

The International Exhibition of 1862

Barry O'Brien – Dover Tales

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Effectively a World Fair the International Exhibition of 1862, or Great London Exposition, ran from May to November 1862 on a site in London's South Kensington that today is home to the Natural History Museum.

Sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Trades, over 28,000 exhibitors from thirty-six countries took part, attracting some 6.1 million visitors, with gate receipts slightly in excess of costs, leaving a total profit of £100,000 by today's equivalent.

The Exhibition opened on May 1st 1862 and, with Queen Victoria still in mourning for her consort, Prince George, Duke of Cambridge and Commander-in-Chief of the Forces, presided, with an opening address delivered by the Earl Granville, Chairman of Her Majesty's Commissioners, the group responsible for



Granville Leveson-Gower, 2nd Earl Granville. Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports 1865-1891

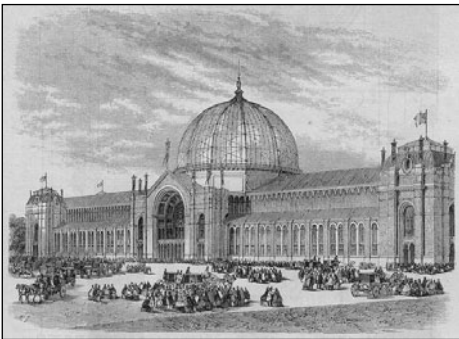
the organisation of the event.

The International Exhibition ran for 6 months in all, with an official closing ceremony taking place on November 1st 1862, although the exposition remained open to the public until November 15th 1862.

With the final closure of the project, the Government of the day, under Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston, proposed purchasing the building, which suggestion was voted down by Parliament and the decision was made to dispose of the structure's materials, with much of them being used for the construction of Alexandra Palace in North London.

Newspapers of the day report: "On October 17th [1864] a great number of persons visited the neighbourhood of the Great Exhibition building, it having been announced that it was intended to blow down the two towers that supported the Great Dome, but the operation was postponed for a day to allow Sir John Burgoyne and other officers of The Royal Engineers to be present at the operation. The public had the opportunity of witnessing the Corps of Sappers and Miners at work."

The report continues that the towers stood 70 feet tall [21 metres] and were 40 feet in circumference [12 metres], with 100lbs of dynamite installed within the walls of each



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tower in order to bring about their demolition. The towers were estimated to weigh approximately 30 tons combined.

Clearly Sir John's attentions were not unwarranted as demolition continued for some time, with a report of November 12th 1864 recording that 'Operations were resumed on November 5th by The Royal Engineers under Sir John Burgoyne. The fuse having been applied and the sappers and miners having connected it with the battery some 200 yards away, the word of command was given by the shrill sound of a bugle, but the explosion had no perceptible effect on the enormous structure beyond a breach in the bricks and an enormous cloud of smoke and dust.' A second and third time charges were applied but with the same result as before. Attention was then turned to towers at the Western end of the building where, after a first failed attempt, half of one tower "came down with a tremendous crash to the ground to the cheers of the spectators."

Clearance of the site continued until "On December 12th [1864] the complete demolition of the grand entrance to the Great Exhibition Building was accomplished by the Royal Engineers Sappers and Miners. There were present on this occasion, General Sir John Burgoyne, Lord Mountcharles, The Marquis of Salisbury, Sir Charles Forbes, Colonel Chapman, Deputy Adjutant General The Royal Engineers, Captain Fowke and other distinguished persons, together with a larger crowd of spectators than on any previous occasion.

There were 110 charges containing a total force of 180 lbs of gunpowder. Precisely at half past eleven the bugle sounded and the three batteries were fired, almost instantaneously the structure crumbled down from crown to base, falling entirely

within the enclosure and without scattering any of the bricks or debris into the road or near the neighbouring houses which were crowded with spectators."

Construction of Alexandra Palace, the "Palace of the People", recycled much of the demolition material, with construction commencing September 1865.

Once cleared, the South Kensington site was purchased, and a competition was held to design the intended Natural History Museum with the winning entry, ironically, submitted by the aforementioned civil engineer Captain Fowke who, sadly, died shortly afterwards. Construction work of the building began in 1873 and the new museum opened in 1881.

Four months after overseeing the successful demolition of the building which housed The International Exhibition of 1862, Sir John Burgoyne was appointed Constable of the Tower of London, but that's another story for another day.



Alexandra Palace