

Historic Reading Room

Large print guide

Who created this Library?

Enriqueta Rylands (1843-1908), founder of The John Rylands Library

Enriqueta Rylands built and named the Library in memory of her husband John. When John died in 1888, he left his widow Enriqueta around £2.5 million. Overnight, she became one of the richest women in the country. Enriqueta had a vision to establish a major library for Manchester. She not only wanted to support the education of religious ministers and students, but also to share the treasures of the Library with the widest possible audience.

Enriqueta never explained why she chose this cramped site, near a notorious slum area, and away from Manchester's existing museums and galleries. Perhaps she hoped to spark an improvement in a run-down area. Perhaps she thought the Library should stand amongst the warehouses which were the source of her wealth.

The Library building took over ten years to construct and cost £224,086. Enriqueta spared no expense in building the Library's collections, including the purchases of the Spencer library for £210,000 in 1892 and Crawford manuscripts in 1901 costing £155,000.

The Library building was inaugurated on 6th October 1899: Enriqueta's 24th wedding anniversary. On the same day Enriqueta became the first woman to be awarded the Freedom of the City of Manchester an honour that was not given to another woman till the 1950s. When she died in 1908, she gave the Library an additional endowment of £200,000, by far the largest of her many charitable gifts.

Visitors to the Library often mistake the statue of Enriqueta as Queen Victoria. The statue faces that of her husband John, at the other end of the reading room.

Who was John Rylands?

John Rylands (1801–1888)

John Rylands made his millions in Manchester through textile production and distribution. Victorian Manchester was nicknamed 'Cottonopolis' when it boomed as the world's first industrialised city. Merchants like John were key to the city's growth. John established the firm of Rylands & Sons with his father and brothers in 1819 and by the 1860s it was the largest textile business in Britain.

John had a reputation as a considerate employer and gave generously to a range of charities and educational causes.

Enriqueta, the founder of the Library, was John's third wife, unfortunately we know very little about how they met.

Sometime in the 1860s she became a 'companion' to Martha, John's second wife, and joined the couple in their charitable activities. Enriqueta married John on 6 October 1875 and remained with him until his death in 1888.

The light fittings within the Library are shaped like cotton flowers, in reference to John's success in the textile industry.

How has the Library changed over time?

Within a year of John's death in 1888, Enriqueta began the building of the Library. The build took ten years at a cost of £224,086, opening to readers on New Year's Day 1900.

Enriqueta commissioned the architect Basil Champneys to design the Library, after seeing his work at Mansfield College, Oxford. In 1911 he submitted plans for an extension as the building was struggling to cope with the growing collections, and had never contained enough office space. The extension included modern library designs, including glass-floored stacks within the collection stores, also seen at the New York Central Library.

The first extension opened in 1920, having been delayed by shortages of labour and materials caused by World War I. Further extensions were added in 1962 and 1970. The 1970 building was demolished in 2004 and the space used to build the modern extension which opened in 2007.

Who is responsible for the Library now?

With its fortunes inextricably linked to the textile industry, which saw a decline in the early 20th century, the Library struggled to meet its running costs. The Library relied on private benefactors and grants to support its work until 1972, when it merged with The University of Manchester Library.

In its life, the Library has seen many changes; from its escape from serious damage during World War II to becoming the backdrop to Hollywood films. Through it all, we have remained a working library; open to all, with exceptional collections at the heart of everything we do.

What was Enriqueta's vision for the Library?

Neo-Gothic architecture was popular during the 19th century as it hinted at a pre- industrial age of honest workmanship and social harmony (far removed from the social realities of Victorian Britain). Enriqueta chose this grand style to help create an instant cultural heritage for Manchester to rival that of the ancient university cities.

The Historic Reading Room resembles the layout of a church; however the alcoves in this purpose built library were designed for private study.

The glass in the high windows was chosen to let light in, but obscure the view to the outside. Today, anyone can study in these inspirational spaces.

What makes this building special?

The Library was built using Cumbrian sandstone and the best Yorkshire hard blue stone. The stone is carved into impressive arches, and adorned with mythical creatures, symbols and realistic portraits of historic figures.

The statues by Robert Bridgeman include famous men like Shakespeare and Gutenberg. They complement the windows, by Charles Eamer Kempe, which represent the wide coverage of the Library's collections, from religion and art to science and printing.

The furniture in this space is original, from these exhibition cases to the tables and chairs. The book cases were designed to be secure and airtight, with a unique lock system.

Despite its medieval appearance, the building was cutting edge for the time. Enriqueta's concern for the upkeep of the collection drove her to look for pioneering technologies such as running the building on electricity rather than gas and using an air filtering system to protect the collection from the grimy Mancunian air outside.

The Library was given Grade 1 listed status in 1994, and needs a high level of care and attention to ensure it is preserved for future generations.

What type of collections are kept here?

After Enriqueta's initial purchases the Library has continued to grow and now contains over 1.4 million items. You may associate us with books – and you would be right – but we are also home to manuscripts, archives, maps, works of art and objects. Our collections span nearly 5,000 years, written in over 50 languages and covering most subjects. We are proud to look after such diverse collections.

Our oldest items include clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq) dating back thousands of years and Egyptian papyri. However, we also collect modern books and archives, and even emails.

Some books are enormous – John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, printed in the 1830s is nearly a metre tall. Some are tiny – less than 2.5 millimetres high.

The collections range from richly decorated manuscripts to flimsy broadsheets intended to be pasted on a wall.

We are often asked what the most valuable item in the Library is but we don't like putting a price on our collections – some of the scrappiest fragments provide priceless insights into the past. As custodians, we want to ensure that everyone can access the collection, drop in to an event, visit an exhibition or do research.

How do you look after so many items?

Part of our job is to make sure the collections are preserved for generations to come. We work to ensure our collections are looked after and kept in the best possible conditions. Our staff work hard to prevent damage and decay to the collections.

What you can see is only part of the collections. There are over 25 kilometres of shelving in specialist stores throughout the rest of the building and at The University of Manchester's Main Library on Oxford Road. In the past, books and archives were catalogued on index cards or handwritten lists; now you can find most of the collections through our online catalogues.

Is the Library still a working library?

We remain true to Enriqueta's original aims – the Library's world-class collections of rare books, manuscripts and archives, maps, works of art and objects are completely free to access online and in person. As we are a reference library you can't take items away with you. Instead, we have a purpose-built reading room on Level 4, where anyone can register as a reader and research our collections.

We are proud to be a part of The University of Manchester. Over 250,000 people visit and engage with the Library each year. Everyone is welcome in the Library, to study, research the collection, participate in our programme of events or simply enjoy how the space makes you feel.

Find out more about our programme of events and activities at the Library by signing up to our e-newsletter by visiting: www.manchester.ac.uk/library/rylands

What goes on behind the scenes?

The gallery alcoves above are now working spaces for The John Rylands Research Institute and Library. The Rylands brings together library professionals, humanities scholars and scientists to research the collection. Researchers have revealed new insights into our collections, ranging from ancient Greek papyri fragments to the works of American Beat writers.

Looking after the collection is a huge task. We have librarians, archivists, curators, collection assistants, photographers and conservators working together to organise, catalogue, digitise, preserve and support access to our vast collections. We are committed to providing access to the collections, and delivering activities for undergraduates, schools, colleges, adults and families in line with Enriqueta's vision for a library at the heart of, and for the people of, Manchester.

A growing selection of our collections has been digitised by our world-class team of photographers. These stunning images are freely available to search and view at www.manchester.ac.uk/luna

Find out what's in our collection by visiting our website: www.manchester.ac.uk/library/special-collections

