

# Alexandra Palace, 1859 to the present day

- **Component 2H: Changes in Entertainment and Leisure in Britain, c.500 to the present day.**
- **Assessment in 2024 and 2025: The nominated historic site in 2024 and 2025 is Alexandra Palace, 1859 to the present day.**

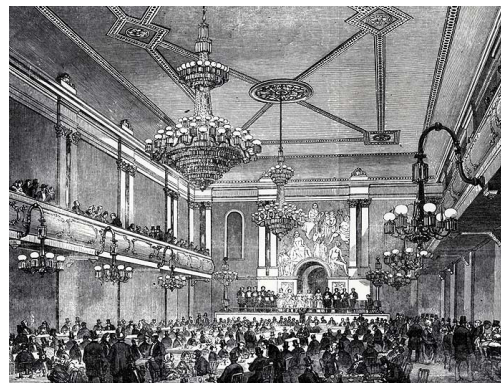
## PART 1: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### Growing demand for popular entertainment in cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

When people moved from villages into the growing towns of the Industrial Revolution, they left behind their local pub and traditions. After working hard for long hours, they still wanted to be able to enjoy themselves and socialise, which is why urban pubs were important to them. However, towns offered plenty of other possibilities for entertainment, including sports, music, theatre, exhibitions, and libraries.

Audiences wanted to be excited and surprised. There was a huge range of entertainment available just in theatres alone, including orchestral concerts, operas, drama, comedy, and ballets. Theatres and concert halls were built in towns and cities across the country, allowing performers to tour their shows. One example is the author Charles Dickens, who would tour his show of dramatized readings from his novels. Working-class people would buy tickets for the cheap seats or the pit where they would have to stand, while middle-class audience members could get a more exclusive view from their boxes.

While middle-class audiences preferred the formal performances of operas and symphonies, working-class people preferred music halls, which allowed them to sing along with popular songs. Music halls had begun as 'singing saloons' in pubs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where, a few nights a week, performers would try to get the audience to join in with the songs, while objects and abuse were thrown at them. The first purpose-built music hall was the Canterbury Hall in Lambeth London, built in 1852 for 700 people but soon expanded to 1500. By 1875, there were 375 music halls in London alone.



*Canterbury Hall in 1856*

Music hall shows were made up of large numbers of acts who would perform short routines as part of a four-hour show. There would be a mixture of acts ranging from magicians and ventriloquists to drag acts and sword swallowers. Music halls made stars of performers such as the singer Marie Lloyd, and Vest Tilley, a woman who impersonated men.

There were also traveling providers of entertainment. Funfairs provided family entertainment with games

and rides, sometimes with sideshows of jugglers or fire-eaters. Circuses, like that run by P.T. Barnum, provided shows involving both human and animal performers. There were also freak shows where audiences came to stare at people who were deformed, disabled or from faraway places. There were also street performers, including Punch and Judy shows, men on stilts and acrobats.

Sport was another form of entertainment that became much more popular and organised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cricket, rugby and football all became more formalised with standardised rules and leagues. New grounds were built to enable people to watch sport more comfortably and in larger numbers than before.

There were not just shows and sports for entertainment. This was the beginning of the pleasure gardens and parks where huge crowds would go just to spend time outside together. One of the earliest examples of this had been the Vauxhall Gardens in London, although they were permanently closed in 1859 due to financial difficulties. Another example was the Cremorne Gardens, which opened to visitors in the 1840s. As well as going walking there, people could see theatrical pageants, fireworks displays and even hot air balloon displays. Birkenhead Park, designed by Joseph Paxton and opened in 1847, went on to become the inspiration for New York's Central Park.

The Industrial Revolution had gathered people together in towns and cities and had provided many of them with more leisure time and money than they would have had living and working in the countryside. The vast array of entertainments of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century was a response to the needs of the people living and working in growing conurbations.

### **Railways and the rise of leisure and tourism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

*Much as we love railways, there is one thing undeniable: Railways are shifting all Towns of Britain into new places: no Town will stand where it did, and nobody can tell for a long while yet where it will stand... railways have set all the Towns of Britain a-dancing. (Thomas Carlyle, historian and social commentator, writing in 1850)*



*A busy railway station in 1866*

The development of railways in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century opened up leisure possibilities that most ordinary people would not have previously been able to afford. In the early days, railways ticket prices had been set high deliberately to keep working-class people from travelling on them. As the Factory Acts led to increased amounts of leisure time for workers, rail companies reduced ticket prices for journeys between towns, although it took a lot longer for the price of return tickets to seaside destinations to come down. This price change enabled the textile workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire to visit seaside resorts like Blackpool.

