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**250** years ago in 1753, Sir Hans Sloane died at the age of 93 and was buried at Chelsea Old Church. Having begun his career as a collector in 1687 when he travelled to Jamaica, he collected some 800 species of plants and other live specimens to bring back to London. Upon his death, his collection amounted to some 71,000 objects. In addition to a preponderance of natural history specimens, the collection included 1,125 “things relating to the customs of ancient times or antiquities” and 23,000 coins and medals. There were also 50,000 books, prints and manuscripts, together with a herbarium.

A group of Trustees was appointed under the terms of his will to oversee the distribution of the collection which was left in the first instance to King George II for the nation. Following the intervention of Parliament, Sloane’s collection was acquired on payment of £20,000 to his two daughters and became the nucleus of the British Museum formed when an Act of Parliament received the royal assent on 7 June 1753.

In December 2000, the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court, at the heart of The British Museum, opened to the public. The two-acre square, enclosed by a spectacular glass roof, has transformed the Museum’s inner courtyard, with the world-famous Reading Room at its centre, into the largest covered public square in Europe. Designed by Foster and Partners, the £100 million project has been supported by grants of £30 million from the Millennium Commission and £15.75 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund.



**500** years ago, in 1503 Leonardo da Vinci paints Mona Lisa, Pocket handkerchiefs come into use in Europe, Nostradamus was born and the Cayman Islands were discovered by Christopher Columbus on his fourth and last voyage to the new world.



The story says that he reported sighting two small islands so full of tortoises (turtles) that they looked like rocks and he gave the islands the name Las Tortugas (The Turtles).

In the same year, Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII of England married James IV of Scotland. Her marriage to James was accompanied by a treaty of “perpetual peace” between Scotland and England, a peace that was ended when James invaded England in 1513 and was killed at Flodden.

A man of many diverse accomplishments, King James was particularly fascinated by medical science and there is some evidence that he was an enthusiastic surgeon and dentist. In 2005 the Royal College of Surgeons will celebrate its quincentenary year dating back to 1505 when the Barber Surgeons of Edinburgh were formally incorporated as a craft guild of the city.

**1000** years ago saw the birth of Edward, the son of King Ethelred II the Unready and Emma, the daughter of Richard II of Normandy. Edward (the Confessor) lived in exile until 1041, when he returned to the London court of his half brother, King Hardecanute. He became king the following year and reigned until 1066.

During 1003, the Danish King Sweyn (Forkbeard) was engaged in one of his many invasions of England. It was also about this time that Leif Eriksson son of Erik the Red, became the first European to set foot on the shores of North America. Though many still regard Christopher Columbus as the discoverer of the New World, Eriksson’s right to this title received the stamp of official approval in the USA when in 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson, backed by a unanimous Congress, proclaimed October 9th “Leif Ericson Day” in commemoration of the first arrival of a European on North American soil.

Written a thousand years ago in Japan, The ‘Tale of Genji’ by Murasaki Shikibu may well be the first novel ever written. Written to be read aloud, unfortunately the original was lost. Luckily, early manuscript scrolls survived and have since been translated many times.

In contrast, 13 million copies of the latest Harry Potter book have already been printed with author J K Rowling expected to make in excess of £30m from book sales alone.