The Society of Antiquaries at Burlington House
Brief for an RIBA Stage 1 Design Plan

Executive Summary

In October 2024, the Society of Antiquaries purchased its premises at Burlington House from the British Government. This presents an exceptional opportunity to rethink the way the building helps the Society fulfil its objectives and serve audiences. The building as it stands requires considerable investment to make it fit for purpose for the future. As an independent charity and membership organisation, the Society is committed to supporting our Fellows (3,230) and Affiliates (700), caring for the historic collections and opening its doors to share and create excitement around its work and heritage.

The Society now seeks to commission an RIBA Stage 1 Design Plan. This essential first step will:

- Assess the building's condition and plan for its repair and conservation.
- Explore new possibilities for visitor spaces.
- Improve the accessibility and sustainability of the building.
- Optimise the use of our limited space and consider the viability of options for increasing it.

The plan will lay the groundwork for transformative capital investment, providing scope, a budget and specialist assessments to guide sensitive renewal of the building while preserving its historic character.

Society of Antiquaries' Mission

"The encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of the antiquities and history of this and other countries." The Society of Antiquaries of London Royal Charter (1751).

"Exploring the material past together." (2024 Strategy)

The building and its current functions

Purpose-built for the Society in 1874, Burlington House is an important example of Victorian institutional architecture and forms part of the historic Burlington House courtyard on Piccadilly, which includes the Royal Academy, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Geological Society, the Linnean Society and the Royal Astronomical Society.

The Society of Antiquaries holds historic collections of national significance, including:

- 130,000+ books and rare manuscripts (from the 15th century onwards).
- 40,000 museum objects (Accredited collection).
- 55,000 prints and drawings.

Main functions of the building:

- The library is open for an average of 38 hours each week between Monday and Friday, and an average of 2,740 researchers visit each year. The main users are Fellows and researchers (usually post-graduate level and above).
- The building houses 22 staff, many of whom who are part time, as well as frequent project workers, freelancers and placement students.
- The Society welcomes on average c7,500 public visitors annually for lectures, exhibitions, open days and education programmes. The National Lottery Heritage Funded exhibition, *Magna Carta 2025* attracted over 5,500 visitors in summer 2025.
- The ground floor is hired out for commercial and charitable use for most evenings during spring and autumn. These events usually range from 30 – 100 attendees.

Vision

The Society of Antiquaries is proud of its 300-year history supporting understanding of the material past and making it relevant in the contemporary world. The Society has a vision for its building to become the natural place for people who work or who are interested in the heritage sector to come together, both formally and informally. This

partly happens already with the use of the library, collections and archives, with other societies meeting in the building and though an ambitious lecture and public events programme. But it can and should be much more.

Burlington House is a large building, housing large rooms in a rigid configuration. Of primary importance is to increase flexibility or dual usage of these spaces. The Society's overall approach to renewal has three complementary strands:

- **Enhancing access** – welcoming a broader public and improving engagement to collections and resources.
- **Securing collections** – providing an appropriate environment for the library and collections so that they can be properly curated, used by scholars and accessed by the public. Conservation of Burlington House, a grade II* listed building.
- **Improving facilities** – creating high quality facilities for staff. Fellows and visitors.

Concept

Burlington House combines large and dramatic rooms with smaller spaces, stairs and passages. A conceptual reconfiguration could include:

- Ground floor: public reception rooms fully adapted for public access with flexible display space.
- Basement: research and learning areas, visitor welfare facilities and improved kitchen to support commercial venue hire. Improved storage potential.
- First Floor: double height-library, with restored access to upper galleries and review of lighting and layout. Fellows' meeting room, private study areas and possible display of collections.
- Upper Floors: consolidated staff offices and administrative areas.
- Front basement: Utilising currently unused external space, including front basement area, coal holes and other smaller spaces.
- External building envelope to the north and west of the building: potential new escape/ circulation areas and / or storage space.