The connection between the railways and leisure can be seen in how quickly tourist attractions in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century connected themselves to the rail network to maximise the number of visitors. For example, when the Crystal Palace re-opened at Sydenham Hill, after being relocated from Hyde Park in 1854, it was positioned near the Penge West railway station. Soon, it had two stations of its own built.

Railways also influenced the development of spectator sport. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, urbanisation had reduced opportunities for sport as the crowded environment where factory workers lived had no spaces for recreation. It took the introduction of laws later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which reduced working hours, improved public health, and empowered local authorities to be able to build recreational spaces. This increased the opportunities for people to participate in and spectate on sports. The railways contributed to the growth of spectator sports by enabling both players and spectators to be able to travel to matches, which enabled the development of regional and national competitions.

## The Crystal Palace of the 1851 Great Exhibition

One of the most spectacular attractions of the Victorian age was the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the great glass “Crystal Palace” that housed it. It was Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, who had come up with the idea of a ‘Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations’ to advertise the successes of British industry to the world, with a particular focus on new technology, from the latest machinery used in the cotton industry, to telegraphs, to scientific technology such as microscopes and medical instruments.

The exhibition took place in a specially designed metal and glass pavilion, which was designed by Joseph Paxton and built by Charles Fox and Sir William Cubitt. This iron and glass building was popularly known as the “Crystal Palace”. It was 563 metres long and 138 metres wide, which meant that the trees on the building site could be incorporated into the building.

The Great Exhibition was a showcase for culture and industry and was made up of around 100,000 objects from 15,000 contributors. More than half of the exhibits were British, including objects from around the British Empire. Exhibits were divided into four categories: fine arts, raw materials, manufacturers, and machinery. There was a vast array of different exhibits ranging from the Koh-I-Noor diamond to George Jennings’ flushing toilets that cost a penny to use, hence the expression ‘spend a penny’ for going to the toilet.

Tickets usually cost five shillings, which priced out working people, but soon, weekday prices were reduced to one shilling a ticket to allow working-class people to visit. Discounted train tickets and days with specially lowered entrance prices were used to try and attract as many working-class visitors as possible. Six million people visited the Great Exhibition during the year it was open, generating so much money that it paid for the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum to be built in South Kensington, as well as funding engineering scholarships to the present day.



*Inside the original Crystal Palace of the Great Exhibition 1851*

Once the original Hyde Park exhibition ended, the Crystal Palace was taken down in 1854. It was reconstructed at Sydenham Hill, in a different part of south-east London, where it became the focus of a new pleasure park. It was re-opened there in 1854 by Queen Victoria. The new and improved Crystal Palace included:

- a permanent fine art exhibition curated by the architect Owen Jones, who would go on to design Alexandra Palace
- an orchestral concert room that could seat 4,000 people
- a circus that featured artists like the famous tightrope walker Charles Blondin
- extensive parklands that included the Great Maze, the Italian Garden and the English Landscape Garden, as well as life-sized models of newly discovered dinosaurs designed by sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Watkins.

By the 1860s, the Crystal Palace had been visited by 15 million people, which led to plans to build a similar attraction in northern London – Alexandra Palace and its parks.



