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# London's cherished ghost: Crystal Palace



by Tim Locke

**A**long a lofty ridge in the south London suburbs, Crystal Palace Parade is a grandiose approach road for the Crystal Palace, the capital's most cherished ghost. I can think of nowhere else where a vanished structure is quite so intensely and fondly remembered: more than seventy years after it burned down in 1936, the spectre of the old palace still completely dominates a district of London (that really is called Crystal Palace). The Berlin Wall or New York's Ground Zero respectively signify denial of freedom and a peculiarly modern tragedy. Dresden's Frauenkirche

steadfastly refused to disappear from public memory and has now re-emerged — but where else is quite so tangible, has such positive associations as Crystal Palace and is at the same time

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so patently banished from our lives? Roads wind up to it from all directions, and half a dozen or so buses have their routes named after it. The New Zealand writer Janet Frame recalls in her autobiography, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, boarding a 137 bus to Crystal

Palace drawn merely by the expectations the destination board gave her. What she would have found was a blank, inaccessible rectangle behind a bus terminus: hardly glamorous, but something for which south Londoners still have immense affection.

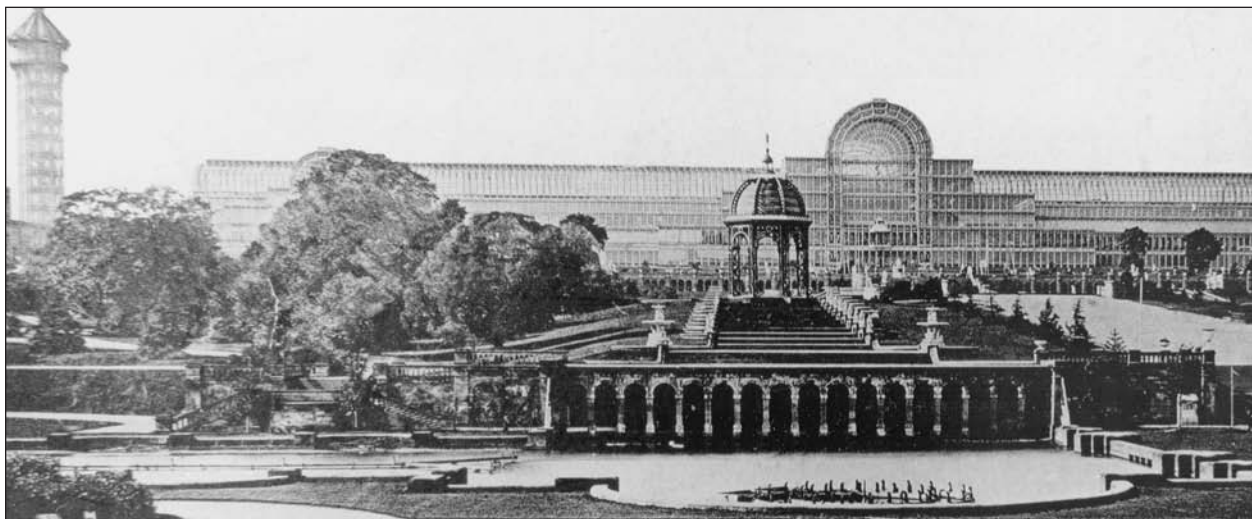
When I grew up in Sydenham in the sixties and seventies, the Crystal Palace site was a somewhat forbidding, fenced-off space littered with wartime rubble. It was years before I managed a peek inside, but adult talk all around me was of memories of the Palace and its spectacular downfall. Newspaper reports just after the great conflagration in 1936 made mention of “the

plans already underway for the rebuilding of the Crystal Palace” but nothing ever happened.

