



Food for the Soul

The World's Great Libraries

From clay tablets and classical papyri to medieval illuminated manuscripts, our hunger for knowledge has been traced back from the earliest civilisations to modern day; and how we preserve that knowledge is just as important. Libraries are more than just repositories of information and intellectual capital. They are institutions where we can learn about world history, people, places and cultures we wouldn't otherwise know about.

Text: Teri Glass | Images: © iStockphoto.com

With World Book Day approaching, we delve into the wonderful world of libraries, both current and ancient.

New York Public Library

The New York Public Library was founded in 1895 and comprises four non-lending research libraries, four main lending libraries, a library for the blind and physically handicapped, as well as 77 neighbourhood branch libraries.

Altogether, the New York Public

Library collections amount to more than 50 million items and more than 20 million books. Its Rare Books Division contains treasures such as the first four Folio editions of the works of William Shakespeare, the first book printed in North America (1543), the first book printed in English in America (1640) and the first printings of the Declaration of Independence, to name but a few.

The two famous statues of lions,

The Library of Congress holds more than 32 million books and other print materials, as well as the largest rare book collection in North America.

sculpted by Edward C. Potter, were placed in front of the library building at Fifth Avenue in 1911. During the 1930s, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia named them Patience and Fortitude, as he felt they were the qualities New Yorkers needed to survive the Great Depression. Today, Patience still guards the south side of the Library steps and Fortitude, its north side.

Library of Congress

Situated in Washington D.C. and housed in the Capitol building, the Library of Congress was founded in 1800. It is the oldest federal cultural institution in America and the largest library in the world. The Capitol building was burned by British troops in 1814, destroying the library's main collection of over 3 000 volumes. In 1815, Thomas Jefferson sold his personal library of 6 487 books to the Library for \$23 950.

The Library of Congress holds more than 32 million books and other print materials, as well as the largest rare book collection in North America (more than 700 000 volumes). Among its

special collections are the rough draft of the Declaration of Independence and a Gutenberg Bible (one of only three perfect copies on vellum in the world). Its non-classified collections include over 105 million items ranging from audio materials, sheet music, manuscripts and maps to visual materials such as photographs, moving images, prints and drawings. The largest book in the Library is a 1.5 by 2.1 metre book featuring colour images recording the ancient life and culture of Bhutan in Southeast Asia.

British Library

The British Library in London (the UK's national library) holds approximately 14 million books, 920 000 journal and newspaper titles, 58 million patents and three million sound recordings, amongst many other things. Three million new items are added annually, calling for an extra 12km of shelves to be added to the existing 675km each year. In fact, if you were to see five items each day, it would take you over 80 000 years to see the

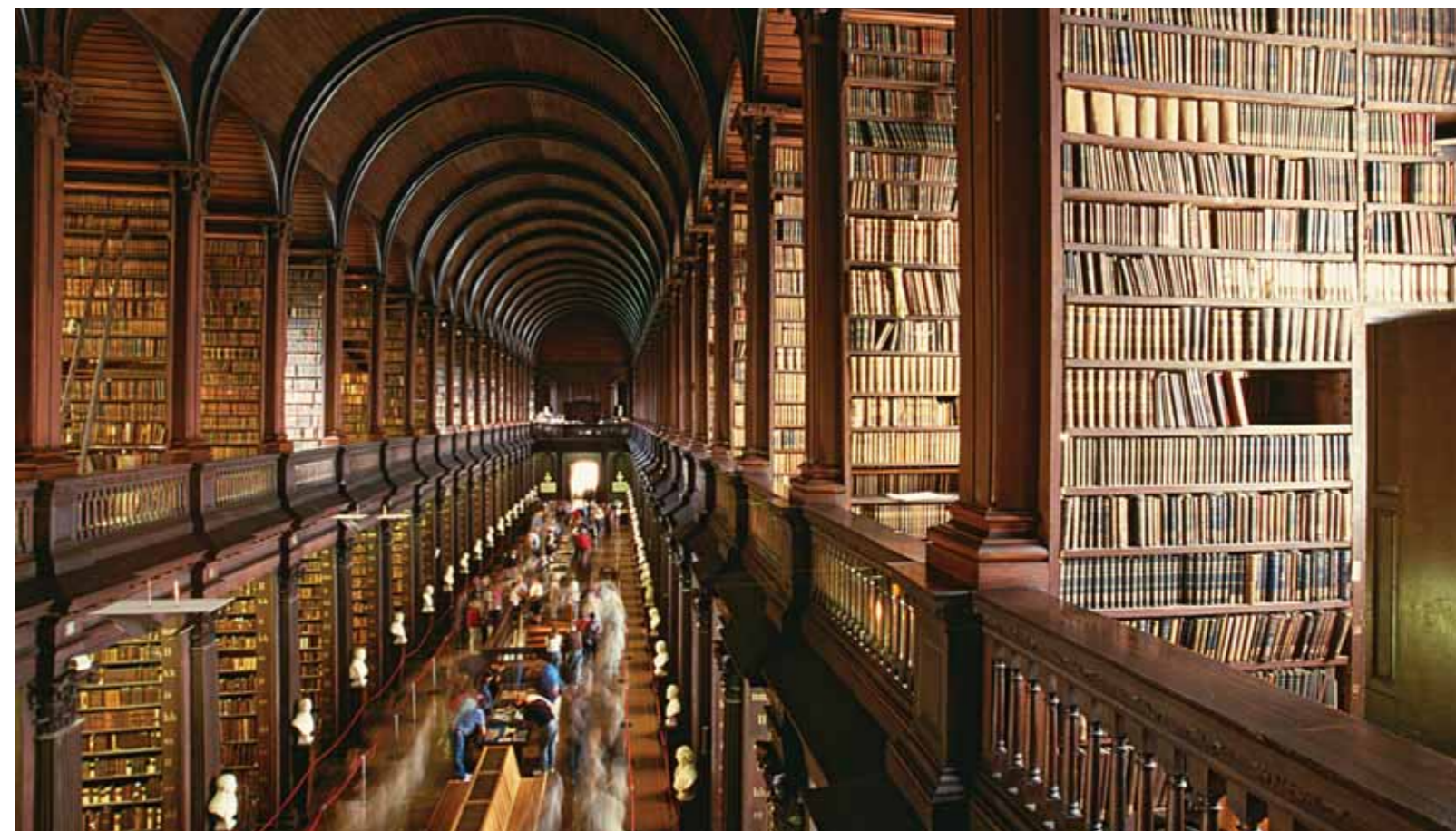
whole collection!

