticultural Society in Regent Street, London, then later at 3 Waterloo Place and 15 Whitehall Place.

In 1870, the Society finally found a more permanent home when it moved to 1 Savile Row, off Piccadilly, to a building that was already more than 100 years old. It was cramped and, some complained, rather squalid. Now in better shape, it is

occupied by the tailors Gieves and Hawkes.

This was the era when the Society was preoccupied with colonial exploration in Africa, the Indian subcontinent and central Asia. But at home the besetting problem, which lasted for decades, was the lack of a large enough lecture theatre to accommodate the growing interest in geography.

There were premises at Burlington Gardens, borrowed from the Civil Service Commission, but they were too small. Many other venues were used, but none became a permanent home.

Various presidents urged action to remedy this problem and the lack of space in Savile Row and finally, in 1909, a building fund was set up to find new headquarters and to construct an "Explorers' Hall". Various ineffective attempts were made to buy premises for conversion over the next few years, notably the Burlington Hotel and a house in St James'.

Then enter in 1911 a force of nature: George Nathaniel Curzon, former Viceroy of India, Tory MP, future Foreign Secretary and for whom the word imperious might well have been coined. Among his pronouncements, which had a great effect at the time was: "*Gentlemen never wear Brown in Town.*"

Lord Curzon of Kedleston was used to getting his own way, but he was more than a politician and administrator. He was a compulsive traveller, passionate about geography, and had been awarded the Society's gold medal for his exploration of the source of the Amu Darya (Oxus) river in the Pamir mountains of western Asia.

In the summer of 1911, he became president of the Society, closed the building fund, which had reached some £6,000, and set up another. As well as gifts from Fellows, large companies like P&O and Burmah Oil were persuaded to stump up. So were Indian princes, whom Curzon had known in his vice-regal role; some were made Life Fellows for their generosity. In eight months he added £31,000 to the fund.

Curzon reported his efforts to a special general meeting of the Society in January 1912 and added drily:

*"We have succeeded in persuading His Majesty's Government, who are, as a rule, more given to taking money from others than to giving it themselves, to raise their annual grant to us from £500 to £1,250."*

Curzon's friends in high places had agreed the increase on the understanding that it was used for a new building and that the public should have access to the map room. By the early summer he had found Lowther

1912  
£1,250 Government grant

1912  
Society buys Lowther Lodge for £100,000

Lodge, probably through his political links with James Lowther, Speaker of the House, who had put it up for sale after the death of his father. The auction was to be on July 30th, 1912, if the house were not sold earlier.

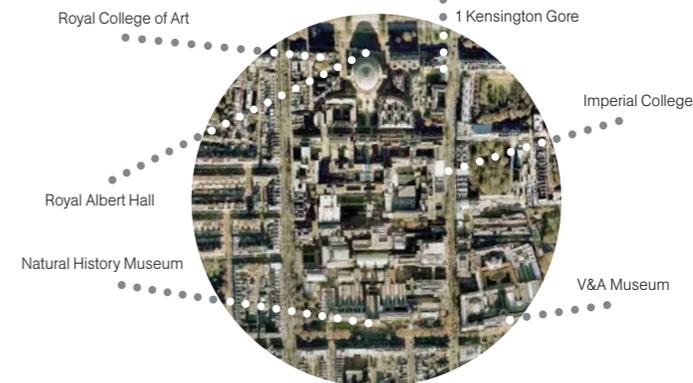
The apocryphal story is that Curzon bought Lowther Lodge in his usual high-handed manner without consulting anyone, but this is not the case.

By July 15th he was reporting to a special meeting of the Council that not only had he secured an option for a week to buy Lowther Lodge for £100,000, but 1, Savile Row had been sold for £38,000 and another property in Vigo Street had gone for £10,000.

*"Council authorized me to enter into negotiations...before it could be snapped up by another competitor,"* Curzon wrote in a letter to Fellows two weeks later.

He had originally insisted that the Society's new home should be in central London; however after seeing Lowther Lodge he was *"stung by this splendid vision, forgot his objection to the remoteness of Kensington, and pushed affairs through straight away."*

He threw himself into the project with huge enthusiasm, buying furniture at Christie's and even supervising the hanging of the pictures. His own portrait, by John Singer Sargent, commissioned by the Society in 1914, hangs above the marble fireplace in the Hall.



## Our place in Albertopolis

Our building stands in one of the most important cultural quarters in Europe: the 86 acres of Kensington which contain three great museums, the Royal Albert Hall, the Royal Colleges of Art and Music, Imperial College and nine other world-class institutions. Many are on land bought with profits from the Great Exhibition of 1851.

It was a hugely successful event in Hyde Park organised by Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, to celebrate British industrial progress and the expansion of empire.

The Royal Commissioners for the Exhibition of 1851 used part of the profits to buy land to establish this unique cultural site.

It became known, slightly mockingly, as Albertopolis because of the Prince's overwhelming interest in his project of 'education for the people'.

Prince Albert wanted all London's learned societies to move to his new cultural quarter and wrote to them

in 1852 offering them subsidised accommodation. The remoteness of Kensington was too much for all of them. The RGS replied that it *"...would not be compatible with the well-being of the Society."*

The 1851 Commissioners still own the freehold of much the estate though, uniquely, the Society is not on land owned by them because there was a building on the site before Lowther Lodge was constructed.

By 2012, Exhibition Road will be transformed into a public space fitting to a great cultural quarter by huge improvements in access and design.



This 1882 photograph of the hall shows that it is little changed today

## Life with the Lowthers

The Lowthers were a mediaeval knightly family and landed dynasty in Cumberland and Westmorland whose sons became the Earls of Lonsdale. They enjoyed great wealth and political power. The first Earl of Lonsdale was one of the richest men in 18th century England; William Lowther, who built our home, was the namesake of the second earl and the younger brother of the third.

The second earl, an avid art collector, died a bachelor in 1872, leaving his nephew William a large bequest.

It's thought that it was this which helped him to fund the purchase of the plot of more than two acres on which Lowther Lodge originally stood. Estimates at the time put the cost at £36,000. The average wage of an agricultural labourer on the family's estates then would have been just over £40 a year.

William Lowther was educated at Cambridge and entered the diplomatic



William and Alice Lowther's initials, surmounted by a sunflower, above the entrance in Kensington Gore. The sunflower was often used as a symbol by the late Victorian arts and crafts movement of which Alice was a fervent admirer.

service in 1841, serving in Italy, Russia, Germany and finally Argentina.

After his last diplomatic posting, he became Conservative MP for Westmorland, although he lived in style in Mount Street, Mayfair with his wife Alice.

However, social ambition dictated an even grander venue to entertain – and what more fitting than a huge house named after oneself with a dining table which could seat 24?

Alice, the daughter of Lord Wensleydale and mother of seven, was a society hostess passionately interested in painting and the burgeoning arts and crafts movement. She had a great influence in the design of Lowther Lodge – not forgetting to include a granny flat in the new building for her aged mother, Lady Wensleydale.