Current challenges, opportunities and risks

Despite its historic and architectural significance, the building is not currently fit for purpose as a public heritage resource:

- No step-free entrance; no DDA-compliant lift.
- Outdated visitor facilities (limited toilets, no catering provision).
- Library and mezzanine spaces difficult to access and inflexible in use.
- Building services requiring upgrade for sustainability and efficiency.
- Limited space for collections and other storage.

Rethinking the use of the building will include consideration of significant over-arching questions:

- How to make the building (especially the entrance) friendly and welcoming while retaining the historic atmosphere, charm and “wow factor”?
- How to optimise income from venue hire and other commercial activity?
- How to reconfigure the basement spaces for learning, events, conservation and collections?
- How to strengthen security as the Society adapts from being primarily a membership organisation that offers quiet study areas to one also serving the wider public? Currently there is no physical division between study areas, office space and open days and events.
- How to fully use our outside space, including the front area, coal holes and behind the building in the West Yard?
- How to ensure a positive and productive working environment for our staff?

Although re-thinking the use of Burlington House clearly offers great opportunities, there are also risks that the Society is aware of and will mitigate. These risks include losing some of the current charm of the building if the development work is not carried out sensitively. Too much emphasis on display of the collection or on the building as a venue risks affecting our identity and functionality as a place of learning and research. Any change runs the risk of alienating current users and audiences and must be carefully managed.

The Society is responsible for the upkeep of the building, directly for its interior, and indirectly for its structure and exterior as members of the company of learned societies which hold the 999-year lease of the Burlington House campus. Maintenance has been neglected in recent years while discussions about the ownership of Burlington House were ongoing. In addition to a creative examination of spatial usage, priorities for this commission to examine are access for people with disabilities, the roof, ventilation in the basement and replacing the lift, which was installed in 1983. Consideration should be given to whether it is less disruptive and more cost-effective to do this work separately or together with re-thinking use of spaces.

Details of this Brief will be circulated amongst the Fellowship. An important part of the commission is to contribute to a minimum of two consultation sessions with Fellows, Affiliates and other stakeholders. Written responses will also be sought and collated by the Society

The Conservation Management Plan

In 2009, the Society commissioned an extensive Conservation Management Plan, a detailed architectural review and history of the entire building and its potential use of space. Although this will need review, especially in view of current sustainable energy and physical accessibility recommendations, it remains a useful and relevant document.

Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability is a priority for the Society. Offering more welcoming and accessible premises will help to increase the Fellowship and Affiliate schemes. Creating facilities that are of the highest quality for meetings and lectures will generate increased income from venue hire, with a special charitable rate for organisations and partners within the sector.

Planning

The building is Grade II* listed, along with the other Learned Societies apartments forming the Burlington House courtyard, built in 1867 - 1873 by R.R. Banks and C. Barry (with E.M. Barry). The Statutory List description is Appended and the Conservation Plan provides an assessment of the relative significance of the spaces within the building.

Burlington House is within City of Westminster local authority. The building is not mentioned specifically in Westminster's Mayfair Neighbourhood Plan but there are potential synergies with the Westminster City Plan 2019 – 2040 especially regarding green energy and conserving and enhancing Westminster's heritage.

Key outcomes

- Clear options for improved public access and inclusion (step-free entrance, lift).
- Concept designs for repurposed basement and public learning spaces.
- Proposals for enhanced visitor facilities to support exhibitions, events and education.
- Defined strategies for sustainable and efficient energy use of the building; and for its repair and conservation.
- Scope of works, budget and schedule to inform future capital investment.

The team, timetable and consultation

While architect-led, the selected team must be multidisciplinary, including the following skills:

- Quantity Surveying, with experience of historic buildings.
- Structural engineering, with expertise in working with historic structures.
- Mechanical and electrical engineering, with experience in working with sensitive historic interiors.
- Project Management.

