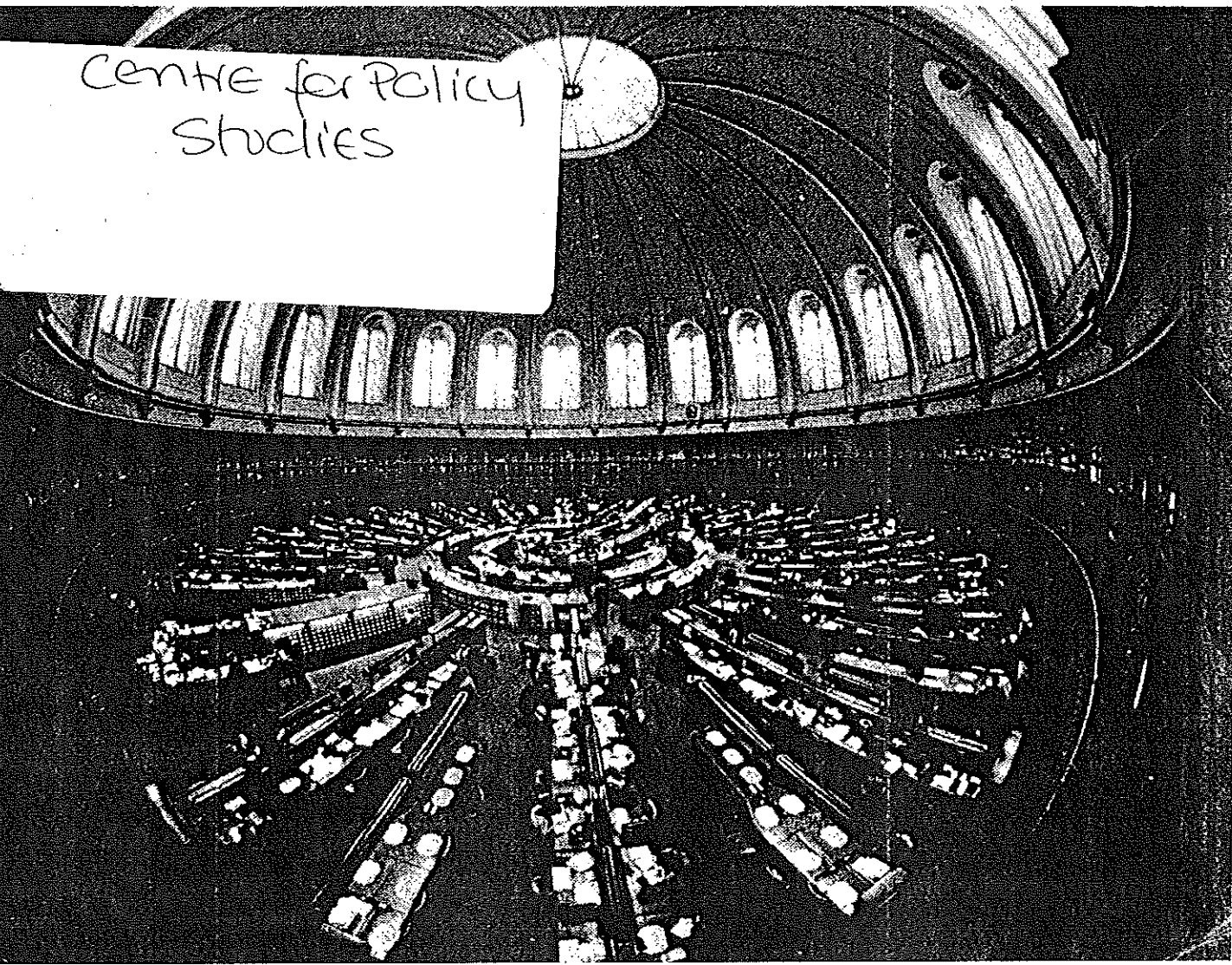




The case for the round reading room

by Hugh Thomas

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THE CASE FOR THE ROUND READING ROOM

by Hugh Thomas

"I have seen all sorts of domes of Peters and Pauls, Sophia, Pantheon - what not? - and have been struck by none of them as much as by that Catholic dome in Bloomsbury, under which our million volumes are housed. What peace, what love, what truth, what beauty, what happiness for all, what generous kindness for you and me are here spread out! It seems to me one cannot sit down in that place without a heart full of grateful reverence."

William Makepeace Thackeray,
"Nil nisi bonum" (1862)

CONTENTS

	PARAGRAPH
The Case for a British Library Integrated around the Round Reading Room at Bloomsbury	
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I	17
CHAPTER II	29
CHAPTER III	36
CHAPTER IV	67
CHAPTER V	70
CHAPTER VI	72
APPENDIX I	72
APPENDIX II	72
APPENDIX III	72
APPENDIX IV	72
APPENDIX V	72

The Case for a British Library Integrated around the Round Reading Room at Bloomsbury

This paper, backed by a Committee of nearly fifty well-known scholars and writers, reviews the history of the present proposal for a new British Library, and presents the case against building a major, new, all-purpose, science and humanities library (Library City) on a disused goods yard near St. Pancras. The Government's proposal is that this would replace, and put out of library use, the British Museum's Round Reading Room at Bloomsbury, which has been the main British national library for over a hundred years. The proposed new library would offer community and similar facilities as well as library facilities. Implied in the Government's plan is that the new library would become a library of first as well as of last resort. It is here argued that this would dilute and damage its present prime role as a central source of knowledge and scholastic excellence serving the needs of the highest levels of scholarship. It is pointed out that the holdings needed by other levels of scholarship (student, school and general public) are different and are already available in other publicly funded libraries. The national importance of the highest levels of scholarship being efficiently serviced and being able to operate efficiently to lead Britain through this technological age are emphasised.

While accepting that the store now being built at St. Pancras is needed, the paper points out, on grounds of aesthetics, librarianship and the different needs of scientific and humanities users, that the grandiose £300,000,000 new library is neither necessary nor wanted by its readers, and is an unnecessary spending of a very large amount of public money. A survey of current use shows that the original case based on overcrowding is no longer valid as the drop in foreign visitors has led to a drop to less than half in book requests at the Round Reading Room. It points out the large increase in revenue costs which the proposal would generate: eg a staff increase in revenue from present 1,475 to 2,500 (staff in 1969 was about 500). It points out the completely different collections of documents required by science/technology and

humanities users, and the consequential practical need for separate science/technology and humanities libraries to overcome problems of size which must reduce library efficiency.