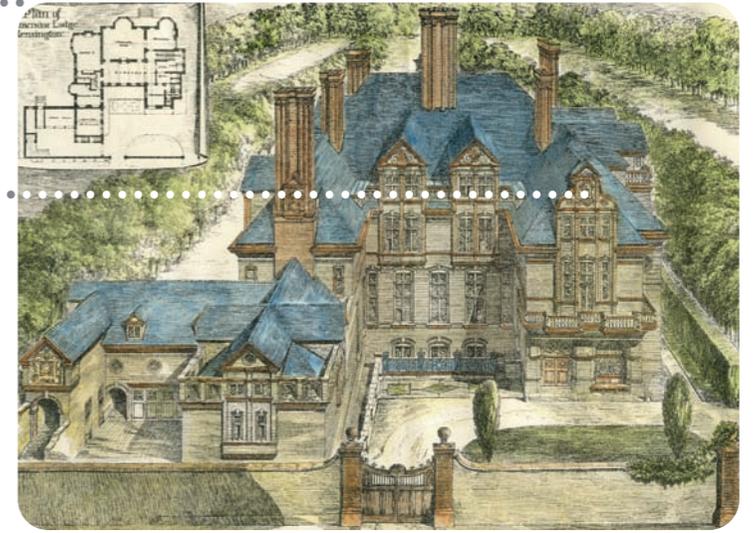
The Lowthers were not in residence

for the whole year. In the summer, they stayed at the family seat, Lowther Castle in the Lake District, and then moved on to France.

Then, in 1883 eight years after moving in, the Lowthers bought a country house to add to their property portfolio – High House at Campsea Ashe, Wickham Market, Suffolk.

Alice died in 1908 – William four years later at the age of 90. Both are buried at St John the Baptist church in Campsea Ashe, as is Alice's father Lord Wensleydale.

There are a dozen Lowthers in the churchyard and the building's east window is a memorial to the Lowther family; on its right-hand side are St Hilda, who represents Yorkshire where Alice Lowther was born, St Edmund for Suffolk, and St Oswald for Cumberland – the home of Lowther Castle, the family seat.



A few months after William's death in 1912, Lowther Lodge was put up for sale by his eldest son James, also elected as Tory MP for Westmorland, and at the time Speaker of the House of Commons. It was then that the Society bought it.

The house at Campsea Ashe was demolished sometime in the 1950s. Lowther Castle in the Lake District, of which Wordsworth wrote:  
*Lowther! in thy majestic Pile are seen  
Cathedral pomp and grace, in apt accord*  
is now just a shell, having been dismantled in 1957.

It is left to Lowther Lodge, the Society's House, to carry on the family name, though the "*Country House in Town, Unique in all London*" as the estate agents put it, has been put to a use inconceivable to its first owners.

What was the preserve of one rich family is now an institution rich in learning and inspiration, open to all.

- 1-2 St. James St London
- Craggside Rothbury, Northumberland
- Lowther Lodge Kensington Gore, London
- 6 Ellerdale Road Hampstead, London
- Bedford Park London
- Albert Hall Mansions Kensington Gore, London
- Savoy Theatre London
- New Scotland Yard Embankment, London
- Albion House James Street, Liverpool
- Swanscombe Church Kent
- Bradford City Hall
- Piccadilly Hotel Piccadilly Circus, London



## The master architect

The brilliant architect Norman Shaw led a revolution in English domestic architecture in the late 19th century. He is often called the father of the urban Queen Anne style, in which Lowther Lodge is built – though many have pointed out that Queen Anne is actually a blend of many different elements of 17th and 18th century English and Dutch domestic architecture.

Shaw distanced himself from Victorian styles of domestic architecture and developed new forms derived from 17<sup>th</sup> century half-timbered buildings he had sketched in the Weald of Kent and Sussex. He built country houses for businessmen and industrialists in this rural idiom, though for a London town house, the style was thought too bucolic.

So for Lowther Lodge, one of his most important buildings, he combined some of these 17<sup>th</sup> century motifs with English rubbed red brick and used modern materials and construction methods to display monumental chimneys, steep roofs, Dutch gables and long, leaded windows.

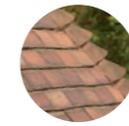
Curiously, after taking such care with the details of the building, a few years later he designed in the same Queen Anne style the massive adjacent block of Albert Hall Mansions (1879-86) which, as the V&A points out on its website, somewhat overwhelms Lowther Lodge.

He also designed both large and small public buildings – from Kentish Town police station in north London to New Scotland Yard on the Victoria Embankment, home of the Metropolitan Police from 1889 to 1966.

Shaw's last major works were Vauxhall Bridge and the Piccadilly Hotel in London. He died at the age of 81 in 1912 – four months after the Society bought one of his finest creations.



Narrow 2ins red brick



Staffordshire roof tiles



Leaded windows



Marble chimney-pieces

## Only the best materials

Norman Shaw's first designs for Lowther Lodge were more baronial than the eventual Queen Anne style: an 1872 plan shows a gate, archway and tower and a long broad flight of stairs. These were abandoned by the following year as the Lowthers refined the designs, changing the shape of rooms and adding tall window bays to bring more light into the house.

The building contract was signed in 1873 with the London firm of W H Lascelles, with whom Shaw had worked before. His insistence on constructing the house with narrow 2ins red brick meant that specialised work had to be carried out to cut, rub and lay them when they arrived from Ipswich; the tiles on the huge roof came from Staffordshire.

The best materials were used, both inside and out. Lynne Walker, who has written an architectural history of the house, points out that the existing woodwork, glazed and leaded windows, marble chimney-pieces and plasterwork ceilings and friezes are among the finest surviving Queen Anne interiors. Their integrity has been preserved mainly by default, as the Society had little money over the years to carry out major alterations.

Still surviving are the ceramic tiles in the hall fireplace painted by Alice Lowther and bearing the imaginative coats of arms of the Lonsdale family and its branches. The walnut ceiling above conceals iron beams.

The oak staircase, rising past the minstrels' gallery, led to the family bedrooms; the nurseries for the Lowther children were on the floor above.

Mrs Lowther liked to fill the house with flowers during her dinner parties and the room which is now next to the kitchen was her flower room.



**Garden**  
Lawn for strolling

**Basement**  
Storage

**Ground floor**  
Council room, map store, exhibition room, and offices

**First floor**  
Library, writing, smoking and tea rooms

## Moving in

The terms of the sale of Savile Row meant that the Society had to move out of central London before Lowther Lodge could be converted into the new headquarters. So everything was put into storage and business was run for five months from a large rented house at 5 Cromwell Gardens, South Kensington, now the site of the Ismaili Centre.

Lowther Lodge was handed over to the Society in November 1912. William Lowther had kept it in good condition, but five months of work by the London firm of Thompson and Walford at a cost of some £4,000 was needed in the interior, to transform it from a family home to the headquarters of a learned society.

One of the major changes was the demolition of the brick wall at the front of the house facing Kensington Gardens and its replacement by iron railings.

Electricity was installed and the heating improved. Inside the entrance, the porter's box was built of Spanish mahogany. The nearby lift, thought to be the first in a private house in London, was augmented by a book lift at the other end of the hall.

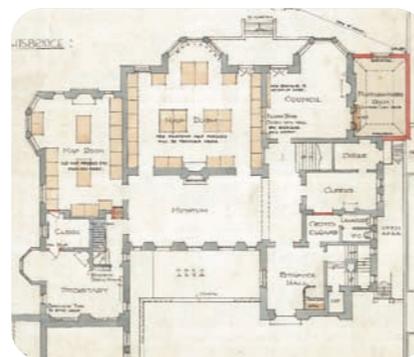
The ground floor of the 1874 house accommodated the Council room, a map store, a display space, photographic exhibition room and offices.

