

The Great Library

Welcome to Osgoode Hall. My name is Elise Brunet. I'm the Curator at the Law Society of Upper Canada and I'll be your guide for this visit of the Great Library.

Let's start the visit standing in front of the main doors of the Great Library, on the second floor above the main entrance. Don't stand too close – you don't want to get hit if the doors open and besides, I need you to see something. Back up just a little bit. A little bit more. There. Look at the surround of the doors – the decorative door frame. The doors are quite big, but the surround extends almost all the way to the ceiling. Doesn't it make you feel very small? There is something very humbling about the architecture in this part of Osgoode Hall.

Don't go in just yet. Have you noticed the peculiar metal feature above the door? That's an old fire door. It's designed to close when a low melting point connector melts, releasing the mechanism. You can go in now.

This is the Main Reading Room of the Great Library. It has been said of this room that its elegance could inspire a person to become a lawyer. The Library is called the Great Library not because we have a high opinion of ourselves, but because people needed a way to distinguish it from the students' library located in another part of the building. It doesn't mean that it's not a great library though. The Great Library, administered by the Law Society, is the largest private law library in Canada, with holdings of about 100,000 volumes. The focus of the collection is still on paper materials, but that's changing rapidly as many resources are now available online. This is also a reference library, so the books are not lent out.

The Main Reading Room was built between 1857 and 1860 by the firm of Cumberland and Storm, the same architects who built the Atrium and Courtrooms 3 and 4. The room is 112 feet long by 40 feet wide, and the ceiling is 40 feet above your head. Let's look at that ceiling. The ceiling is made of plaster. Quite something isn't it? A ceiling like this one is built of several layers: first, wood lath – parallel strips of wood – that form the base. Then a rough coat of plaster is applied on top and encouraged to ooze through the gaps between the wood strips to create lumps called keys at the back and that will hold the plaster in place when they dry. Progressively finer coats of plaster are applied on top of that and finally pre-cast plaster ornaments are put in place with what else... more plaster. It was crafted by a local contractor, the Hynes Brothers.

The windows are glazed with etched glass. You'll notice the "VR" which stands for Victoria Regina or Queen Victoria in English and the beaver, a symbol of Canada.

The Library originally had four balconies. The ones on the south side were removed at the end of the 19th century, leaving two. The balconies are accessed by a small turning stairwell that I wouldn't recommend using if your arms are full of books.

The impressive Corinthian columns that appear to be holding up the ceiling are decorative features. They are hollow wood structures and the only thing they are supporting is the vision of the architects.

If you're still at the entrance, head to your left. The statue at the East end of the room is a memorial for the lawyers who died during World War One. It is very different in material and tone from the one in the atrium. There are two QR codes at the foot – I should say the feet – of the statue if you want more information about it. If you have a reader on your smartphone or other smart device, there is a public wifi connection in this room. If you can't read QR codes, don't worry. You can access the information through the Law Society's website history pages when you can get to a computer.

The large chunk of rock next to the war memorial was a gift from the Inner Temple, one of the four English Inns of Court, which are more or less the British equivalent of the Law Society. The Inns of Court go back to the Middle Ages and they are all located in the heart of London in England. When London was bombed during World War Two, their buildings suffered extensive damage. The Law Society here raised funds to help the Inns rebuild and the "rock" is a piece of one of the original buildings that was sent as a token of their gratitude.

Start heading to the other end of the room. The flooring is cork. If you look carefully and ignore the repairs, you'll notice that light and dark cork tiles were used in combination to create a design on the floor. The original floor, below this one, is fir – the evergreen, not the animal hair – and is laid in a herringbone pattern. The centre of the room, where the reference desk is located, is decorated with a compass made of different woods. It must have been a noisy floor for a library and old photographs always show the floor covered with carpet or cork runners until the existing floor was installed in 1948.

The fireplace at this end of the room is monumental, to say the least, yet it's obvious from the small firebox that it wasn't meant to heat the room. It was a functional fireplace however, and was probably very cosy on cold winter evenings.

Head to the door at the left of the fireplace. This room is called the American Room. It was designed by architects Burke and Horwood and was completed in 1895. The architects were instructed to maximize wall space and eliminate features that would reduce shelf space. These requirements led to the two-floor arrangement with the narrow gallery and the space-efficient spiral staircase. The copper electric fixtures were part of the original design.

The woodwork is done in quarter-cut oak. The curved part of the ceiling, the cove, is made of a composite material called "staff" – a type of moulded plaster reinforced with fibre. The contractor who did this ceiling was William J. Hynes, whose father and uncle had done the plasterwork in the main reading room 35 years earlier. The patterned material under the balcony is embossed paper.

Today the American Room contains materials from various jurisdictions, but it was originally built to house American legal materials. It's unusual to have large American collections in a Canadian institution but in the early days of the library, which was started in 1827, there was little Upper Canadian case law. Most of the early purchases for the Library were British reports and statutes since Ontario law is based on British law, and the Library soon started purchasing the reported decisions from other common law jurisdictions – such as the US – as sources of "persuasive authority" – decisions that relate to a legal system close to ours but that are not binding for the judges here. You could say that they are useful source of legal inspiration.

This isn't all there is to the Library, but they're certainly the more interesting spaces. The rest is mostly stacks and offices in considerably less appealing rooms.

Our next stop is Convocation Hall. If you're still in the American Room, you can reach Convocation Hall by leaving the Library through the door to the left of the war memorial. Follow the hallway past the washrooms to the stair landing. When you get there, Convocation Hall is through the doors on your left.