The paper proposes that instead of building a completely new, centralised library, the new store and the present Round Reading Room should be connected by tunnel to provide the basis for an integrated library service, using many of the existing British Library buildings to provide a fast and efficient service with a capital saving of about £200,000,000 from public funds and vast savings per year.

INTRODUCTION

1. In this paper I argue that the nation would be best served by amending the present plans for a monumental new British Library. My suggestion is that the Library should limit itself to carrying out a modified version of its first stage as announced by the then Secretary of State for Education and Science in March 1979, approved by the then Minister for the Arts in November 1980, and embarked upon in April 1982. This would retain the Round Reading Room in the British Museum, as it has always been known, in its accustomed use. This act of conservation should be a prime consideration for our government if it is to show itself "conservative" in the most creative sense of the word.

2. The Round Reading Room is efficient in design as well as inspiring. The access to a great range of reference books on the open shelves helps research. The desks are comfortable, conveniently furnished and well lit. The catalogues, bibliographies and issue desks in the centre of the room are conveniently located for all readers. The acoustics are right: as important a dimension in a reading room as in a church. These are among the reasons why many others have built libraries copying the Reading Room: for example, the Library of Congress in Washington, the State Library at Stockholm and the Manchester Central Library.

3. It has been said that, in arguing for the retention of the Reading Room, and particularly the adjacent rooms (such as the King's Library) as they are, I seek to obstruct the necessary expansion of the Museum - including means whereby circulation through the Museum is rendered easier. No evidence has been adduced to explain how "Circulation" could be improved on what existed before the Library was submerged in the new "Bureaucracy of Books". Naturally the Trustees of the Museum would like more space. That would presumably be true for any trustees of any museum at any time. The present Director of the Museum would like to bring back the Museum of Man from Burlington Gardens. The desire is comprehensible. It is natural and right for the Trustees of the Museum to seek

new space in or near the Bloomsbury area. But those hopes, comprehensible though they may be in themselves, do not affect the general question of the preservation of the Reading Room.

4. The arrangements suggested in this paper are in keeping with our national traditions. They are something of a compromise. They do not demand, for example, the re-establishment of the old links between the Library and the Museum, regrettable and unnecessary though the separation was. They would, however, save the nation a great deal of money without disadvantage to the Library's users. The present reading rooms of the British Library, so far from being overcrowded, are under-used (see Appendix II). The solution suggested here is based primarily on the argument that there can be no justification in going ahead now with a grandiose scheme for a huge new building which is neither necessary nor desired by users as well as being enormously expensive in capital and running costs.

5. Ever since the new conglomerate empire, labelled, misleadingly, "The British Library", was assembled in 1973-4, its Board has complained that the Library, "urgently" needs additional storage for shelving its three miles of new annual acquisitions. Yet, having been granted £88 million, it is spending that sum on a structure which will be unavailable for storage, or any other purpose, until the "end of the 1980s" (if finished on schedule). Urgency, it would seem, has its gradations. The oft-proclaimed necessity for accommodation for storage seems indeed to have been a pretext to take the initial step of a grand project to house, in one colossal, air-conditioned palace, not only the Library proper, and its books, but the indexing, publishing, information-giving, and other money-making activities of the "Empire": activities which, for the most part, are distinct from, and have no need for, accommodation within the Library proper and which, moreover, are adequately housed already. The Board, and other departments of the "Empire", have recently moved into new premises, "comprehensively renovated to required standards". The centralisation of all sections of the "Empire" in one building is no more necessary than would be the rehousing,

say, of all the colleges of Oxford, of all departments of government, in a multi-storey sky-scraper.

6. What has occurred also shows, I fear, the ineffectiveness of Select Committees of the House of Commons to recognise and prevent extravagant projects conceived by civil servants. When the Select Committee on Education, Science and the Arts reported in 1980 that "the Library is now scattered over 18 buildings" and that its services would "substantially and rapidly deteriorate" unless the St Pancras project "went quickly ahead", it seems to have been transcribing uncritically claims and misleading statistics given to it by representatives of the "Empire" and repeated over the years to push their grandiose plans. The Select Committee seems to have taken evidence from no one with recent personal experience of using the British Library, nor to have invited such evidence, but to have assumed that what it was told was unambiguous and uncontroversial. That is not so. Without calling informed members of the public to comment on the Library's claims, the Committee could not know this, nor that the Board of the Library ignores the uniformly adverse criticism of their claims by users of the reading rooms in Great Russell Street.

7. The modified plan here proposed would, in summary, provide for the "Reference Division of the British Library", but not the Science Reference Library, to remain in the building in which it is now*, the main reading room remaining the famous Round Room. A new depository for the authorised and new stock of the "Reference Division" would be built on the site designated for the new library on Euston Road.

* That is, the Department of Printed Books, the Department of Manuscripts and Printed Books. The first of these includes the Official Publications Library, (ex-State Paper room), the Map Library, the Music Library and, rather surprisingly, the British Museum's famous stamp collection, but not the Department of Prints and Drawings. It also includes the Library Association, which is still in its purpose-built accommodation in Ridgmount Street, where it fulfils its intended function as well as, and more conveniently for its users, than it could on the site at Euston Road.

8. Connecting the Library's rooms in Bloomsbury and the depository in Euston Road, an underground passage or tunnel would be constructed, with mechanised transport for book delivery. The distance is 2/3 miles (in a straight line). The cost of such a tunnel should not be more than £2 million (see Appendix V). This should enable books to be carried from depository to Reading Room with no more damage than if the books were in the same building and perhaps as fast.

9. The Library's Board has claimed that a new building is necessary because of the compelling need for air-conditioning or, rather, for the stabilisation of temperature and humidity, and the exclusion of pollutants. The Board says that the Round Room and its neighbours could never be adapted for this purpose. This view has been challenged by experts and other librarians with no axe to grind. One feature of the new building desired by the Board is to establish mechanically controlled air-conditioning. But such mechanical control might bring new risks and disadvantages. These matters are discussed further in paragraphs 41 to 46.