On the first floor were the library, writing, smoking and tea rooms.

A contributor to the Geographical Journal mused: *"It would have shocked some of the conservative members of past Councils if anyone had proposed to include in the Society's House a smoking room, a tea room or a lawn where the lady Fellows may stroll on sunny afternoons."*

The new House was opened to Fellows on April 14th, 1913.

1880 The railings in the plans (below) were designed personally by Lord Curzon. He seems to have disliked the wall fronting Kensington Gore which was part of the original build (right). It was knocked down in 1913 when the Society moved in.



## Settling in 1913-1930

After the Society moved into Lowther Lodge, its Edwardian calm was disturbed only by the possibility of an attack by militant suffragettes. A Council minute of March 1914 is headed: *“Precautions against damage by women”*. Then, in August 1914, war broke out and the Society’s consolidation plans, including the new lecture theatre, were postponed indefinitely. During the 1920s, although membership grew initially, there was growing discontent among the younger Fellows who found it difficult to have their papers published by the Society. This led eventually to the formation of the Institute of British Geographers – now happily reunited within the Society since 1995.



The year after the House was opened there was a reception in the huge **Garden**, which extended almost down to Prince Consort Road. *“The walks surrounding the lawn were roofed with canvas and illuminated; the band of the Royal Artillery played on the lawn and refreshments were served in the large marquee on the terrace”*. The major part of it was not sold off until 1927.



The **Main Hall** needed little change when the Society moved in and it became very useful for exhibitions. The Lowthers had used it as a reception area and occasionally a ballroom, with musicians playing in the gallery above. Today it is invaluable for use for all manner of functions.



The **Reading Room** on the first floor had been the sitting room of Alice Lowther’s mother Lady Wensleydale, who had her own bedroom adjoining it. Today it is the Lowther Room, used for meetings and with books from the collections lining its walls.



The **Map Room**, overlooking the garden and now the Education Centre, had been the family’s drawing room. The map store itself was beneath the room in the vaulted servants’ quarters of the basement, which were notable for maintaining a reasonably constant temperature.



This is now the Tea Room on the ground floor, when it was being used as the **Council Room**. It was originally the boudoir of Alice Lowther, unusual in that it was not attached to her bedroom on the first floor, probably because of the need to accommodate her mother on that floor. Alice loved to paint in watercolours in the garden, to which the room had its own private entrance.

1914  
At disposal of  
army and navy

1914  
Tactical maps

1914  
Seven staff enlist

1918  
Admiralty  
Intelligence division

1939  
Buildings protected

1939  
Fireproof record room

1939  
Extra water storage

1940  
Artifacts stored  
in tanks

1940  
Staff on nightwatch

1944  
Bomb damage

1945  
Bomb damage  
repaired

## War and the Society

On the day before the outbreak of the first world war, the whole of Lowther Lodge was put at the disposal of the geographical section of the Army general staff and a division of the Admiralty war staff.

They took over the library, reading room, writing room and several rooms on the second floor.

Within two or three days, the Society's draughtsmen had produced skeleton maps of the western front and went on to produce indexes of place names for the tactical maps of Belgium and northern France to be issued to the British expeditionary force.

Seven of the Society's staff had enlisted and volunteers helped with the task.

The skeleton maps of 1:500K gave rise to a 1:1M version which led to the draughtsmen taking on the European and Near Eastern sheets of a map of the world. Towards the end of the war, a large part of the first floor was taken up by the Admiralty intelligence division.

Approximate schedule of damage to R.G.S. House by bomb which fell on southern border of Kensington Gardens opposite Albert Hall. 15 October 1940 at 01.20.

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**ROOF.** Extensive displacement of tiles over offices. Several holes and small patches of damage elsewhere.

**LEADED WINDOWS ON NORTH FRONT.**

Sections	Out or badly bulged.	Minor damage.	Whole.
Museum	9	11	12
Front Hall	3	4	1
Central Passage	1	0	0
Smoking Room	0	1	0
Tea Room	0	4	8
Offices and Passage	0	6	4
Andrews Room	1 Skylight - one pane.	2	1
Drawing Office	0	1	21

By the time of the second world war, there was a direct threat to Lowther Lodge from German bombing.

In 1939, the windows of the map store were protected by iron tanks filled with sand. More water cisterns were put in the attics. A fireproof room was built in the basement to hold records and there was a fireproof door between the original building and the 1930 extension.

Eighteen boxes of the most valuable books and atlases were sent to bank

strong rooms in the west of England.

The secretary or librarian usually stayed in the house on fire watch overnight with a couple of the staff and for most of the war the Society escaped major damage, but then in 1944, a heavy bomb badly damaged roofs, doors, windows and ceilings; the external brickwork was deeply scarred.

By 1945 most of the repairs had been done with a grant from the War Damage Commission.

## Fellows and women

The Society made a robust start with 460 men signing up in 1830, but growth was slow. By the time it moved to 3 Waterloo Place nine years later, numbers had grown to 697. Only 100 more were added in the next 15 years when the Society moved to Whitehall Place.

But by the time Savile Row was occupied in 1871, the interest in exploration had pushed numbers up to 2,300.

By 1912, just before the Society moved to Kensington, the number had doubled to nearly 5,000.

They were, of course, all men – apart from a handful of women who had been allowed in and who, through no fault of their own, had caused a crisis in the Society's affairs.

The admittance of women was to cause explosive rows and a schism within the Society in the late 19th century. The Council had discussed the matter for eight months in 1887, before quietly dropping the matter due to the



Isabella Bird  
Early member of RSGS



Kate Marsden  
Early RGS Fellow



May French Sheldon  
Early RGS Fellow

outrage caused by the suggestion.

However since its inception in 1884, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society had allowed not only women members but women Fellows, and the issue was forced into the open again when the RGS granted access to members of all British geographical societies.

So women like the intrepid Asiatic explorer Miss Isabella Bird had rights in the RGS only because she belonged to the Scottish Society. The absurdity was overcome temporarily when the Council voted in July 1892 to elect women Fellows and 15 were admitted.

But a clique of die-hards, mainly army and navy officers – including several explorers – refused to accept the decision, organised protest meetings and agitated in the press for it to be overturned. Admiral Halliday Cave declared: "I should be very sorry to see this ancient Society governed by ladies".

Curzon (who was to perform a *volte face* many years later), thundered in a letter to the Times:

*"We contest in toto, the general capability of women to contribute to scientific geographical knowledge. Their sex and training render them equally unfitted for exploration, and the genus of professional female globe-trotters with which America has lately familiarized us is one of the horrors of the latter end of the 19th century."*

Tempers worsened, QCs were consulted on both sides and the dissidents forced a special general meeting at which Council's decision was overturned by 147 votes to 105. This led to an even more absurd position, that the women Fellows – now 22 – could remain, but no more could be elected.

The Council's next step was to organise a postcard referendum among Fellows – 1,165 voted in favour of admitting women and 465 against. There was yet another special general meeting; the dissidents marshalled their forces well and again the cause was lost.

It was to be another two decades until the matter was resolved by a referendum.

On January 15th 1913, a few weeks before the move into the new building, the results were published – 2,082 had voted in favour and 674 against.

Although public opinion – and the extra subscriptions that women could bring to the Society – had softened Curzon's opposition, he was no supporter of women's rights.

He was a founder and joint president of the Anti-Suffrage League, which claimed that the vast majority of women in Britain were not interested in gaining the parliamentary vote.

