Discover UCL’s hidden treasures
About UCL

From its foundation in 1826 at its Gower Street site, UCL aimed from the start to be radical, secular, liberal, inclusive and international: principles which can be found reflected in its varied architecture and the impressive holdings of its museums and collections, with artefacts drawn from around the globe.

UCL has grown dramatically over the last 30 years from its Bloomsbury hub, and now has departments and centres all over London, from Hampstead to Mill Hill. Today, the university community incorporates 12,000 undergraduate students, 7,000 graduate students and 4,000 academic staff.

As a leading research university, with strengths across the arts and sciences, the UCL building stock has developed organically to meet the needs of generations of academics and students. On the Bloomsbury campus, visitors will find state-of-the-art new buildings, dedicated to nanotechnology and biomedicine, jostling alongside grand 19th-century designs.

An ongoing programme of new building and refurbishment will continue to provide facilities fit for tomorrow’s researchers to work at the frontiers of knowledge.

The Portico

UCL’s neo-Grecian central Portico is its most famous landmark, and is generally recognised as the greatest work of William Wilkins – certainly it is regarded as more architecturally distinguished than the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square, which he designed several years later. The main entrance to the Wilkins Building is at the top of a wide staircase under the ten-column Corinthian Portico, topped by the elegant Dome.

Work on the Portico was begun in 1826, but was not completed until 1829, by which time academic sessions were already underway in UCL. Lack of funds caused the delay, which also meant that the grand architectural development planned for the rest of the central UCL site did not take place. It was once referred to as “the grandest entrance in London, with nothing behind it”.

The Wilkins Building

The Wilkins Building, refurbished in 2005, lies at the heart of UCL and contains both the main UCL Library and the Flaxman Gallery, which houses work by the distinguished sculptor and artist John Flaxman. Original plans for the building included grand double-height rooms – intended for a museum and a library in what now forms the first and second floors above the North and South Cloisters.

In 1841 Thomas Donaldson became the first Professor of Architecture at UCL. He set out to remedy a perceived fault in Wilkins’ planning: the lack of links between the grand upper rooms and the ground floor. In 1849 he added small staircases behind the Portico and a principal staircase from the east of the Octagon up and into what was to become the Flaxman Gallery, beneath the Dome. By 1907, the Library had moved to its intended home in the upper Wilkins Building. The collections were eventually divided within a series of separate though linked rooms on what became two floors, all but destroying Wilkins’ concept of double-height spaces.

The recent refurbishments now enable complete access to all levels for people with disabilities. They also create a light, open entrance for all, along with a greeting and enquiry point for anyone who visits UCL. Included in the entrance is a dramatic, two-stage, cantilevered, curved staircase in stone, glass and bronze.

The Cruciform Building

The Cruciform Building was designed by Alfred Waterhouse in 1896, and was formally opened one year after his death in 1906. Originally designed as the new home for University College Hospital, it now houses the UCL Wolfson Institute for Biomedical Research and the UCL Medical School pre-clinical teaching facility.

Waterhouse was one of the most prolific architects of the Victorian era and had already designed over 30 buildings – including Manchester Town Hall and the Natural History Museum – before he began work on the Cruciform Building.

Waterhouse did not limit himself to one architectural style and was expert in both Gothic and free Renaissance styles, having a preference for the Neo-Romanesque. The Cruciform Building is in the free Renaissance style, as can be seen in the curved arches, classical mouldings to window surrounds and contrasting string course banding. The materials used – hard red brick and terracotta – were chosen because they were economical and less susceptible to erosion in polluted Victorian cities than stone. The same economy was followed inside with terrazzo, mosaic and wood block used for the floors and glazed brick for the walls.
Jeremy Bentham

The preserved ‘auto-icon’ of Jeremy Bentham relates to perhaps the most famous story about UCL. Bentham left instructions for his body to be preserved “in the attitude in which I am sitting when engaged in thought”. The body has been preserved and is dressed in Bentham’s own clothes, but the head is made of wax – the real head lies preserved in UCL’s vaults.

Bentham was an extraordinarily prolific philosopher of ethics, law and government and is still studied today as the modern father of the moral doctrine of ‘utilitarianism’, which holds that action is good in so far as it tends towards the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’.

Jeremy Bentham’s body is on permanent display at UCL and the 250th anniversary of his birth was celebrated in 1997. In a Council meeting of 1976, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of UCL’s founding, Bentham was brought into the meeting, in his box, and was recorded in the minutes as “present, but not voting”.

UCL SSEES Building

The UCL SSEES Building is unusual in modern architecture as it uses brick and heavy masonry, together with natural light wherever possible. This commitment to environmentally friendly design was recognised by the architectural profession when the building received a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) award for design excellence.

The ‘Architects’ Journal’, which sponsors the awards, summed up the building: “The brick facade of this new academic building challenges the ubiquity of glass elevations and sun screening. The concern for energy conservation together with an accommodation of history has produced a building which is engagingly idiosyncratic, reminiscent of a small palazzo.”

Alan Short, founder of Short & Associates, the firm which designed the building, said: “Architects have a fascination with ultra-lightweight envelopes. In the summer in our climate very lightweight, glassy buildings are almost inevitably cooled using air conditioning. This building combines ancient techniques with ones that have never been used before. The engineering is sophisticated, the brick façade is seamless, with no movement joints, so indicative of bricks merely used as wallpaper glued to concrete.”

UCL Museums & Collections

UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

The UCL Petrie Museum houses an estimated 80,000 objects, making it one of the greatest collections of Egyptian and Sudanese archaeology in the world. It illustrates life in the Nile Valley from prehistory through the time of the pharaohs, the Ptolemaic, Roman and Coptic periods to the Islamic period. Highlights include: one of the earliest pieces of linen from Egypt (c5000 BC); two lions from the temple of Min at Koptos, from the first group of monumental sculpture (c3000 BC); a fragment from the first kinglist or calendar (c2900 BC); and the earliest example of metal from Egypt.

UCL Grant Museum of Zoology & Comparative Anatomy

The UCL Grant Museum was established in 1827 by Robert Edmond Grant (1793–1874) to serve as a teaching collection at the newly founded University of London (later UCL). It is the only teaching university zoological collection in London. It houses around 32,000 specimens, covering the breadth of the animal kingdom. The museum is packed full of skeletons, mounted animals and specimens preserved in fluid. Many of the species are now endangered or extinct, including the Tasmanian tiger or thylacine, and the dodo.

UCL Art Collections

The UCL Art Collections contain over 10,000 objects including paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture dating from 1490 to the present day. Works on paper are housed in UCL’s String Print Room, and paintings and sculpture are displayed in public rooms around the university. The collection was founded in 1847 with a gift of the sculpture models and drawings of John Flaxman and now includes drawings by Turner and De Wint, Rembrandt etchings, and early proofs and states of Turner’s ‘Libror Studiorum’ and Constable’s ‘English Landscape Scenery’, as well as works by Stanley Spencer, Augustus John, Edward Wadsworth and Paula Rego.