

Graham Heathcote

One of the world's great libraries celebrated its tenth anniversary recently, but hardly anyone seemed to know. There was no party and even the birthday announcement failed to make the malls in time.

"There was some trouble with the post, that's why I am ringing up to remind you of it," said Carol Meads, a spokeswoman for the British Library.

"But later in the year we are going to bring out a publication reviewing our first 10 years."

The typically British low-key approach is typical of the British Library.

It was founded in 1973 to bring all the national collections of books under one roof, but it still lacks a roof. A panel of experts had recommended the creation of the state-run library, because there was overlapping and fragmentation of national books services.

Its officials admit that, while it is well known to librarians around the world, the news hasn't got through to the general public.

Many of the books in the British Library used to belong to the world-famous British Museum, which opened in 1659. The books are still there and scattered through 16 other buildings in London, because the museum in Bloomsbury has no room for them.

Eventually, the British Library will have a building to rival the National Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the Bibliothèque National in Paris and the Lenin Library in Moscow.

The building is going up on a 10-acre (4 hectare) site just over half-a-mile (1 km) away from Bloomsbury. It is next to St. Pancras train station, on the site of a demolished potato warehouse.

The first stage, book storage areas and reading rooms, should be ready to move into by 1990 and the rest will be finished in the 21st century.

The library has administrative offices in a former music publisher's offices in Sheraton Street, part of the capital's seedy Soho district.

Until the new accommodation

British Library

is ready, the books in the various collections stay where they are — more than 14 million volumes of printed books, manuscripts, music, newspapers and stamps, 400,000 discs and 20,000 hours of tape recordings.

They needed 250 miles (402 km) of shelving and are cared for by 2,000 people.

Besides the British Museum books, the stock includes the Science Reference Library, the National Central Library up in Yorkshire which loans books to other libraries, the National Lending Library of Science and Technology, a Library of Bibliographies — books about books, the old India Office Library of Records of the British Empire in India and the National Sound Archives.

The British Library is trying to modernise everything where the books are.

It has developed all sorts of services, including advice to industry and help to libraries and other organisations around the world, and is making money, said Chairman of the Board Sir Frederick Dainton.

"Much has been accomplished in the first 10 years. Britain now has a truly national library serving the needs of users in the humanities and social sciences, science and technology, as well as industry and commerce," said Dainton, a 68-year-old chemical scientist, in an anniversary statement.

He said the library filled more than 25,102 million requests from British and overseas libraries in 10 years, established a conservation branch which has treated 806,000 deteriorating items and promoted research into library computer technology.

It has a government grant this year of 45,365,000 pounds (68 million dollars) and earned 9,790,000 pounds (14.6 million dollars) through sales in the 1981-82 financial year.