Today, the Society has 15,300 Fellows and members. A third of them are women, though among Young Geographers, the balance is equal.



## Growing membership, growing collections

The war had brought a halt to any plans for expansion and the much-needed lecture hall. Then in 1919 the Government announced that the Burlington Gardens Civil Service Theatre, which had been used for many years, would no longer be available as it was being turned into an examination hall. The Society had to find alternative lecture premises.

Lectures moved to the Aeolian Hall in New Bond Street, owned by the Orchestrelle Company of New York, inventors of the pianola, which had a large concert hall that had formerly been an art gallery.

This was even less satisfactory than Burlington Gardens, whose iron-backed benches had been a source of complaint for some years.

The Aeolian Hall, noted a memorandum to the Council, gave “no opportunity for modest refreshment, the pleasant discussion of the exhibition of photographs and drawings that made the old meetings at Burlington Gardens into a social function”.

Even before the war, in February 1914, Lord Curzon had said there was a need for a 1,200 seat lecture theatre of the Society’s own, though the size of the hall was an aspiration that was toned down considerably over the years.

Though the war had brought activity to a virtual standstill, in the decade to 1930 pressure on facilities became intense.

It was not just a new lecture hall that was needed, better facilities for Fellows and proper storage areas for the collections were also necessary.

The President had issued a memorandum in 1920 suggesting that as men and women had served all over the world in the war, they would become

interested in geography and his words seem to have been borne out.

There had been a fall in the number of Fellows during and after the 1914-18 war to below 5,000, but the decade from 1920 saw a sharp rise, with 1,000 being added in six years.

Then there was the library. In 1893 there had been 50,000 books; by the end of the 1920s there were 70,000.

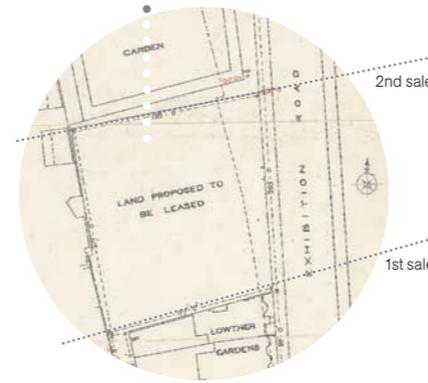
Other collections had grown considerably; there were for instance: 184,000 maps, 1,700 atlases, 75,000 images and 26,000 lantern slides.

In addition, there was an obligation to maintain the map room for public as well as private use.

This was as a result of a Government grant to provide facilities for the public to view maps – first given at the time of the Crimean war and ended only in 1998.

But in the early 1920s, there was far from enough money to undertake major projects and the situation was not helped when the accounts clerk absconded with £780 in 1923. (He was sentenced to a year’s hard labour.)

Just as an appeal fund had been launched to move the Society into Lowther Lodge, another was needed to secure the new extension. By 1928, the President’s appeal had reached £20,000 – all that was needed now was for a large part of the garden to be sold off.



## A ‘drop in the bucket’

The huge garden of Lowther Lodge was a major asset. It originally ran for more than 450ft down Exhibition Road and was some 200ft at its widest. William Lowther himself had sold off the bottom section on the corner of Prince Consort Road to finance the construction of his home. The buildings on the site now house the Jamaican High Commission.

Lord Curzon had declared before WWI that the rest of the well-wooded private garden would not be difficult to sell: “We should thus be in a position to secure our own hall for nothing and solve the problem which has baffled us for half a century”. It proved to be much more difficult that he would have imagined.

The obvious purchasers of what was left of the two-acre garden – now said to resemble a jungle – were Imperial College, already overflowing on their adjacent site further down Exhibition Road and in sore need of more college buildings.

Negotiations began in 1919 and dragged on until the end of 1921 with interminable discussions about covenants and rights until Imperial cited ‘difficulties’ and refused to proceed with the sale, even though they had agreed to buy the site for £48,000.

The Society now hoped to get £50,000 for the land from a developer who wanted to build high-quality flats; a license to do so had been granted in 1913 though there were still options to build private houses there.

Other prospective buyers put forward schemes of varying oddness, from a ‘quiet private hospital’ to an ice rink. Tennis courts were proposed. Then Dr Georges Bresin wanted to construct a French Quarter containing cafes and shops ‘with first-class flats in the

Continental style’. A mysterious Mr Foss proposed to incorporate an Institute of the Horse into a block of flats; after much temporising he and his International Equitation Company galloped away and were not heard of again.

Finally, in 1927 the piece of garden was sold for £30,000. The block of flats which now stands there was designed by architects T P Bennett & Son and built by F G Minter. Along with the building fund, it paid for the new premises which were so badly needed.

One of the contributors to the fund was one of William Lowther’s many sons, now Major-General Sir Cecil Lowther, who was brought up in the house. He wrote from his home in Queen Street, Mayfair in November 1928:

“Having seen Lowther Lodge built when I was a boy of 6 or 7... I am much interested in the present plan of building a lecture hall where the old stables and gravel tennis court stood.

My wife having had three operations in just over two years, I cannot afford as much as I would like at the moment.

But I enclose an order on my bank for £20 for the next four years.

I know it is only a drop in the bucket, but it is all I can do”.

Such drops in the bucket have helped to sustain the Society since 1830.



1928  
The old stables



1930  
'Hot and cold corner'  
before statues installed



## Blending old with the new

The major challenge for the architects of the new extension of 1930 was to make its exterior and the new public spaces blend with what was originally a flamboyant private house built for a rich politician. In the opinion of the architectural press they succeeded. The commission went to the London architects Kennedy and Nightingale, specialists in country houses and schools.

Frederick Bayliss Nightingale had been an assistant to Sir Edwin Lutyens, the designer of New Delhi, the Cenotaph, and dozens of country houses. Some saw Lutyens' influence in the new extension.

Invitations to tender went out to ten of London's principal builders. The contract went to the lowest, Holland, Hannen and Cubitts who quoted £36,439. Work began in July 1929 on the site of the old stables.

Though the extension is quite different in style to the old building, it reflects the fashion for between-the-wars classicism, in sympathy with Norman Shaw's design. For instance, the basic handmade construction materials from the Binfield Brick and Tile Works were chosen with great care to match the originals and the windows facing the garden also reflect the style

of the 1870s building.

The rather bleak face on the corner of Exhibition Road, partially relieved by the imposing statues of Livingstone and Shackleton (cabbies call this 'hot and cold corner') was deliberately left as blank as possible to prevent traffic noise.

The theatre was given its own entrance in Exhibition Road, for ease of access and also so that other organisations could use it.

There was now for the first time a properly designed library and book store, with a new map room, cloak-rooms, an ambulatory (for meetings and discussions during receptions), Council Room on the first floor and secretary and clerk's room.

It had taken nearly two decades for the Society to achieve its aspirations.

## The Society 1930-2000

Delegates from geographical societies all over the world came to the opening ceremony of the new extension on October 21st, 1930. It was presided over by the Duke of York (right, seated centre of the podium) later George VI and father of Elizabeth II. The next decades, apart from the war years, were ones of steady growth and acquisition to the collections, which led to the burden on storage areas becoming intense. More map presses were delivered in the 1970s and 1980s and two rooms were converted in the basement for 1,000 metres of mobile shelving. The other major task, guided by the then director Dr John Hemming, was major roof repairs at a cost of £180,768.