## PART 2: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALEXANDRA PALACE

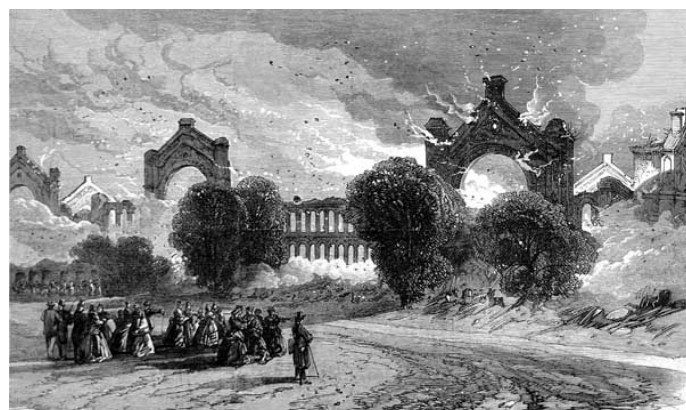


*Alexandra Palace as it is today*

### The “palace for the people”

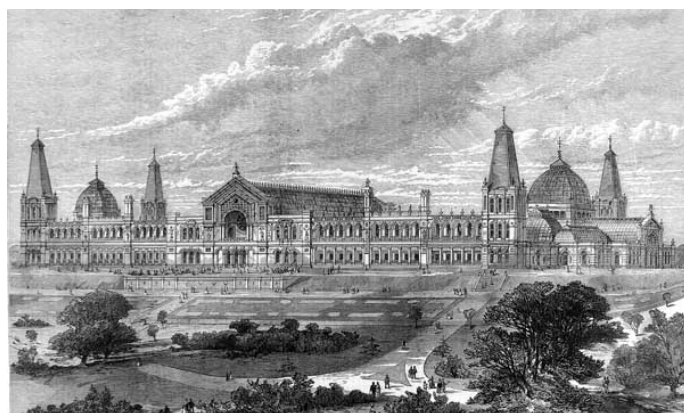
The architect Owen Jones had worked on creating the fine art exhibition for the newly relocated Crystal Palace at Sydenham Hill. This inspired him to make a design of his own in 1858, which he called a “Palace for the People”, that he hoped to build somewhere on Muswell Hill. He had planned to build it on land that had previously been Tottenham Wood Farm, an estate near the London boroughs of Hornsey, Wood Green, Finchley and Highgate. To begin with, he could not get backing for his proposal. A scheme by another design company to turn this land into a park with housing was put forward in 1862 but also failed to get the financial backing it needed.

In 1863, the Alexandra Park Company bought Tottenham Wood Farm and began to build Owen Jones’ design. The 250-acre park was named after the wife of Edward Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne. She was Princess Alexandra of Denmark. The park, as well as a mock Tudor Hall for banquets called Blandford Hall, opened in 1864. A horse racing track, known as the ‘frying pan’ because of its shape, was opened in 1868. The first palace built on the site was designed by Alfred Meeson and John Johnson, with parkland landscaped by Alexander McKenzie. After a number of financial difficulties, the palace finally opened in May 1873 with a grand concert to celebrate Queen Victoria’s birthday.



*The original Alexandra Palace burning down in 1873*

Two weeks after opening, the original Alexandra Palace burned down. Very little of the original building survived. A new Alexandra Palace opened two years later based on a design by John Johnson, with its official opening by the Mayor of London in May 1875. 94,000 people visited on Whit Monday, just two weeks after the Palace had reopened. The four towers at the corners of the new building contained water in case of future fires.



*The rebuilt Palace in 1875*

The Park and the Palace were designed to stimulate both the bodies and the minds of Victorian visitors, so the new Palace included a boating lake and racetrack in the grounds, and a concert hall and theatre inside the main building. There were several places where visitors could buy and eat food, and the scale of the Park and Palace meant that there were opportunities for impressive and extensive entertainment events to take place.

The theatre at the east end of the building opened with a spectacular ballet performance, followed by



a series of operas over the following weeks. In the middle of the building was the Great Hall. The rest of the building was divided into a number of smaller galleries that included works of art, flower and fruit shows, as well as an aquarium and animal displays. The total floor space of the Palace was about half that of the Crystal Palace, even though it was a more conventional building of brick and stone in what contemporary newspapers described as an “Italian, with arabesque” style. In the grounds, horse shows, dog shows, athletics meetings, cricket matches and regular fireworks displays took place, as well as horse racing in front of the large grandstand for spectators.

### Railway access

*The new line of railway from King's-cross to the Alexandra Palace is most convenient, giving access to it by a station platform directly beneath the main entrance, with an ascent by few steps to the central transept, as at the High Level Station of the Crystal Palace. (From The Illustrated London News, May 1873)*

The original plan had been to build Alexandra Palace above its own station. When Thomas Rhodes, the owner of Tottenham Wood, had heard that the Great Northern Railway Company were building a line east from King's Cross, he bought the estate next to his that the line would pass through. Shortly after his death in 1856, his heirs paid £4,000 to the Great Northern Company to build a station on their land. Wood Green station then opened in 1859. Visitors to Alexandra Palace would have faced a long climb up a steep hill to get there from Wood Green Station, renamed Wood Green (Alexandra Park) in 1864. It would eventually be renamed Alexandra Palace in 1982.

