

# THE VICTORIAN EXHIBITION HALLS OF LONDON AS VENUES FOR THE MAGIC LANTERN AND CINEMATOGRAPH

Bill Barnes

The Victorians seem to have had a penchant for the erection of large exhibition halls. They built a dozen scattered across the metropolis.<sup>1</sup>

The Royal Polytechnic in Regent Street was first and foremost as regards the magic lantern. Founded in 1837 it became the centre in London for magic lantern displays and was the first place in England to present projected cinematic films. As the Polytechnic is well documented in Jeremy Brooker's book *The Temple of Minerva* (published by the Magic Lantern Society),<sup>2</sup> it would be superfluous to comment on the subject, except to point out that it still exists but in a much moderated form.

Of the other halls, five are extant although radically changed in appearance over the years – some more than others – and the rest have been demolished with one awaiting that fate.

The magnificent – and revolutionary in construction – Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, built for the Great Exhibition of 1851,<sup>3</sup> was dismantled and moved to Sydenham in south London only to be destroyed by fire in 1937.<sup>4,5</sup> All that remained were its twin towers designed by the great British engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel. These were wilfully destroyed during World War II – and not by enemy action!

Its rival, Alexandra Palace on Muswell Hill, north London, of 1873, is still there after being virtually rebuilt twice after disastrous fires. I have discussed all three of these buildings in previous articles so will not do so here.

The short-lived 'Panopticon of Science and Arts' in Leicester Square, opened in 1854 with the sole purpose of holding 'scientific exhibitions and promoting discoveries in art and manufactures', was the brainchild of an Irishman, Edward Marmaduke Clarke. Within were lecture rooms and a large rotunda, 'the most splendid room ever appropriated for scientific and artistic purposes'. It would seem highly likely that the magic lantern was used here although this has yet to be determined.

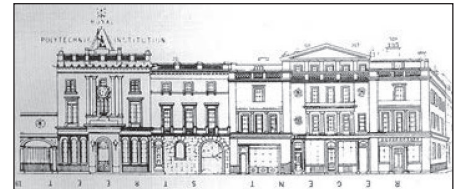
The Panopticon opened on 16 March 1854 but was not a success. Three years later, in May 1857, it was converted into the celebrated Alhambra Theatre where in 1896 Robert W. Paul introduced his 'Theatrograph' projector and operated a small film studio on the roof.<sup>6</sup> This was demolished in 1936 to make way for a super cinema – the Odeon – that still survives.

The Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington was built in 1861–2 as a corral for cattle awaiting slaughter in Smithfield Market. It was designed by Frederick Peck using 1,000 tons of cast iron and had a roof span of 130 feet flanked by two towers. Two smaller halls were added later and the whole became a venue for industrial exhibitions.

'The World's Fair' – a gathering of fairground people from all over Britain – was first held here in 1873 and became an annual event. It was here that Randall Williams, the great showman, first introduced the cinematograph to the English fairgrounds in 1897.<sup>6</sup> Other events held here included circuses, military tournaments, bicycle races and athletics. Religious and missionary services were also held here so the magic lantern is likely to have featured.

The premises were closed at the outbreak of war in 1939, became part of the Royal Mail sorting office until 1971, then stood empty until Islington Borough Council acquired them in 1976. After major alterations, including the demolition of its lovely theatre, the building became an exhibition centre.

Some readers may be surprised to learn that the Royal Albert Hall was originally built as a 'Hall of Arts and Sciences'. Opened in 1867, it stands opposite that extraordinary monument – the



The Royal Polytechnic Institution, Regent Street from Tallis's Street Views of London 1838–40



The Polytechnic in 1849 drawn for the Grand Architectural Panorama of London 1849



The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, built to house the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Barnes Archive)



The Crystal Palace in Sydenham (Barnes Archive)



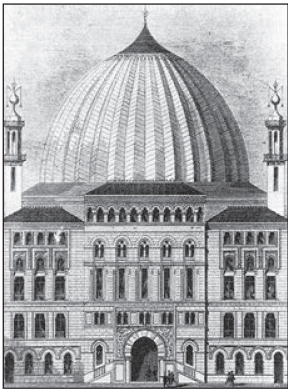
Interior of the Royal Agricultural Hall



Visitors inspecting cattle in the Royal Agricultural Hall in 1861, the year of its opening



Alexandra Palace, Muswell Hill (Barnes Archive)



