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## **FACILITY DRILL**

### **Blog - 2014 - December**

#### **Crystal Palace**

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## Crystal Palace

I have been making an effort to discover all the interesting parks around London. It is easy enough to see a green blob on the map, but finding out whether it is a plain piece of uninteresting grassland or a manicured park takes a little more digging around, and an image search is the quickest way to sort out which ones will be worth the time to go and see. Last October I visited a park whose name conjures up all sorts of images, Crystal Palace, although if you don't have an interest in history, this would merely be the name of a London football team. I remember going to see the life-size Victorian model dinosaurs there very many years ago, but could remember nothing of the rest of the park, which I think we probably did not roam around at that time, consumed as we were by our fascination with the prehistoric beasts.

It was a breezy sunny morning and we rode in pleasant anticipation on the train to Sydenham. We were not really expecting the weather to be so mild and the lateness of the season made the day out even more appreciated, as it could easily have been cold and wet at that time of year. We walked round the lake and took pictures of the dinosaurs from every angle, more than 45 years after the first visit, this time with our digital cameras and their unlimited capacity for photos and movies. We then wandered up the hill, past the sports arenas, and onto the site where the Crystal Palace once stood. This is an entirely open grassy area, with only the ornate front parapet and central stone staircase left to show the enormous size of the building. The only reminders of past days were two lonely and thoughtful sphinxes and a few headless statues, and the only crowds, other than a few walkers, were the crows, using the top of the parapet as a small cliff face to perch on.

There is a far-reaching view from the hill, over a mixture of distant suburbs and countryside, not quite as magnificent as it must have been in the eighteen hundreds when it was all farmland and woods. We walked the length of the building and although it was pleasant to be out in the open in the sunshine, my thoughts turned constantly to what it might have been like when the Crystal Palace was here, the noise, crowds, exhibits, gardens and fountains. I think those people would hardly believe their eyes, if they could see the site now, looking as empty as it was before the building ever arrived.

The original Crystal Palace was situated in Hyde Park in London as a showcase for the manufactured goods, trade, craftsmanship and artefacts of the British Empire. The official name of the exhibition was "The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations" and ran from 1 May to 11 October 1851. There was much opposition to it at first, as it would dominate the park, but as the structure was designed to be a temporary one, the promise of its later removal and restoration of the park grounds mitigated the objections, and the project went ahead. The number of plans submitted was 245, all of which were rejected on grounds of cost and insufficient time to build them, and the Building Committee came up with its own version, which was equally derided by its opponents. At last, Joseph Paxton submitted his plan late in the day, based on the large glasshouses that he had designed as head gardener on the Chatsworth Estate. His modular structure was made entirely of iron and glass, which meant it was easy to produce in the vast quantities needed, extremely quick to erect and could easily be dismantled for reuse once the exhibition was over.

## Crystal Palace

The main building in Hyde Park was constructed in the five months between the last day of July 1850 and the end of the year. It covered 19 acres and enclosed 355,000 cubic feet. It was 1,848 feet long, 408 feet wide and 66 feet high, with a transept 108 feet in height. It used 4,500 tons of iron, over 293,000 panes of glass, 24 miles of guttering and 60,000 cubic feet of timber. It was built in nine months by 2,000 men, at a cost of £79,800. All this provided just under a million square feet of exhibition floor space. There were 100,000 exhibits, and the number of exhibitors was nearly 14,000, just over half of which were British.

The number of visitors was just over six million, and three quarters of a million of these were season ticket holders. It was opened with great ceremony by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who visited it regularly during the exhibition run. One slight problem was the arrival and multiplication of sparrows, which were doing no favours to the high quality and expensive exhibits located below their perching places and under their flight paths. No-one knew what to do, until this perplexing problem was eventually solved by Queen Victoria requesting the Duke of Wellington's advice on the matter: his answer was to introduce sparrowhawks.

Profits from the exhibition were not great but they did fund the building of many of London's museums, including the Natural History Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Science Museum. When the Great Exhibition closed, ownership of the structure reverted as agreed to the manufacturers Fox and Henderson. However, even while the exhibition was still running, Paxton had been hatching plans to reuse it as a Winter Garden. His proposal to keep it in Hyde Park was turned down, and so he formed a company to purchase the building and also a new site on which to rebuild it. The building was relocated and re-erected at Sydenham, beginning in 1852, in a much

larger form, as a "Winter Park and Garden under Glass" with extensive ornamental grounds and fountains. It hosted every sort of cultural and educational event and exhibition and was visited by two million people every year for the first 30 years.

It remained in operation for 85 years, despite a fire in 1866 which destroyed the north transept and wing, which was never rebuilt. It declined in popularity in the later years and on 30 November 1936 it was completely destroyed by fire. The fire started in one of the staff toilets and rapidly spread to engulf the whole building, fuelled by the wooden floorboards and walls. Half of London's firemen turned out to fight the fire but their efforts were to no avail, and indeed were hampered by the crowds flocking to witness the conflagration. Overnight the Palace became a giant heap of molten iron and glass. To many Victorians the Crystal Palace was a magnificent example of engineering innovation and a symbol of their desire for peace and prosperity, but these noble aspirations had already crumbled at the beginning of the 20th century with the Great War of 1914. Standing on the empty foundations, one not only tries to imagine the presence of the building, exhibits and people, but also the fire, noise and smoke.

All was quiet on my visit, with hardly a sound to be heard other than the wind in the trees and the cawing of crows, but all this will change in the future when the current plans to rebuild the Crystal Palace are put into action. The remains present a rather sad sight and in my mind the original building is the only one that really belongs here. I am looking forward to seeing it rise again from the ground and sparkling in the sunlight, and the statue of Joseph Paxton moved from its present obscure corner and given a place of honour where he can admire and approve of a second faithful version of his wonderful glasshouse. (1317 words)