



A Contemporary Archaeology of London's Mega Events

From the Great Exhibition
to London 2012

Jonathan Gardner

UCLPRESS

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List of Abbreviations

CPO	compulsory purchase order
EIC	East India Company
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GLA	Greater London Assembly – London’s current elected and Mayor-led city administration since 2000
<i>ILN</i>	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LBSCR	London, Brighton and South Coast Railway
LDA	London Development Agency
LDDC	London Docklands Development Corporation
LLDC	London Legacy Development Corporation (preceded by OPLC)
LOCOG	London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games
MOLA	Museum of London Archaeology (formerly Museum of London Archaeology Service: MOLAS)
MOLAS-PCA	Museum of London Archaeology Service: Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. (joint venture)
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
NSC	National Sports Centre
ODA	Olympic Delivery Authority
OPLC	Olympic Park Legacy Company (replaced by LLDC in 2012)
OS	Ordnance Survey
UAL	University of the Arts London
UCL	University College London
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum

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Note: Small sections of [Chapter 6](#) related to the Olympic archaeological project appear in a chapter in *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, transformation and destruction* ([Gardner 2020a](#)), in a paper in *Living Maps Review* ([Gardner 2016](#)) and in a paper in *Historical Archaeology* (Gardner In Review). Elements of the section on Olympicopolis/East Bank in [Chapter 7](#) are used in a chapter in *Co-curating the City: Universities and urban heritage past and future* ([Gardner 2022](#)).

1

Introduction: Mega events as time machines

This is a book about exploring the traces left by the largest cultural spectacles London has ever witnessed and their complex relationships with temporality. Although these mega events – the Great Exhibition of 1851, the 1951 South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games – reshaped the city, they, in turn, were products of London's history and inextricable from its pre-existing social and material environments. Each event assembled an enormous array of ideas, materials and participants from around the world to create new visions of the past, present and future, the effects of which continue to be felt today, despite the years and decades that have passed since they closed.

Just what is a mega event though? Although primarily addressing the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expositions and World's Fairs, Paul Greenhalgh captures the sense of scale and spectacle common to all mega events:

imagine an area the size of a small city centre, bristling with dozens of vast buildings with every conceivable type of commodity and activity known, in the largest possible quantities; surround them with miraculous pieces of engineering technology, with tribes of primitive peoples, reconstructions of ancient and exotic streets, restaurants, theatres, sports stadiums and bandstands. Spare no expense. Invite all nations on earth to take part by sending objects for display and by erecting buildings of their own. After six months, raze this city to the ground and leave nothing behind, save one or two permanent landmarks. (1988, 1)

Though less dramatic, Maurice Roche helpfully further defines mega events as a genre of very large-scale, globally oriented, peripatetic cultural spectacles that ‘have dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance’ (2000, 1).¹ As mid-nineteenth-century products of the Industrial Revolution, mega events emerged as the largest internationally oriented cultural and sporting events the world had ever known, and, by the late twentieth century, had gained their ‘mega’ moniker in recognition of this.

Several different varieties of mega event emerged in the aftermath of London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 – widely seen as the world’s *first* mega event and one of the subjects of this book – but generally speaking, they can be divided into two variants. The first to emerge was the exhibitionary form that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and encompassing the many different International Exhibitions, Expositions and World’s Fairs. These were then eclipsed by sporting mega events from the mid-twentieth century onwards and, in particular, the large-scale competitions of the FIFA World Cup and the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

While Greenhalgh’s description succinctly captures mega events’ vast scale and, with talk of ‘primitive’ people, their early versions’ close connections to imperialism and racism, it does leave one wondering if such spectacles really do ‘leave nothing behind’. I do not dismiss the significance of these ‘permanent landmarks’ (perhaps most famously the Eiffel Tower as a remnant of the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle), but the intent of this book is far more ambitious than an archaeological survey of such leftovers. I instead want to question the idea that mega events simply disappear after they close their doors, and to demonstrate their surprisingly persistent effects upon their host cities and societies. Although mega events are often seen as showcases of the ‘world of tomorrow’, in this book I show that they have a far broader array of temporal relationships, many of which draw on visions of the past just as much as those of the future. It is this complexity of relationships to time that draws me to these events and that is the reason for this book’s existence.

My approach is in response to a tendency by both contemporaries of mega events and some later commentators to see them as dematerialised symbols, representatives or stand-ins for temporal metanarratives. For example, each mega event discussed in this book – the Great Exhibition of 1851, the South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain (1951) and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (fig. 1.1) – are often reduced to metonyms for an entire epoch or historical period. The Great

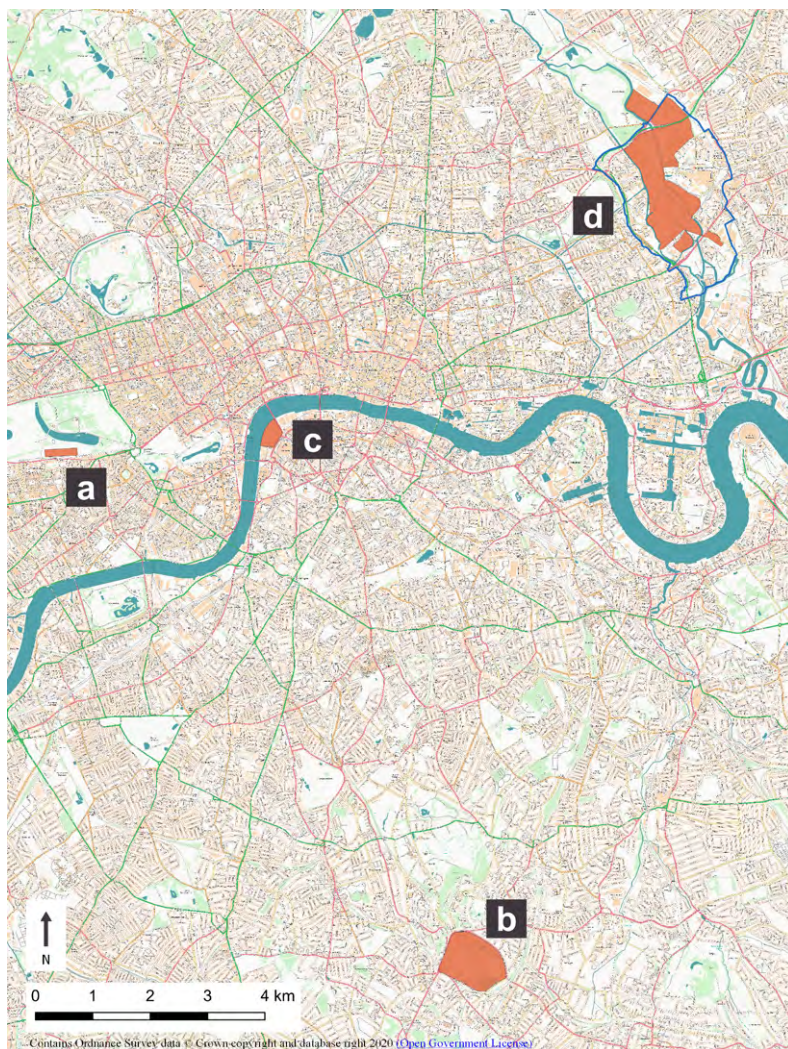


Figure 1.1 Map of London showing the mega events discussed in this book.
a: The Great Exhibition of 1851 (footprint of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park)
b: The Sydenham Crystal Palace and Park (1854–1936)
c: The South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain (1951)
d: The Olympic Park of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Stratford. Ongoing LLDC legacy development area outlined in blue.
 Source: Site polygons by the author. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2021. Open Government Licence.

Exhibition and 1851 are frequently regarded as the high point of Victorian ebullience and the coming of age of British industrial might and modernity writ large (e.g. Briggs 1951). The year of 1951 and the Festival of Britain are similarly seen as representatives of a post-war, left-wing political settlement and the birth of the Welfare State. More recently, the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (London 2012 hereafter) are, even now, viewed nostalgically by some as evidence of a time of national unity, and 'a relic from another age', before the division of Brexit, the pandemic and the so-called culture wars (Sturges 2020).

In such accounts, mega events seem to somehow stand outside normal time, worlds apart from the host cities and societies that lie beyond their glass palaces or security fences. While the urge to simplify such events as singularly historic *moments* or representatives of paradigm shifts is understandable, this risks underselling the complexity and rich materiality of mega events. To challenge this dematerialising tendency, in this book I show how mega events cannot be interpreted in such short-lived terms but, instead, must be seen as having a presence that stretches long before and after their relatively short periods of operation. Mega events are also inextricable from the mass of competing pre-existing temporal relationships that comes with their contents, participants and host sites. As we will see, these relationships are not only spatially and socially laminated upon the neighbourhoods and places in which events take place, but also extend to the distant places from which they draw their components, objects, materials, audiences and workers, and, in turn, to where these different elements are distributed in their aftermath.