10. On the site at Euston Road there might also be:

(a) a new Science Reference Library (now divided over three sites;

(b) other branches of the British Library recently established and whose accommodation could be more economically and conveniently provided there; and

(c) the library of the Library Association.

11. The Newspaper Library will doubtless have to remain for the time being at Colindale though, in the end, that collection should be brought to Euston Road. The Dainton Committee in 1969 found that this "outhousing" of newspapers had inspired much more criticism among readers than the "outhousing" of books at Woolwich (paragraph 319), and current readers agree.

12. At a later stage, and in more prosperous times, the Government might consider anew whether such luxuries as have been proposed for Euston Road - "the cultural centre", the new exhibition rooms and the seminar rooms - are inherently desirable. The bringing of the newspaper library, however, to Euston Road should without question be given priority to these.

13. Two additional observations might be added: first, the present plans suggest that the new British Library, even if completed in all its proposed full grandeur, may be inadequate as well as obsolete after the year 2000. Thereafter, the building would probably require extension or "adaptation"*. Yet even if the existing timetable be adhered to, there is no suggestion that the first stage of the plans as now embarked upon would be complete before 1991. It seems possible, therefore, that the whole scheme may be out of date before it is complete. This in itself should modify any reluctance that there might be about abandoning the project's original aims because they have gone so far.

14. Secondly, it may be represented that the arguments in this paper are being presented too late, over ten years after the Dainton Committee's report (Command 4028) and even after work on the basement of a new library has actually begun. These views have in fact long ago been put privately, to the Board as well as in the press, but they have so far been brushed aside or ignored by officials. They are still timely. For the virtue of the plan now suggested is that it will preserve for all time, in their accustomed use, the Round Reading Room, as well as the North Library, the Manuscripts Room and the King's Library nearby. Indeed, the preservation

*See for example David T. Rodger, Alexandria Updated, Aslib Proceedings, July 1979, page 317.

of the latter, "one of the finest neo-classical rooms in Britain" (in the words of Professor Mordaunt Crook, in his The British Museum) must be as important aesthetically as the preservation of the Reading Room. There is nothing of even remotely comparable quality in the Museum's rooms. To "adapt" the Round Room, the King's Library, and their special designs and still perfectly efficient library equipment (as the Museum's authorities plan), would be an act of vandalism. By making plans for a store-house of books to serve the present Library until halfway into the next century, not merely until the year 2000, the proposals advanced here will be seen to offer longer enduring facilities than those approved by Mrs. Williams and Mr. St John Stevas.

15. A further advantage of this amended scheme is that it will reduce the Government's liability from a notional £164 million in 1977 prices - a figure probably already much more than £300 million in today's prices - to not much more than £88 million in the already out of date prices of December 1981 allocated for Stage 1AA: still a princely sum, it is true, but one much more manageable than the millions of 1977.

16. Hardly any of the work asked for in paragraphs 6 and 7 requires to be done urgently. The Reading Rooms are usually half-full. The "outhousing" of books belonging to the Reference Division is being successfully provided (following the recommendations to that effect by the Dainton Committee). Certain ancillary services (e.g. photocopying and conservation) are still cramped or scattered but room could be found within the small, easily walkable, area in Central London, around the Bloomsbury building, as is the case among similar institutions in universities. Their needs do not require removal of the Reference Division as a whole. The British Library would prosper, and its Reading Room no doubt inspire works of scholarship, even if it had to remain as it is for a few more years while the whole matter raised here is reconsidered.

I HISTORY

17. The British Museum was established in 1753 as a universal Temple of the Arts. Its modern history has, however, been a process of fragmentation. In 1825, the paintings which it owned went to Trafalgar Square, to become the National Gallery. In 1883, the collection of natural history went to South Kensington. In 1905, the newspapers and periodicals went to Colindale; and in 1970, the holdings on ethnography went to Burlington Gardens.

18. Some schemes were devised for the expansion of the Library as part of a projected enlargement of the Museum. The most ambitious scheme envisaged a growth of both Museum and Library (which were, until 1973, part of the same institution) in four directions. This plan was abandoned in the early 1950s. A scheme was then devised for extension into the built-up territory between Great Russell Street and New Oxford Street, facing the Museum. This general idea was approved in 1956.

19. In 1959, the Trustees of the Museum also planned a new National Reference Library of Science and Invention, to be composed first, of the Museum's scientific books and, second, of the old Patent Office Library in Southampton Row founded in 1885. They sought to build this new Library on the South Bank. Once again, the idea did not prosper. But a Science Library was eventually constituted, as a branch of the British Museum Library. Much of it was housed temporarily in Bayswater and Woolwich Arsenal, and it also included the Patent Office Library (with the "Foreign Patents" Library).

20. In 1964, meantime, a scheme for a new library on the Great Russell Street site was approved. It echoed the grander plans of the past. It would have created a National Library for the Humanities to the south of the British Museum, linked by underground passages to the Reading Room and King's Library. But that noble concept was eventually (and regrettably) rejected by the then Secretary of State for Education and Science, Mr. Patrick Gordon-Walker, in 1967,

because of complaints by local members of parliament (and members of Camden Council), who wished to avoid the re-housing of local residents.

21. A committee of enquiry was then set up, under Mr. (later Sir) Fred Dainton, to investigate all national libraries and their inter-connection. This "Dainton Committee" published its report in 1969 (Command 4028). It recommended that the "geographical separation of the library departments of the British Museum from the antiquities departments would not have advantages for staff of a national libraries service" (paragraph 54 of recommendations). The report also stated that the rejected site in Great Russell Street was the best place for any new library, even though that had been the one recommendation barred by the committee's terms of reference.

22. The Dainton Committee proposed too that the British Museum's library should be institutionally separated from the British Museum and, with some other libraries and other undertakings, turned into a "national reference library". The Government accepted these recommendations in 1970 and, two years later, a "British Library", to articulate these ideas, was formally created, following an Act of Parliament.