The Great Northern Company opened a new branch line from Finsbury Park to Edgware in 1867, adding a line from Highgate station directly to Alexandra Palace over a 17-arch viaduct. A new station called Alexandra Park was opened on this new line after construction had begun on it in 1871. This meant that when the Palace opened in May 1873, most of the 124,000 people who visited in the first two weeks had come on a train directly from King's Cross Station. It was temporarily closed for two years after Alexandra Palace burned down.



*The original Alexandra Park Station, now disused*

This new station continued to be in use, coming under the ownership of London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) in 1923. Work to incorporate the line into the London Underground network was disrupted by the Second World War. Passenger numbers failed to return after the war and the line was permanently shut in 1957. The tracks were taken up and the stations along the line were mostly demolished. The land now forms part of the Parkland Walk.

### Leisure facilities in Alexandra Park

The Great Hall could seat 14,000 people for lectures or be used as an exhibition space. The other main facilities within Alexandra Palace were a theatre for 3,000 people, containing all the latest theatrical technology that allowed actors to fly and for sets to be changed quickly, and a concert hall for 3,500, which would eventually become the ice-skating rink. The organ in the Great Hall was the largest in the world at the time, built by Henry Willis in his workshop in Camden Town.



*The Palm Court at Alexandra Palace today*

The Palm Court was an enclosed space under a glass roof that hosted a display of exotic plants. Galleries had displays of tapestries and statues, as well as exhibitions of fine art and demonstrations of new technologies and scientific ideas. There were also banqueting suites that could be rented out, with the food supplied by the large kitchens in the basement of the building.

Outside in the park there was the racecourse that allowed both horse and bicycle racing (the only one in London between 1868 and when it closed in 1970), a cricket ground, a permanent fun fair and tennis courts. There were also ornamental lakes that could be used for boating and an open-air swimming pool. The huge parklands could also cater for spectacular events, like a mass balloon ascent or displays of parachute jumping. The rollercoaster in the park was one of the first attractions in Britain to be immortalised in film in 1898 and, in 1905, an airship built in the park flew to Paris. One of the most spectacular outdoor shows involved the recreation of the destruction of Pompeii on one of the lakes.



*The lake at Alexandra Palace*

## Public ownership

Despite the income generated by large numbers of visitors on weekends and at bank holidays, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the park was in financial trouble as it had such high running costs. The Alexandra Park Company sold the site off in 1877 and, over the next few decades, several different companies tried to keep it going even though it bankrupted five of them. Land to the north of the park was sold off for housing but even then, the Palace was closed between 1889 and 1898.

By this point, the surrounding areas of London had become much more built up, leading the Palace and the park to become increasingly important assets to the community. Local councils were worried that the park would be sold off to build more houses, so they worked together and persuaded Parliament to pass the Alexandra Palace and Park Act in 1900 to preserve the park in public ownership.

This Act allowed the councils of Wood Green, Tottenham, Hornsey and Muswell Hill to jointly buy the palace and the park and put them into public ownership. This came into effect in 1901 after £165,000 had been paid for the property rights. It was at this point that the Park and Palace were reopened. The roller-skating rink that opened in the old concert hall in 1901 remained a popular visitor attraction until the 1970s.

The Palace and park were closed during the First World War but reopened for public entertainment in 1921. As well as the sports that went on there, a technology showcase called the North London Exhibition was held there in 1925. The theatre was renovated, and the singer Gracie Fields came to use it to rehearse. It is believed that she gave it the nickname it is known by today – “Ally Pally”.

In 1967, the Palace and park were handed over to the Great London Council and, in 1980, they came under the control of Haringey Council. Alexandra Park and Palace are still in public ownership today.



## A centre for BBC broadcasting

John Logie Baird had first trialled a broadcasting system in 1926 that could send a low-definition image over a short distance. He went on to sell tickets for people to see these in the Selfridges department store in the centre of London. As he worked to improve the quality of the broadcast image, the public began to put pressure on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which was in charge of Britain's radio broadcasts, to begin a television service as well.