This book emerged from my own very small part in London's most recent mega event: my employment as an archaeologist in 2007 and 2008 in Stratford (East London), excavating on the site of the 2012 Games prior to construction. As part of a large team tasked with recording and removing archaeological remains, this experience led me to recognise how mega events' effects stretch far beyond the weeks or months they were open to the public. I began to think about how those buried artefacts that we so carefully recovered and documented would not only have stayed in the ground, but also about how the future of the site we picked over would have turned out very differently without the coming of the mega event. In Stratford the Games literally reshaped the city and our interpretation of its history. However, this reshaping was not a one-sided relationship; it was only because of Stratford's long history of land use (and particularly the role of industrialisation) that the 2012 Games came to be hosted here in the first place, as we will see in [Chapter 6](#).

The mega events I discuss in this book seem to have an uncanny ability to exist in several times and places at once. It is in this ability to reach back into the past and connect with the present and future (and vice versa) that makes them *time machines*. I mean this both figuratively, in the sense of an act of shifting through time and, more literally, in their creation of novel temporal narratives.

In the first sense, the objects, sites and spaces connected to mega events have a habit of persisting and remaining present for decades or more after an event closes. Events also change the traces of the past and its representations by their activities in the present. This occurs not only through materially transformative processes such as demolition or archaeological excavation, but also, more discursively, in the language organisers use to frame the future they put on show in comparison to what came earlier. Although they are not literally moving backwards from the time of the present into the past, such activities can nonetheless cause a disruption of traditions and effect broader social and cultural shifts – not least of all to pre-existing communities in and around their host sites. Though obviously not true time travel in the sense of H. G. Wells' eponymous contraption, this ability of mega events to influence both the remnants and representations of the past, and visions of the future, can lead to paradoxes worthy of any DeLorean-based temporal mishap.²

This analogy may be extended more successfully, and in its more literal sense, if we reverse the word order. As *machines (of) time*, mega events draw materials, landscapes, humans and non-humans, ideas and representations into their buildings and sites as raw materials to produce new temporal visions. These visions are then put on display at exhibitions, paraded in performances or enacted in promises and (hopefully) delivery of urban regeneration. At first glance, such events would seem to be concerned with the present and, especially, with envisioning the future. They showcase the latest technologies, act as settings for sporting competition and record-breaking, they attempt to demonstrate moral, economic and social 'progress' and, more recently, have promoted sustainable development and legacy programmes. Yet this forward-facing temporal emphasis is only a part of their story.

Mega events also draw heavily upon the past. In the events of this book famous ancestors took centre stage at lavish ceremonies, displays of (supposedly) less-advanced people were compared with (supposedly) more-advanced British society, and the materials of deep time – from lumps of coal to flint arrowheads – were proudly displayed as totems of imperial and national heritage. This bringing together of different

elements of the past, present and future was – and is – a production line of processing, ordering and packaging for mass consumption.

While organisers may set this process in motion, once the wheels grind into action, the time machines of mega events inevitably draw unofficial or forgotten temporal fragments into their workings. The ultimate products are hybrids of materials and representations from different times and places that can act to challenge the official visions of mega events' organisers, just as much as they may support them. It is this complicated and contested envisioning of past, present and future, and its representation and materialisation in their participants, sites and materials that makes mega events resistant to simplistic categorisation and, indeed, makes them such intriguing subjects for archaeological research.

The aims of this book

In searching out the relationships between events, their participants, contents, sites and temporality, I have three overarching aims.

First, I want to show that these events are inextricable from a far wider assemblage of temporal relationships than has traditionally been attributed to them. I explore how event organisers self-consciously engage with notions of progress and modernity and how other actors (both human and non-human) have acted to unsettle these temporal visions. All mega events are characterised by their longevity, their persistence and their profound material and social impacts upon their host cities and societies. This effect is not only incidental but, in most cases, is also a direct result of decisions made by event organisers and participants. For example, in the official guidebook to the Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition we hear that the event, 'tells the story of British contributions to world civilisation in the arts of peace. That story has a beginning, a middle, and an end – even if that end consists of nothing more final than fingerposts into the future' (Cox 1951, 8).

This self-awareness of each event's own historicity necessitates an investigation of their attempts to construct and manage their place in time: how the past and the future were put to work through their marketing, contents or design for example; and how such temporalities were contradicted by those in opposition to them, or manifest in an event's own mixed messages.

My second aim is to foreground each mega event's materiality. Although this book focusses on London and how its most spectacular

events shaped (and were shaped by) the city, my examination of these three spectacles makes a more fundamental point about mega events in general. These vast events are materially and temporally inextricable from a much wider set of connections in their host cities and societies that may stretch decades or centuries before and after their short periods of operation. This book therefore attempts to address what Rebecca Graff has recognised as mega events' 'monumental ephemerality' (2020, 69) and their tendency to leave significant and long-term material and social changes, despite their ostensibly 'temporary' nature. This interest in events' dual short- and long-term lives extends to my exploration of their legacies: what happens a year, a decade or a century after the circus leaves town? What traces are left? Do their material remnants become appreciated and conserved as heritage, or are they destroyed and forgotten? Who gets to decide upon such processes and how are these challenged by alternative visions?

This book is not written as an instruction manual on how to *do* a contemporary mega event archaeology, however; my final aim is to demonstrate the value of the approach and methods used in this research and to show how they may be useful for future comparisons of mega events and for understanding their role in contemporary societies.

Mega events: a brief history

The 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations', which was held in London's Hyde Park in 1851, is recognised as the *first ever* World's Fair and, indeed, the first mega event. This first label is, in part, the result of its unprecedented international character and vast scale. While smaller, nationally focussed industrial fairs had taken place in France and England throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the Great Exhibition's vast physical dimensions, the quantity and variety of its exhibits, and its six million visitors set it apart. This event's long-standing influence is also a result of its sheer novelty: nothing quite like it had ever been seen before. The significance of the Exhibition was well recognised by contemporary observers (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), but, to some extent, its importance has been retrospectively magnified due to its influence on subsequent mega events, and the role it plays as a symbol of the times and metanarratives mentioned earlier.

If we turn our attention to the origin of sporting mega events, we can trace their beginnings in the establishment of the modern Olympic Games by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, and the first Games in Paris in 1894

(see [MacAloon 2006](#)). These resurrected the form of the Ancient Greek Olympic Games, which were first held in the early eighth century BC and ran for almost 1,500 years. Beyond these direct lineages, John and Margaret Gold (2005) outline a long 'genealogy' of European spectacles from the Classical period onwards that, they suggest, provide significant antecedents for modern mega events. These include a variety of religious festivals, seasonal fairs, parades and many others. Obviously, such events persist to this day, but what is interesting is that, as the genre of mega events developed into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they seemed to draw more and more on these earlier smaller-scale activities. This found an apogee in the Midway funfairs and sideshows attached to US World's Fairs in particular, which had an enormous impact on early theme parks and vice versa ([Koolhaas 1994](#), 32–4), and on sites like the Sydenham Crystal Palace (discussed in [Chapter 4](#)).

The Olympic Games have always had a surprisingly strong cultural component. Having originally been held as part of Exhibitions and World's Fairs, they included artistic competitions alongside their more well-known sporting events. For example, London's first Olympic Games in 1908 were an adjunct to the much larger spectacle of the Franco-British Exhibition. These Games saw the first Olympic opening ceremony; now one of their most well-recognised cultural 'rites' and discussed further in [Chapter 7](#) ([MacAloon 1984](#); [Baker 2015](#), 412).

Following exponential growth in the number (and scale) of exhibitionary mega events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the trend for hosting such spectacles waned after the fairs of the 1930s and as a result of the Second World War. Enormous later events included Chicago's Century of Progress Exhibition in 1933, Paris' Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in 1937 and the New York World's Fair of 1939–40. No large-scale events were held after the war that could be seen as true World's Fair-scale mega events until the Brussels Expo of 1958.³ This hiatus was a result not only of widespread austerity but also of an understandable unease in the aftermath of the conflict around mega events' tendency towards nationalism. That said, several nationally focussed events did take place in this period, which copied many of the features of their more internationally oriented predecessors, including the 1951 Festival of Britain examined in [Chapter 5](#).

In this post-war period the Summer Olympic Games grew in significance and they eventually eclipsed the exhibitionary mega events. With the rapid growth of Western economies in the 1950s and 1960s, the exhibitionary events that did take place became showcases for

corporations rather than for nations and empires. This trend is best epitomised by the enormous pavilions constructed for Detroit automobile manufacturers and electronics corporations, such as General Electric and the RCA Corporation, at the 1964–5 New York World’s Fair, and also seen to some extent at its 1939–40 predecessor.

