Cultural Heritage & Museums | United Kingdom | Greening

British Library installs solar panels in greening initiative

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The British Library has kept in step with greening museum practices by installing a 1.5 million pound solar panel system, cutting its carbon emissions by 55 tonnes per year, and generating enough energy to heat itself.

The British Library, which houses iconic documents including the Magna Carta and a collection of handwritten Beatles lyrics, is a hub of historical treasures. However, it is far from being stuck in the past. The UK institution recently took a step towards a greener future by installing the country's largest solar thermal system, aimed at keeping visitors comfortable while significantly cutting carbon emissions. Patrick Dixon, the British Library's director of estates and construction, said the organisation was "delighted" to have received government financial support to implement the project' which costs 1.5 million pounds.

The system, which covers over 712 square metres of the library's roof, comprises 950 solar collectors. This installation is projected to reduce the London landmark's CO2 emissions by 55 tonnes per year while generating 216 MWh of energy annually – enough to power and heat a community centre or a swimming pool for an entire year.

"We're thrilled to be leading the largest solar heat installation project in the UK for the British Library, an iconic national institution, as it embarks on its journey to net zero," says Jon Benford, Managing Director at CBRE Global Workplace Solutions, the library's facilities management partner. "Achieving net zero emissions in a Grade 1 listed English Heritage building presents unique challenges, and we're proud to contribute to a project that balances preserving the past with safeguarding the future."

Museums and cultural institutions face a unique challenge during the era of climate change: protecting their collections and

reducing their environmental impact. The Network of Museum Organisations (NEMO), continues its work to advocate environmentally sustainable practices for museums, whilst offering support on greener transition. Some museums around Europe and across the globe have already risen to the challenge by adopting sustainable practices.

The Louvre in Paris has implemented measures to manage the Seine River's flood risks, elevating its collections to safer levels and installing flood barriers to protect artworks. In the United States, the Smithsonian Institution has made strides with its "Greening the Smithsonian" initiative, which focuses on energy efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable building practices across its facilities. These cases demonstrate how museums can adapt and thrive, even as they navigate the complexities of climate change.

Special planning permission was required to install the solar panels on the Grade 1 listed building, ensuring they remain out of sight from street level, preserving the aesthetic of the London building and the historical Victorian Neighbourhood.

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