Our decision will be based on:

- Experience of the team, particularly in projects involving historic buildings with libraries and collections.
- How they would engage with us to fully understand our needs and aspirations for the building.

- How they would approach the commission, and in particular, take account of the views of the Fellowship in their assessments.

The following client meetings will be mandatory:

- On inception.
- Participation in an in-person consultation with the Fellowship at Burlington. House on 23 April 2026 at 2.30pm (coinciding with the Society's Anniversary Meeting).
- To present the draft to the Society's Project Board and CEO.
- Participation in a second consultation meeting, date to be mutually agreed.
- To present the final Plan.

The final version of the Plan is to be completed by 31 August 2026.

Further work on the project will be subject to securing funding through the Development Campaign; we anticipate that it will take place in 2027. However, the substantive project design will be subject to a future open tender, to comply with National Heritage Lottery and other potential funder's procurement rules.

Information available

- Conservation Management Plan.
- Floor plans and other drawings.
- Asbestos Survey.

Budget and fee schedule

We have a budget of £45,000- £50,000 (exclusive of VAT) available for the preparation of the Plan.

Fees will be paid as follows:
25% on appointment.
50% on acceptance of the draft Plan.
25% on approval of the final Plan.

Contact

For further information, please contact:

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Appendix I

Transcript of the Listing description

The building is Grade II listed, with the other Learned Societies forming the Burlington House courtyard, built in 1867 - 1873 by R.R. Banks and C. Barry (with E.M. Barry).*

Ashlar, rusticated at ground floor, brick rear, slate roofs. Grand Italianate manner, inspired by the original Burlington House. Three storeys, four storey centrepiece, and basements. Opposing entrances to Society of Antiquaries and Royal Society of Chemistry breaking forward; ground floor vermiculated rustication to round arched doorways with figure keystones, quadrant upper glazed lights to panelled oak doors with etched glazed lights, flanking stone plinths set forward each carrying iron lamp stand.

Interior of Society of Antiquaries:
Entrance hall, three bays, lined with marbled Ionic pilasters, pairs of marbled Ionic columns in antis. Richly moulded ceiling with modillion cornices, moulded panels. Opposing doorways and recesses under round arches with panelled lunettes and linings, pairs of raised and fielded panelled doors. Rear stair hall treated as the front, arches supported on four marbled Ionic columns. Cantilevered open well stone stair with iron balustrade, each panel with lyre motif, moulded mahogany rail, modillion cornice.

Meeting Room: 3 x 3 bays, enriched Ionic paired pilasters, deep modillion cornice and moulded ceiling with large central ring and flanking spirals, oak leaf moulded ribs; embellished reeded soffits; marble chimneypiece with pedimented overmantel. Former Secretary's Dining Room: modillion cornice, marble chimneypiece with polychrome tiled linings, cast iron fire.

Library: two storeys, top lit, 5 x 3 bays. Pairs of panelled piers to lower storey with continuous dentil cornice, supporting balustraded gallery on three sides. Upper storey Corinthian order of paired columns supporting top lit flat roof. Engaged columns to south elevation, pilasters at the angles. Modillion cornice to ceiling, oak leaf moulded ribs, pendant gasoliers with daisy sprays. Chimneypieces obscured. Secondary timber and cast iron gallery to upper storey.

Inner library formerly Secretary's Drawing room, dentil cornice, acanthus moulded ceiling panel, marble chimneypiece with polychrome tiled linings.

Secretary's accommodation at rear mezzanine level reached by spiral stone stair with moulded iron balusters, mahogany rail. Marble chimneypieces, mostly round-headed, except that to Fellows' Room also with polychrome tile linings. Ground floor chandeliers and Meeting Room clock formerly from Somerset House.[1]

[1] Pevsner, N & Cherry, B, The Buildings of England: London I - The Cities of London and Westminster, (1973), 623
Survey of London, The Parish of Westminster Part 2 North of Piccadilly: Volumes 31 and 32, (1963), 626-7
The Builder, 25 March 1871