

THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851

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THIS was written in November, 1946, precisely 10 years after fire consumed the Crystal Palace, which had been translated in 1853-4 from its original home in Hyde Park to Sydenham Hill, S. E. 27 in the Greater London of to-day. In *Roaring Century*, R. J. Cruikshank, an eye-witness of the conflagration of 1936, says: "One thought of the music . . ., the balloon ascents; the firework nights; the packed trains on bank holidays. It was like watching the burning of a Victorian Valhalla where the gods of our forefathers sat in a solemn circle awaiting the end." But its passing was of more than antiquarian interest; for the Government proposes to stage (if possible) in 1951 a second Great Exhibition, to celebrate in this 20th century the ideas embodied in Paxton's "dream of iron and glass", namely, the furtherance of British trade and of international good will.

The Exhibition thus housed in 1851 was promoted by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, the record of which was officially written by Sir Henry T. Wood, *A History of the Royal Society of Arts*, 1913. Two other indispensable authorities are the Reports of the Commissioners on the Exhibition, 1852-79, (Parliamentary Papers, Catalogue by P. S. King *sub Exhibitions*) and the autobiography of Sir Henry Cole, *Fifty Years of Public Work*, 1884.

The Royal Society of Arts, which flourishes still, was founded in 1754 by the drawing master, William Shipley. To it, among other things, the England of to-day owes many of its great woods; for it gave the impetus to the planting, at the lowest estimate, of 50 million trees, of which 20 million were fir and larch and 15 oak. Its method of premiums was commended by Adam Smith in the penultimate paragraph of his scathing chapter on Bounties. (*Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, Ch. V: ed. Cannan II, 24). Among its members was Arthur Young, who won its Gold Medal, and for a time was Chairman of its Agricultural Committee; he said of it in retrospect in his *Annals of Agriculture*, "It is probable that the Kingdom has benefited a thousand pounds for every guinea that has been expended."

The way in which the Society became associated with the

Exhibition of 1851 was as follows: In 1843, when the Prince Consort became its President, the Society was rather in the doldrums; for it had failed to secure a firm footing in the stream of mechanical invention which was running so powerfully in the industrial Midlands and North. It could reward a Henry Greathead for his lifeboat, and other smaller figures for a piece of life-saving apparatus, for a fire-escape ladder, or for helmets and gauze masks to be used in the dangerous trades. In all probability there was inspirational contact here from John Julius Angerstein, the Lord Keynes of that day, who spared time from the insurance market and teaching Pitt how to borrow in the funds, for the protection of chimney sweeps and other victims of industrial exploitation, and for the collection of the pictures that formed the nucleus of the National Gallery. The Prince Consort was a German with an orderly and scientific mind, and he gave to the Society the outlook needed for the embodiment of a great idea. This drew to his side Henry Cole, who was the Prince Consort on a lowlier plane. Cole it was who, when the Houses of Parliament were burnt down (1834), salvaged the public records and organized the Public Record Office. This done, he put himself behind Rowland Hill's campaign for the Penny Post; after it had been won in 1840, he battled for the Standard Railway Gauge and cheap rates on Railway Parcels Traffic. When finally in 1845 he gained the Royal Society's silver medal for a utility tea-service (service "for common use" and not "utility" was the language of the day) to be exhibited in the Society's rooms, he was marked down for the Prince's chief executive; and in 1851, the Exhibition year, he served as the Society's Chairman of Council. As early as 1849, on the Prince's initiative, the decision had been taken to make the Great Exhibition an International Exhibition. In Cole's Autobiography there is the facsimile of a minute, corrected in the Prince's handwriting, which runs:

While it appears an error to fix any limitation to the productions of Machinery, Science and Taste which are of no country, but belong to the Civilized World, particular advantage to British Industry might be derived from placing it in fair competition with that of other Nations.

Thus conceived, the Exhibition was too large an affair to be sponsored by a voluntary body, and accordingly in 1850 a Royal Commission was appointed to oversee it, Gladstone, Cobden and Labouchere being among the members. The

Exhibition was a phenomenal success. The railways had been built (but only just built), which could bring up the crowds from the length and breadth of the country. As C. H. Oakley observes in his history of Glasgow: "When the hordes reached London, by cheap excursions on the new railways—many of them from Glasgow—they were found to be thoroughly decent chaps." In the hunger year of 1842, such a display would have been a grim joke. In 1862, when a second International Exhibition was held in London, the tragic death of the Prince Consort Dec 14, 1861, spoiled its financial success, and I think it is true that if the Prince of Wales had died in 1923, the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 would have suffered an equal setback. For at a time when the British people rejoice among themselves, they rejoice in their monarchy.

