



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.

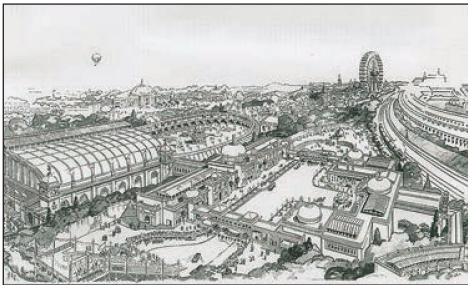
The last on the list of Victorian halls is Olympia's sister hall, Earl's Court.<sup>7, 8</sup> This began its existence as an open-air pleasure ground for outdoor activities. The site had been acquired by J.R. Whiteley in 1887. Here was erected the first ferris wheel seen in England (as shown in the 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 showing development of buildings by 1895

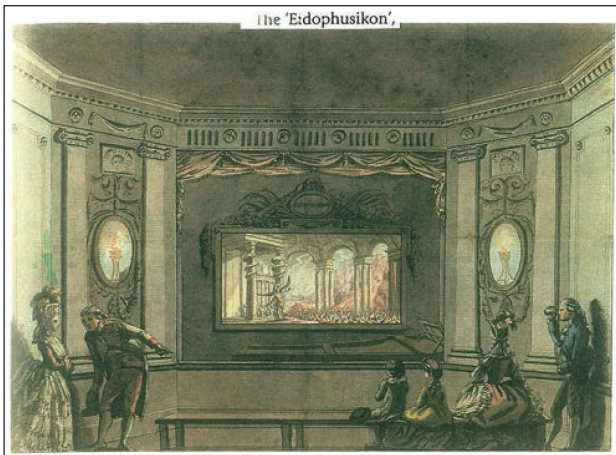


Earl's Court became a complex of exhibition buildings by the end of the 19th century



## 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.

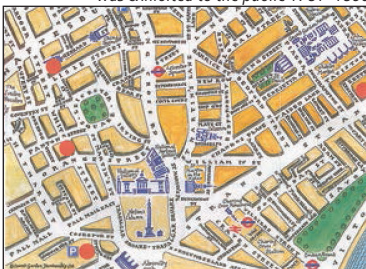
Spring Gardens had occupied an area west of Trafalgar Square, incorporating Admiralty Arch and land on both sides at the far end of the Mall, facing the distant prospect of Buckingham Palace. Of course, these present-day landmarks did not exist at this time, except for the Mall which had been created 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,



The Spring Gardens in 1830 (courtesy Guild Hall Library, City of London)

Puritans under Oliver Cromwell, only to be re-opened on the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. It was here and hereabouts that some members of the gentry had homes – Prince Rupert had a house close by from 1670 until his death in 1682.



The 'Great Room' when it was Charles Wigley's Auction House

A public house there, 'The Blue Posts Tavern', was much frequented by the Jacobites until the reign of William III and Mary. It featured as the scene of romantic intrigues in the 1697 play *The Provoked Wife* by John Vanbrugh.

George Canning, the English statesman, lived in the area on the corner of Cockspur Street in 1797, since demolished. Sir Robert Taylor, architect of the Bank of England, also had a house here until he died in 1788, and Sir Gilbert Scott, an equally prominent architect, lived in the area from 1834 to 1844 as well as keeping an office here until he died in 1878.

So it was no mean place – quite the contrary.

Situated just left of where Admiralty Arch stands today was a Huguenot chapel until 1753 when it passed into the hands of a Mr D. Cock. He used it as an exhibition room and the vaults beneath as wine cellars.



Admiralty Arch from the Mall



A satirical cartoon, June 1823, by J.W. Fores, showing the 'Great Room'

During the next fifty years it became a fashionable rendez-vous for concerts and exhibitions of all kinds. The annual exhibition of the Society of Artists was held here between 1761 and 1772. Mozart (1756–91), then a child, made his London debut here on 5 June 1764. Londoners flocked to the 'Great Room', as it had become known, to hear the latest celebrity or witness the latest marvel or admire the latest works of art, etc. The cartoon from 1823 depicts the 'Great Room' at the height of its popularity, but it appears to have lost some of its embellishment if this illustration is to be believed.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a wealthy jeweller by the name of James Cox, described as 'a mechanic, silversmith and watchmaker' when indeed he was very much more – a genius artist-craftsman – had been unable to sell his valuable collection of automata and other similar mechanical contrivances in India and the East, then

a market for all kinds of expensive goods with rich potentates having the money to spend. Cox decided to exhibit them to a well-to-do paying public in London.

In 1772 he acquired the 'Great Room' in Spring Gardens and opened it as a museum in which to display his own masterpieces. In order to show off his wonderful bejewelled automata to their best advantage he employed Joseph Nollekens (1737–1823) the English sculptor, and John Zoffany (1733–1810) the English portrait painter, to embellish its interior. James Boswell (1740–95) visited the museum in 1772 on Dr Samuel Johnson's recommendation and was impressed by what he saw there.

The automata included a golden peacock which spread its feathers when the hour struck and screeched. This is now in the Hermitage in St Petersburg. Eisenstein featured it in his film *October* (1928) – also known as *Ten Days that Shook the World* – in a sequence showing the storming of the Winter Palace. Another exhibit was a silver swan that lowered its neck, dipped its beak into what appeared to be a shimmering lake and caught a fish. This now resides in the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham. Both are still in working order.

In 1775 the 'Great Room' became the premises for Charles Wigley's Auction House although it continued to host various exhibitions and entertainments as it had before Cox acquired it. The 'Great Room' was said to have measured 52 feet wide and 62 feet long. Sadly it was demolished in about 1825.

There are two items referring to panoramas having been exhibited at the 'Great Room', Spring Gardens, in the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, Exeter University. The first is a playbill announcing Marshall's 'Grand Historical Peristrepic Panorama of the Coronation of His Most Gracious Majesty King George the Fourth' (1822) giving full details of its size and what it represented. The second is a broadsheet containing a graphic guide to a panorama of the 'Pandemonium of Boulogne' (1804) by Serres, marine painter to His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence (later William IV). It is worth noting the skylight on the building itself, probably constructed for the panoramas exhibited here.

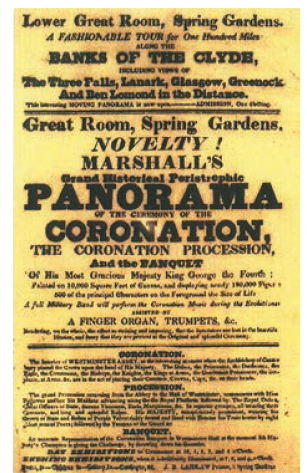
Nothing now remains of these delightful gardens – the grand houses have gone along with the 'Great Room', once decorated with the work of Nollekens and Zoffany. Everything of historical or artistic merit has been swept away – with one saving grace. Near the site of the 'Great Room' until recently stood a large bronze sculpture by Henry Moore cast in the famous Noack Foundry in Berlin, a kind of memorial to those pleasures of past times where once the Eidophusikon could thrill as the cinema and TV screen do today.



The peacock automaton (courtesy Hermitage, St Petersburg)



The silver swan automaton (courtesy Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle)



Poster for Marshall's coronation panorama, 1822 (courtesy Bill Douglass/Peter Jewell Collection)

Spring Gardens today – the 'Great Room' stood near the leafy area on the right