Great attention was paid to the sound qualities of the 1930 **Theatre**, which seated 750 people. Its diamond shape provided good reflecting surfaces. An acoustic consultant prescribed heavily upholstered seats and when audiences were small, a thick curtain could be pulled across under the balcony. But the state-of-the-art acoustics of the 1930s were no longer acceptable 60 years later.



The classical bays and arches of the new **Library** gave the room a clean contemporary look. The bays with their writing tables gave readers some privacy for their research, though making it difficult for the librarian to supervise users. The ample oak shelving in each bay helped to accommodate the books as did the adjacent store above the lecture theatre.



The 1930s extension provided a **Map Reading Room** in addition to the map room, originally the Lowther's drawing room. Most of the maps were stored in the basement, with the most valuable in a strongroom. The oldest is a German atlas of the 1480s, once owned by William Morris, one of the leaders of the arts and crafts movement so warmly embraced by Alice Lowther.



The Society was very keen on what it called *conversazione* – opportunities for members to talk, drink tea and coffee and examine exhibitions of photographs and curios. There was a small **Ambulatory** for this purpose in Lowther Lodge and this was greatly extended by the arched additions of 1930 – still used as a display space, corridor and break-out space.



Many momentous decisions have been taken in the **Council Room** where the Society's course is charted, including the decision to recommend to Fellows that the RGS and IBG should merge. The large chair is a duplicate of the throne presented in 1891 to Mwanga, the last independent King of Uganda, by the Imperial British East Africa Company.

1930  
New theatre opened



Three days of celebrations marked the Society's centenary in 1930, which coincided with the opening of the long awaited extension and the new theatre. Among the first lectures in the theatre was a series on 'the habitable globe' and short talks on notable incidents in this history of British exploration. Among the geographers and explorers taking



1932  
Shackleton statue unveiled

part were Lewis Leakey, Lord Lugard, Sir Martin Conway, Sir Halford Mackinder and JM Wordie.

The statue of the explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, dressed in heavy polar clothing, which overlooks Exhibition Road from its alcove in the exterior wall of the theatre, was executed by Charles Sargeant Jagger. In 1953 the other alcove overlooking Kensington Gore was filled



with the statue of David Livingstone.

During the 1951 Festival of Britain the Society and the Institute of Navigation put on a public exhibition of British maps and charts in the ambulatory, with the help of the Ordnance Survey and other bodies. It showed the development of maps over the previous 50 years and also had a small historical section which included the Molyneux globe of 1592, the first globe made in England. The OS

1951  
British Maps and Charts Exhibition

1953  
Livingstone statue unveiled



section illustrated triangulation methods.

The conquest of Everest by Hillary and Tensing, under the leadership of Lord Hunt, (who was later to become a president of the Society), was planned in our building and organised jointly by the Himalayan committee of the RGS and the Alpine Club. The expedition planning model remains in our archives.



1953  
Planning the Everest expedition

1971  
Gold Medal for Neil Armstrong



Many illustrious names adorn the Medal Boards lining the lobby walls of the Kensington Gore entrance, including astronaut Neil Armstrong (above) and Sir David Attenborough

The drawing office, first set up in 1878 to provide a valuable service of maps and other material, was still going strong 100 years later.



1978  
Drawing office centenary

During a day of celebrations on June 9<sup>th</sup> 1980, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh toured the building and met the staff, Fellows and guests. They were able to see some of the prize items in the Society's collections. The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary was also marked with a series of lectures on exploration and another following the pattern of 'our habitable planet'.



The railings facing Hyde Park were designed personally by Lord Curzon. He disliked the original wall which Lowther had built in front of the house and had it knocked down to make the Society more accessible. But his railings were themselves cut down in 1941 when metal was required for the war effort. They were eventually restored with the help of donations and unveiled by the Prince of Wales in July 1992.

1980  
150th anniversary

1992  
Railings replaced



During Lord Jellicoe's presidency the Society merged with the Institute of British Geographers (IBG). When the merger proposals were put to a ballot of the IBG membership in 1995 more than 70% voted in favour of the RGS-IBG merger, as did RGS Fellows at an SGM; the result is a world leading geographical Society.

1995  
Merger with IBG



• Better seating

• Better lighting

• Air cooling

• Audio and video



## The Ondaatje Theatre

The lecture theatre of 1930 had served the Society well for decades, but it became increasingly outdated in terms of facilities and audience comfort. To continue to attract top quality speakers and large audiences, it needed to be brought up-to-date. Its refurbishment, in 2001, was the first step in a £9m project to make the Society more welcoming by enhancing its public areas and access to its collections.

The lecture theatre – one of the largest and most popular in London – is a very important asset. Apart from its pivotal role within the Society, its hire to other organisations for conferences, meetings and debates is a vital source of income, and for that the Society has to compete with other venues.

A survey of the theatre in 2000 found that the 1930s seating had become worn, uncomfortable and dangerous, and much of it had poor viewing angles. The speakers for the audio system were too large, the lighting poor, the screen too small and there was a lot of noise from the ventilation system.

To remedy these shortcomings, London architect Craig Downie proposed a radical refit of the Grade II\* listed theatre – retaining its diamond shape and the wood panelling, gold lettering and doors, but providing better seating, lighting, audio and video facilities, air cooling for the first time, and improved wheelchair access.

Thanks largely to the great generosity of Sir Christopher Ondaatje, after whom the theatre is now named, the £1.76m project went ahead. The theatre also provided a wonderful way of marking the contribution to our 2004 appeal of around 500 donors who paid £1,000 each to dedicate individual chairs to themselves or others; a plaque on the back of each seat records their names.





## Meeting 21st century needs

The Society as it neared the 21st century was a paradox: its remit, as always, covered the whole world, but some described it as inward-looking. For others it held a great sense of tradition and awe. The Society's Trustees sought to retain this sense of tradition while modernising and embracing the world outside more fully through the Society's first strategic plan in 1998. The task of implementing the developments was led by Director, Dr Rita Gardner, and her senior staff.

Although a number of the Society's activities and events were open to the public, access to the holdings of the library, archives and photographic collection was largely reserved for Fellows and a small number of scholars. Much of it was difficult to find, buried in a warren of rooms in the basement and upper floors and stored under unsatisfactory environmental conditions.

But the 'Unlocking the Archives' project was far more than giving people access to things that had been very difficult to see in the past.

It was a way of using a sensitive new building attached to the old to present an exciting, transparent and inclusive face to the public – building on our tradition and opening up the Society visually, intellectually and physically to all those interested in learning about our geographical heritage and its relevance to understanding and managing the modern world.

The combination of new facilities, exhibitions, online cataloguing, and much-needed environmentally controlled storage facilities for the Society's older maps and images, offers everyone from schoolchildren to the longest serving Fellow (who became one in 1929) the opportunity to benefit from enhanced access and the informed interpretation and presentation of the Society's treasures.

## Raising the money

It has been the most ambitious fund raising project in the Society's history – to raise £11m to transform the Society with an iconic building which offers a welcoming public face to the world whilst at the same time providing improved facilities for Fellows and members. It has also been about raising the profile of geography and emphasising its importance.

The capital appeal had four aims: to refurbish the rather shabby theatre; to unlock the archives for public access; and to provide more funds for research and scientific expeditions and for new initiatives.