23. A new institution thus came into being. This "British Library" consisted of a union (carried out during 1973 and 1974) of:

(a) the library in the British Museum which, at the time of the unification consisted of the Department of Printed Books (including music, prints, drawings, maps and the philatelic collection of the Museum); the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books; the Department of Western Manuscripts; the collection of newspapers (of which British newspapers of the years before 1801 and all newspapers since 1801 had long been held in a building in the suburb of Colindale); the new National Reference Library of Science and Invention; and the Patent Office Library;

(b) the National Central Library, which was the central clearing house of an inter-library network (originally financed by the Carnegie Trust and later by the universities), with its cataloguing and loan services;

(c) the National Lending Library for Science and Technology (at one time a part of the Library at the Science Museum); and

(d) the "British National Bibliography", a publishing business set up in 1947 by the Library Association to compile bibliographies and catalogues.

24. These bodies, except for the British Museum's Prints and Drawings (see next paragraph below), were then re-arranged as:

(a) the "Reference Division", under which misleading and inadequate name was included the old established Departments in the Museum of Printed Books, Manuscripts, and Oriental Manuscripts in the Museum, as well as the Science Reference Library (a new name for the National Library of Science and Invention). The Department of Printed Books was to remain responsible for the Newspaper Library and, curiously enough, for the Library Association Library in Ridgmount Street;

(b) a Bibliographical Services Division, based on expansion of the "British National Bibliography";

(c) a "Research and Development" Department, whose progenitor was the Office for Scientific and Technical Information (O.S.T.I.) and which "promotes research and development related to library operations";

(d) a central administration with an Accommodation Office and a Security Office, for which there were no obvious ancestors; and

(e) a Lending Division, to include the old National Lending Library of Science and Technology as well as the National Central Library.

25. These divisions, departments and branches were mostly established in and around Bloomsbury, within half-an-hour's walk of each other - with the exception of the Lending Division, in Boston Spa, Yorkshire, and the Newspaper Collection, still at Colindale.

26. This complex organisation, now misleadingly labelled "the British Library", thus lumbered what had previously been the British Museum Library with several attachments, whose addition made arguments for a new library seem more plausible. The attachments were somewhat arbitrarily selected since it might have been sensible, in some ways, to have included the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum with the British Museum's artistic holdings; or perhaps to have amalgamated the National Reference Library of Science and Invention with the Library of the Science Museum. The exclusion of the Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings from the British Library was another anomaly - carried through as a result of the determination of its then keeper - even though the Dainton Committee's report had found that most users of the Print Room were wont to combine a visit there with one to the Library. (The Dainton Committee, in its paragraph 287, had explicitly suggested that the Print Room should be merged with any new library: but the idea was fought off).

27. Once the new organisation's administration had been formed, there was immediate pressure from within its directorate to collect all branches of the new institution under a single roof, separate from that of the British Museum. That pressure was successful. In 1975, it was decided to plan a new library on a 9½ acre site on Euston Road next to St. Pancras Station. Colin St. John Wilson and Partners, architects, the same firm which had designed the buildings envisaged for the Great Russell Street site, and also engineers and surveyors were appointed by the Department of the Environment. In March 1978, the then Secretary of State

for Education and Science, Mrs. Shirley Williams, gave formal approval to the plan. The building was to be constructed for the Library by the Department of the Environment, through its "directorate of civil accommodation", in the Property Services Agency. In November 1980, after discussion, a revised version of the first stage of the original plan was approved by Mr. Norman St. John Stevas, the Minister of the Arts, to whom authority for the arrangements had gone in Mrs. Thatcher's administration. In April 1982 work began. British Library News of that month suggested that "work on the substructure" would begin in 1984.

28. Meantime, the conglomeration of new services in the library cannot be said to have been an unqualified success. The Library photographic services, for example, appear to have incurred a loss of £119,000 through non-payment of manually prepared invoices in its Reference Division (Bloomsbury): the computer did not seem to work very well.*

* See Appropriate Accounts 1979/80 Class X Vote 9 Libraries England, paragraphs 24-29; see also The Times, July 9, 1981 where it is reported that some administrative department was responsible; another £48,000 of computer-prepared invoices had been outstanding for more than six months.

II THE PLANS FOR A NEW BRITISH LIBRARY

29. The present project is for a British Library to be built on an irregular quadrilateral of land bounded by Euston Road, Midland Road, Phoenix Road and Ossulton Street, known as Somers Town, which once belonged to St Pancras Station. Work on the site has begun. Plans for the projected building have been made available.* They are of debatable aesthetic merit.

The proposal includes scope for "exhibition and restaurant areas", "lecture and meeting room facilities", as well as a new "open space". The reading rooms appear as an important element in what looks in some ways to be less a library than a community centre. This aspect of the plans has been muted in public presentations of the scheme.

30. The "first stage" of the scheme, costed at £88 million in the prices of September 1981, accounts for about two-fifths of the total area. It is understood that this stage is expected to establish a Science Library, some Science reading rooms, and storage for books on four floors underground. It is expected to be complete in 1991, if the "existing timetable is adhered to".

31. In April 1982, as already indicated, work on what the architects describe as stage 1AA of the scheme was begun. It will be followed by Stage 1AB. These two stages are expected to be finished by about 1985. The building will by then apparently house:

(a) a large depository, able to contain all the books from Woolwich and other outlying storehouses;

(b) a unification of the branches of the Science Reference Library;

* See Library Association Record, vol 80, no 4 (April 1978), pages 180-83; and Architectural Review, December 1978, pages 336-44.

(c) some of the administrative and information services belonging to the Library; and

(d) the central heating and air conditioning plant for (a) to (c) above and for the rest of the project as approved in 1978.

32. All would then be ready for approval of Stage 1 B, which would mean beginning the building of new reading rooms to replace those parts of the British Library hitherto always housed in the Museum, in the accommodation specially built for them.

33. Stage 2 would complete the whole bibliopolis as originally planned, but cannot be expected to be finished till the very late 1990s, even if the original time schedule be kept to.

34. The new Library, when complete, would seat 3,500, instead of a present total of about 1,200 in the combined reading rooms of the British Library (excluding Colindale and the Lending Library). It would employ 2,500 people instead of the present 1,475 in the same departments of the institution: an increase of 80% on today's already inflated numbers. In 1969, those working in the equivalent bodies of the Museum Library seem to have numbered only about 500 (see Appendix III); in 1975/1976 the figure was 646.