Why host these enormous and costly spectacles at all? Mega events have been held for a wide variety of purposes since their nineteenth-century genesis. Most commonly, they have provided a performative arena for competition between states and empires, with displays of material abundance and sporting prowess as replacements for warfare. They have also served as significant means of demonstrating national (and later, corporate) identities and ideologies, along with the latest technological developments. Though ‘critical junctures where globally mediated urban identities are refashioned, future directions forged, and past lineages overwritten’ (Boyle and Haggerty 2009, 257), such events were also aimed at domestic populations. With the events I discuss, this purpose is found in both the sense of a state-led ‘bread and circuses’ distraction from the problems or issues of the day, and as a paternalistic means of moral or educational ‘improvement’, particularly with the Great Exhibition and its aftermath (Chapters 3 and 4).

It is worth remembering that not all mega events have been government funded or supported, and that the motives of the organisers may not always align with the intentions of the host nation. That said, more recent events are, almost without exception, backed by government investment. For example, the 2012 Games cost the British taxpayer £8.77 billion and were supported by an additional ca. £2 billion in private sponsorship (BBC 2013). Such government funding is justified today not so much by national or imperial promotion (as with the earlier events), but instead through an emphasis on how mega event investment is a means of leveraging further spending, improving urban areas and addressing social issues. Mega events are now frequently used to unlock further capitalisation for new transport links, improved utility networks, parks and as city-branding opportunities.

This is the idea of ‘event-led regeneration’, the belief that the construction of a mega event and its associated wider socio-economic impacts can be transformative to both cities and their populations’ wellbeing. This is now one of the major drivers behind the hosting of mega events (A. Smith 2012). It first emerged as an overt aim of the 1960 Rome Olympics and its wholesale redevelopment of former industrial lands (Telesca 2014), although such redevelopment was, to some extent, pre-empted by the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair. That Fair was

constructed on a former landfill site (Corona Dumps) and the temporary event was used by the city's (in)famous planner, Robert Moses, as a means of funding a major new public park that remains on the site today (see [Moses 1938](#); discussed further in [Chapter 8](#)).

This book reveals a similarly regenerative urge and the transformation of existing London districts (often industrial and working-class ones), particularly at the sites of the South Bank Exhibition in 1951 and the 2012 Games in Stratford. The representation of the prior uses and inhabitants of these areas was instrumental in making their transformation for these mega events not only seem possible, but also desirable and legitimate. Thus a whole language of 'slums', 'wastelands' and similar terms is to be found associated with mega events, as we will see.

Related to all of this is a word that will be encountered frequently in this book and that I have not yet satisfactorily defined: *legacy*. In broad terms, a mega event's legacy is simply what is left behind after its operational period is over. While legacy tends to be portrayed by more recent event organisers as something that can be entirely planned for – often in relation to urban development or in the aforementioned forms of positive socio-economic outcomes – this fails to capture the far broader, and often unpredictable, *inheritance* left by mega events. Instead, I follow Preuss' usefully expansive definition of legacy as, 'all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by [an] event that remain longer than the event itself' (2007, 211). Although Preuss is specifically referring to sporting spectacles like the Olympics, his definition sums up the huge range of consequences mega events leave in their wake, and recognises that many of them are 'unplanned' and beyond the organisers' control. As will be discussed in [Chapter 7](#), the word legacy also shares significant etymological origins with the word *heritage*, a concept that is itself returned to throughout the book as a crucial means for understanding mega events' long-term role in London.

The spectacles of London

London has been repeatedly reshaped by many events – in the broadest sense of the word – over its two millennia of history. Such a litany of disasters and radical reconstructions have occurred, often in quick succession, that it would be foolish to try to list them all here. Nonetheless, a small selection might include: the near-total destruction of the original Roman settlement by Boudicca in 60 AD; Londinium's subsequent

rebuilding and the construction of the vast walls that would constrain its boundaries for centuries; the establishment of a new settlement in the early medieval period (Lundenwic) on the site of today's Covent Garden; and then the return to the 'old' city in the ninth century. Later 'defining moments' (Schofield 2009), might include the devastation wrought by the Black Death and its aftermath in the fourteenth century, or the twin disasters of the Great Plague in 1665 and the Great Fire in 1666, not to mention the Civil War; all these episodes were followed by rebuilding and expansions of the city. More recently, we might think of the razing of slums and the building of new streets in the name of 'improvement' from the eighteenth century onwards, the public health crisis of cholera, the Great Stink of the 1850s and the creation of the sewer system, and the immense redevelopment that took place after the Blitz of the Second World War. We might also remember the now-lamented demolition of older districts and the loss of buildings such as Euston Station (and the rise of the heritage preservation movement as a result), or the rapid deindustrialisation and rebirth of the Docklands from the 1960s onwards.

Despite these significant events of destruction and (re)construction, unlike its continental cousin Paris, London has rarely undergone any coherent comprehensive redevelopment. Its history is one of piecemeal speculative rebuilding, unplanned modification, triumphs wrenched from the jaws of defeat and a good deal of hubris. The city is literally built on vast quantities of its own rubble, yet seems to sometimes forget this – the mega events in this book are no exception. This is not to say the city completely forgets its history. Although mega projects and events have erased whole districts, rivers have been buried or 'lost', and the populations of London's many village-like districts have come and gone, memories can linger, even in the absence of a coherent ruin or monument. As we will see, mega events, as time machines, seem to concentrate and even accelerate such processes.

The above snippets of London's history are obviously selective and run the risk of suggesting that the city's most spectacular and visible historical events are somehow mostly detached from human agency; where are the city's people, their demonstrations, their battles, their pomp and pageantry, or indeed, their long-standing habit of rioting? In his magisterial *London: A social history*, Roy Porter rightly cautions that if 'buildings take precedence over people[,] we get heritage, not history' (2000, 11). Only by considering the breadth of interaction of the city's materials, landscape, its economic and political systems *and* its people, animals and plants, can any credible history of London be written. In writing about the city and its relationship to these mega events, while I



Figure 1.2 (opposite page) The mega events of London. Note: a) The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, home to the Great Exhibition of 1851. b) The rebuilt Crystal Palace at Sydenham, ca. 1862. c) Aerial photograph of the South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain 1951. d) Aerial photograph of the Olympic Park in Stratford, East London, during the Games in 2012.

Source: a) Ackermann & Co., British (English), d. 19th century. *Building for the Great Exhibition of Industry of All Nations, London (The Crystal Palace), 1851*, Public Domain. Open Access Image from the Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University. DAC accession number 1975.20.2. Olin Library transfer, 1975. <https://dac-collection.wesleyan.edu/objects-1/info/95>. b) Photograph by Negretti and Zambra. Public Domain. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program. <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/89817/negretti-zambra-exterior-view-of-crystal-palace-and-grounds-british-negative-1855-print-about-1862/>. c) EAW035702 © Historic England. <https://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/en/image/EAW035702>. d) CC BY 2.0. EG Focus. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/egfocus/6944381592>.

recognise that they have had significant material effects on the city, they are not separable from those who built, planned or used them or the city's pre-existing environments.

The consideration of several mega events and their afterlives in one city allows for a comparison of how this genre of cultural spectacle developed and changed over a relatively short time-frame (fig. 1.2). Why focus specifically on the events of 1851, 1951 and 2012? Before answering this fully, some context is needed. Depending on how one counts, the city has hosted between ten and twenty purpose-built mega events since the mid-nineteenth century. Some of these are almost forgotten today due to their low numbers of visitors or their significant financial failures, such as the annual International Exhibitions of 1871–4 (see Hoffenberg 2017).⁴ Of the other internationally focussed mega events that followed the Great Exhibition, the largest were the International Exhibition of 1862, the Colonial and Indian Exposition in 1886, the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908 (incorporating the Olympic Games) and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924–5.

Each of these events drew millions of visitors, were held in purpose-built venues and several of them had significant long-term impacts on the city. For example, The British Empire Exhibition was instrumental in the establishment of the suburb of Wembley around its originally semi-rural grounds, after attracting over 20 million attendees (see Geppert 2010, chap. 5; Stephen 2013 for an overview). This was the last of the city's mega events until the 1948 Olympics (also mainly held at Wembley) and the Festival of Britain in 1951. No further events of this scale or with the same impact on urban transformation were held until the 2012 Games.⁵

Given this choice, my selection could be seen as providing only a partial history of the city's hosting of mega events. As I shall demonstrate however, the mega events of 1851, 1951 and 2012 are those that had the most dramatic and transformational impact upon the city. Each of them also demonstrates important and successive changes to the purpose of hosting of mega events in London and show a move to ever-greater emphasis on urban redevelopment and legacy. While the Great Exhibition is chosen for its status as the first ever international mega event, the Festival of Britain provides a useful mid-point, where the relationship of events to this urban transformation and to the developing idea of legacy becomes explicitly articulated for the first time, despite its smaller scale. This represents a trend that becomes fully fledged by the time of London 2012 as the city's most recent mega event.

At first glance, the Great Exhibition may seem to be a very different beast from the Festival of Britain or London 2012, nonetheless there are clear commonalities. Each event saw a contested transformation of established city districts, each demonstrated an intense introspection around British history and identity and, as will become apparent later, all shared surprising connections to conflict, ruination and waste. There are, of course, many differences between them – most obviously in their divergent approaches to legacy planning, or in the sporting emphasis of London 2012 versus the exhibitionary format of the others – but even here there are productive opportunities for comparison.