The Panopticon of Science and Arts

## REFERENCES

1. B. Weinreb and C. Hibbert (eds), *The London Encyclopaedia*, Book Club Associates/Macmillan, London, 1983 (prime source for article)
2. J. Brooker, *The Temple of Minerva – Magic and the magic lantern at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London 1837–1901*, *The Magic Lantern Society*, 2013
3. Y. ffrench, *The Great Exhibition 1851*, *The Harvill Press*, London, 1950

4. J.R. Piggott, *Palace of the People – The Crystal Palace at Sydenham 1854–1936*, Hurst & Co, London, 2004
5. *Crystal Palace, Programmes of the Saturday Concerts, 15 October 1892 to 27 October 1900 (examples in Barnes Archive)*
6. J. Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England, 1894–1901*, *University of Exeter Press*, 5 vols, 1996–8



The Royal Albert Hall (Barnes Archive)



Artist's impression of the proposed building for the Exhibition of 1862



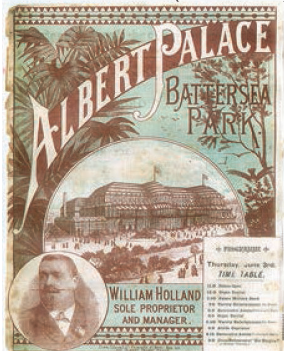
The Royal Aquarium, Westminster



Albert Palace 1885 (8)  
(Wandsworth Public Libraries)

The Albert Palace, Battersea Park

A programme from the Albert Palace in 1886, including an artist's impression of the building and its proprietor William Holland (Barnes Archive)



Albert Memorial – in Hyde Park that is adjacent to the original site of the Crystal Palace. The Albert Hall is an oval building with exterior measurements of 272 feet. Its glass and iron dome is 135 feet high. The organ, when installed, was the largest in the world – Anton Bruckner played on it. Richard Wagner conducted concerts here during the Wagner Festival of 1877.

During the 'Gay '90s' charity balls, bazaars and festivals were held, and in January 1897 a satisfactory performance of H. Heinze's cinematograph projector, the Pholimeograph, was given to a large audience. The size of the picture was 40 x 30 feet.

In 1906 an audience of 9,000 heard the first gramophone concert. From 1919 boxing matches were held and in 1923 the first performance of *Hiawatha*, which later became an annual event until WWII. The Henry Wood Promenade Concerts moved here in 1941 when their former home, the Queens Hall, was bombed. The acoustics were improved in 1968 to deaden the echo – it having been said that 'the only place a British composer can be sure of having his work heard twice is at the Albert Hall', the acoustics being that poor.

A large exhibition hall had been built on the site of what was to become the Natural History Museum for the Exhibition of 1862 but seems to have been a brief affair. The original plan had two domes, as shown in the artist's impression, but only one featured in the final building as illustrated. When demolished, some of its fabric was re-used in the building of Alexandra Palace.



The building for the Exhibition of 1862 as realised

The Royal Aquarium in Tothill Street, Westminster, opened in 1876 – a magnificent building designed as a palace of Victorian entertainment. The main hall had palm trees, pieces of sculpture, tanks of curious sea creatures and an orchestra. There were rooms for reading, smoking and eating. It included an art gallery, skating rink and theatre as well as a large pool for aquatic displays.

However, it never succeeded in becoming the intellectual centre it had been hoped and by 1890 had degenerated into a large seedy music hall. Here took place the sensation of London in 1897 – the one-and-a-half hour coverage of the world title prize fight between Corbett and Cornishman George Fitzsimmons. The fight had taken place in Carson City, Nevada, USA, and was specifically staged with film in mind with a purpose-built camera. The successful exploitation of the film in America was followed by an equally successful run in

London when it opened on 27 September at the Royal Aquarium. It was remarkable for the fact that films at this time were only 40 to 60 feet long and lasted a few seconds – this film lasted 90 minutes.

The Royal Aquarium was sold in 1903 to the Methodists for their Central Hall and sadly demolished except for the theatre whose interior was used in the building of the Imperial Theatre in Camden Town, only to be destroyed by fire in 1931.

A Victorian exhibition hall that has been almost totally forgotten is the Albert Palace, Battersea Park. It was built from the shell of the Dublin Exhibition Hall of 1872. Opened in 1884 it closed four years later in 1888. The Palace and gardens covered an area of ten acres. Entertainments were given in a number of places within the Palace including the Connaught Hall, the Nave and an outdoor theatre.

