

# The past life of the National Museum of Scotland



As the transformed [National Museum of Scotland](#) prepares to open up to the public again on Friday The Reporter considers the fascinating history of this iconic and unique museum.

The museum has been a thrilling place to visit in Edinburgh for 150 years, and it holds a special place in the memories of Edinburgh residents and visitors alike. The values of its original founders are very closely related to those of today's curators and because of that it remains an incredibly special place.

The institution's history is rooted in the beginning of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, founded in 1780 to collect and protect the archaeology of Scotland. Almost 80 years later in 1858, the vast collections of the Society were transferred to the government and this original collection of artifacts became the National Museum of Antiquities.

Originally established as the Industrial Museum of Scotland, the building on Chambers Street was designed in 1861 by Captain Francis Fowke, who was also the architect for The Royal Albert Hall. The most memorable and treasured aspect of the museum, the central courtyard, was inspired by London's Crystal Palace.

Like the Great Exhibition which was held at Crystal Palace in 1851, the Museum of Scotland building was founded in a spirit of enthusiasm for industrial technology and design. Both of these exhibition spaces represented a very impressive visual demonstration of the strength of industry in Great Britain.

By 1866 the Chambers Street building had become the Edinburgh

Museum of Science and Art and after completion of the building in 1904, it was renamed the Royal Scottish Museum.

The iconic Victorian cast iron structure of the building represents a spectacular feat of contemporary engineering for its time and it remains a place of stunning light and beauty and is a social space, as much as a place of learning. The architecture of the building has always been impressive, but in 1866, when the east end of the building was completed and opened, it must have seemed a marvel, the exterior stone facade concealing a wondrous and impossibly elegant courtyard. Curator Alexander Hayward explained that the engineering to produce the cast iron uprights in such a uniform design was pushing 19th century building technology to its absolute limit.

The opening of the Museum in the 1860s came at a time of architectural renewal for the Edinburgh area. Edinburgh's New Town was completed in 1835 and building had just begun on the Scottish National Gallery in 1850.

The Great Exhibition in London in 1851, like other Great Exhibitions around the world in the 19th Century, celebrated the era of the pursuit of knowledge through collection and the cultural and moral learning to be found in a museum became increasingly popular as a leisure activity.

The dual goals of the museum's founders were of public amusement and instruction, and they intended to encourage the Victorian ideals of morality and intellectualism among their visitors. It was also a place that told the story of Scotland's disproportionate contribution to the history of collecting of antiquities. As the changing titles of the Museum suggest, it has always sought to document the combined histories of Art and Science and the history of the growth of the Museum's collections is also Scotland's history of exploration, discovery and invention.

✘ Specifically focusing on Scottish History, the striking Museum of Scotland wing, designed by architects Benson and Forsyth was added to the Victorian building in 1998. The project which has taken place over the last 3 years has included the aim of integrating the two buildings and of creating a museum with a common and comprehensible goal, so in 2006 the two structures were combined under the single title, the National Museum of Scotland.

In 2007 the Museum was awarded £17.8 million by The Heritage Lottery fund to realise Director Dr Gordon Rintoul's vision to restore the Victorian building and integrate the two structures, and The Scottish Executive backed the project with £16 million in capital funding.

Today, National Museums Scotland has grown to include the [National Museum of Flight](#), the [National War Museum](#), the [National Museum of Rural Life](#), and the [National Museum of Costume](#).

Its collections are housed at three sites in the Edinburgh area:- the [National Museums Collection Centre](#) at Granton, Leith Customs House, and Port Edgar, South Queensferry.

The National Museum of Scotland reopens on 29 July 2011 at ✘ 10a.m.