A link to heritage is another reason for my selection. All three of the mega events discussed can be said to have become rapidly 'heritagised' following their closure and became curated and valued parts of London and the UK's cultural landscape. Each mega event has been the subject of intense popular and scholarly interest and critique, representation, mediation and mythologisation at a level that far exceeds any of London's other events. These three events also come with a surfeit of primary and secondary sources, which, along with their archaeological and material traces, has provided a rich vein for the exploration of their relationship to London and to one another. Finally, as ancestors or inspiration for large parts of London's present-day cultural and economic landscape, these three events continue to cast a long shadow over ongoing developments in the city, from South Kensington to Stratford. All three mega events have also been invoked in support of the hosting of subsequent events, such as the Millennium Experience or the planned post-Brexit Festival of Great Britain (e.g. [Sandbrook 2018](#)).

Reading mega events

There is a vast amount written on mega events, both in London and as a genre more generally. This scholarship encompasses a broad array of disciplines including history, sociology, geography, architecture, performance studies, literature and even geology (e.g. Doyle 2008). Within this, several important, more general, works compare and contrast individual mega event examples at a global level and underpin my work. All these accounts take different phases and aspects of global mega event history as their subject and often take the events as a broad signifier of modernity itself (e.g. Roche 2000). These works focus on subjects that cover: the move from single buildings like the Crystal Palace to entire exhibitionary districts across multiple sites (Benedict 1983; Gold and Gold 2005); the role of expositions and fairs as a form of political 'soft power' (Hayes and Karamichas 2012) and as an ideological technology (Greenhalgh 1988); the decline of exhibitionary events in favour of sporting ones; and the increasing emphasis on legacy planning from the 1960s onwards (Viehoff and Poynter 2015) – to name but a few. Such works have in common the idea that mega events act as foci for a wide range of material and discursive trends that exist at different times across different societies. They also emphasise the important point that each event tends to influence those that follow and the genre as a whole.

More detailed studies focus on specific elements of single events, for example: Olympic opening ceremonies and performance (Simandiraki 2005; Falcous and Silk 2010; Baker 2015); exhibitions' engagement with science (Forgan 1998; Cogdell 2000; Hornsey 2008); mega events as performance or ritual (Benedict 1983; MacAloon 1984, 2019; Klausen 1999; MacRury 2008; Hinsley 1991); and the role of art, media and architecture (Dickinson, Johnston and Zaiontz 2016; Garcia 2008; Rydell and Burd Schiavo 2010; Jolivette 2009). All these topics are engaged with throughout this book, but especially significant are those works that deal with issues of imperialism, class and varied responses to events (Stephen 2013; Vanke 2008), and that critically analyse events' representations and image-making processes (Broudehoux 2017; Adese 2016). Importantly, many such authors reveal the previously hidden experiences of individuals and groups in the midst of the sometimes-incomprehensible scale of each event (authors in Buzard, Childers and Gillooly 2007; Blanchard et al. 2008). Many also emphasise the importance of the materiality of venues, sites and contents in complex processes of contestation and differential identity-making and -marking within them

and in their aftermath (Hoffenberg 2001, Bennett 1995; Nichols and Turner 2017). Following these authors, I emphasise that those who attended mega events did not experience them homogeneously, and I show how the construction, operation and legacies of the events in this book were strongly contested by a variety of people and groups.

Scholarship on mega events' role in stimulating urban development is particularly well developed and this underpins my exploration of their complex relationship to London (Hiller 2000; Gold and Gold 2008; Powell and Marrero-Guillamon 2012; Telesca 2014; Cohen 2015; Kassens-Noor 2016). In particular, event-led regeneration, the idea that the construction of a mega event and its associated wider socio-economic impacts (both during operation and in legacy), can wholly transform an urban area from somewhere seen to be run down (such as former industrial land), is arguably now the main driver for hosting mega events. This is particularly explored in this book's chapters on the Festival of Britain and the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Such justifications for hosting a mega event, out of all the others, are especially significant from a heritage and archaeology perspective, given that event-led regeneration is often predicated on destroying or reconfiguring what previously existed on a site.

Most works of mega event scholarship can be subdivided into those that focus on the operational period of events and those that consider their aftermath and legacies. It is rare that a study treats these periods equally. In contrast, throughout this book I show that distinguishing between preparation, operation and legacy periods can present something of an unnecessary distraction, particularly if we want to understand an event's long-term spatio-temporal relationships.

Therefore this book also draws on scholarship that considers how mega events engage with time, both the visions of the past, present and future mentioned earlier and how they stand in for larger metanarratives. As noted above, in almost all mega event scholarship is the idea that these spectacles are *modern* and are expressions of modernity itself. However, the most critical examples of this work see mega events not simply as *representatives* of technological innovation or progress but as material manifestations of the inherent contradictions of modernity – such as the alienating conditions of consumer capitalism (e.g. Berman 1983). Several studies also draw on the work of Walter Benjamin and the importance of the role of the past in an event's presentation (particularly Murphy 2010; D. Smith 2012), and in the next chapter I explain my own engagement with this scholarship in more detail.

One must search both discursively and materially for signs of this modernity at mega events rather than simply taking the whole assemblage as its stand-in. Alfredo González-Ruibal has argued that an attendance to ‘the persistence of the old in the new and the presence of marginalized experiences of time’ is essential if we are to understand modernity from an archaeological perspective (2016, 159). With this in mind, to understand how mega events both evoke and disrupt the idea of a modern technological and progressive present and future, we must explore their, often complicated, relationship with the past. To this end, I focus on the origins and trajectories of mega event materials and exhibits and on those who produce them, on how events foreground certain histories or other temporal narratives at the expense of others and on how each event changed the traditional uses of the sites in which they were hosted and vice versa.

Numerous authors have also recognised mega events as masters of creating idealised times and spaces, modern and otherwise. Events often attempt to show what the future will be like through displays of technology, or act to reinforce notions of contemporary identity by drawing on ancient origins (e.g. Nordin 2011). Despite an event’s often rich engagement with both the remains of the past and its idealisation, only a few archaeologists have engaged directly with mega events to date. The archaeological research that does exist is significant in its critical and interdisciplinary emphasis (e.g. Moser 2012), and for its refusal to see events or their remnants as straightforward manifestations of heritage or monuments within their host cities, instead understanding them as hybrids of material and discursive, political, economic and social elements.

In this vein, through discussing the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, Angela Piccini argues that ‘notions of the past are materialized’ through assemblages of ‘material-discursive relations’ at such events (2012, 292). Rebecca Graff’s work on the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition (2020) similarly shows that a mega event can only be fully understood by considering the lives of those who built, visited, experienced and remembered it. Not only does Graff explore and document the sites of event buildings, but she also considers how far the consumerist modernity on display at the Fair permeated the domestic sphere through the excavations of a family home contemporaneous with the mega event. She demonstrates that the spectacular and the seemingly exceptional spaces of the Fair necessarily co-existed with the everyday lives of Chicagoans and the city’s own historical emergence and growth.

Though not a traditional mega event under the definitions I have used here, Carolyn White's (2020) examination of the Burning Man festival, using archaeological and anthropological approaches, is especially significant with regard to the use of contemporary archaeology and large-scale events. Approaching the festival's ephemeral city of Black Rock (pop. 75,000), which springs up for just a week each year in the Nevada Desert, White uses an 'active site archaeology' to attempt to capture the transitory complexity of the city's infrastructure and its inhabitants' lives and traditions. Her method is especially important in addressing archaeology's long-standing difficulty in capturing the traces of temporary events. Though I have not utilised a direct ethnographic methodology, as White does in her work, her approach has had a strong influence upon my efforts to take in the whole history of such temporary events (including the cycles of their creation, operation and aftermaths). Similarly, her comparative approach to different versions of Black Rock, year on year, is readily applicable to documenting the changing uses of the exhibitionary and sporting mega event sites that I discuss here.

I rely heavily on archival material in this book, rather than on excavation or ethnography, but it is my intention to move beyond seeing mega events as solely exceptional and spectacular and to recognise them as places that can be quotidian too: grounded in a city's pre-existing districts and communities, as workplaces that have employees, as consumers of materials and producers of waste (Graff 2020 is again of particular importance here). Despite the aforementioned important historical and contemporary archaeological studies, no detailed work appears to have considered the overlapping and jumbled material traces of *successive* events within one city (but see Penrose 2012). In making a comparison of three events over 170 years, I gain a significant insight into not only how subsequent mega events borrow from their predecessors but also how, together, they continue to shape their host city and its inhabitants over the long term.

