

Lords of the manor

The stories of the Estonian National Museum and Raadi Manor are like the first and second halves of the same book. You see, the museum building you're in right now is on the manor's old grounds.

Once upon a time, Raadi Manor belonged to a prominent family of landowners called the Lipharts. They were big fans of the fine arts, and had a huge – and hugely valuable – collection of books and paintings. In fact, they had so many paintings that there wasn't room for them all on the manor's walls: some of them were simply propped up on the floor in its halls and salons. Beautiful string music would often be played in those rooms, too.

During the time that the Lipharts lived at Raadi Manor, its gardens truly blossomed. It also had impressive heated greenhouses, which were home to the biggest pineapple farm in the Baltic States, and an impressive collection of orchids.

It's also said that before the Lipharts left for Italy during the First World War they hid part of their riches at the bottom of Lake Raadi, because not all their cases would have fit on the train. Those precious valuables could still be there today, since the lake is both deep and muddy, and hides its secrets well.

Ownership of the manor was passed to the Estonian National Museum shortly after the Liphart family left the country – and it wasn't long until Raadi was drawing curious crowds...

Keen collectors

A museum is a place where items are collected, preserved and studied so that we can learn about how people lived in the past.

For our museum, the first thing that had to be done was to gather up old stuff. Collectors started scouring Estonia's villages for traditional garments and items of historical interest, but they also recorded songs and stories. Most of these collectors were schoolteachers, university students and other smart, proactive people who cared about our nation's past. They felt it was important to show that we have our own language and culture, and our own history, all of which we should be proud of. An enormous number of things were procured for the museum between the years 1911 and 1913 in particular.

Founding fathers

The Estonian National Museum was founded in 1909 by people who were determined to preserve the songs and stories of the Estonian people and items that they owned. One of the best-known organisers of the collecting of folk songs and people's things, and a keen collector himself, was linguist and clergyman Jakob Hurt. In a way, he was like Estonia's most famous treasure-seeker. When he died in 1907, the well-educated Estonians who attended his funeral – teachers, university students, artists, church ministers and others – decided to establish a museum. It would become the home of Hurt's extensive collection of folklore and artefacts, and anything else of interest to do with Estonia and the Estonian people.

The museum's founders held their first meeting on the 14th of April 1909, which is now considered the Estonian National Museum's birthday. Not that it had a building of its own at that point – all the stuff that had been collected for it was scattered around the city. In fact, quite a few homes in Tartu became mini-museums in their own right for a time, since there was nowhere else to store the items. Of course, the founders' big wish was for the museum to have its own dedicated space.

Knights in shining armour

The Estonian National Museum's collections have come under threat quite a few times over the years. Very shortly before Tartu was bombed and Raadi Manor destroyed during the Second World War in March 1944, the museum's staff managed to whisk most of its items and assets to safety, hiding them in churches and other places. The occupying Soviet army then took over Raadi Manor to make use of the neighbouring airfield – but while all this was going on, and for many years after, the dream of a museum in Raadi never died.

Estonia was no longer free after the war, and then, too, museum workers had to hide and save a lot of artefacts that the Soviets no longer allowed to be displayed, or that they even intended to destroy. These staff members mightn't have been actual knights in shining armour, but it's thanks to their hard work and courage that so many old books and tools and documents and garments are still around today.

Ardent adventurers

The researchers at the Estonian National Museum have always been keen travellers. Not only have they explored every corner of their own country, but their curiosity has taken them far beyond the forests and rivers of Estonia to the lands of the Udmurts, the Veps and other distant 'cousins' in the Finno-Ugric family to collect their songs,

their tools and their traditional clothes, and to record rare words and stories of languages in danger of disappearing.

In the olden days, these trips were never easy: you'd often have to take several trains, followed by a long boat journey or a ride in a truck to get to smaller villages. But these pilgrimages meant that things from places where Estonians had never been before made it to the museum, and that the stories of peoples with whom they shared cultural and linguistic roots were immortalised.

As a result, the museum's collection of Finno-Ugric artefacts is one of the world's biggest and most diverse, with over 10,000 items!

A home of one's own

The one true dream of the Estonian National Museum – to have a place to call its own – only came true in 2016. That building, which is the one you're standing in right now, is on the site of the former Raadi military airfield. You might have noticed that the museum was built to resemble a runway.

Long and narrow, the museum stretches more than three and a half kilometres. Walking the length of it can feel like you've set out on an expedition! It's a very special building, where things that are important to us are held for future generations in an underground storage space measuring 7853 square metres.

Open the door and see what history has to say!