

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Geoffrey Kay, The Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition of 1851

Henry Cole who worked for the Board of Trade had the idea to hold an exhibition to promote improvements in design in British industry. Manufacturers would be invited to display their products. Cole was friends with Prince Albert, and told him of his idea, the Prince supported his idea, and thought it should be an international event. A committee was formed, which invited architects to compete for designs for an exhibition building, as no suitable venue was available. The next question was where to build the pavilion. Queen Victoria offered Hyde Park on condition the structure was only temporary. But all the designs submitted were rejected. John Paxton, a young head gardener for the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth House had experience in building huge glass houses to produce exotic fruit for Chatsworth. His designs were sent to the committee and approved in the summer of 1850, to be completed by spring 1851. In autumn 1850, during construction, trees were obstructing the design. Queen Victoria refused to allow felling of the trees, so they were incorporated into the building. Thousands of tourists flocked to see the building work, the use of iron and glass was a new innovation, and the 200 men working on the site had no experience, 5 were killed during the construction. The strength of the building was doubted, and soldiers were brought to march inside to test the strength. Prince Albert brought beer for the workers. No expense was spared with proper plumbing and flush toilets, which cost one penny to use.

In May 1851 the building was complete, an enormous structure the size of several football pitches, with galleries around the perimeter, and the iron work painted in bright colours. World dignitaries attended the opening, and many countries sent examples of their manufacturing industries and crafts. America sent a steam locomotive, and Germany sent examples of their textiles. The building was divided into pavilions for each country's exhibits, and the centrepiece was a fountain playing on glass. John Ruskin, the art critic hated the building, and named it Crystal Palace. William Morris also disliked the idea, as he promoted hand made and designed goods as against mass produced. But Charlotte Bronte thought it was wonderful, and visited many times. From May to October 5 million people visited and bought souvenirs. Thomas Cook started organised trips to the Palace. A farewell concert was held attended by the Royal family. The exhibition had been a financial success, and legacies from this include The Royal Albert Hall, and the V & A Museum where many of the exhibits are displayed today.

Despite protests the Queen insisted on the demolition of the Palace. But Joseph Paxton and others bought it, dismantled it, and it was re-erected in Siddenham where it housed sculptures, sports, concerts etc. On November 30th the Palace was destroyed by fire, thought to have been possibly caused by an electrical fault. The site at Siddenham is still a pleasure garden, sporting large concrete dinosaurs.

Angela Bigley.