A surviving programme in the Barnes Archive (see illustration) announces a variety of entertainments including 'Paris in London – Café Chantant', an organ recital, a children's corner, the Palace Military Band, a picture gallery, 'The Greatest Wonder of Japan, Katsunoshin Awata – Prince of Jugglers' and a number of music hall acts. Situated at the west end of the grounds was 'The Great Camera Obscura or Living Panorama. The greatest marvel of the age. The finest ever shown in this country'. Admission was twopence, children half-price.

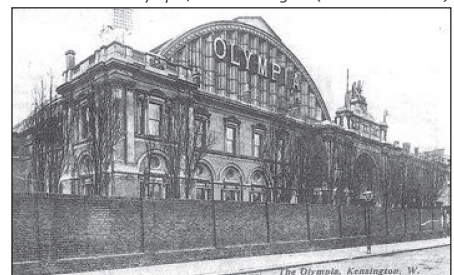
There are records of the Albert Palace in the Enthoven Collection and the Battersea local collection, consisting of cuttings, playbills, and illustrations. Careful examination of these might reveal whether the magic lantern was ever used here.

Olympia in Hammersmith Road, West Kensington, was opened in 1884 as the Agricultural Hall and when its use as such moved elsewhere in 1886 it became a universal exhibition centre for all manner of spectacles. It staged its first circus – the 'Paris Hippodrome' – with 400 animals and from then on the circus became an annual event here at Christmas time.

Here too Imré Kiralfy (later associated with White City and Earls Court) put on the first of a number of spectacular shows. The first motor show was held here in 1905 and the International Horse Show in 1907. In 1911 C.B. Cochran transformed the interior into a representation of a cathedral to stage *The Miracle* and brought Max Reinhardt from Germany to direct.

In 1895 the Grand Hall was extended and, in the Palmarium, Robert Paul exhibited his Animatograph projector from 21 March

Olympia, West Kensington (Barnes Collection)





Earl's Court began as an open-air pleasure ground in 1887 (Barnes Archive)

1896. Some consider this to be the first cinema in England as its use was solely for film shows, although other events took place here when not occupied by the cinematograph.

As with Alexandra Palace, it was taken over by the military during World War I. In 1923 the National Hall was added and in 1929 the Empire Hall. The role of the magic lantern here has still to be determined.

The last on the list of Victorian halls is Olympia's sister hall, Earl's Court.<sup>7, 8</sup> This began its existence as an open-air pleasure ground for outdoor activities. The site had been acquired by J.R. Whiteley in 1887. Here was erected the first ferris wheel seen in England (as shown in the illustration) – an early forerunner of the London Eye. Here too was staged 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show' and in 1895 the 'Empire of India Exhibition' where Robert Paul exhibited his Kinetoscopes (a peepshow device) from 27 May to 26 October when some of the first films made in this country were seen.

The present building was erected in 1937 and, at the time, was the largest reinforced-concrete building in Europe. The site covers 12 acres and was used for public exhibitions such as the Boat Show, Royal Tournament and Royal Smithfield Show. Demolition work began at the end of 2014 to make way for a residential and retail development.

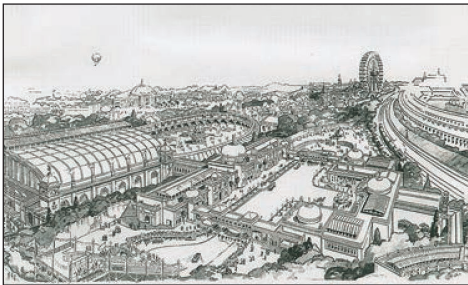
Further research is needed to establish the links to the magic lantern in some of these venues and hopefully this article will provide some impetus. Sadly half these spectacular palaces and halls have already been lost to us – the Crystal Palace, the Royal Aquarium, the Panopticon, the 1862 Exhibition Hall, the Albert Palace and more recently Earl's Court. One wonders how many will follow. Whatever their fate let us hope that the Royal Albert Hall will remain as a yearly reminder of Elgar's 'Land of Hope and Glory' and Blake's 'green and pleasant land'.

