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# The Crystal Palace and Great Exhibition of 1851

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The Crystal Palace evokes a response from almost everyone that you meet. Its fame is part of our culture. The origin of the Crystal Palace lay in a decision made in 1849 by Albert, the Prince Consort, together with a small group of friends and advisers, to hold an international exhibition in 1851 of the industry of all nations. This exhibition came to have the title of: 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations', normally shortened to 'Great Exhibition'.

There had been exhibitions prior to the Great Exhibition. These had occurred in Britain and also in France and Germany.<sup>1</sup> The spirit of competition fostered by the trade of mass-produced goods between nations created, to some extent, a need to exhibit goods. This, in turn, promoted the sale of goods. The matter of ensuring that some degree of artistic expression was applied to manufactured goods occupied the attention of many people as mass production techniques advanced. Prince Albert was keenly interested in linking the two. With his election to the Presidency of the Society for Arts and Manufactures in 1843, he was able to promote his ideas more vigorously. Henry Cole had joined the Society of Arts in 1846. He and Prince Albert had worked together with other members of the Society to create a series of exhibitions of manufactures.

Those exhibitions, held in 1847, 1848, and 1849, were increasingly successful. In 1847, 214 objects of British manufacture and decorative art were shown in the Great Room of the Society's House. The exhibition was visited by more than 20,000 people. In 1848, some 700 exhibits were shown, and visited by 73,000. The

exhibition of 1849 was visited by 100,000 people.<sup>2</sup> As the introduction to the catalogue of the 1846 exhibition explained:

'We are persuaded that if artistic manufactures are not appreciated, it is because they are not widely enough known. We believe that when works of high merit, of British origin, are brought forward, they will be fully appreciated and thoroughly enjoyed. ... this exhibition when thrown ... open to all will tend to improve the public taste.'<sup>3</sup>

This declaration of intent has a prophetic ring about it, when we consider what eventually happened in 1851.

### **The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park**

A meeting at Buckingham Palace on the 30th June 1849 confirmed that the intended exhibition would be an international one.<sup>4</sup> It was settled at this meeting that the best way of carrying out the plans for the Exhibition was to recommend the appointment of a Royal Commission, to be headed by Prince Albert. The great advantage of a Commission was its impartiality from the competing interests of the exhibitors.<sup>5</sup> This matter took six months to realise, with the Commission receiving its appointment on the 3rd January 1850. The Royal Society of Arts (as it had become in 1847) was able to have several of its members appointed to the Royal Commission. Scott Russell became one of the two joint secretaries of the Commission, Henry Cole became a member of the Executive Committee, and Digby Wyatt became the Secretary to the Executive Committee.

Joseph Paxton's involvement with the Great Exhibition came quite late in the planning process. Paxton had to develop his ideas fully in the space of no more than ten days. He had produced a sketch of an exhibition building, and had to convert this into a full design very quickly.<sup>6</sup> His task was unprecedented, as, besides iron, the chief building material was to be glass. It is worth remembering that glass was not a common building material at this time. There had been a duty on glass until the mid 1840s, and this had prevented all but the wealthy from using it in any quantity in buildings.<sup>7</sup> The building that Paxton designed was huge—1848 feet long and 450 feet wide, and the nave was to be 64 feet high. The design called for the manufacture and placement of large quantities of glass.

The whole of the construction was marked by a need for speed. Consequently, it was necessity that forced as many of the building processes as possible to be mechanised. Casting processes were devised to manufacture the base plates, columns, and cross-section girders. The floor boards, the sash bars (with their associated cutting and painting), and the hand rails—all had machines specially made to mass produce these parts. By the end of December 1850, 2,000 men were employed in the construction work, which attracted widespread attention.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the raising of the transept ribs caused great wonder, because they were so large.<sup>9</sup>

The floor area of the Crystal Palace was partitioned. The productions of the United Kingdom and of British Colonies were to be grouped to the west of the transept. Productions from foreign countries were to be

grouped to the east of the transept. The exhibits of each country were to be grouped according to the 30 classes of goods. Those goods of Britain were apportioned the whole nave west of the transept, so there was room to group goods by subject. The medieval court was in a class all of its own, as the only 'stylistic' court. The court was completely filled with objects designed by Augustus Welby Pugin, a friend of Henry Cole. Just as he was doing in the newly rebuilt Palace of Westminster, Pugin here shows his extraordinary facility for the design of a complete range of objects, all in the Gothic revival style.<sup>10</sup> Another memorable view is one of moving machinery; whilst outside, the raw materials of coal and other minerals were on display. There was almost too much to see—Bohemian glass, clay models of Hindoo castes, ivory carving, threshing machines, porcelain and earthenware flower stands, a thistle inkstand, a gothic bookcase presented to the Queen by the Emperor of Austria, a group of stuffed cats and frogs from Wurtemberg, a papier mache canterbury, Etruscan vases, books, models of ships and boats from India, clocks, lecterns—the list is endless. Up to the present day, organisations still catalogue what was exhibited.<sup>11</sup>