35. While the new bibliopolis is being built, the true "British Library" will remain in the Museum where it always was before its institutional metamorphosis, its heart in the Round Reading Room close to its indispensable adjuncts, the North Library and the Manuscript Room, although the Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books have now been moved to a reading room in Store Street. Other "Reference" sub-divisions in London will remain where they are. The Science Reference Library will remain in the Aldwych reading room at 9 Kean Street, and the Patents, and the Foreign Patents reading room will remain at Holborn*.

* All the addresses are given in Appendix IV.

III THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST THE PLANS

36. Against this background, it is now possible to consider the case made for the plan approved by the Secretary of State in 1978, given general support by Mr. Norman St. John Stevas in 1980, and embarked upon without commitment to go beyond the beginning by Mr. Paul Channon in 1981. The arguments are:-

37. Space for books - there is need to house the growing number of books (and other printed matter) in the Reference Division, whose number is expected to rise from about 10.4 million today (British Library Ninth Annual Report) to 25 million by the year 2000. At present, nearly half the existing books (or "items") are outside the Library's stores in the Museum, mostly at Woolwich Arsenal, but also some in a number (apparently four or five) of other "outhouses";* this makes for delays in delivery of books and is said also to risk damage to them.

38. My reply to that argument about the book space is that the kind of building which can house a constantly expanding number of books efficiently, and the staff to look after them, is not necessarily the one best suited for readers. Indeed, the temperature and humidity levels requisite for readers' comfort differ markedly from those ideal for conservation of books and papers. There is thus distinct advantage in, and no incompatibility between, on the one hand, keeping the present Reading Room as a place of study and, on the other hand, building or converting store-houses, or providing in other ways for keeping the books air-conditioned. If shortage of space were the only argument in criticism of the existing state of affairs, it would thus be appropriate merely to build

* The exact number of stores is not disclosed.

a new store-house, providing that it be reasonably close to the Museum. The site at Euston Road would, no doubt, be a good place for such a building. Service to the British Museum - ten to fifteen minutes' walk away - could be by van. I have been persuaded to agree that an overhead passage of the type used to connect the Uffizi Gallery and the Pitti Palace over the River Arno by the Ponte Vecchio is too imaginative a concept for our days. But a real alternative might be an underground passage perhaps served by rail or other system. Even on foot the distance from Euston Road to Bloomsbury is no more than from one end of the palace of Versailles to another. It is thought that a disused post office tunnel could supply some of the underground connections.

39. Moreover, as the Dainton Committee observed, "there must be a substantial amount of material in both the British Museum Library and the National Library of Science and Invention which could be out-housed with very little inconvenience" (paragraph 323)* because it is used so rarely. Since books have for years been brought from Woolwich and other places by van, this would not be a new departure and a good service could be ensured more easily from a specially designed warehouse near at hand than from any existing depository. In 1968 (and, judging from the table in the latest Ninth Report of the Library**, this percentage, I fear, has increased) a third of the one and a quarter million new items each year derived from "foreign official publications". (Dainton, paragraph 13 (iii)). How ironic that it should be the deluge of such verbiage that threatens to expel readers from their old temple! The Ninth Report of the British Library on its page 20 explains that the 26 "kilometres" of shelving used for "official publications" is "greatly disproportionate to the limited demand which they satisfy" and engagingly adds: "The possibilities for encouraging greater use of official publications are being investigated."

* The Dainton Committee in fact recommended a "deliberate policy of out-housing" (paragraph 324)

** Page 17

40. At present, no manuscripts are held outside the Museum. Nor do any rare books seem to be so held. In 1968, at the time of the Dainton Report, requisition slips for books which had to come from Woolwich numbered less than 1 per cent (0.75%) of those for books at Bloomsbury.

41. The argument in respect of air and pollutants is that the conditions under which the stock of books are now held do not protect them adequately against deterioration; some are, allegedly, "beyond repair" in consequence. The best way to preserve books is said to be to store them at a constant temperature in "an atmosphere free of pollutants and at a constant humidity".

42. My comment on this is that it is indeed a serious problem. It is not easy, however, to see why it should have become such an urgent issue during the last few years when the air of London has improved. Yet the matter was not so much as mentioned in the Dainton Committee's Report. The oldest books have survived very well for several hundred years, because of the quality of their paper and leather bindings.

43. It is evident that there are serious problems whose solutions differ and conflict with each other: first, there is the damage caused by central heating to old binding and to certain kinds of paper; second, the damage caused by pollutants and atmospheric conditions to some modern paper. Some experts believe that the libraries, depositories and reading rooms, should be fully air-conditioned. Others consider that to be undesirable and that in England books only need to be kept in humid constant temperatures. Since, as noted in paragraph 38, different conditions are needed in reading rooms, these problems need further consideration before further action be taken.

44. Most great libraries in England are not air-conditioned. The evidence available does not prove that the entire British Library should be. When the libraries in Trinity College, Cambridge, and at Eton College, for example, were recently remodelled, it was not considered necessary that they should be air-conditioned. "Duke Humfrey", in the Bodleian, full of old rarities and MSS, is not, nor is Christchurch, Oxford, whose great Burton Collection has survived in its unheated location since 1640.

45. Some problems remain:

(a) only the most meticulous maintenance can avoid difficulties deriving from air-conditioning and, in the conditions of modern Britain, that may be difficult to secure. There is also no reason why the book-stacks in the British Museum should require unusual conditions: they are probably at present too dry, being maintained at a high temperature. The consequent problem might easily be put right by lowering the temperature and so saving the cost of fuel; and

(b) the digging of a large and deep hole to be the location for a store of books will certainly cause some unforeseen problems for books kept there.

46. Two additional points seem worth making in connection with air-conditioning:

(a) in the future, deterioration of books may occur because of the decline in the quality of paper now used in many. This also applies to many books published since 1870. At that time, the character of paper generally changed. Books published since then are those principally at risk; and

(b) use, not air, probably causes the gravest damage to books. Books are at risk each time they are moved from a shelf to a desk, and would be so whether the intermediate journey were carried through by machinery or by human hands - automatic machinery may easily affect books as badly as human handling. Machines go wrong more often than human beings.

