In 2008 the Parliamentary Library celebrated its 150th birthday! The library has played a vital role over the last 150 years, supporting representative and parliamentary democracy and responding to the needs of MPs.¹ By the late nineteenth century it had become a magnificent national treasure house in a splendid building. Today it is a focused research and information service. The library’s transformation into an electronic powerhouse equips it well to serve Parliament into the twenty-first century.

¹ For a full history of the Parliamentary Library, see John E. Martin, Parliament’s Library – 150 Years, Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2008 (available from the Parliament Shop and bookshops)
Parliament first met in 1854 and voted the first money for its library in 1856. In 1858 Captain F.E. Campbell, Clerk of the House of Representatives, was appointed as the first ‘librarian’ for Parliament (in addition to his other duties). At this time Parliament sat in Auckland. The tiny library was housed in a little room on the upper floor of the cramped building. It comprised only 750 volumes – a small reference collection of legal books and little more. The library then moved to the ground floor adjacent to the House of Representatives chamber, in what had been the smoking room.

Parliament struggled to build up the library without a full-time librarian and with little funding. When Parliament sat in Wellington in 1862, books were sent down on a ship, the *White Swan*. The ship was unfortunately wrecked on the Wairarapa coast and the books were lost.

In 1865 Parliament moved to Wellington permanently. The library was in a newly built hall with galleries at the rear of the wooden Parliament Buildings. Scotsman Ewen McColl became the first full-time librarian in 1866. Other Scots were to follow.

The library began to grow faster as book orders from London flowed in, the library exchanged official publications with other Parliaments, it received private donations and built up a newspaper collection. McColl prepared the first comprehensive catalogue of the collection in 1867.
Treasure house

In the 1870s the library employed an assistant and as the collection grew it moved into adjacent rooms. By the mid 1880s the library comprised 25,000 volumes and employed 4 staff. It was the country’s leading library. It not only had the vital reference works for Parliament but also good collections of travel, biography, history, political and social sciences, a range of classics, and a selection of fiction for light reading. The library also proudly held a selection of rare and illustrated volumes and artworks. View library treasures from the past.

The library began to collect New Zealand publications. From 1903 it was the country’s library of copyright deposit – by law copies of all New Zealand publications had to be deposited in the library. The New Zealand collection became an important national resource. But even though the library was like a ‘national’ library for the country, only researchers and a limited number of lucky members of the public were allowed access. View treasures held by the library today.

Fires and a new building

MPs were concerned at the threat to their treasured library in the wooden buildings but could never seem to agree on where and how a new library should be built. Cost was also a major issue. Finally in 1899 a magnificent new Gothic revival fireproof library building was constructed after more than 25 years of hot political debate and a number of outbreaks of fire in the buildings.
In the end Premier Richard John Seddon seized the moment in 1897 and got the job done, amid great protest that Parliament had not approved the money. The controversy meant that the planned third storey to the building had to be sacrificed. View images of the library building construction.

The library was finished in 1898 and the books were moved into the building in 1901. The library now enjoyed much more spacious quarters and was protected against fire. At this time it adopted a comprehensive classification system for finding books and replaced the printed book catalogues with a card catalogue.

Before long the remainder of Parliament Buildings were destroyed in a disastrous fire in December 1907 – only the brick library building was left. A magnificent new Parliament House was designed – which included a more substantial open-plan library – but only the first half of the building housing the two chambers was ever built. The library has remained in its Gothic revival quarters ever since.

A national library?

The library gained other functions in the early twentieth century: from 1918 to 1931 supervision of the newly established Alexander Turnbull Library; and from 1926 to 1947 responsibility for the country’s official archives. The library’s growing collections reached more than 100,000 volumes and the staff had increased to around 10 by the 1920s.
From the 1930s a national library for New Zealand was a hot topic, with Parliament's library at the centre of discussions. By now the library had established a reference service and its book and archives collections were heavily used within Parliament and also by the public. Growth of the library after the Second World War was substantial. By the 1950s the collection had reached 200,000 volumes and some 25 staff were employed.

Following long deliberations on a national library, Parliament's library became part of the new National Library in 1966. It remained nonetheless in the Gothic revival building in Parliament grounds. In the following twenty years the library clarified its purpose and shifted less relevant parts of its large collections (now close to half a million volumes) elsewhere in the National Library.

**Serving Parliament**

In 1985 the library left the National Library to become part of the newly formed Parliamentary Service and made service to Parliament its primary objective. In the early 1990s the library building was completely refurbished as a national heritage building. [View images of the library building today](#).

The building was protected against earthquakes and new basements were created to house the collections. A feature was the recreation of the old lobby used by members before the fire of 1907. This became the members’ reading room.

Computers and electronic information resources became increasingly important to the library. Staffing grew to around 70. Today the library operates in subject teams with both librarians and research analysts to service Parliament's diverse needs for information. An Information & Knowledge team is responsible for information and knowledge management within Parliamentary Service and jointly administers the Parliamentary website. Services to the public include the Parliamentary Information Service and the International Documents Service.