The huge quantity of goods arriving elicited satire from Punch, in a splendid cartoon entitled 'May Day 1851'.<sup>12</sup> Others likened the event to a beehive, with the bees swarming around the Crystal Palace and its exhibits.<sup>13</sup> There was no shortage of publications detailing the contents of the exhibition. The Royal Commission had contracted with Spicer Brothers, a company of stationers, and with William Clowes, Printers, for the production of catalogues. The prices charged reflected the quality of the production. There

was the Imperial quarto edition of the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, issued together with the *Reports by the Juries and Reports by the Royal Commissioners*, printed on fine paper, "in the highest style of typography". Originally issued in six volumes, the cost was twenty guineas.<sup>14</sup>

All the major daily London newspapers carried extensive reports of the Great Exhibition, both in the days before the opening, and on the 1 May 1851, and subsequently. These reports were variously taken up by newspapers published in the provinces. On Saturday 1st May 1851, the inauguration of the Palace of Industry was graced by Her Majesty Queen Victoria. It was estimated that the Crystal Palace could hold between 40,000 and 60,000 standing visitors on the ground floor alone, and on the opening day 25,000 people paid for seats inside to witness the opening ceremony. A dais had been erected in the centre of the transept on which Prince Albert made an address and then presented a copy of the illustrated catalogue of the items in the exhibition to Queen Victoria. The Queen, Prince Albert, and their entourage then made a circuit of the whole building to view the huge variety of exhibits before returning to the dais and officially announcing the Exhibition open to the public. The price of admission on this day was 4 pounds per person.<sup>15</sup>

The prices of admission reflected the priorities of the Commissioners. From the 2nd to the 24th May, admission was 5/-. Thereafter, admission was 1/- from Monday to Thursday, 2/6 on Fridays, and 5/- on Saturdays. This arrangement lasted until August the 2nd; after this, 2/6 was charged for admission on

Saturday instead of 5/-. The attendance figures clearly show that many more people visited on the shilling days, often double the attendance on Fridays and Saturdays.<sup>16</sup> Punch, as you see, had something to say about the meetings between those who had paid the different prices.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most sumptuous of publications to appear was *Dickinson's comprehensive pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851...*<sup>18</sup> The work was intended to be a record of the Exhibition, and was published with the 'express sanction' of Prince Albert. It was issued in 18 parts in 1852. Each part cost one guinea. There are 54 plates of folio chromolithographs, superbly executed. It is no wonder that so many people came to stare: the sight of so many objects, and such colours, many had never seen before, let alone in such quantity. No less than seven plates of chromolithographs were devoted to the wares of India—plate no 4 shows a splendid model elephant, with a rich caparison.

The Exhibition provoked a large amount of literature devoted to both the building and the exhibits. Samuel Warren's *The lily and the bee* was an early verse apologue of allegorical outpourings.<sup>19</sup> Symbolically, the lily represented beauty and art, while the bee stood for industry and labour. The aim was to marry art and labour, to the benefit of all.<sup>20</sup> This theme was echoed in William St. Clair's poem *The Great Exhibition of 1851*:

'Now peace, step down and claim thy long lost right,  
The nations listen - boldly speak thy mind-  
That they may order things without a 'fight',  
Since REASON is the weapon of mankind...' <sup>21</sup>

Of course, the whole event also had its lighter side. Throughout, Punch had supplied its readers with a steady stream of cartoons to make fun of the show. Prince Albert is shown as being quite unready at the start of the Exhibition.<sup>22</sup> Shipwrecked ministers, with all their attendant problems, are depicted as being saved by the 'Exhibition steamer'.<sup>23</sup> Ostler's crystal fountain is turned into barrels spouting beer for the shilling days, when the cheaper price admitted so many more in than when it was one pound.<sup>24</sup> *The great Derby race for 1851* features a cast of all nations, with the Crystal Palace as the backdrop.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the exhibition, Paxton is shown being handed his 'pudding' of 20,000 pounds by Prince Albert, as his share of the proceeds.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, on October 11th, it was over. 6,039,195 people had visited the Exhibition. 75,557 pounds/15s. had been spent on refreshments. The quantities of food consumed was prodigious: 60,698 cottage loaves; 68,428 pound cakes; 934,691 bath buns; 1,046 gallons of pickles; 33 tons of hams; 33,432 quarts of milk; and 1,092,337 bottles of Schweppes soda water, lemonade, and ginger beer.<sup>27</sup> Receipts for the Exhibition amounted to 506,100 pounds. Expenditures were 292,794 pounds. The difference was 213,305 pounds. For an enterprise not intended to make money, the Exhibition was successful at doing so.<sup>28</sup>

The Great Exhibition proved to be the precursor of a whole movement of national and international exhibitions, staged all over the world. What is known today as EXPO (or World's Fair) originated with the Hyde Park Great Exhibition of 1851.