I felt an innate sense of loss for something I had never seen. Right up to the nineteen seventies virtually the only postcards of the district that were on sale locally were ancient stock of pre-1936 views of the Palace: it seemed nothing else in Sydenham or Upper Norwood mattered or needed to be celebrated, only mourned; John Betjeman likened the Palace’s departure to the loss of a close relation. That fateful day in 1936 was something of a Kennedy moment: every Londoner alive at the time seems able to pinpoint the event, and huge numbers turned out to watch the blaze. A second-hand music shop in Sydenham was run by one Monty Garrard, who was said to have been driven quite insane by the catastrophe. Monty was the very last organist at the Crystal Palace, and its destruction — reputedly humanoid groans were heard as the massive organ pipes succumbed to the fire — simply broke his heart. Monty had an old church organ installed at the back of his shop, but he seldom let anyone in, and plastered his windows with anti-Winston Churchill messages.

Many of Sydenham’s stately Victorian villas, all hangovers from the heady, society days of the Palace, were boarded up and demolished, one by one, row by row, through the sixties and seventies. The accompanying sense of doom forever instilled in me an affection for what I like to think of as Sydenham Vernacular — Gothic lodges, turreted villas, Arts and Crafts mock-

OPPOSITE: image of Crystal Palace engraved and printed by Edmund Evans, published in THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS (9 June 1855); BELOW: part of the Palace with one of the Brunel water towers, probably shot around 1865 (photo courtesy of Bromley Libraries)



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The Crystal Palace, greatly enhanced in grandeur and beauty [...] should form a Palace for the multitude. [It will] afford to the inhabitants of London, in wholesome country air, amidst the beauties of nature, the elevating treasures of art, and the instructive marvels of science, an accessible and inexpensive substitute for the injurious and debasing amusements of the crowded metropolis.

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*from 'Crystal Palace: A Guide to the Palace and Park' by Samuel Phillips (1854)*

Tudor extravagances and encaustic-tiled hallways bathed in a stained-glass glow. For too long, Victorian buildings were deeply out of fashion, but fortunately the tide eventually turned: Sydenham gained a vociferous civic society; and locals protested successfully against the removal of Eliot Lodge on Sydenham Hill — a fetchingly spooky pile dubbed by us schoolchildren as Dracula Towers. The Crystal Palace may have gone, but something of Victorian London has been preserved in the area: some of the best

old and new: sphinx and TV transmitter at Crystal Palace  
(photo by Tim Locke)



architectural extravagances can be found in Belvedere Road, Crystal Palace Park Road and Jews Walk. The area even still has a couple of other buildings by Joseph Paxton himself, who died in Sydenham in 1865: Dulwich Wood House (a pub, but originally a private house) on Sydenham Hill and a working men's institute in Kirkdale that was originally conceived as a scaled-down version of the Crystal Palace but was modified by another architect.

Revisiting many years later, I arrive by train: from across south London the two TV masts thrust up Eiffel Tower-like at either end of the Crystal Palace ridge and point to the spot for miles around. Those two towers are landmarks that nicely keep the Palace on Londoners' mental maps.

Crystal Palace (Low Level) station — one of two that served the Palace — has immense, dark, bricky depths and a huge feeling of expectancy for something that isn't there: generous stairways were intended to be broad enough for two crinoline-clad ladies to pass. There used to be a Roman Catholic chapel inside the station when I lived here, but now a pastiche mini Crystal Palace booking office and entrance has been added outside, something of a nod to the gracious colonnaded footway that originally connected the station with the Palace.

#### APPROACHING CRYSTAL PALACE

The way to approach the phantom Palace is from the top. Here, from Crystal Palace Parade you get a hint of the scale of the building — from the vacant space that flanks one side right up to one of the huge television masts. Its northern side was once home to the stately brick and terracotta Crystal Palace (High Level) station, which survived until the fifties — pulled down in what now seems an act of architectural vandalism. Today it would surely have been recognized as a



an aerial view of Crystal Palace taken around 1920  
(photo courtesy of Bromley Libraries)