Scope and structure

In the chapters that follow, I examine each mega event's spatial and social history, its architecture, landscapes, contents and activities, along with a discussion of their aftermaths and legacies. Chapter 2 includes a more detailed methodological exploration of how we can examine mega events archaeologically, and a consideration of their different temporal, spatial and material relationships. In Chapter 3, I move to the Great Exhibition

and discuss its emergence and persistence through close readings of its host landscape, its Crystal Palace's construction materials and some of its vast array of contents. In [Chapter 4](#), I discuss the Exhibition's aftermath and follow its Crystal Palace to Sydenham, South London, and begin a broader exploration of mega event legacies. An emphasis on urban regeneration continues in [Chapter 5](#) with a discussion of the South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain in 1951. Bringing my explorations of the city's mega events up to the present, I finally turn to London 2012 and the Games' main location in Stratford, in [Chapters 6](#) and [7](#). I document how the history of the East End informed the choice of the site for hosting the mega event and I pay particular attention to how different ideas of legacy and heritage operate in the ongoing development of today's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. In the final chapter, I compare the varied temporal relations of each spectacle and their impact upon London, as well as reflecting on my methodology and the role of mega events in the future.

In each event-focussed chapter the reader will see that I have employed a broad range of research methods and that I take in an array of different sources. Given the subject, not all varieties of method or source are available or suitable for studying every event. For example, while hundreds of thousands of photographs exist of London 2012, far fewer survive of the Great Exhibition (but see [figs. 3.6](#) and [3.8](#) in [Chapter 3](#)). In some cases, this means that the focus and structure of each chapter varies from event to event. In the case of the Great Exhibition ([Chapter 3](#)) for example, my primary emphasis is on how the event transformed its site and the role of its architecture, with a lesser focus on its contents. Although more emphasis is placed on the displays of the rebuilt Palace at Sydenham in [Chapter 4](#), I devote considerable time to how it acted as a legacy and reminder of 1851 and how both the Crystal Palace and the original event have become heritagised today. The later chapters then bring in explorations of how such legacy becomes formalised and how heritage and archaeology come to the fore more directly.

Thus, while some chapters may place differing emphases on event sites, architecture and contents, this combination of case studies and approaches are intended to act together to provide a rich vision of each event's relationship with time. Rather than making a direct comparison of, say, the contents of the Great Exhibition to the displays of the Festival of Britain, it is the diversity and variety of an event's temporal relationship *writ large* that I seek to compare and contrast.

By examining the inner workings, and the sometimes paradoxical effects, of three different mega event time machines on London itself and

British society more broadly, I hope not only to provide a new insight into the history of these cultural spectacles but also to initiate a broader discussion about our relationship to them. While mega events are often seen by would-be hosts as offering a positive boost to cities and societies, such events are also frequently criticised because of their enormous cost, their tendency to disrupt or displace existing communities and their nationalistic leanings. Rather than attempting to take sides, I am more interested in exploring those unintentional effects of such events (and their temporal relationships) that do not necessarily fall neatly into categories of positive or negative. In considering these less-noticed, unexpected, serendipitous, contested and sometimes chaotic effects and legacies, I hope this book will prompt further exploration of mega events in London and beyond, and will stimulate reflection on their continued role in the future.

Notes

- 1 There is considerable debate over what 'counts' as a mega event and such terminology, particularly with regard to more recent events (e.g. Müller 2015; Shoval 2002). Regardless of this, all the London examples I describe are characterised by their enormous scale, their self-contained and 'one-off' nature, the fact they were, at least in part, internationally oriented (the Festival of Britain is a slight outlier as we shall see) and, perhaps most importantly, their permanent material and spatial impact upon the city.
- 2 See Zemeckis 1985; cf. Herek 1989.
- 3 International Expositions since 1928 have been subject to scrutiny and regulation by the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), a voluntary membership organisation that was set up to ensure the largest events were held at reasonable intervals from one another, and to define what makes a World's Fair or International Exposition versus a national-scale or specialist fair. One of the BIE's major aims was to limit the 'arms race' of hosting ever-larger events in the heightened nationalistic atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s in particular, and to ensure that exhibitions promoted mutual understanding and peace. The notorious episode of enormous Soviet and Nazi pavilions sited opposite one another at the Paris Expo of 1937 seems to indicate the failure of this policy (see Udovički-Selb 2012; <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/about-the-bie/our-history>).
- 4 The host building for these exhibitions is still around; following its deconstruction and sale it was rebuilt as Alexandra Palace in North London. This survives, relatively intact, as a leisure, concert and exhibition venue.
- 5 The Commonwealth Games were held in Cardiff in 1958, Edinburgh in 1970 and 1986, Manchester in 2002 and Glasgow in 2014. They attracted large audiences and, to some extent, involved new venue construction and urban redevelopment, but they are usually understood as having considerably less impact than the Summer Olympics/Paralympics (but see Gray and Porter 2015).

2

Mega methodologies

To get to grips with mega events' bewildering array of participants, places and contents, we need a methodology that can attend to the equally enormous range of sources and materials they leave behind. Mega events' relationships to time – their temporalities – are not only created by those who plan, build or visit them but also emerge from the interaction and agency of their non-human elements, including their sites, building materials and contents. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the effects of these interactions can be both local and distant, and range from the short to the long term. With this imbrication of time, space, materials and participants in mind, in this chapter I sketch out my approach to exploring the diverse past, present and future of London's mega events.

Contemporary archaeology/archaeologies

The sub-field of contemporary archaeology is my starting point; the use of archaeological methods and theory to examine the recent past and the present (e.g. [Buchli and Lucas 2001](#); [Harrison and Breithoff 2017](#); [Graves-Brown, Harrison and Piccini 2013](#); [McAttackney and Ryzewski 2017](#)). Contemporary archaeology casts a critical and material-focussed eye on the modern world and its origins, and offers opportunities for research beyond purely historical or archival approaches. One of contemporary archaeology's defining features is its methodological agnosticism. By this, I mean that, while its practitioners use excavation, artefact analysis or other traditional archaeological methods, they also embrace visual methodologies, mapping, ethnography and archival studies, all of which are deployed in this book.

I cannot give a detailed overview of the whole sub-field here but it is useful to expand on some of the definitions and approaches that come

with different strands of contemporary archaeology or, as it was first known, the ‘archaeology of the contemporary past’ (Buchli and Lucas 2001). Kathryn Fewster (2013) notes that many of the roots of contemporary archaeology emerged in the broader discipline’s ‘processual’ turn from the 1960s onwards, and particularly in ethnoarchaeological approaches that sought to understand relationships between human use of material culture in the present as a model for understanding the past. While processual archaeology (sometimes called the New Archaeology)¹ and its scientific approach were later criticised for their faith in empiricism and pretence of objectivity, such work helped to establish the legitimacy of systematically studying the material culture of the very recent past using archaeological methods and theories.

One of the most important direct antecedents for today’s contemporary archaeology emerged in the wake of the New Archaeology paradigm shift: William Rathje’s studies of contemporary American waste disposal habits and his and his collaborators’ excavations and analyses of landfill sites (e.g. Rathje and Murphy 1992). Rathje’s excavations were combined with interviews and observations of contemporary domestic situations, with participants’ self-reported behaviours often contradicted by what he and his teams found in their trashcans and nearby landfills. Such research used a combination of archaeology and ethnography to understand contemporary human behaviour (and situated these findings within a contemporary socio-economic and political context) and laid significant groundwork for the emergence of contemporary archaeology by the late 1990s.

Another important ancestor came with the reaction against New Archaeology and processualism in the loose affiliation of scholarly approaches termed ‘post-processualism’ from the early 1980s. These rejected attempts to codify or systemise processes of human behaviour and questioned evolutionary theorisations of cultural change. Such scholars also utilised archaeology to study present-day habits (for example, Shanks and Tilley [1992] compared Swedish and British beer cans). There was also discussion of how archaeology tells stories about the past based on present-day conditions and politics (e.g. Leone in Fewster 2013; see Harrison and Breithoff 2017, 205). Drawing on this, contemporary archaeologists frequently argue that investigations of the past can only be undertaken ‘in and of the present’ (R. Harrison 2011), and are a present-day ‘mode of cultural production’ (Lucas 2004, 118). This means that we cannot produce an objective or singular narrative of the past, given that we encounter its remains only in our experiences of the world of *today*. This is not to say that the past never existed, nor that

our interpretations are simply projections that imagine the past, but it is to accept that our knowledge of this past is subjectively shaped by the choice of methods and concepts we employ (see [Graves-Brown 2013](#)).