In 1935, the BBC leased the old dining rooms in the eastern part of Alexandra Palace to begin experiments in television broadcasting. They had chosen Alexandra Palace as they needed somewhere high to broadcast from so the signal could reach as many people as possible. The hills to the north of London around Alexandra Palace seemed perfect for this and the towers on the building itself enabled a very tall antenna to be built. An aerial for television broadcasting, designed by Charles Samuel Franklin, was built on the south-east tower. The signal travelled so far that it was said it could be picked up in Germany – over five hundred miles away!



*The BBC transmitter tower at Alexandra Palace*

There were two studios: one to trial the Baird Company's 240-line system of filming and broadcasting (known as Studio B) under the watchful eye of John Logie Baird himself, and the other to trial the Marconi-EMI 405-line system (known as Studio A) as directed by Isaac Shoenberg. The Baird system never got beyond its experimental phase as it was too cumbersome to be useful, so the BBC decided to use the Marconi-EMI system instead, which had lightweight cameras that were easier to move with twice the image quality. On the first day of broadcast, however, it was decided by the toss of a coin that the Baird system would be tried first, then the same programme would be broadcast on the Marconi-EMI system. The two systems continued to alternate until 1937.

The world's first regular television broadcast service was made from Alexandra Palace on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1936. The programme began with the presenter Elizabeth Cowell saying, "This is direct television from Alexandra Palace", and the first broadcaster seen was Leslie Mitchell. The BBC began with variety shows, like *Picture Page*, filled with performers and acts who usually performed in the theatres like the ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn or the Vic Wells company. They then moved to outside broadcasts that started from Alexandra Park. The coronation procession of King George VI in 1937 was filmed from Hyde Park. Sports programmes like golf and racing and even gardening programmes like the one presented by Mr. Middleton began to be shown. Sometimes it was difficult to generate new programming and a 15-minute ironing demonstration was sometimes reshowed to fill in the gaps.

There were limits to the service. Few people could afford television sets, at a cost of £100, and although the signal broadcast clearly over London (and beyond), very few people in the rest of Britain could receive it. It is estimated that only 500 people watched the first broadcast. Programmes came to an abrupt halt in 1939 when war was declared, with the service temporarily ending with the broadcast of a Mickey Mouse cartoon from America.

## Post-war decline

Alexandra Palace and Park were bombed during the Second World War as the BBC transmitters were used to interfere with the guidance systems of

German bombers attacking the capital. Television service resumed in June 1946. The first programme broadcast was the same Mickey Mouse cartoon that had been the last show in 1939. The cabaret and variety shows continued as they had done before the war, but new programmes like children's shows, like the puppet *Muffin the Mule* show, were made.

At this stage, performances were not recorded but still broadcast live – producers could quickly cut the sound and shout a forgotten line to an actor then turn the sound back on if needed. Although they were not broadcast in colour, the sets and costumes were coloured because it looked better when broadcast but also seemed to inspire actors to perform better. Sets were stored in the Victorian theatre and moved around as needed. The scale of programmes became more ambitious, including bringing all 66 cast and crew of the *Paris Lido Show* from Paris to Alexandra Palace to perform in 1948.

Eventually, shows could be telerecorded for future repeats. The first live election show was broadcast in 1950. Elements of the coronation broadcast of 1953 were broadcast from Alexandra Palace as well. Some of the BBC's most famous dramas from the 1950s, like *Quatermass* and 1984, were filmed at the Alexandra Palace studios. *The Quatermass Experiment*, broadcast live from Alexandra Palace in 1953 over six Saturdays, was one of the first mass-market serialised dramas ever shown.

The BBC continued to film and broadcast drama from Alexandra Palace until 1956, when its programmes began to be made in the specially built Lime Grove studios. *Journey's End* was the last drama to be filmed there. After problems at other studios, Alexandra Palace became the home of the first night of broadcasting a new channel – BBC Two – in 1964.

BBC News continued to be broadcast from Alexandra Palace, including its coverage of the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy and the Vietnam War, until 1969. BBC programmes for the Open University were made from 1971 to 1981, which allowed students to study from home after a normal day at work instead of being full time at a university. When the BBC's lease ended in 1981, OU programming was moved to new studios in Milton Keynes.

Although the racetrack was shut down in the 1970s as it did not meet modern standards, live sporting events like the Masters snooker tournament and World Darts are still broadcast from the Palace. It continues to be a place for experimenting with new technologies, like high definition (HD) broadcasting. The television antennae are still in use today for local television and radio broadcasts, but the main London transmitter is now, ironically, at Crystal Palace.