47. Overcrowding - the 785 seats in all the public rooms of the British Library at Bloomsbury and the 220 seats in the various reading rooms of the Science Reference Library are said to be inadequate and restrict the Library to an "elite of scholars". This point was made by an unsigned article in the Architects Journal of 14 April 1982 speaking of the new library being likely to be far more accessible to the public than the existing over-crowded accommodation!

48. This is false in fact and also misrepresents the purpose of the library proper. There is now rarely any shortage of seats in any of the British Library's reading rooms.* When the scheme for a new British Library was mooted, in the late 1960s, that was not the case. There were times then, in some summers, when there were so many research students from abroad that one could find no seat at all in the Round Reading Room. In August 1968, about half of one day's complement of readers in it were visitors from abroad. That is no longer so. Requests for books have declined and, despite a modest rise in the year 1977 to 1978, stand at about 580,000 a year, about one third what they were in 1968 (they then totalled 1.6 million).**

49. A sifting of those who apply for permanent tickets to keep out those who can find what they need in public, university or other libraries, has much reduced pressure on the Reading Room. The British Library is not intended as a library of first resort: last resort has always been its purpose. It was never contemplated that anyone should use it for "browsing".

50. Perhaps a time will come when a new generation of well-endowed students from abroad will again come to this country in large numbers. But Britain should not abandon a well-loved part of its national heritage for an unsatisfactory substitute in order to satisfy a hypothetical influx of students from distant places in the future. Many of them in the past said that they returned to the Reading Room incidentally because they liked it!

51. The argument that the Reference Division, by applications for admission, is catering for a minority of scholars and not for the wider public, is wholly mistaken. The Museum Library has catered for an elite ever since its inception. It must continue so to function. There is another point here: in 1968, university staff and research students totalled

* See Appendix II

** Dainton Report: Ninth Report of the Library, (1982) page 33

two-thirds of all readers (Dainton Report, paragraph 48). Today, happily, a multitude of public libraries and ancillary library services (not least, the Lending Division of the British Library) has brought greater access to books, and a much greater range of them, within the reach of all. It would be unwarrantable to support a new building for the British Library by claiming for it a new function already fulfilled by the London borough libraries.

52. It is important to recognise that the Library now merged in the British Library was from its foundation designed, as it should continue, to serve "an elite of scholars" from anywhere in the world, exactly as were the Bibliotheque Nationale, the Royal Libraries in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, and the Library of Congress in the U.S. Like these, it was conceived as a national "library of last resort" for scholars and researchers whose work needed resources richer and more extensive than those available in their own or similar institutions accessible to them.

53. No other national library known aims to be a "community centre" such as the present directorate of the British Library apparently has in mind. All are, and always have been, directed and controlled by scholars of repute. It is unfortunate that for the first time in its history the British Library is now controlled, not by scholars of the standing of Sir Frank Francis and his predecessors, but by an administration in which scholars are a dwindling minority, while policy is influenced by the needs of "professional librarians", computer technologists, and personnel with "managerial" or "marketing" experience.

54. Experience of what happened in the Public Record Office may be of interest in this respect. There, a temporary increase in readers - partly because of the alteration of the fifty-year rule on official documents to a thirty years one - seemed to add weight to the argument of those who desired expansion; but in fact, the new Public Record Office at Kew is half the time half-empty.

55. Bad Service - the complaint that present service is bad is best met by arranging that the Reading Room be once again

staffed by an educated, and interested, staff, such as - and all who have constantly used the Reading Room will wish to confirm this - used to be the case in 1969, and earlier. It is the delivery of books which still leaves something to be desired, although there has been a marked improvement lately.

56. Establishment of a new depository within the short distance of the Euston Road site from the north side of the Museum would certainly reduce to half an hour or less the delays necessitated now by the much greater distance of the depository in Woolwich.

57. Bad conditions for the staff - it is undesirable that staff of any institution should work in bad conditions, especially those of a great library. Conditions have recently been improved for most of those who work in the Reference Division. Better arrangements could possibly be made if it were accepted that the Reading Room is to remain at the centre of the Reference Division's undertakings, not just until the late 1990s (as is anyway inevitable), but permanently.

58. A consolidation of the Science libraries should certainly be made if possible. Much of the work in these libraries derives from requests for information from abroad which may be more easily satisfied by the centralisation of this specialised collection.

59. Efficiency - This argument is that a new library building would make possible more efficient mechanisation of the services of the Library, including computer access to remote data; better data processing; and an automatic handling system for efficient delivery of books.

60. My comment about that is that no one in their senses would wish to reject the benefits of innovation, provided it be a benefit. Yet the planners of the new Library have shown little awareness of what non-scientific research requires or entails. Expectations of the early 1970s about scholars' use of new technology have not been fulfilled. There have perhaps been too many scientists on the Board of the British Library, who do not always appreciate the nature and needs of research in the humanities. Even had it been demonstrated, as it has

not, that such devices were useful, that in itself is not an argument for a lavish expenditure to install them. What proportion of readers will really wish to use them?

61. Here, naturally, students of different subjects may disagree; but most readers in the humanities are likely to benefit more from what Dr. Mordaunt Crook has called the "unique contiguity" of books with works of art and antiquities than that of only books and access to data banks. Most readers would prefer a book to a microfilm of that book. The suggestion that nearly every seat in the new Library will be equipped with facilities for microfilm does not fill every heart with joy - because many readers will scarcely ever need to use such machines.

62. On these matters, it is evident that even some who work on the British Library staff have doubts: the report of the Library in 1979 pointed out that "the arrival of computers makes so great an impact, and generates so much enthusiasm (!), that technology for technology's sake could smother the human reflection and life-enhancing purposes to which libraries and literature and the arts in particular have for so long contributed so much". It could indeed.

63. Centralisation - It is said that there are benefits which derive from "cross-fertilisation" or meeting of disciplines in a major centralised library which has everything in it from patents to maps. The case for having, say, all the Scientific Reference collections and the Library of the Library Association in one building with the holdings of the old British Museum Library cannot be assumed: it must be made. The case for such massive centralisation was not made, however, in the Dainton Committee's Report, nor has it been made elsewhere. Are historians and theologians likely to benefit from access to patents and technological literature? "Cross-fertilization" between all fields in Humanities and Social Sciences is already provided for in the Museum Library. The sciences need separate provision; "cross-fertilization" understates their needs. The sciences are indivisible.