## the Palace at Sydenham

The Crystal Palace opened as the Great Exhibition of 1851, a celebration of scientific and industrial achievement, the proceeds of which funded the museums in the South Kensington district of London. It was packed up and moved from Hyde Park, and reassembled in enlarged form in Sydenham in 1854. This was the granddaddy of all exhibition halls: four times the length of St Paul's Cathedral, its glittering glassy form dominated the skyline across the capital and could even be seen from the North Downs in rural Kent. It was designed in iron and glass by self-taught architect Joseph Paxton, who had been head gardener at the Chatsworth estate in Derbyshire and was therefore no stranger to greenhouses. His masterpiece is often cited as the first truly modern building — a very early example of a prefabricated frame — and its admirers included Le Corbusier, who saw it as the triumphant herald of the Modern Movement. Its legacy lives on in nineteenth-century creations like the Kibble

Palace glasshouse in Glasgow's Botanic Gardens, as well as Manchester's Barton Arcade and countless watered-down modern versions in shopping precincts.

As soon as it was installed at its new site in Sydenham, the Crystal Palace assumed immense national importance: it instructed the masses about the history of art and civilization, had a great bearing on the development of public taste and opened up the world in a way denied to the vast majority of society who could not afford to travel. Until then, images of exotic countries would have typically been limited to monochrome engravings: now for the first time everything appeared in full scale, three dimensions and glorious colour. There were faithful replicas of architectural interiors from different periods of history; here, paintings of Egyptian slaves building the pyramids shaped the visual consciousness that was later recreated in Hollywood epics. The Crystal Palace became a venue for music: classical composers such as Schubert and Schumann, and such works as Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* were introduced to the English audiences with the first public orchestral concerts in Victorian London. Liszt came to play the piano in front of adoring crowds, and the tradition of amateur choral societies really took off here, with massed choirs performing Handel festivals that lasted for days.

gem and so saved for posterity. Underneath the Parade a lavishly constructed crypt-like subway

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The long terrace at the top of Crystal Palace Park, where the Palace stood, is dotted with sad remnants of broken statuary and figures of sphinxes.

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remains virtually unscathed, pillared and vaulted, and sporting Italian brickwork: through here, visitors walked from the High Level station to the Palace entrance. It is sealed off nowadays, but there is talk of making this great undercroft

into a long-awaited museum. But they do ponder things for a long time here without getting

anywhere: proposals in the past to create a sub-Crystal Palace-like entertainment and retail facility with a car park on the roof came up with massive petitions and protests, as eco-warriors made barricades in tunnels and ensconced themselves on treetops.

The long terrace at the top of Crystal Palace Park, where the Palace stood, is dotted with sad remnants of broken statuary and figures of sphinxes: I rootle around the undergrowth, and chance upon small dollops of glass from the 1936 fire. Molten crystal, now solidified as lumps of London history. At the far end, near the base of the mast, are the excavated remains of what was the world's largest aquarium; it has something of the character of an ancient bath complex. Monumental granite staircases sweep down

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Unity in architecture is one of the most requisite and agreeable of qualities: and certainly no building possesses it in a greater degree than the Crystal Palace. Its design is most simple: one portion corresponds with another; there is no introduction of needless ornament: a simplicity of treatment reigns throughout.

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*from 'Crystal Palace: A Guide to the Palace and Park' by Samuel Phillips (1854)*

to a lower terrace lined with arcades. Beneath that, uncomfortably fenced off, the stadium of the National Recreation Centre (NRC) occupies the middle of the park, where the great fountain once was: a bust of Paxton is positioned so the great man stares away from the graveyard of his creation — perhaps he simply can't bear to look. Behind is the NRC's most successful structure, its swimming pool built in the nineteen sixties, a building that catches the spirit of the Palace without simply imitating it.