After a post-war programme of restoration, the Palace was open to the public again from 1957 once the Grand Hall had been restored. Trade shows used the Palace for exhibitions. There were other uses for the Palace in this period, however. Hornsey Art College had its premises there between 1964 and 1980. The Palace also became a venue for rock bands following the 1967 counterculture "14-hour Technicolour Dream", followed by gigs by the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and the Grateful Dead.

When the Greater London Council had taken over the site in 1967, they had originally planned to knock the original buildings down and build a huge new sports complex, although this never became a reality. After a consultation in 1974, it became clear that the local residents wanted to keep the Palace and park as they were. When Haringey Council took over in 1980, they planned to keep things as they were for the public as well and the site became a conservation area.

## Fire and restoration



*Alexandra Palace after the 1981 fire*

In 1981, the Palace caught fire again, destroying most of the 1875 building, including the Great Hall and the old concert hall, although the theatre and the BBC studios survived. Reconstruction started



in 1984, guided by Dr Peter Smith and paid for by £42 million of insurance money and £8 million from the Greater London Council. Descendants of Henry Willis were brought in to repair his original organ. A new West Hall was added and the Great Hall was remodelled, reopening in 1988. By 1990, an ice-skating rink had been added and was now home to a number of ice hockey teams and skating clubs.

While arguments raged over who was responsible for the debts still left over from the restoration, Alexandra Palace was given Grade II listed status by English Heritage, nearly twenty years after Haringey Council had first tried to have it listed. This should help protect the building and park for future generations. In 2015, the Heritage Lottery Fund gave £18.8 million to the Alexandra Park and Palace Charitable Trust towards the restoration of the eastern wing of the building, especially the Victorian theatre, which reopened in 2018 and has recently been the venue for recording live bands playing for the BBC's *Later... With Jools Holland* programme.

As well as the restoration of the Palace, the parkland has a new status as well. The Parkland Walk, which goes through many of the hills to the north of London, passes through Alexandra Park along the disused railway line. Declining passenger numbers in the 1940s as a result of improved bus services and a new building away from the centre of London meant that the line was not needed anymore. Passenger services ended in 1954 and the line was completely shut by the 1960s. The tracks were pulled up in 1971.

Haringey Council opened the old line as a 3.1 mile 'linear park' in the 1980s. The threat of it being turned into a dual carriageway was defeated by the local residents group the Friends of the Parkland Walk, who look after the park to the present day. They continue to work to maintain and improve access for walkers. As environmentalism becomes more influential in Britain, the Parkland Walk reflects this as over 200 species of wildflowers have become home to thousands of animals, insects and birds.

## PART 3: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ALEXANDRA PALACE

### The importance of music halls and parks for 19<sup>th</sup> century entertainment

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people who lived in towns had more and more leisure time as a result of restrictions on working hours that followed the Factory Acts. Leisure was no longer just for the rich, now it was for the workers as well. People were looking for opportunities to escape from their working lives, even if it was just for a few hours. Somewhere like Alexandra Palace could offer them a variety of opportunities to escape – watching or playing sport, walking the extensive landscaped grounds, having fun at the fair, indulging their curiosity with art galleries and lectures, etc.

Music halls, which had developed from the singing parlours of pubs, tended to reflect more the interests of working-class people with impressive cabaret acts mixed with comedy and songs that the audience could relate to, as well as plenty of familiar songs that they could join in with. Music halls had a wide range of variety acts in their programmes such as:

- Marie Lloyd – singer and comedian
- Dan Leno – clog dancer and singer of comic songs
- Annie De Montford – mesmerist and hypnotist
- John Nevil Maskelyne – magician who specialised in illusions like levitation and decapitation as well as performing automatons
- Henry Evans (known as "Evanion") – comedian, illusionist and ventriloquist

The music hall's influence continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and some early Hollywood stars like Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel began their careers there.

Victorian theatres came in all shapes and sizes. More formal theatres put on performances of plays from writers, like Shakespeare, comic operas, like those by Gilbert and Sullivan, and pantomimes for the children at Christmas. The Victorian theatre at Alexandra Palace still exists today and illustrates many of the techniques and technologies that were developed in Victorian times to create the spectacles that people came to the theatre to see.



