

## The Signet Library in Brief

The Signet Library is one of the great centres of Scottish law and culture. It is the home of the Society of Writers to the Signet, one of the oldest legal bodies in the world with its origins at the medieval royal Scottish court and now a registered charity. Events take place here all year round, ranging from legal education conferences to exhibitions, book launches and dinners, and the Library is frequently called into use by film and television as a location set. Its tea room, Colonnades, is one of Edinburgh's true culinary destinations. The Library is home to one of the finest libraries in Scotland, and to historic collections of art and furniture.

The current building was completed in 1822 and began life as a home not just for the Writers to the Signet but for all branches of what is known as the College of Justice, which also includes Scotland's advocates and judges. After the building narrowly escaped destruction in the 1824 Great Fire of Edinburgh, the Writers to the Signet took full responsibility for the building's care and it has been our home ever since.

The Library's architecture is neo-classical, taking its inspiration and design features from ancient Greece and Rome. The architect of the splendour all around you was William Stark, a genius whose short life prevented him from being as famous in Scotland as his pupil William Playfair who also worked on the building. Stark had undertaken his own architectural apprenticeship in the Russia of Empress Catherine the Great, where he had been one of a group of French, Italian and Scottish architects working on the great palaces of St. Petersburg. The Russian form of neo-classicism is freer and more mobile than that usually encountered in Scotland and the Signet Library shows this well.

The Library as a collection of books is a product of the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, with collecting beginning in 1722. The Library specialises in Scots Law but holds world class collections in Scottish culture, history, topography, and travel, with a tradition of making its collections available to researchers far beyond the borders of the Society's own membership. The Library's oldest manuscript is a fragment of Gregorian chant which has been dated to the 1020s; its oldest book is a work of philosophy printed in Germany in 1472 and its greatest treasure is the original manuscript of Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* from 1819.

The Library has a long tradition of scholarship, with the Librarian Macvey Napier being responsible for the editing of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> editions of the famous Encyclopaedia Britannica in the early nineteenth century when the Encyclopaedia was still based in Edinburgh. Other librarians have included the historian David Laing and the theologian Thomas Graves Law. The Library has been a centre for research and historical publishing and this continues to this day.

Practically all of the great Scottish portrait painters have work on the Library's walls, including Allan Ramsay and Sir Henry Raeburn, and much of its historic furniture is

the work of Scotland's answer to Thomas Chippendale, William Trotter, whose studio was once on the site of the modern Edinburgh Waverley Station; the iron lantern at the head of the Grand Staircase was made by the Bromsgrove Guild, a radical arts collective of the Edwardian era who also made the Liver Birds in Liverpool and the gates of Buckingham Palace.

A Scottish lawyer's library such as this one is built around the idea of sociability and is all about people coming together in fellowship and for friendship and debate, a world away from monastic ideas about silence and solitude. The earliest pictures of the Library show entire families here, grouped in conversation, reading books or just walking the rooms in a traditional Scottish spirit of welcome which everyone at the WS Society would like to extend to you all.