Senate House Library Guide

Senate House Library

One of the UK’s largest academic libraries for arts, humanities & social sciences

From medieval illuminated manuscripts and rare first editions through to clandestine publications and more recent political pamphlets, Senate House Library’s collection of over 2 million books, 50 special collections and 1,600 archival collections is unique in its breadth and diversity of material.

The library and its collections have been continuously developed since the 1780s and include highlights such as the first folios of Shakespeare published in 1623, a roll depicting the funeral of Anne of Cleves from 1557 and Lord Byron’s unfinished draft for Don Juan. Lord Byron’s unfinished draft for Don Juan, a roll depicting the funeral of Anne of Cleves from 1557 and Lord Byron’s unfinished draft for Don Juan, a collection on magic and the paranormal who deposited his ‘Harry Price Library of Magical Literature’, in the Library in 1936, just as Senate House’s construction was being completed.

The art deco building, which Senate House Library is part of, is a literary landmark in the heart of Bloomsbury, located next to the British Museum.

Senate House Library occupies the 4th to the 19th floors of the building with member areas on the 4th to 7th floors containing over 430 study spaces.

There are 6 main historic library reading rooms on the 4th floor: 
- Goldsmith’s Library reading room 
- Middlesexes South and North reading rooms 
- Sterling Library / Palaeography room (Special Collections) 
- Durning Lawrence Library 
- Periodicals room 

Also on the 4th floor is the Durning Lawrence Library and the Dr Sung Tae Lee Seminar Room which are used for meetings and private hire.

Senate House Library was formerly known as the University of London Library. The University of London was founded in 1836 and, two years later, in 1838 it received its first donation of 200 books. The first known mention to the University of London Library appears in 1846. Only in 2004 was it renamed Senate House Library. The Library is open to the public as well as students and academics of the University of London – membership is required.

In 1937, after a century of being housed in temporary premises, the University of London and its Library permanently moved to Senate House. The beautiful art deco building was constructed between 1932 and 1937 as the first phase of an uncompleted scheme designed by the University by Charles Holden. It consists of 19 floors and is 210 feet (64 m) high.

During the Second World War the Ministry of Information used Senate House as its headquarters. The building would later become the model for the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. Today Senate House is an architectural landmark in the heart of Bloomsbury and is open to the public for events and conferences. It is also a popular venue for film and TV productions.