The major part of the project was 'Unlocking the Archives' – at a cost of £7.2m. The Council agreed to the final proposal in June 1999, recognising that this project brought with it the need for a challenging fundraising task.

The Heritage Lottery Fund granted



£5.04m in 2001 and the rest was raised from Fellows and members and charitable trusts including the Weston Family, the Clothworkers' Company and the Foyle Foundation. The Foyle Reading Room recognises the contribution of the latter and a plaque in the reception area recognises the Weston Family and all other major donors. The donors' book is in the Foyle Reading Room.

The Sunley and Drayson training suites mark the generosity of other

donors, as does the Niarchos Everest Room. There were, of course, thousands of individuals whose help was equally invaluable – for instance Simon Murray and Pen Hadow's sponsored trek to the South Pole brought in another £240,000.

Donations from more than 1,500 Fellows and members totalled around £1m.

The fundraising effort took five years and reached the target of £11m. Building work began in autumn 2002.

## Careful planning

The major challenge for architects StudioDownie was to design a contemporary building that would respect the sensitive heritage of Norman Shaw's Lowther Lodge while providing a new exciting public face for the Society on Exhibition Road. The entrance pavilion and display space represent only 20% of the new building, as much of it is underground.

Joining a modern glass pavilion to a Grade II\* listed Victorian house and a 1930s extension required careful planning – and visits from English Heritage and Westminster City Council planning department. The local residents' group – the Knightsbridge Association – also took a close interest, as did the Victorian Society and the 20th Century Society.

There are six different colours of bricks in Lowther Lodge; the extension has five different colours.

Restrictive covenants imposed by the 1851 Commissioners meant that the new extension could not go too close to existing buildings.

Working in a restricted space, the architects cleverly manipulated the levels in the garden, creating a lovely terrace with the reading room beneath,

so that only about a quarter of the garden was lost to the new building.

The reading room was designed to have a very low environmental impact. It relies on natural ventilation to the garden and a flowering vine provides shading around the clerestory window; the only air conditioning needed is for the archival storage.

The temperature is remarkably constant. When the judges for an architectural competition visited the room, the outside temperature was 36°C but one of the readers told them that, if anything, at 10°C lower, the room was too cool.

The long glass pavilion forms a very effective sound barrier between the garden and traffic on Exhibition Road, creating a quiet and peaceful reading room.



## Meet the architect

Craig Downie is a Scottish architect who founded his London practice StudioDownie in 1994. It has worked on a wide range of projects. His study centre for the Society received the Judges' Special Award for a particularly inspirational building in the 2005 British Construction Industry Awards and was commended by the Royal Institute of British Architects.

"We had been working for four years on the new library for Corpus Christi, Cambridge, but when that was put on hold for financial reasons, we got the commission from the Society which was wonderful, as we were the youngest of the seven practices competing.

We did a master plan for the entire building, then began with the refurbishment of the theatre, and followed it with the new education centre and the study centre both of which were created as part of the 'Unlocking the Archives' project.

There was never any intention to create a pastiche of the Norman Shaw house in the pavilion on Exhibition Road – the design had to be contemporary to fit in with the new direction the Society was taking in opening itself more widely to the public.

The site was very tight, so we had to maximise the usable space, burrowing into the garden to build the reading room.

I was a bit concerned that the foyer would be too small, but now I'm delighted with the result.

The foyer is one of my favourite areas, not only because of the 'telescope' of the view through the garden to the Albert Hall beyond, but also because of the diamond-shaped concrete of the ceiling.

This work has been published in architectural books and has led to other major projects, which is very gratifying."

- 1999 Masterplan
- 2000 Stage 1 application to Lottery Fund
- 2001 Final application approved
- 2002 Building work starts
- 2004 New extension opened



Autumn 2002  
Work begins

Winter 2002  
Ground broken

Spring 2003  
Piling commences

Summer 2003  
Base concrete slab laid

# Building the new extension

For some years, the view from the south face of Lowther Lodge had been of a patch of scrubby grass bordered by a gravel terrace. The lawn was sometimes used to erect a marquee for functions, but there remained a real opportunity to make much more of the space. That was to happen in the autumn of 2002, after several years of detailed planning to make the best of this sensitive site.

Heavy machinery moved on to the site as builders Durkan Pudelek began a complex two-year project to build the new extension on a very tight building site. A huge piling rig sank supports to a depth of 15 to 20 metres.

The gravel was interspersed with unexpected pockets of soft clays, which put paid to the original plan of butting the basement of the Foyle reading room and the archive storage up against the



foundations of the 1874 house. It was moved several feet away, though it has a subterranean link.

One of the most difficult aspects was achieving good quality interior finishes on the poured concrete and making sure the basement was waterproof. In addition, careful design, engineering and natural ventilation ensured the new building meets high environmental standards.



Another challenge was the building of the new foyer for the Ondaatje Theatre, as several structural pillars in the old building had to be removed to allow for the construction of new cloakroom areas. This severely limited access for several months to the recently refurbished theatre. Work finished only days before the Society's first annual conference to be held at its headquarters in 2003.



Autumn 2003  
Internal rooms refurbished and re-purposed

Winter 2003  
Basement and Pavilion construction completed

Spring 2004  
Collections returned to site

Summer 2004  
Official opening



What are now the Sunley and Drayson rooms had been let out for 20 years to tenants who had their own access to the rooms, which were boarded off from the rest of the Society. The project not only refurbished the rooms and made them available again, but also opened up the area to give more ground floor space as a break-out area from the theatre and to extend the ambulatory.



In the old map room, the floor was taken up for data and electrical wiring and to install air cooling so that the space could be re-purposed for flexible use as the Education Centre. This large airy room was originally the drawing room of Lowther Lodge and then the map room of the Society for 90 years. Removal of the floor-to-ceiling shelving, which had caused the room to look very full, revealed the detail beneath.



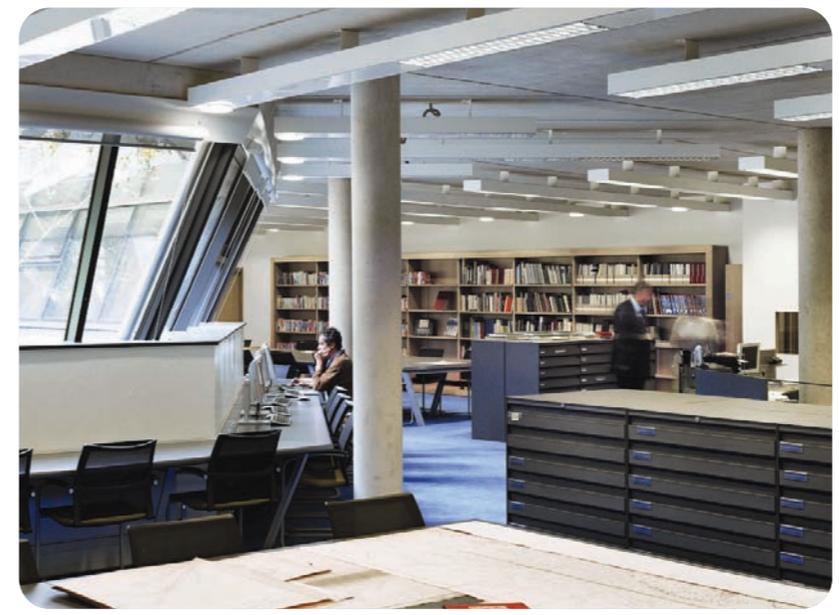
for storage in two warehouses. Only the picture library, books in the old library and those hidden away in stacks above the theatre remained. The rest of the collections stayed in warehouses for two years as work went on, finally being returned only weeks before the official opening of the new extension in June 2004. The event itself made headlines in the national press and featured on TV.

