

BRITISH MUSEUM.

RETURN to an Address of the Honourable The House of Commons,
dated 6 July 1858;—for,

A “COPY of a MEMORIAL addressed to Her Majesty’s Government by the Promoters and Cultivators of Science on the Subject of the proposed Severance from the BRITISH MUSEUM of its NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS, together with the Signatures attached thereto.”

Treasury Chambers, }
19 July 1858. }

GEO. A. HAMILTON.

(*Sir Philip Grey Egerton.*)

Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed,
23 July 1858.

MEMORIAL of the PROMOTERS and CULTIVATORS of SCIENCE on the Subject of the proposed Severance from the BRITISH MUSEUM of its Natural History Collections, addressed to Her Majesty's Government.

THE Report of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the best site for a National Gallery, and recent discussions in Parliament having led to the contemplation of breaking up the British Museum, by severing from it the Natural History Collections, we, the undersigned, promoters and cultivators of natural knowledge, beg to record our strong objections to such removal, and for the following reasons:—

1st. The British Museum, when established by Act of Parliament in 1755, was essentially a Natural History Collection, the enlightened views of its founder, Sir Hans Sloane, being that it should “be rendered as useful as possible, as well towards satisfying the desire of the curious as for the improvement, knowledge and information of all persons.”

2d. This object of Sir Hans Sloane has been so satisfactorily carried out, that according to the Report of the last Royal Commission, which inquired into the whole state of the Museum (1849), “the evidence of men of the highest authority in science was referred to with great satisfaction, to show that the Natural History Collections were, as a whole, equal if not superior to any in the world.”

3d. Whilst we are aware that much greater space is required to provide for the reception of antiquities and ancient sculpture (chiefly on the ground floor) it has been ascertained by the Trustees, that when additional buildings shall be called for, they can be extended northwards in halls requiring little embellishment, and, according to a plan laid before the Trustees by Mr. Smirke, involving a considerably less expenditure than that which must be incurred by a transference of those collections to any other spot, and the consequent erection of an entirely new edifice. On this point we beg to quote the following resolutions adopted by the Trustees of the British Museum, composing the Standing Committee, as printed in a Return to the House of Commons, dated 4th February 1858.

“The Committee having had under their consideration the report of the principal librarian, dated 10th November 1857,

“RESOLVED,—

“1. That it appears from such report that there is a great deficiency of space at present for the proper exhibition of the different collections in the different departments of the Museum, and that there is no vacant space now belonging to the Trustees which will be sufficient to provide for such deficiency.

“2. That in providing an adequate space for that purpose, it is very desirable to contemplate the future and progressive, as well as the actual and immediate requirements of the British Museum.

“3. That it appears to the Trustees that the best mode of providing for such present and future requirements will be by adopting the plan submitted by Mr. Smirke for the purchase of land to the north of the Museum, as contained in the report of the principal librarian.

“4. That, in the opinion of the Trustees, even if the increase of the collections which are under their care should at some future time make it necessary

necessary to transfer any of those collections to some other place, the land of which the purchase is now recommended must always be of great and peculiar value to the Museum.

“5. That such plan, together with the present resolutions, shall be laid before Her Majesty's Ministers, with the view of requesting their concurrence therein, and their recommendation thereof to the consideration of Parliament.”

4th. Presuming that few persons will be found to advocate the removal of the grand masses of ancient art from their present position, so it is manifest that, if all the Natural History Collections be taken away, their transference will afford no place for the classical works, which now temporarily encumber the principal façade, or crowd the crypts below. For, as such massive objects must be placed on the ground floor, so an extension of the basement is inevitable, if the antiquities remain part of the Museum, and all that the Natural History Collections can require for their future development will be an allotment of space above such extension of the ground floor.

We would also observe that the prolongation of the present building northwards on the above-mentioned plan, besides being much less costly than the formation of an entirely new building, will put a stop to all controversies respecting the appropriate site, and the style of architecture to be applied to a new building.

5th. In reference to other suggestions that have been vaguely thrown out, of a breaking up of the Natural History Collections of the nation into several parts, by transferring, *e.g.* the minerals to the Government School of Mines; the stuffed animals to the Zoological Society; the insects and shells to the Linnean Society, &c., we have first to observe, that not any of the above institutions, two of which are only voluntary associations of individuals, possesses the space or means for the reception and display of such constituent parts of the great national series of illustrations of nature; and, further, that as the chief end and aim of natural history is to demonstrate the harmony which pervades the whole, and the unity of principle which bespeaks the unity of the Creative Cause, it is essential that the different classes of natural objects should be preserved in juxtaposition under the roof of one great building.

6th. We further strongly object to the proposed transference, because those engaged in the study of natural history have in the British Museum the paramount advantage of consulting every work which can aid their researches; whilst a removal of the collections would either involve a conjoint transference of a very large portion of the National Library, or necessitate a very expensive purchase of a special Natural History Library.

7th. Whilst such are among the prominent reasons against the removal of the Natural History Collections from the site where they have been established, for upwards of a century, in the centre of London, we beg to add the expression of our opinion that such removal, particularly if to any situation distant from that centre, would be viewed by the mass of the inhabitants with extreme disfavour; it being a well-known fact that by far the greater number of visitors to the Museum consists of those who frequent the halls containing the Natural History Collections; whilst it is obvious that many of those persons who come from the densely peopled districts of the eastern, northern, and southern parts of London would feel it very inconvenient to resort to any distant locality.

For these reasons, as based on scientific advantages, the convenience and instruction of the people, and the saving of a large sum to the nation, we earnestly hope that the Natural History Collections may not be interfered with, but be allowed to remain associated with the many other branches of human knowledge which are so admirably represented in this great national establishment.

Her Majesty's Government, we trust, will never yield to the argument that, because in some countries the products of Nature and Art are exhibited in distinct establishments, therefore the like separation should be copied here. Let us, on the contrary, rejoice in the fact, that we have realised what no other kingdom can boast of, and that such vast and harmoniously related accumulation of knowledge is gathered together around a library, illustrating each department of this noble Museum.

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