Perhaps the most telling epigraph for the Great Exhibition was written at the time: verse written for the passing of the Hyde Park Crystal Palace:

'Let the wandering winds blow freely o'er the site where  
shone so late,  
The gleaming wonder of the world.  
Let world wide pilgrims come,  
In all times hereafter, unto this sceptred isle,  
This little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
This blessed spot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
To that green spot:  
And, pointing to their sons, all grown incredulous, say,  
Here it stood!' <sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An account of these earlier exhibitions appears in Derek Hudson and Kenneth Luckhurst. *The Royal Society of Arts, 1754-1954*. London, John Murray, 1954. pp. 187-205.

<sup>2</sup> Hudson & Luckhurst, op. cit., pp.193-195.

<sup>3</sup> Ditto, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> The Great Exhibition Conference at Buckingham Palace. 30th June 1849

<sup>5</sup> *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851*. Official Descriptive and illustrated catalogue. 3 vols., and Supplement. London, Spicer Bros; W, Clowes and Sons, 1851. Vol.1, p.5. Henry Cole wrote the 'Introduction' on pages 1-35 of Vol. 1. Matthew Digby Wyatt wrote 'The construction of the building', pp. 49-81 of vol. 1

<sup>6</sup> A memorial of the Great Exhibition, 1851. The embodiment of a great idea. Memoranda, plans, etc, ... [Collection formed by Mr R.H. Love...] British Library. Add. MS. 35255, fol. 30.

<sup>7</sup> P. Beaver. *The Crystal Palace 1851-1936*. London, Hugh Evelyn, 1977. p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Great Exhibition... Official ...Catalogue. op. cit. Vol. 1, p.78.

<sup>9</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 14th December 1850.

<sup>10</sup> *Pugin: a Gothic revival*. Exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, 15th June-11th September 1994. Some of the objects in the Medieval Court at the Hyde Park Crystal Palace were on display at this exhibition.

<sup>11</sup> Exhibits from Guernsey. See:  
[http://www.museums.gov.gg/great\\_exhibition\\_\\_1851.htm](http://www.museums.gov.gg/great_exhibition__1851.htm)

(Visited May 2007)

<sup>12</sup> *Punch*. Vol 20. Jan.-June 1851, p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> H. Mayhew and George Cruikshank. *The adventures of Mr & Mrs Sandboys & family*. 1851.

<sup>14</sup> 3 vols. The presentation copy of this work from the Commissioners to the British Museum is in the British Library.

<sup>15</sup> With acknowledgements to the account published at:  
[http://www.museums.gov.gg/great\\_exhibition\\_\\_1851.htm](http://www.museums.gov.gg/great_exhibition__1851.htm)

(Visited May 2007); see also: P. Beaver. *The Crystal Palace 1851-1936*. London: Hugh Evelyn, 1970, pp. 37-42; Hobhouse, Christopher. 1851 and the Crystal Palace... London: John Murray, 1950, pp. 62-70.

<sup>16</sup> Full details of the attendance figures are in Appendix no. XXVIII of the First Report of the Commissioners... pp. 147-149.

<sup>17</sup> *Punch*. Vol 20. Jan.-June 1851, p. 247.

<sup>18</sup> Dickinson's comprehensive pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851; from the originals painted for H.R.H. Prince Albert by Messrs. Nash, Haghe, and Roberts, R.A. Published under the express sanction of His Royal Highness Prince Albert, President of the Royal Commission, to

whom the work is, by permission, dedicated. 2 vols. London, Dickinson Brothers, Her Majesty's printers, [1852].

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Warren. *The lily and the bee. An apologue of the Crystal Palace*. Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood & Son, 1851. xiii,224,[1] pp.

<sup>20</sup> Tallis' history and description of the Crystal Palace... op.cit., vol. III, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> William St. Clair. *The Great Exhibition of 1851. A poem*. London, Partridge & Oakley, 1850. Verse xv. This copy is at BL Add. MS. 35,255, fol. 494.

<sup>22</sup> *Punch*. Vol 20. Jan.-June 1851, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> *Punch*. Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>24</sup> *Punch*. Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>25</sup> *Punch*. Ibid., p.213.

<sup>26</sup> *Punch*. Vol. 21. July-Dec. 1851, p.181.

<sup>27</sup> First Report of the Commissioners... Op. cit., Appendix XXIX, p.150.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Appendix XXXII, p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Warren. *The lily and the bee*. op. cit., p. 24.

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