*The recently restored Victorian theatre at Alexandra Palace*

The wide proscenium arch allowed audiences to not only see more of what the actors were doing but also for very elaborate backs to be hung behind to establish a scene – this also allowed for less props on stage so that scenes could be changed quicker. A lot of effort went into lighting the theatre, with effects ranging from a bright sunlight to a night-time that still allowed audiences to see what was happening on the stage. The space beneath the stage was filled with elaborate machinery to create the effects that shows required – pulleys, levers and lifts to move actors around as well as to quickly change scenery. The new pulley and locking mechanisms designed by Thomas Grieve & Son made 48 rapid scenery changes possible during a show.

The theatre held audiences of up to 3,000 who would come to see operas, dramas and ballets, as well as music hall acts and pantomimes. The stage was big enough to accommodate 150 performers at a time. Some of the shows could be breath-taking to watch, if not a little dangerous for the actors; the first ever pantomime performed in the Victorian Theatre was *The Yellow Dwarf* but its opening had to be delayed as the leading acrobat had twisted his back preparing for his role.

The theatre constantly adapted to changing times. From 1896, the theatre would also be used as a cinema and, in 1905, a permanent projector was installed. In the 1920s, the actress and singer Gracie Fields used the theatre to rehearse and perform and The Alexandra Palace Operatic and Dramatic Society continued to develop and perform shows. It was closed for performances in 1935, although it was occasionally used by the BBC as an unofficial third studio and props store.

### **The influence of public ownership from 1901**

Alexandra Park and Palace were very expensive to maintain but to make them as accessible to as many people as possible entry prices had to be kept low. As a result, a number of companies went bankrupt trying to make a profit. To keep them open to the public, a consortium of local councils applied to Parliament for permission to take joint ownership of the Palace and park. The subsequent Act of Parliament declared the Palace and park to be “a place of public resort and recreation” and created the Alexandra Palace and Park Trust to run it. This is significant as it is one of the earliest examples of laws to protect public access and had kept the site free and open to the public ever since.

There have been other developments in the management of the site:

- Control passed to the greater London Council in 1966 and then on to the Borough of Haringey in 1980.
- A 1967 Act of Parliament established Alexandra Palace and Park as a charity held in trust for the public.
- In 1996, the Hornsey Historical Society successfully had the Palace and park put on the Grade II heritage protected buildings list.
- In 2007, the local campaign “Save Ally Pally” successfully prevented the sale of the Palace and park to a private investment company. It still campaigns to keep it in public ownership today.
- In 2013, Alexandra Park was declared a local nature reserve and a Site of Borough Importance for Nature Conservation.



- In 2015, the Alexandra Park and Palace Charitable Trust was given £18.8 million by the Heritage Lottery Fund to restore historic features and make the site more of a heritage destination.

### The site of the first BBC television broadcasts



*Blue plaque commemorating the first BBC television broadcast*

The trustees leased the old dining rooms of Alexandra Palace to the BBC for twenty years in 1935 to use as the site for their experiments in television broadcasting. They created two studios, known as Studio A and Studio B, each with their own control room and dressing rooms nearby. In Studio A the Marconi-EMI system allowed for light cameras to move around performances, while in Studio B the heavier Baird camera recorded from a fixed position that could pan across the stages in front of it. Studio B also had a small side room where a continuity announcer could be filmed between set changes and programmes. In the early days of broadcasting, both systems were used alternatively each day, although eventually the BBC settled for the higher definition Marconi-EMI system.

From November 1936, the BBC studios at the Palace became the centre of Britain's first regular television recording and broadcasting service. After some experimentation, the Marconi-EMI 405-line system was chosen as the first totally electronic broadcasting system in the world. These television studios can be visited today where you can see the equipment that was originally used.

Although the BBC was committed to providing information and education, early programmes centred around entertainment like singing, dancing, acrobatics and even performing seals. One of these thirty-minute variety shows was the first programme broadcast. By 1938, 30% of studio time was spent on these television variety shows, which some described as being like a high-speed circus as they got through a lot of acts very quickly. Sports broadcasting was also very popular, with Wimbledon tennis championships shown for the first time in 1937 and the FA cup shown for the first time in 1938. These were very popular, unlike many of the demonstration programmes where audiences were shown how to do something. By 1939, programming had successfully convinced more and more people to buy TV sets and viewer numbers steadily increased.