The basement in the original building, which was once the servants' quarters also had to be upgraded. Some areas needed waterproofing, and new lighting and floors were installed to give better working conditions for staff and improved storage conditions. While this was going on, 100 tons of the collection material, documenting 500 years of geographical progress, had to be lifted out of the basement and taken away





## New, exciting spaces



The 20 metre long transparent 'geographical' glass screen etched by Eleanor Long bounding Exhibition Road gives the thousands who pass by on this busy street the opportunity to peep into the elegant display space within the pavilion – tempting them in to take free advantage of the many exhibitions mounted here with the Society's resources and giving them a taste of the riches within.

Openness was a key driver for the project – access not just for passers-by, but also for community groups, schools, travellers and anyone with a curiosity about the way the world works. That openness starts from the new entrance with its stunning views of the Albert Hall and the south façade of Lowther Lodge.

Underneath the pavilion lies the 70-seat Foyle reading room and two large climate-controlled storage areas for the most fragile and precious of the Society's collection of around two million items. Some can be viewed only in the library's consultation rooms, one of which is named after Constantine Niarchos, who climbed Everest in 1999.

Between the glass pavilion and the Albert Hall, the delightful landscaped garden is on two levels – the extended gravel terrace atop the Foyle Reading Room and the peaceful green lawn, now some two metres lower.

The warm south-facing walls of Lowther Lodge protect tender species in our geographical garden while temperate woodland plants are clustered in the north-facing beds.

Around 150,000 people a year now enjoy using our building – a figure several times greater than in the 1990s. With the help of the construction team, the architect and engineers, our advisors and donors, we were opened to the world on June 8<sup>th</sup> 2004.

**Go and explore...**

Where to find these surprises

Glass balustrade along Exhibition Road

Brickwork above the Kensington Gore entrance

Gold Medal winners in the old Kensington Gore entrance

Tile in the fireplace of the main hall

Statues on the corner of Kensington Gore and Exhibition Road

Portrait in the Main Hall

Map on the wall of the Ambulatory

Livingstone's tree in the Ambulatory

Sculptural installation in The Pavilion

Map on the wall of the Map Room

# Exploring the building

The Society has one of the most notable geographical collections in the world, charting the progress of the discovery of our world and acting as an exceptional repository of knowledge about people, places and environments.

Of the two million items in the collections, one million are maps – the oldest a version of Ptolemy's *Cosmographia*, dating back to 1486 and once owned by William Morris.

There are a quarter of a million books, half a million images and a rich resource manuscripts, diaries, letters and artefacts.

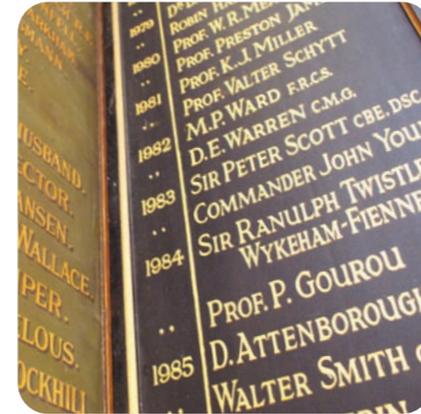
The artefacts include the sextant taken by Darwin on the *Beagle*; David Livingstone's first sketch of Victoria Falls; and an oxygen set used on the British Everest assault in 1953.

The Society runs regular Collections Showcases to explain the materials and to highlight the treasures.

[E showcase@rgs.org](mailto:showcase@rgs.org)



2004 Etched **Glass balustrade**  
The 20 metre long glass balustrade which fronts the pavilion at street level is etched with images from the Society's collection. It is the work of artist Eleanor Long.



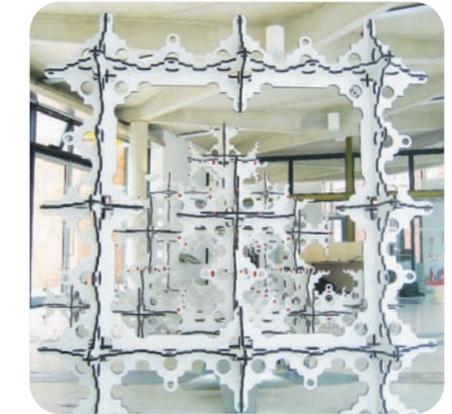
1930 The **distinguished** remembered  
Medal winners memorialised by the Kensington Gore entrance – and in the theatre, the names of famous scientists, travellers and explorers adorn the wall panelling.



1953 Statues on **'hot and cold corner'**  
The London cabbies call it 'hot and cold corner' because of the statues of David Livingstone (1953) and Ernest Shackleton (1932) on the outer walls of the Ondaatje Theatre.



1608 **Hondius map** of the world  
The Flemish cartographer Jodocus Hondius produced this copper-plate wall map of the world made up of 16 main sheets on the Mercator projection.



2004 Changing exhibitions in **The Pavilion**  
The Pavilion hosts constantly changing free exhibitions by the Society, by external organisations and by the Society's sponsors, engaging visitors of all ages and interests in geography.



1874 Brickwork **sunflower**  
The initials of the original owners, William Lowther and his wife Alice, surmounted by a sunflower, one of the symbols of the fashionable arts and crafts movement.



1875 The original **fireplace**  
The fireplace was designed by the architect Norman Shaw and its ceramic tiles were painted by Mrs Lowther and her daughter with fanciful family coats of arms.



1914 Portrait of **Lord Curzon**  
A grateful Society commissioned this painting by John Singer Sargent at the end of Lord Curzon's presidency, during which he moved the Society into Lowther Lodge.



1873 Bark from **Livingstone's tree**  
A carved section of the tree from the shores of Lake Bangweulu, Central Africa, under which Dr David Livingstone's heart was originally buried in a tin box.



1644 **Chinese map** of the world  
A woodcut map of the world on six sheets, a copy of the 1602 original by Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit priest, one of the first Western scholars to live in China.

● **Michael Palin**  
President

① ● **Doug Scott**  
Fellow  
Mountaineer

② ● **Nick Crane**  
Fellow  
Author and broadcaster

③ ● **Cliff Pereira**  
Fellow  
Cultural historian

④ ● **Christopher Ondaatje**  
Fellow  
Honorary Vice President

⑤ ● **Rita Gardner**  
Director

⑥ ● **Pat Laughton**  
Long-serving staff member

⑦ ● **David Hayman**  
Fellow  
Chair, Regions Committee

⑧ ● **John Hemming**  
Fellow  
Director 1975-96

⑨ ● **David Riviere**  
Head of Finance  
and Services

⑩ ● **Suzi Harby**  
Fellow  
Speaker

## My favourite place...

Our iconic building stirs feelings of deep affection in the thousands of people who pass through the doors of the Society every year. Almost everyone has a part of the building that they cherish as somewhere special. Here are some of those places.