Some of the British Library treasures include: *The Magna Carta*, Leonardo da Vinci's notebook, *The Times* first edition from 18th March 1788 and the recording of Nelson Mandela's Rivonia trial speech.

The Bodleian Library

The second biggest library in Britain, the Bodleian is the most important of the Oxford University's libraries. It was first opened to scholars in 1602, incorporating the University's existing library in order to hold the numerous books donated by Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester. When King Edward VI, a Protestant, instituted a law designed to remove all remnants of Roman Catholicism from the English church, the majority of Humfrey's books were either destroyed or recycled. Interestingly, the leather from some of the covers was turned into gloves, while other books were burnt or sold. At present, only 16 of those original 280 books are known to have survived.

The Bodleian's collections include →





more than eight million volumes. Its special collections comprise a broad range of archives and manuscript volumes. These are divided into: Western manuscripts, Western-language rare books and printed ephemera, maps and music as well as Oriental manuscripts and rare books comprising material from the Middle East and Asia.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Located in Paris, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France is a result of the merger between the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Bibliothèque de France in 1994. However, its origins can be traced back to 1382 when Charles V placed 1 200 manuscripts at the Louvre. It has two branches – Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, whose collections include the Archives of the Bastille, and the Cabinet de Médailles, with collections of coins and antiquities originating from the treasuries of French kings of the Middle Ages.

Its collection boasts over 13 million books. It also has some 180 000 manuscripts, a large collection of prints, maps, drawings and paintings, sheet music, phonograph records, and medals and antiques.

Some the Great Libraries of the Ancient World

The Library of Ashurbanipal

Built in the city of Nineveh (modern-day Iraq), it is believed to be the first systematically collected library comprising thousands of clay tablets and fragments.

The Library of Alexandria

The Library of Alexandria was founded by King Ptolemy I Soter in Alexandria, Egypt. It was regarded as the largest and most beautiful library in the ancient world. The library was said to have housed approximately 400 000 volumes. It was burned down on several occasions, the exact details of which are still debated to this day.

The Library of Pergamum

Situated in present-day Turkey, the Library of Pergamum is another great ancient library. It is believed to have housed about 200 000 volumes, making it the only real rival to the Library of Alexandria for many years.

The Villa of the Papyri

Believed to have belonged to Julius Caesar’s father-in-law, Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, the

Villa of the Papyri was buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. It was rediscovered around 1752 when carbonised scrolls were found in the top storey of the villa.

The Library at Caesarea

Under the patronage of the priest, Pamphilius, the theological school of Caesarea gained a reputation for having the most extensive Christian library at that time. It is believed to have contained more than 30 000 manuscripts.

The House of Wisdom

The House of Wisdom, situated at the Academy of Gundishapur in Baghdad, was established during the Sassanian Dynasty. It was regarded as an unparalleled centre for the study of humanities and sciences, until it was destroyed following the fall of the empire.

The Library of Constantinople

Located in the capital city of the Byzantine Empire, it was one of the last of the great libraries of the ancient world. It was mostly destroyed during the Fourth Crusade in 1204.



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