The BBC garden on the south side of the hill that Alexandra Palace is built on was created as part of the first ever gardening show broadcast at the end of November in 1936. It was called *In Your Garden* presented by Cecil Middleton, who was one of the well-known BBC radio presenters. This programme was particularly important as it was the first outside broadcast, live and unrehearsed. Middleton became such an influential figure as a result of this that he went on the front the government's "Dig For Victory" campaign in the Second World War to encourage people to grow their own food. The garden is still visited by 3 million people a year.

The plan had been to expand into the Victorian theatre and divide it into smaller stages for filming as by the 1930s it was no longer used as a theatre but once production was halted by the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, they never returned to this idea.

## Decline in use after the Second World War

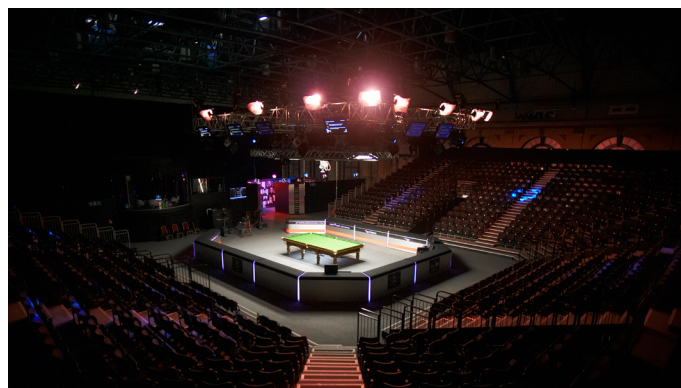
When the BBC started television broadcasts again in 1946, it was a time of austerity and rationing when most ordinary people would have struggled to buy a television. The government, however, thought it was important to help boost people's morale as well as providing a showcase for British electronics that could be sold abroad.

Instead of developing the Victorian theatre into further studio space, the BBC had bought property at Lime Grove and built four more studios there. Most programme production moved to Lime Grove in 1956 and BBC News took over the Alexandra Palace studios. Experiments had already begun into colour television and these were moved to Lime Grove as well. The first BBC colour broadcast would be of Wimbledon in 1967 on BBC Two; the first colour news broadcast from Alexandra Palace followed in 1968. A year later, BBC News moved into new studios at BBC Television Centre that had just been built at White City. From 1971 to 1980, the studios were still used to produce programmes for the Open University but in 1981 they moved out to Milton Keynes.

Although the BBC studios were not damaged by fire in the 1980s, they were no longer in use and are currently waiting full restoration, although the studio spaces do currently have displays of the equipment that was used.

## Recent revival as a concert venue

Alexandra Palace has recently become more well known as the home of important sporting events like the Masters World Snooker Tournament as well as a number of darts tournaments and, most recently, the Red Bull Soapbox Derby. During the 2012 Olympics, Alexandra Palace was also used as the base for the Dutch team.



*The London Masters Arena at Alexandra Palace*

It has also become a venue associated with music – the Rolling Stones played there in 1964 and Pink Floyd were one of the main bands at the 1967 “14-hour Technicolour Dream”, which was one of the big festivals of the psychedelic ‘Summer of Love’. The Who, Led Zeppelin and Queen are some of the other famous British rock bands that have played there, as well as the American band The Grateful Dead who played in 1974. The Stone Roses played one of their biggest concerts at Alexandra Palace in 1990 and Blur launched their Parklife album from there in 1994.



*Codeine playing at Alexandra Palace*

Alexandra Palace also became the location of the Brit Awards, which were broadcast from between 1993 and 1996. It has also been the venue for the MTV Europe Music Awards and the MOBO Awards. In 2016, Apple Music live-streamed a Skepta performance from Alexandra Palace. It continues to be an important music venue today with recent bands like Fontaines D.C. ending their British tour there in 2021. It has also been used as a venue for films, such as its use for *Idiot Prayer: Nick Cave Alone at Alexandra Palace*, which was broadcast during the



national COVID lockdown in spring 2020 and is now available as a live album.

The Victorian theatre re-opened after its restoration in 2018 with a concert as part of the BBC Proms series, followed by shows from Horrible Histories and an evening of jazz presented by Ronnie Scott's club. It is currently being used as part of the *Later... With Jools Holland* BBC Programme, where bands are recorded playing live.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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