* Fifth Report

64. Users of the Science Reference Library know, in fact, that their work would be better served by proximity to the Science Museum itself than to holdings in Bloomsbury relating to Byzantium. Egyptologists would certainly prefer to be closer to the Egyptian collection in the Museum than, say, to current journals of librarianship. What case is there for having the great collections of the Music Room cheek by jowl with Patents? Why really is the Stamp Collection to be included in the new colossus, while the Prints and Drawings are excluded, and so distanced from the vast number of books for which so many of the prints were commissioned, and from those which reproduce and discuss both prints and drawings?

65. The notion that there is a need for one large library to collect all of a nation's knowledge is hardly a self-evident truth: except to enthusiasts for centralisation for its own sake. The inefficiency of centralisation, well demonstrated in other areas of our national life, may however be as great with regard to libraries.

66. In any case, the plans envisaged for the British Library would not achieve centralisation. The Department of Prints and Drawings is to remain in the Museum, though historians of art and other scholars would prefer contiguity to that collection. The Library's Newspaper Collection will remain at Colindale, though historians of the press - indeed, modern historians in general - will continue thereby to be inconvenienced by the long journey to Colindale. What help will it be that they will have at hand the British Library Automated Information Service (B.L.A.I.S.E.) a facility rarely used, if at all, so far by readers in the humanities departments of the Libraries?

67. The Museum needs space - finally there is the argument that the Museum needs more space to show new items in its collection and even wishes to show the Round Reading Room, as Lord Trend and Sir Fred Dainton once put it, with an uncharacteristic touch of populism, to "more people than has been the case hitherto". It would be unkind to suggest that the Trustees of the Museum have devised this argument to

answer the question as to what they would do with Panizzi's and Smirke's masterpiece if they could get their hands upon it. Most museums wish to expand. The Museum has wished to do so for a generation. But there is no reason why the Library should gratuitously provide space for another institution. For that in effect is what would happen: the nation would pay for a new Library and the Museum would get free space - though not, of course, without the enormous cost of removal and of taking the bookcases (built-in and glazed), desks, and other furniture, and replacing them with new ones.

68. One argument for the retention of Panizzi's Reading Room is that its size and design facilitates research in any branch of the Humanities and Social Sciences, and that to provide anything comparable in the projected new library would now be impossibly expensive. Research often necessitates incursions into many branches of study, but one can never forecast into which others. To have at immediate command, therefore, on the open shelves of the Round Room the range of reference and bibliographical material which its size and shape make easily accessible, is a great help to researchers. To have this range of material dispersed into separate reading rooms, on three different floors (as Mr. St. John Wilson's plan apparently proposed) would be positively inconvenient. No combination of lifts or escalators could make such a three-floor distribution anything like as time saving, convenient, and economical as the arrangements now existing in the Reading Room. The new plan would require a tripling of staff, but would narrow their experience and, consequently, the range of help that they could make available.

69. It may be said by some that this paper has neglected the argument that the proposed British Library would best be loved because of its services as a new cultural centre. Manchester has created just such a bibliopolis. But the benefits are far from obvious. What is the justification for all these projected meeting rooms and exhibition halls? To give, among other things, readers a good excuse for not reading. If they are not intended for readers but for visitors, or the staff, they can scarcely be said to satisfy what the Dainton Committee described as "to provide a national reference collection of books, contemporary and antique, British and foreign" (Command 4028, paragraph 31).

70. A good library should no doubt have places where exhibitions can be held. Magna Carta and Shakespeare's First Folio should be on show. Whether a greatly extended series of exhibits is desired by the public or by readers is unknown. Certainly, there should be places in which to have coffee and light meals. Such facilities are today provided in cafes near the British Museum in or around Great Russell Street.

71. Finally, the new project has not been fully costed. The first estimate for the new building at the time of the inception of the British Library in 1973 was £36 million. Estimates for the completed new building in the end now (1983) range from £300 million to £600 million. There are no guesses at all for what the furnishing and equipment, as well as the upkeep, would cost. Such buildings always cost far more than seems to be the case ab initio. The operating cost of the National Theatre, for example, was £3.2 million in 1977/78, against £6.6 million in 1982/83. The likelihood of the same sort of rise happening in the Library is indicated by the figures already quoted about the extraordinary increase in staff already achieved for this new institution. The feckless attitude to money shown by the photographic division may be indicative. The likely costs of the computerised information retrieval side of the Library's affairs are certain to be colossal, though it might generate some revenue, if other comparable endeavours are any guide.

VI CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

72. The conclusion from the arguments discussed here is that the Library should modify its plans for a huge new building and instead construct a new storehouse on the site at Euston Road. This should be capable of receiving all the Library's books now held in depositories, those expected to be acquired up to the year 2000, and those which may be acquired during the first half of the 21st century. The areas which the present plan allocates for various forms of leisure not related to research should be abandoned and the present books in Bloomsbury should be left there. It should thus be possible to provide much more space for storage than hitherto projected while still spending less than the plans at present envisage.

73. It has been questioned, it is true, whether books will continue to be published in the same form in future years (sotto voce and in private even by advocates of the new building for the British Library). Information will perhaps be acquired, it has been suggested, through magnetic tape cassettes or some form of person-to-person computerage. Such daydreams are premature. Even in England, with a generous public library service, and a good deal of television watching, more books are being bought than ever before. World literacy, as well as world population, is also increasing. There can be no reasonable doubt that books will be published in ever larger numbers. But such new technology will surely make it unlikely that the existing reading rooms of the Library will soon again be over-crowded.

74. Assuming money is available, the British Library should go ahead and construct a new Science Reference Library, though it is not urgent.