Elsewhere the park still has its unmistakably Victorian moments, even though the London Borough of Bromley has tinkered with municipal tidying-up and fence-erecting. You can

the Victorian models of dinosaurs in Crystal Palace park presented visitors with recent discoveries which were not yet well understood, several years before Darwin published his work on evolution (photo by Tim Locke)



ignore the tat, and wander curving paths past valleys of rhododendrons, explore a replanted maze and encounter a stately avenue leading up to where the great fountains would have been. By the lower lake the last word aptly goes to extinct beasts, lurking in shrubberies by rockeries on artificial islets — the first ever attempt at replicating dinosaurs and other long-gone species at full scale. Placed on or near the rock type in which their fossil remains were found, they have stood here over one hundred and fifty years, and look remarkably well for it, thanks to some recent restoration. This is very much an appreciation of science frozen in time: some of the anatomical detail was not then fully understood. Close by is an artificial miniature cliff of rock strata created to illustrate the availability of lead, coal and iron — materials that had fuelled the industrial revolution — displaying the then new science of geology to a London public with a great appetite for learning.

The Palace and its sad demise spawned wonderfully offbeat suburban myths and untruths: tales of mice and rats fleeing the fire while a river of molten glass flowed down Anerley Hill — and some maintain that somewhere underground is a lost pneumatic railway with its trains still intact. One recent author added to the commonly cited fact that half a million turned up to watch the Palace burn down in 1936 the anachronistically misguided observation that “many also saw it on television”! Well not quite. But somewhere beneath the rubble of the Crystal Palace are the

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Among many unfulfilled schemes floated over the decades have been a university, a museum of sport, a sculpture park, a viewing tower and a complete downsized replica of the palace.

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remains of the original John Logie Baird television studios — here in the basement of the Palace, Baird's team worked on their first experimental transmissions in 1933. The modern television masts nicely recall Crystal Palace's place in the history of broadcasting, and some might even argue that the transmission masts perpetuate the original function of the Palace: providing entertainment for the masses.

To me this is a poignant place evoking a very lost Victorian London. It tantalisingly hints at what was, but I still cannot quite rekindle the feeling of the huge glass cathedral towering cliff-like over Crystal Palace Parade, the heat, the crowds and the sheer novelty and magic of it all.

I also find it frustrating for its lost opportunities. There were two water towers (designed by Brunel) that flanked the main structure of the Palace; they served the elaborate network of fountains, cascades and lakes in the park. They survived the fire but were needlessly torn down during the Second World War, though the base of one is still there. Even part of the Palace stood in a rickety, mangled state until vandals burned it down in 1950. A lot of the statues were sold off in the sixties and presumably still adorn back gardens around the capital. Among many unfulfilled schemes floated over the decades have been a university, a museum of sport, a sculpture park, a viewing tower and a complete downsized replica of the palace. The latest plan is just to mark out the outline with trees — to my mind a timid, safe compromise between nature conservation and an iconic structure on the site. Trees would



the modern railway station at Crystal Palace, formerly known as the Low Level Station (photo by Tim Locke)

probably neither offend nor delight anyone. In the meantime, if you want to sample that air of a secretive paradise the derelict site once had, seek out the joyous cavortings of the 1953 avant-garde film *The Pleasure Garden*, by American poet James Broughton. For myself, I am happy just to greet the dinosaurs, poke among the headless statues, forlorn sphinxes and empty plinths, and climb those magnificent stairways to nothing. ■

Tim Locke is a travel writer and editor living in Sussex. He was born in Sydenham in a house once owned by John Scott Russell, a Victorian engineer who was one of the original directors of the Crystal Palace Company. Tim's website is [www.timlocke.co.uk](http://www.timlocke.co.uk).

## travel facts

Crystal Palace is about fifteen kilometres south of central London. The old Low Level station is still open for business. The High Level station closed in 1954. Nowadays regular suburban trains link central London with Crystal Palace. The best point of departure is London Bridge, from where trains run at least thrice each hour, taking between twenty and thirty minutes. There are equally frequent trains from London Victoria, generally taking twenty-five minutes.

The days when Janet Frame could take the 137 bus all the way to Crystal Palace have long since gone. The service was curtailed in 1998 and now no longer extends so far out from the heart of London. But devotees of slow travel can still reach Crystal Palace from central London: route 3 connects both Oxford Circus and Trafalgar Square with the site of the old palace. The journey takes one hour, meandering along the way through some of London's more colourful suburbs.