The Commissioners of 1851 devoted the profits of £186,000 to acquiring the South Kensington estate. It was the dream of the Prince Consort that all the learned societies of the country should have their headquarters here with the National Gallery and London University beside them. (University College, Gower St., London, had been founded in 1826.) And though this dream was not fulfilled, there was an approximation to it. For South Kensington, in this way, got its Museums, its Science and Art Departments, its Technical and Engineering Schools, the Administrative Headquarters of London University and, last but not least, the Imperial Institute, founded in 1887 to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria and serving since that day as a central home of scientific and technical assistance for the development of Empire products.

Economic history rightly concerns itself at times with the little things of everyday life (*vide* Trevelyan's *English Social History passim*); and of this, the Exhibition of 1851 was an alluring example. It was the first great venture in mass provision for the safety and amusement of the masses. Six millions visited the Exhibition. No smoking or drinking was permitted, but there was an abundant supply of filtered Chelsea Drinking Water—1848, be it remembered, had been a cholera year in London—and the Royal Engineers without a hitch discharged their difficult task of fire prevention. The fear that a hail-storm, such as that which in 1846 shattered the glass roof of the picture gallery of Buckingham Palace, to say nothing of 7,000 panes in the new Houses of Parliament, may have kept Paxton awake at night. But Providence had spared the glass conservatory at Chatsworth in which this young gardener to

the Duke of Devonshire had housed the giant *Victoria Regia* lily, and Providence was kind again in 1851—and even kinder in 1936—for it was better surely to be burnt down by the Act of God than to be blitzed down by the bombs of Hitler! In the matter of fire risk in 1851, so thorough were the precautions taken by the Executive Committee that exhibitors decided that it was unnecessary to incur the rate of 1% demanded by the insurance companies. Scheppe's were the contractors for the Refreshment Court, takings £45,000, with Bath buns, plain buns, soda water, lemonade and ginger ale as leaders. This surely will be the problem of 1951. I envisage marvellous displays of "Britain Can Make It", gazed upon by thousands, and endless queues, with fading hopes of Bath buns and lemonade, weaving their serpentine way in tens of thousands towards a trayless slop of tepid tea. The intake of food and drink was not, however, the proudest achievement of 1851: here were the first public conveniences, some free and some pay—receipts from the latter, £2,441, profit, £1,769. So impressed was the Royal Society of Arts by this triumph of money over nature, this harmonious blend of Physioeracy with Neo-mercantilism, that it endeavoured after the Exhibition to introduce them to the streets of London. This time the conveniences did not pay, and they had to await the time when they should rank as a public service, as they did under the subsequent direction of Sir William Haywood, the City Engineer, who made central London the most convenient capital in Europe.

Among the six millions who visited the Great Exhibition was a Yorkshire lad of farming stock, William Whiteley, whom people came to call the Universal Provider. It was his 20th year and his first holiday. As a draper's apprentice, he inspected with peculiar interest the silks, linens, damasks and other textiles, so beautifully displayed. Why should not London have great shops of this type, bright and open, through which, and outside which, customers might pass in parade? Gas light and plate glass were cheap—the glass excise had gone in 1845. Since there was then no restriction in shop assistants' hours of work, it would be possible to shop till midnight in well-lit streets with well-lit window fronts. He, therefore, migrated to London, to master the wholesale side of the business in the employ of Bradbury Greatorex, and after eight years of intense application opened his shop in Westbourne Grove, by Paddington, on March 11, 1863, timing it to the day after the marriage of the Prince of Wales to the Princess Alexandra,

when all London would be in a festive mood. Whiteley was the father of the department store. His premises grew, like the early factories, by adding shop to shop, till the time was ripe for rebuilding the lot in a great and orderly emporium. Royalty patronized his store, and in 1882 he acted as chaperone to ex-King Cetawayo and his black entourage. By this time he boasted he could sell anything from an elephant to a second-hand coffin; if you needed a waiter for your dinner party, the man from Blankley's appeared at your doorstep.

Whiteley's, of course, is not the oldest of London's famous shops, nor is it possible to state precisely how far later creations modelled their layout on his. It is, however, certain that after the fashion of the Great Exhibition, he sought to attract every range of purse. In the January sale of 1881 there was a free fight for bargains, into which rich and poor entered with equal zest. It is a matter of history that the head of his provisions department, Richard Burbidge, left him to build up Harrod's, and that he also supplied the men who put John Barker's and the Army and Navy Stores on the shopping map.