This presentist standpoint also imbues contemporary archaeology with a critical edge, one that often questions the social and political foundations of the contemporary world. Since the sub-field's emergence, contemporary archaeologists have often taken interest in political processes and in issues of rupture, incongruity and dissonance. Along with Paul Graves-Brown's edited volume *Materiality and Modern Culture* (2000), Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas' *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (2001) proved foundational for much of the contemporary archaeological work that followed. Buchli and Lucas, along with other early practitioners, saw the radical potential of undertaking archaeological investigations of the present-day as a means to question the taken-for-granted nature of society and to expose its contradictions and incongruities. As a result, contemporary archaeology has often focussed on topics that are seen as forgotten, mundane, ruined, traumatic, abject or connected to conflict, including: forced migration (e.g. [Hamilakis 2017](#)); warfare and repression (e.g. [Funari, Zarankin and Salerno 2010](#)); and homelessness (e.g. [Kiddey 2017](#)). By integrating multidisciplinary examinations of materials, archives and ethnography, contemporary archaeological approaches provide a unique means of investigating the role of the past in the present and the complex relationships we have with both the material culture we use and the landscapes that we inhabit. Building on this scholarship, my own approach is grounded in an awareness of how the past operates in the present, specifically, how the traces and representations of previous mega events continue to shape our societies and cities.

To be clear, this is not a book whose research involved going and digging up mega event sites across London. As enjoyable as that would have been, for numerous financial, ethical and practical reasons this was not possible, though in places I draw on my aforementioned experience working as a field archaeologist on the London 2012 project prior to the construction of the Games. Nonetheless, an investigation of the materiality of mega events' varied landscapes, artefacts and structures forms the book's core. This is undertaken not only with reference to previous archaeological work, but also through my own on-site survey work, mapping and photography, alongside the use of a diverse array of documentary, visual and cartographic sources.

All such sources, archaeological, archival or otherwise, present invaluable evidence for understanding the three mega events discussed

in this book. These sources have a broad array of possible valences and their lives extend far beyond the construction or operational period of the mega events themselves. However, these sources are not simply an objective record of the past, or a resource that we can simply mine for mega event histories. They are partial, fragmentary and ordered selectively by those who made them and they are interpreted subjectively by their investigators (myself included). However, the partiality of all sources can also be a strength, as each presents a range of different material-discursive snapshots of particular times and spaces in a mega event's history. In this, I follow Phil Cohen's suggestion that the (counter) power of an archive lies in its 'bringing unlikely things together in order to take their established associations apart' (2018, 5).

To these sources I also bring my own role in this story – a few months spent digging on the Olympic site in 2007 and 2008. This has provided a form of 'retrospective autoethnographic' insight unavailable to most scholars (Smith 2015, 6), though I am well aware that such recollection must be used with caution, given the risks involved in terms of ethics and bias (Chang 2008, 46–7). I played a (very small) part in the creation and legacy of the most recent mega event but I have also had the privileged position of being able to return to that spectacle as both spectator and researcher. This has led me to reflect upon how individuals are implicated within a mega event's operation and legacy more broadly. In 2007, as a 21-year-old archaeologist on the Olympic project, I did not envisage that I would be writing a book about it some 14 years later! Nonetheless, this episode profoundly influenced me and led, eventually, to the creation of the text you have before you.²

Mega events and temporality

If we accept that the remains – and representations – of the past play an active role in the present, we can say that the mega events in this book never seem to have quite ended. As mentioned in the Introduction, as time machines, their ruins, fragments, memories, controversies and triumphs linger for decades after they have officially closed their doors. Furthermore, memories of previous mega events play an active role in inspiring subsequent spectacles. For example, organisers of both the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the 2012 Games took the Great Exhibition of 1851 as the foundation for their hosting to different extents. As we will see, these later events often struggled to reconcile a respect for these ancestors with their own, often quite different, visions of the future.

Thinking about time more broadly, it seems fair to suggest that most of us in the industrialised world take the apparent linearity of past, present and future for granted in our day-to-day existences. If anything, our attachment to the comfort of a before and after seems stronger than ever in the troubled times of the early twenty-first century. It has long been recognised that a regularisation and increasing uniformity in understandings of time both emerged from, and shaped, the modern era and eventually came to almost entirely replace more fluid conceptualisations connected to seasonality and religion. Some have suggested that the coming of Western modernity saw the ‘discovery of history’ itself, with the era of the contemporary set apart from what came before, with the pre-industrial past rendered ‘bygone and lost’ (Fritzsche 2004, 5–7) and – even more radically – with ‘prehistory’, rendered as almost totally alien (see Lucas 2004). It is this apparent rupture, manifest in a longing for idealised pasts alongside the ordering and objectification of others (and Others), as well as an obsession with, and fear of, what the future might bring, that is said to characterise the experience of modernity at large (e.g. Berman 1983; Huysen 2010, 176).

While modernity may seem to enact a sense of distance or difference from that which came before, and an ever-increasing rush towards that which is to come, it is also clear that our encounters with certain materials and spaces can prompt an unsettling of time’s arrow. Recognising this, numerous archaeologists and anthropologists have argued that a sense of overlapping temporality, and the intrusion of the past (or indeed, *past* imaginings of the future) into our present-day consciousness is commonplace in contemporary experience, and that, as a result, strictly delineated historical or archaeological chronologies are misleading (e.g. Lucas 2005; R. Harrison 2011; Olivier 2011; González-Ruibal 2016). Shannon Dawdy makes the significant suggestion that our experience of time more generally (i.e. not only in archaeological research) is heterogeneous (2016a): our lives are characterised by their ‘heterotemporality’, where the past, present and future co-exist in our encounters with one another and the materials and spaces we inhabit. In this book, I see such heterotemporality as an inherent part of London’s mega events. These events’ relationships to time are frequently characterised by multiplicity and intermingling: borrowing and reuse; rubble; destruction and rebirth; haunting and anachronism face off against organisers’ official efforts to manage time in a more planned and linear fashion.

In examining the traces of each event through their remnants and representational proxies (such as contemporary newspaper accounts), it

becomes clear that organisers were well aware of the dangers to mega events' carefully managed temporalities, and the threat of both the physical remnants of previous times (such as contaminated land or sites' pre-existing inhabitants), and others' alternative or unofficial visions of the past, present and future. In response to this, each mega event made an effort to ensure their own contemporaneity: establishing which materials, participants and other elements fitted synchronously within an accepted, or canonical, time-frame and which did not (Lucas 2015). In other words, attempting to sort what was to be seen as of the present or the future, and what was seen as of the past.

Gavin Lucas notes that 'the trope of modernity defines the very possibility of something being untimely' (2015, 9). Organisers of these self-consciously modern spectacles appear to be similarly attenuated to what is timely or untimely. Mega events are, by their very nature, carefully planned to be experienced as short-lived cultural phenomena, unlike, say, the permanent collections of museums (Siegel 2010, 34). This performance of brevity has important resonances for mega events' relationship to time more generally, particularly in light of their physical structures' confounding tendency to stick around for years afterwards. Thus, I argue that event organisers were often overtly concerned with what I call *temporal managerialism*, an attempt to directly organise and shape how mega events are placed and perceived *in* time, and how they defend this temporal position against other competing visions.

The most positive sense of such temporal management, and one encountered several times throughout this book, is based around what David Lowenthal called 'creative anachronism', the projecting of present-day values or ideas onto the past and an intentional mixing up of time periods (1985, 363). At the Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition (discussed in Chapter 5), this was achieved through the use of an idealised history of 'The People of Britain'. This was intended to provide a backstory to the national character of contemporary British people and to contextualise the technological futurity on display at the event, demonstrating that there was 'one continuous interwoven story' of development up to the present (Cox 1951, 8).

In contrast to this creative use of the past, a second, less-acknowledged, anachronism seems to characterise the operation of each mega event. This type of anachronism presents a threat to the mega event's contemporaneity, that is, how undesirable traces from the past can corrupt promises of what is to come. An example of this is seen in attempts to denigrate uses and users of sites earmarked for mega event development and to cast them as holdovers from the past that are

incompatible with the planned future. As we will see later in much more detail, the labelling of the pre-2012 Olympic Park in Stratford as an ‘industrial wasteland’ (and as *post*-industrial) effectively portrayed the district as out of time and outdated; its mega event-led clearance and redevelopment became portrayed as a timely act of bringing it back into the correct time of the present.

Both creative anachronism and this sense of an unsettling ‘anachronicity’ permeate all three of the London mega events I discuss. The spatial dimension of these anachronistic ruptures are returned to shortly but, for now, having discussed how *previous* uses or eras are conceptualised (or argued over) in the hosting of mega events, we must also consider how the concept of the future is understood and used as a key part of their creation and operation.

Contemporary archaeology and critical heritage studies increasingly recognise the importance of the future and the idea of futurity, both as a temporal frame and as a concept useful for analysing the remnants of how people planned and imagined times to come (e.g. [Tamm and Olivier 2019](#); [Lucas 2008](#)). Reilly suggests that certain actions, such as planting crops or laying foundations for a building, can be understood as anticipatory acts concerned with preparing for future situations, which remain today as archaeological traces ([2019](#), 2). Clearly, the huge range of preparations for the future required to create a mega event present a particularly dramatic set of traces in this regard, from the buildings or sites themselves, to the vast array of documents, representations and materials they leave in their wake, many of which I explore in the chapters that follow.