75. The Library should continue to use, as a main Reading Room, the famous round room in the centre of the British Museum. The Bloomsbury library should be connected by underground passage to the storehouse in Euston Road. The Museum should accept that the library at its heart inspired by

one of their greatest directors, Sir Anthony Panizzi, is there for good, and should also recognise that, unusual as the arrangement undoubtedly is, this has many benefits which continue to be prized by those who work in both the library and Museum. A remarkable achievement would thus be preserved. The Round Reading Room reflects the ideal that a library still can be (in the words of Lord Clark) "at the centre of visual testimonies to man's enlightenment". This act of preservation will gladden many, here and abroad. All who have worked in great foreign libraries know that none of them offer the facilities available in the Bloomsbury Reading Room, even though some of them were consciously modelled on it. The needs of the Museum to expand should be satisfied in other locations nearby.

APPENDIX I

International Committee of the Campaign to Save
The Round Reading Room

Present Members

Hugh Thomas (Lord Thomas of Swynnerton), Secretary

Dr. J. Mordaunt Crook

Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre of Glanton)

Professor John Hale

Wayland Young (Lord Kennet)

Dr Shirley Letwin

The Rt. Hon. Maurice Macmillan MP

I. A. Shapiro

Kingsley Amis

Professor John Bayley

Sir Isaiah Berlin OM

Sir John Betjeman

Sarah Bradford

Sir Arthur Bryant

Richard Collier

Antonia Fraser (Lady Antonia Pinter)

Philip Gaskell

John Grigg

Professor Eric Hobsbawm

Elizabeth Jane Howard

Alistair Horne

Paul Johnson

The Lord Kaldor

Professor Elie Kedourie

Walter Kendall

Professor William Letwin

Johnathan Miller

Professor Karl Miller

Kenneth Minogue

Iris Murdoch

Dr. Conor Cruise O' Brien

Thomas Pakenham

Sir Karl Popper

The Lord Quinton

Professor G. S. Rousseau (California)

Anthony Sampson

Professor Leonard Schapiro

Professor Arthur Schlesinger (New York)

Professor Claudio Veliz (Australia)

David Watt

Dame Veronica Wedgwood OM

Professor Maurice Wilkins

Professor Richard Wollheim

Woodrow Wyatt

APPENDIX II

Record of recent visits to the Reading Rooms of the British Library, July 1982 and May 1983. The record does not differ much from visits made in October 1979.

Science Reference Library

Total seating said in Reports of British Library to be 204 but my estimate by eye is that there are 350 seats in all.

(i) Holborn Branch 1 (Old Patents Office Library)

34 persons present at 3.15 p.m. on July 7 1982 and 46 people at 3.00 p.m. on May 5 1983. The top floor was empty on both occasions though there are seats there which could be used; three people present on first floor on July 7. The total seating seems to be 270: 72 on top floor, 66 on first floor, 101 on ground floor.

(ii) Holborn Branch 2 (Foreign Patents)

3 readers, about 32 seats, 4.05 p.m. on July 7, and 24 people present at 3.15 p.m. on May 5 1983.

(iii) Aldwych Branch (Kean Street)

6 persons present and 52 seats at 3.40 p.m. on July 7, 1982, people present at 3.15 p.m. on May 5 1983.

British Museum Library (now Reference Division of the British Library)

(i) Round Reading Room

178 persons were sitting down in seats at 3.10 p.m. on July 6. Perhaps another 20 were consulting catalogues. 190 were seated on May 5 1983, 30 consulting catalogues. The seating there is 412.

(ii) North Library including gallery

53 people sitting down at 3.25 p.m. on July 6, and 54 people were there at 1.20 p.m. on May 5 1983. 2 were consulting attendants. Total seats number 146.

(iii) Official Publications Library (ex State Paper Room) (including Music Reading Room)

5 people there at 3.45 p.m. on July 6 in 96 seats, 28 people there at 1.20 p.m. on May 5 1983. Music tables more crowded than the rest of the Room.

(iv) Map Reading Room

6 people, 27 seats at 3.40 p.m. on July 6; 2 people at 2.00 p.m. on May 5 1983.

(v) Typing Room adjacent to Reading Room

Three people present in May 1983.

(vi) Oriental Manuscripts

3 people, 32 seats, in 1982; 7 people there on May 5 1983.

(vii) Manuscripts

27 people, 56 seats, at 4.00 p.m. on July 6, 1982.

(viii) Library of the Library Association

4 persons present at 5.00 p.m. on October 17 and 4 persons on May 5 1983 at 2.45 p.m. No attendant visible to ask questions. Total seats, perhaps, 24.

APPENDIX III

Staff in the British Library and its ancestors

	1968/68		1982/83	
British Museum Museum	90 senior 165 other exec. 255	255		
Nat. Reference Library of Science & Technology	27 senior 130 other exec. 157	157	1100	(in Reference Division of British Library)
British National Bibliography	80	80	202	(Bibliograph- ical Divison)
Porters, cleaners, messengers, say	50	50	—	
		542	1302	
	(Figures in paras. 42 & 73 of the Dainton Committee's Report)		(Figures from the British Library's Ninth Annual Report)	

APPENDIX IV

Present Sites of the British Library

Reference Division:	
Department of Printed Books	British Museum
Department of Manuscripts	
Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books	Store Street
Science Reference Library:	25 Southampton Buildings WC2 19 Kean Street
Bibliographical Services Division:	2 Sheraton Street W1
Research and Development:	2 Sheraton Street W1
Library Association Library:	8 Rathbone Place
Newspaper Library	Colindale

APPENDIX V

The Cost of a Tunnel

Extract from an estimate by a reputable firm of engineers
(1982)

We understand that this project is required for the transportation of documents and therefore an expanded concrete lining would appear to provide the best form for the tunnel. This type of lining would be inexpensive to produce, fast to erect behind a shield and straightforward to waterproof against the amount of water generally encountered within the London Clay.

Our global estimate of the costs of such tunnels would be as follows:

(a) 1.5 miles of 6 foot internal diameter expanded concrete lining built within London Clay from purpose built shafts at adequately sized working sites which have no access restrictions. £1.5 m

(b) 1.5 miles of 12 foot internal diameter expanded concrete lining built within London Clay from purpose built shafts at adequately sized working sites which have no access restrictions. £2.0 m

The above prices refer only to Civil Engineering works and do not include finishes and Mechanical and Electrical equipment.

It should also be emphasised that the prices assume favourable ground conditions at the site, an assumption which should be tested by appropriate site investigation before the quoted figures can be confirmed.