Another line of inspiration of a very different order may be followed out, deriving from the first Exhibition of 1851 through the second Exhibition of 1862, which was managed by trustees at the invitation of the Royal Society of Arts and held at South Kensington on the estate acquired by the Commissioners of 1851. Working men of many nations visited England for the occasion. Socialists from Europe met the trade union *elite* of England. Ferdinand Lassalle came over from Germany to try (unsuccessfully) to make it up with Karl Marx, the red-bearded *habitué* of the British Museum. The outcome of these contacts was the International Working Men's Association of 1864, known later as the First International. The history of this and the Second and Third Internationals (commonly dated at 1889 and 1919) has recently been told by John Price in his *International Labour Movement*. Thus internationalism, originating with the exhibition of material goods, was the stepping stone to the international program of organized labour. It may be taken for granted that similar contacts will be sought in 1951; if a motto is needed for their gatherings, they could do worse than erect above their meeting place a scroll bearing the words penned by Albert, second son of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg Gotha:

It is our earnest prayer that he who has so far protected an undertaking designed to promote the common good of mankind may give to this that effect which it was intended to produce; and that the Exhibition of 1851 may prove in its results to have been the means of advancing the happiness and prosperity not only of this, but of all other countries, and of strengthening permanently and surely the bonds of peace, of friendship and of brotherhood throughout the world.

Perhaps, however, it will be prudent in 1951 to omit Duke of Saxe-Cobourg Gotha and to call Albert Albertski.

Postscript

The excursion traffic which the Crystal Palace engendered in its new site on the hill crest between Sydenham and Norwood—some 6 miles from Charing Cross as the crow flies—makes an important chapter of English railway history. The first in the field was the London Brighton and South Coast Railway (L.B.); and Samuel Laing, the railway's chairman, was chairman also of the company that bought the edifice, removed it and christened it Crystal Palace. To handle the traffic the railway laid an additional down line from London Bridge, with a branch coming in from the south east to the lower limits of the Palace grounds (i.e. to the Low Level Station, as it was later termed). Tickets, including admission to the Palace, could be bought at offices all over London, and there was a special entrance to the departure platform at London Bridge for such ticket holders. Passengers booking at the station had to present the exact fare, no change being given. The ticket cost 1/6d, 3rd class return, of which the Railway took 5d and the Palace 1/1d. The 3rd class single from London Bridge to Norwood was 9d.

It was necessary first, however, to get to London Bridge on the south side of the Thames, and this was accomplished by bus or steamer. To handle West End custom the "West End of London and Crystal Palace Junction Railway (E.W. and C.P.), from Battersea to the Palace, was authorized, the London Brighton to work it. In 1856 the section from the then wilds of Wandsworth Common to the Palace was finished; and with the opening of Victoria Station, north of the Thames, the route was Victoria—Battersea—(parallel with the London South Western Railway) Clapham Common, which thus became Clapham Junction, from which the W.E. and C.P. branched off to Wandsworth and the Crystal Palace.

In the 1860's, the London, Chatham and Dover Railway

(L.C. and D.) entered the lucrative traffic, coming in from the north and thus reaching the Palace on a level with the building at a terminus, consequently named High Level Station; the service was opened on August 1, 1865. This ensured the bilateral competition, so beloved of Victorian railway economy.

What of visitors arriving from the Provinces at King's Cross, the London terminus of the Great Northern Railway, now part of the Victorian desideratum, an end-on amalgamation or working agreement. In 1864 the L.C. and D. had built a costly extension over the Thames to Ludgate Hill (in the City) and Farrington Street, whence there was a Metropolitan connection to King's Cross; and accordingly the Great Northern was induced to invest in this 1864 extension, to secure direct access to the Crystal Palace traffic.

One wonders if the Plastic Palace of 1951 will unfold a similar chapter of transport history. Be that as it may, it is to be hoped that 1951 will not see a repetition of certain events of 1851, while the Palace was still in Hyde Park. In those golden months the omnibus companies and cabbies of the Metropolis reaped a more than golden harvest. The cabby, indeed, was in clover, carrying fares who knew little of the English language and nothing of London's cab laws or the ways of its cabbies. When royalty weds or world wars are won, owners of balconies and windows along the coveted route throb expectantly. When Britain in 1951 shows the world that it can make it, the restaurants, hotels, lodging houses and taxis will help the promotion of overseas trade and international good will if they moderate their levy on Britain's invisible exports.