Increasingly, planning for the future at mega events concerns not only their operational period, but also organisers’ intentions to leave a legacy. As discussed in the Introduction, a planned mega event legacy involves a conscious articulation of desires and hopes for what is to come and, in some cases, an attempt to avoid an undesirable future. Unlike the spatially unreachable utopia, a vision of a better future, or indeed, a prediction of a worse one, is a temporal destination that is potentially achievable ([Graves-Brown 2021](#), 9). The idea of a future mega event legacy is an anticipatory one – that something better will come to pass given enough effort. Andrew Smith, discussing cities’ ‘event-led regeneration’, notes that ‘[b]oth events and regeneration are concepts that can be understood only with reference to time’ ([2012](#), 9–10). In this, he suggests that mega events are reliant on historically situated visions, and specifically those concerned with delivering demonstrable material changes on the ground: new infrastructure; the removal of old or

(supposedly) decrepit neighbourhoods and their replacement with new ones; and the effecting of social and political change, such as poverty-reduction efforts, improved health outcomes and so forth.

However, alternative and pre-existing visions of the future, just like those of the past, may interrupt the planning and operation of a mega event. As will be seen in [Chapter 6](#), several areas of what became the 2012 Olympic Park were dedicated to waste management and recycling. These included extensive water treatment works and numerous landfill sites from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and, later, recycling companies and scrapyards. Though no doubt unpleasant activities to live next door to, they were future-shaping, anticipatory activities that ultimately operated to mitigate against pollution, disease and the build-up of rubbish to turn a profit (see also [Gardner 2020b](#)). These waste-focussed preparations for the future left traces that the mega event's *own* future-oriented preparations subsequently had to deal with in the form of removing their buildings or remediating the contamination they had left behind. In some cases, the rubble and waste resulting from earlier activities was repurposed productively in landscaping the Olympic Park ([Chapter 7](#)).

I want to introduce briefly one last concept to help define how mega events seem to be characterised by this temporal indeterminacy and heterogeneity: *pharmakon*. First discussed by Plato and reconsidered by Jacques Derrida – and usefully, in terms of heritage, by Beverley Butler (2007, 2011) – *pharmakon* is a substance or medium that straddles the ambiguity between remedy and poison, and whose definitive effects remain uncertain. Throughout this book I use this concept to describe, first, how time itself can be understood as ambiguous by mega event organisers and others, and second, to suggest that mega events operate *pharmakonically* in cities like London.

In the first sense, as a temporal *pharmakon*, the clamour of the potential pasts, presents and futures that a mega event must negotiate creates indeterminacy in how it is seen as fitting into an established chronology or timeline by its contemporaries and those who examine it afterwards. A *pharmakon's* true nature is never quite clear. Are mega events representative of the future or of the past? Does an event seem modern or outdated? Do events erase and escape from the waste, ruins or slums they are said to be built on, or is their functioning ultimately reliant on such places? Such uncertainties arise at all the events in this book.

The second sense of *pharmakon* concerns how a mega event produces uncertain or contested effects upon its host city and society. For example, an event's proponents may claim it will act as a 'cure' for such

issues as poverty or pollution on its host site, yet for other groups such a project is more akin to a poison that will remove opportunities and established communities, housing and resources, often through eviction, gentrification and destruction of livelihoods (e.g. [COHRE 2007](#); [Butler 2007](#)). The indeterminacy resides not in the material changes the event brings per se, but in the sense that the value of a mega event is never clearly agreed upon as a positive or a negative influence upon its hosts. Because of this tendency, it is difficult to deliver a final judgement over an event's successes or failures – what counts as a blessing and what as a curse.

The spaces of mega events

The complex and contested temporality of mega events cannot be separated from their host spaces and the wider networks from which they gather materials and participants and their outward distribution of goods, ideas and waste. A mega event's spatial impacts are considerable, across both local and more distant spheres, yet their seemingly dominant presence is nonetheless confounded and challenged by pre-existing relationships. For instance, as we will see with the debates around the Koh-i-Noor diamond at the Great Exhibition ([Chapter 3](#)), events can be interrupted by controversies over the supply of exhibits or materials from distant lands. In other cases, they have to redesign their venues or sites to deal with unexpected ground conditions. For example, the Olympic Velodrome in Stratford had to be built 1.6 m higher than originally planned due to unforeseen issues with the pre-existing, contaminated West Ham rubbish tip that lay beneath ([Hartman 2011](#), 28).

While it is clear that all the mega events in this book acted to change the spaces of their host landscapes (and were also frequently shaped by each site's earlier uses), there are significant differences in how this took place. For example, with the Great Exhibition in 1851 and the Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition in 1951, permission to build their venues was granted by government authorities only on the condition that their structures would be removed after closure; no planned on-site legacies were intended (with the exception of the South Bank Exhibition's long-planned Royal Festival Hall). This is in distinct contrast to the 2012 Games, where a desire to radically and permanently reshape its main Stratford site was part of the plans from the Games Bid onwards ([London 2012 Ltd 2004](#); see [Chapters 6 and 7](#)).

Space is fundamentally a relational concept; it is not a ready-made container we fill with ideas or materials at will. Instead, spaces are a socially produced result of the relationships between those who inhabit and use them and their material components (Massey 2005; Thrift 2009). Given that spaces are ‘neither totally material nor completely mental’ (Cresswell 1996, 13), it follows that their temporal relations are similarly the product of both mental and material elements. In this vein, Doreen Massey argued that spaces are never truly ‘finished’ given that they are always being (re)produced in our relations and not only with one another, but also with the material worlds we all inhabit. Massey saw spaces as made up of a ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’, without a priori meanings or significance, and as ever changing (2005, 130). In exploring a mega event’s temporal connections, we must therefore pay attention to the idea of spatial history; of how spaces continually change as a result of material and immaterial relationships and how these can be made visible in the traces different changes leave behind.

In this sense, the spaces of a mega event may be understood and used in radically varied ways by different individuals or groups. We must be careful not to assume that organisers’ intentions always translate neatly to what actually gets built, nor ignore how event spaces may also find alternative and unplanned uses. This means that even where event spaces appear straightforwardly produced as the result of particular discourses, the uses intended for them by their creators are not immanent within their physical properties, simply there to be ‘read’ or followed without question (Lefebvre 1991, 17). In other words, the intentions of those creating mega event spaces may be misunderstood or contested in others’ experiences of them. Ultimately, ‘space produces and reinforces social relations but also sometimes challenges them’ (Boykoff 2011).

Karen Barad reminds us that ‘discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements’ (2003, 819); discourses are materially, as well as linguistically and socially, formulated. The meanings they describe have multiple possible origins and are not fixed in time nor are they the result of a singular subject. Rather, it is through the mingled relationship of materials, ideas, humans and non-humans that discourses are performed and enacted to temporarily delineate and ‘mark’ out the world and our understandings of it (Barad 2003, 819–20). In this sense, planning for a mega event relies upon a discursive reimagining of a host city’s spaces to enact their physical transformation. This ultimately involves decisions about what (and who) matters and what (and who) does not, and is the result of an ongoing interaction between spaces, their occupiers or users, and how each are conceptualised and represented. In

this sense, mega event sites are 'imagined, planned, discarded, amended and ultimately allowed to evolve' primarily in terms of what is seen to be acceptable for their organisers or participants (Strohmayr 2013, 186). In a discussion of Chicago's failed bid for the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, van Dijk and Weitkamp suggest that processes of imagining and planning such projects are, 'an intervention in perceived reality that may change physical reality'; in other words, that an 'imaginative' production of space is as crucial as any materially based construction for making a mega event (2014, 112). Such spatial imagination is therefore a powerful tool for how events situate themselves in cities and, indeed, how they attempt to silence or counter their critics (Broudehoux 2017).

If, as a result of such spatial imagineering, mega events are in the business of creating *new* pieces of a city, we also need to ask what happens to the *old* pieces upon which they are built. When event spaces are imagined in the abstract by planners (and sometimes by academic researchers), their pre-existing host sites are sometimes reduced to idealised and ahistorical tabula rasa, where pre-existing spatial and social conditions are assumed to be separate from, or incidental to, mega events' visions. In organisers' planning and construction literature, and sometimes in academic or popular accounts, such sites can appear as predestined for their events, being described as ready or as the perfect place, and indeed, as 'wastelands' or 'slums' in need of development. The construction of a spatialised discourse of readiness is therefore one grounded in understandings of the time before an event; the event time of the operational period itself; and, particularly with more recent mega events, a future time of legacy. This temporal discourse is mediated through representations in the form of before and after site photographs, plans, press releases and computer visualisations that are often treated as stand-ins for reality. Such tools are a key spatial strategy for situating mega events in their host cities and for justifying the changes they bring, as we will see with the events of 1951 and 2012 in particular.

The materiality of mega events

So far, I have outlined how mega events produce and are produced by competing visions of temporality and how I see these visions' expressions and contestations as expressed through both local host spaces and those distributed further afield. I have yet to consider the materials and materiality of mega events in detail however.