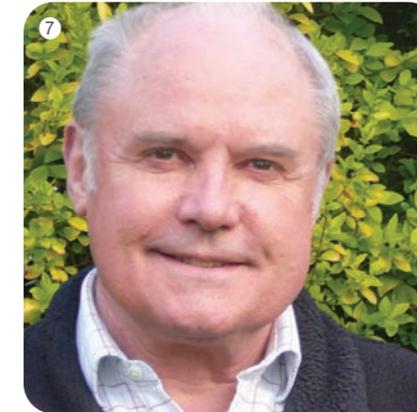
My favourite room in the splendid original Society building is the **Council Room** – but not the outside waiting area. So many times I sat in trepidation to be ushered inside for scrutiny as to whether I should be given a grant towards my next expedition.



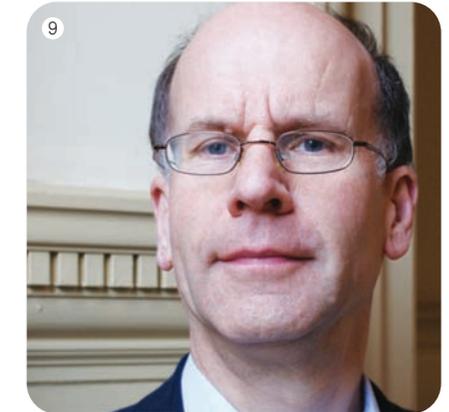
The **Foyle Reading Room**, because this is the place where I find the most spectacular gems – insights to forgotten or hidden worlds, in words, images, maps and objects.



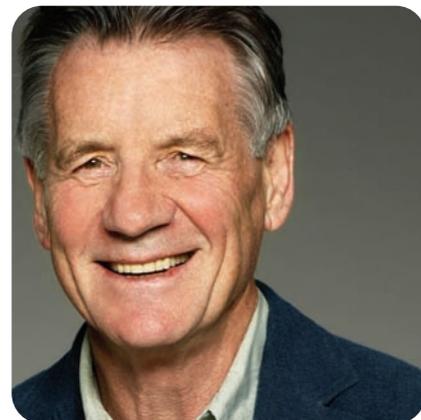
The new **entrance** lifts my spirits every time I enter the building. Opening up the wonderful views along the terrace and south façade of Lowther Lodge to the Royal Albert Hall, it is a superb piece of modern design and reflects our innovation.



The **old library** with its series of reading and study recesses, ideal work areas where you could get on without distractions but with advice always close at hand. It always felt friendly as if the ghosts of all those who had worked there before encouraged you.



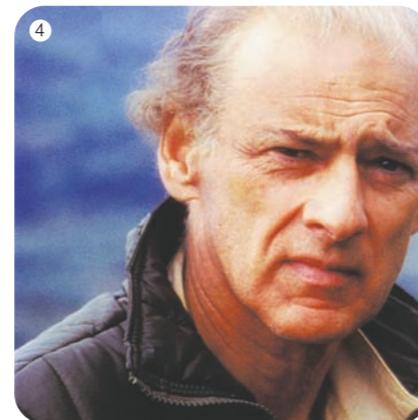
Looking across the **garden** from the south-west corner is the best place to see the three ages of the building (1874, 1930, and 2004) in harmony. It is where the builders' offices were during construction and where I spent many hours with an hard hat on!



Of all the wonderful things to be found at Lowther Lodge nothing moves the hairs on the back of my neck quite like the **honours board**. The list of Gold Medal Winners is a roll-call of heroes from my childhood to the present day. Here is achievement writ large.



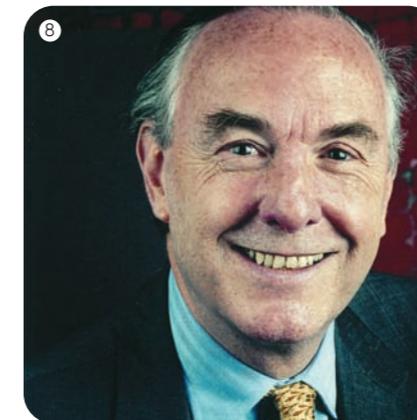
The new **exhibition space** on Exhibition Road because it's a brilliant example of modern architecture which announces that the RGS-IBG is a forward-thinking forum which puts geographical knowledge on the metaphorical – and literal – thoroughfare.



The **theatre** to which I have given my name represents for me the essence of the Society – extraordinary speakers from the worlds of science, exploration and travel telling of discoveries and inspiring people to understand and care for their planet.



My favourite room in the old building is the **Geography Outdoors office** as it was the Lowther children's schoolroom and the balcony afforded wonderful views of Hyde Park with the opportunity for fresh air.



The **old library**, purpose-built at the centenary in 1930. This was the nicest place in London to do research, because it has overhead daylight and each bay had all the books one wanted on shelves around the reader.



The **lecture theatre** with its majestic wood panelling and in gold lettering around the top, names of those famous explorers; Stanley, Markham, Scott, Murchison, Speke, but to name a few. It gives you nothing but inspiration to go and explore the world.

## Next steps

Our President, Michael Palin, launched an appeal in 2009 to raise £860,000 for two major projects at our London home. We need to carry out long overdue repairs on the north face of Lowther Lodge, which is now nearly 140 years old. We also want to create a new members' room out of the old library in the 1930s part of the building.

Our priority is to restore the north face of Lowther Lodge to its original glory and preserve it against future deterioration so essential repairs must be undertaken, at an estimated cost of £470,000.

The failing balcony on the first floor, peeling paintwork and the cracked tall chimney stack, supported with iron bands, are there for everyone to see. More insidious are the chipped ornamental brickwork and tiles, failing leaded lights to the windows, and the need for substantial re-pointing to brickwork.



This repair work will complete this round of external conservation of the building, which started with the replacement of the roof covering of the 1930s building in 1994 and the repair of the south façade in 2003/4.

Our other project is to refurbish the elegant and much loved first floor Nightingale Room, named after one of the architects of the 1930 extension and formerly the Society's library. We will transform it into a much-needed space for members to meet, work and relax. To do this will cost £390,000.



The plans retain the classical design of the original room with its arches and bays and will create a welcoming environment with eight informal lounge areas and six private meeting rooms.

With help from members and Fellows, and the generosity of a number of trusts and foundations, we had raised £560,000 by April 2010 and hope to complete the projects by late 2011.

Warm thanks to those who have already donated; we encourage others to support these important projects if you are able to do so.

### Picture credits

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## About the Society

The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) is a leading world centre for geographers and geographical learning dedicated to the development and promotion of knowledge together with its application to the challenges facing society and the environment. Founded in 1830, it has been one of the most active learned societies ever since. Today, the Society supports and promotes geographical research, education, fieldwork and expeditions, and geography in society; it also advises on policy issues. The Society has substantial Collections, accessible to all.

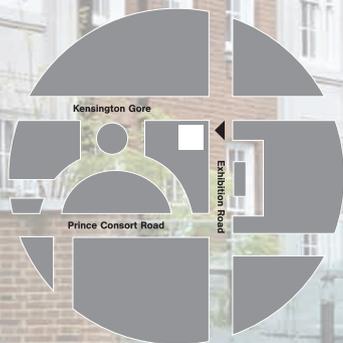
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“For almost a hundred years, explorers, travellers, writers, scientists, students and geography enthusiasts young and old have come to Lowther Lodge to celebrate, exchange wisdom, and learn about our world and the planet on which life depends. Their dreams and hopes and collective curiosities have shaped a character which few buildings can match and given Lowther Lodge a value beyond measure. Embodied here is the past, the present and the future of geography.”

**Michael Palin**  
President, 2009-2012



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