7. R. James, Earls Court and Brompton Past, *Historical Publications, The Royal Boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea, London, 2005*  
 8. J. Glanfield, Earls Court and Olympia, *Sutton Publishing, 2003*

Earl's Court became a complex of exhibition buildings by the end of the 19th century

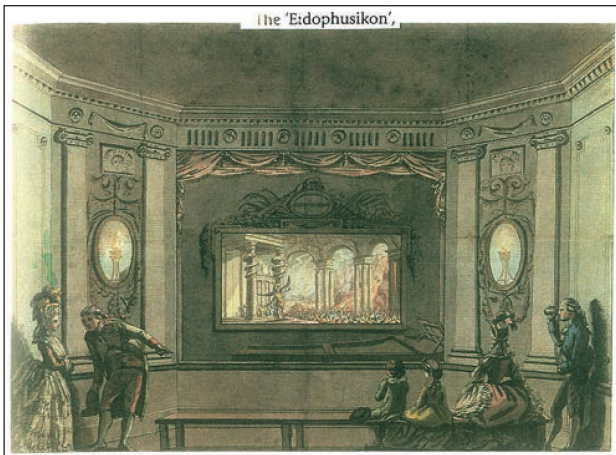


Earl's Court showing development of buildings by 1895



## THE EIDOPHUSIKON AND SPRING GARDENS

Bill Barnes



Watercolour drawing of the Eidophusikon by Francis Burney (1760–1848)

The Eidophusikon of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg RA (1740–1812) was a sort of miniature theatre without actors. The initial advertisement in *The Public Advertiser* describes its novel attraction as an 'imitation of natural phenomena represented by moving pictures'. The illustration shows the proscenium of the Eidophusikon with the scene of Satan arraying his troops on the banks of the Fiery Lake and the raising of the Palace of Pandemonium, from Milton. After it had been exhibited at the inventor's home in Lisle Street, off Leicester Square, it moved to Exeter 'Change in the Strand. [For the full story of the Eidophusikon and its venues, see Bill Barnes's articles

Haymarket, to 'Hickford's Great Room', situated on the south side of the street, probably on or near where a cinema complex stands today. It was here that it was totally destroyed in a disastrous fire soon after opening (see map).<sup>1, 2</sup>

At present there is relatively little information about 'Hickford's Great Room' and no known illustration of it. Pantion Street first appeared in the rate books in 1674 and was described in 1720 as 'a good open street' inhabited by tradesmen. It ran in a straight line from the south-west corner of Leicester Square to the Haymarket. Today it has the well-known Comedy Theatre (opened 1881) on its southern side where Thomas Hickford, proprietor of 'Hickford's Great Room', lived from 1696 to 1730. This room became a centre for auction sales and a variety of entertainments, until its final destruction by fire – together with the Eidophusikon – in 1800. The street was to suffer another disaster when it was bombed during World War II.

As for the more celebrated 'Great Room' in Spring Gardens, what kind of establishment was that? And what sort of place was Spring Gardens?

The illustration shows Spring Gardens in 1830 as a rather leafy pleasant place of some elegance, surrounded by fine houses, whereas the 'Great Room' appears as an unimposing structure. Its interior, however, must have been quite remarkable for towards the end of the eighteenth century it had been refurbished by two of England's most notable artists when it became a private museum.

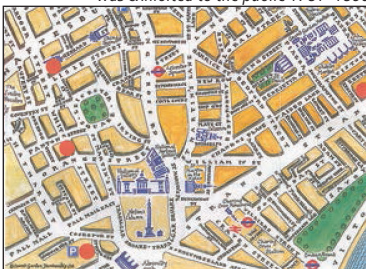
Spring Gardens had occupied an area west of Trafalgar Square, incorporating Admiralty Arch and land on both sides at the far end of the Mall, facing the distant prospect of Buckingham Palace. Of course, these present-day landmarks did not exist at this time, except for the Mall which had been created in about 1660 with a wooden fence along each side and a double row of trees, which it still retains.

The 'Gardens' had been laid out as a pleasure ground at the beginning the seventeenth century but were closed down by the

### REFERENCES

1. B. Weinreb and C. Hibbert (eds), *The London Encyclopaedia*, Book Club Associates/Macmillan, London, 1983
2. *The Greater London Council (London County Council), Survey of London (volumes covering Spring Gardens/Panton Street area)*

Map showing (four red dots) where the Eidophusikon was exhibited to the public 1781–1800



in *MLS Newsletter/Journal* numbers 103–5 and 115.]

In 1793 it appeared at the 'Great Room', Spring Gardens, Westminster, where it changed ownership. There is some evidence that it had been on tour beforehand. It then relocated to Pantion Street,