Mega events are obviously composed of a huge variety of different things; the vast amount of stuff in an exhibition or the enormous amount of materials consumed in building an Olympic Games is at the core of their mega-ness. A list of this stuff, or things, of mega events might include sites, buildings, contents and representations in media or art. This list could also include what Dawdy refers to as ‘structural inheritances’ (2016a, 40) – those things events inherit as part of their hosting. With the London mega events, such structural inheritances might include pre-existing neighbours, infrastructure, geology, wildlife or environmental conditions.

To try to account for the multitude of materials that make up a mega event’s construction, operation and aftermath and that contribute to their temporal relations, I attempt to follow the different trajectories, lives and interactions of their varied participants (following Appadurai 1986; Holtorf 2002). This includes tracing the origins of building components; following the production and use of displays and contents; and understanding how substances require disposal or are reconceptualised as archaeology, heritage or waste. The long lives of some materials can disrupt a more managed sense of temporality by reminding participants – and later observers – of other times and other places that a mega event may have ‘officially’ ignored, forgotten or exploited (see also Purbrick 2016).

As with the ‘turn to things’ in anthropology and archaeology and the ever-growing interest in ‘new materialisms’ more broadly (e.g. Olsen 2010; Witmore 2014; Harman 2018; Bryant, Srnicek and Harman 2011; Bennett 2010; Knappett and Malafouris 2008), my approach rejects the primacy of humans over the material world or the suggestion that materials are simply an extension of human consciousness. Instead, ‘things’ are not simply understood as ‘representations’ but as agents in their own right that can act independently of humans to shape the world and, in turn, our experiences of it (González-Ruibal 2018, 250).

The idea that materials or objects can have this kind of agency is connected with the theory of assemblage first discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (e.g. 2004), and developed in different ways by DeLanda (2006) and Bennett (2010). The concept of assemblage takes the world as made up of heterogeneous entities, each of which may be made up of a huge variety of human, non-human, material and discursive elements. Furthermore, each entity within an assemblage is itself made up of assemblages of other entities and operates across the largest to the smallest possible scales. Although the exact nature of agency under this conceptualisation is much argued over (e.g. Hamilakis and Jones 2017),

simplicistically put, change in an assemblage occurs through the interaction of these many elements, and indeed, between assemblages as agents in and of themselves (for example, a mega event as an assemblage interacts with the assemblage of a city).

Rather than seeing the world as understood and controlled by human will alone or as a series of isolated materials, structures or objects, conceptualising existence as made up of overlapping networks of assemblages allows for a more distributed understanding of agency, whereby groupings formed by many different ontologically distinct elements can effect change. Thus, to understand an entity like the Great Exhibition, we must understand the relationships between its materials and contents, its planners, the non-human environment (e.g. climate, animals, plants), the mediation and representation of both the event and its participants, its place in webs of national and international political and ideological discourses and a myriad of other elements. In this sense an *entity* is not only a material but any component (any actor) in such a network. As Jane Bennett usefully notes, an assemblage is,

a web with an uneven topography: some of the points at which the trajectories of actants cross each other are more heavily trafficked than others, and thus power is not equally distributed across the assemblage. An assemblage is ... not governed by a central power: no one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the activities of the assemblage. (Bennett 2005, 445)

A building such as the London 2012 Olympic Stadium needed to assemble both architects and plans and materials and machines (fig. 2.1) – each member acted in relation to each other (and many other elements too) in creating the structure, each possessing differing, though intermingled, degrees of influence. This is not to suggest that all entities in an assemblage, material or otherwise, have an equal ability to act, or to deny the existence of hierarchies or power relationships, and neither is it to say that materials have intentionality or that they must be treated in the same way as organic life or ecosystems.³ However, by considering materials as actors capable of producing change within assemblages, and which are both influenced by and capable of influencing other elements, we gain a deeper and richer insight into how mega events develop, operate and linger.



Figure 2.1 Inside London Stadium (the former Olympic Stadium) during the Anniversary Games in 2013.
Source: Photograph by the author.

Dialectical seeing

Having somewhat artificially drawn time, space and materials apart, I want to attempt to put them back together again. To do this, I draw upon Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'dialectical image' (1999) and archaeologist Shannon Dawdy's archaeological expansion of the concept to objects and landscapes (2016a, 9)

Although not fully developed before his untimely death, Benjamin conceptualised the dialectical image as the *flash* or *shock* produced when materials, ideas or other elements of the past are encountered disruptively in the present, and the sudden recognition this provokes of the 'contradictions of social life, the dialogue between the past and the present, and the tense feedback loop between human intention and material agency' (Dawdy 2016b, 37). Benjamin rejected conventional notions of temporal progress, historicist certainty and the inevitability of

development, in favour of producing a critical understanding of the present from ‘scraps’ of the past and, in particular, from images reassembled from the outdated and abandoned debris of modern consumer capitalism (Pensky 2004, 180). He argued that drawing attention to – or ‘excavating’ – the lingering material presence of early failed or outdated bourgeois enterprises (most famously, the cast-iron architecture of Parisian shopping arcades) allowed for challenge to the alienating conditions of the present by tracing the ‘prehistory of [m]odernity’ (Frisby 2004).

Significantly, Benjamin recognised that the ‘phantasmagoria of display’ he sought to expose as trapping the world in this capitalistic fugue, had ‘reached its apogee’ in the Expositions and World’s Fairs of the late nineteenth century (Buck-Morss 1993, 309). He saw such exposition buildings and contents, like the arcades, as the ancient ruins of the commodity fetishism which continued to ‘enchant’ the modern world. Such structures had themselves been fetishised (and historicised) as triumphs of capitalistic development almost immediately by their contemporaries, yet, in his act of re-excitation, he saw their potential as evidence of modernity’s ‘failure’ to deliver upon its utopian promises (Benjamin 1999, conv. G; Buck-Morss 1993, 316). In this conception, a mega event’s optimistic portrayals of progress or ‘the future’ are also imbued with the spectre of ruin and entropy (fig. 2.2). The radical potential of this lies in not simply ‘reading’ the past so as to tell us how to build a better future or, synthetically, to reconcile society’s contradictions. Instead, Benjamin argued that:

[i]t is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, [a dialectical] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. (1999, 463).

Benjamin’s effort was to create a radical interruption of a regular historical temporality, an active juxtaposition of past and present as a singular image – ‘dialectics at a standstill’ – which offers the opportunity for recognising the potential for change in the moment of the now.

By rejecting a purely symbolic reading of materials, Benjamin’s work was vague as to what degree dialectical images could be seen as ‘objective’, though he did distinguish between a ‘thing in itself’ that was effectively mute, versus a thing’s transformation and associated aura



Figure 2.2 Scraps of a mega event: the socketed base of one of the Crystal Palace's cast-iron columns at Sydenham today.
Source: Photograph by the author.

acquired through its naming as an 'object' (Pensky 2004, 181; Homburg 2018, 105). Certainly, as with assembling any archival evidence, the act of drawing together such dialectical images (or objects and landscapes) is a subjective one. Such an activity is not the creation of an objective version of history but is instead the production of a critical, materialist account of the present. Benjamin also seemed to suggest that the power of the dialectical image was in itself enough to prompt recognition and insight prior to interpretation. This presents an uncertain foundation for any research method and it was questioned by contemporaries such as Theodor Adorno (Pensky 2001, 223; 2004, 195). Susan Buck-Morss argued that Benjamin's aim was nothing less than a challenge or replacement of the traditional legitimatory role of history, but as a result,

the particular kind of historical knowledge that is needed to free the present from myth is not easily recovered. Discarded and forgotten, it lies buried within surviving culture, remaining invisible precisely because it was of so little use to those in power. (1989, x)

Shannon Dawdy has made a significant theoretical development of Benjamin's work that puts these rather abstract concepts into practice (2016a, 2016b). Discussing her long-running archaeological fieldwork in New Orleans, she describes her efforts in crafting a 'Benjaminian archaeology'. As a method of 'dialectical seeing' this involves 'attending to the multiple temporal frames that can endow an image (an object) with meaning and make it politically active' (Dawdy 2016a, 9; see also Barndt 2010). Dawdy reminds us that Benjamin saw these meanings not as 'hidden' or immanent, simply there to be 'read' in past materials, but as requiring excavation (sometimes literally) and a revealing of their presence to expose the complex heterotemporal nature of our present-day world. Her method also demonstrates that the past is rarely ever 'over'; she suggests that, '[t]aking one slice of time represented by a single archaeological stratum and viewing it dialectically means being disposed to think that it may not reflect a stable mode of life, but rather the tug of forces pulling in different directions' (Dawdy 2016b, 37).

With this tug of forces firmly in mind, I attempt a reconsideration and reassembly of the fragmentary materials and spaces of the London mega events and the materials and spaces they have annihilated, enveloped, ignored or otherwise changed. As with my approach more broadly, I want to avoid a false and unreflective alternate history that wilfully denies these mega events' important historical significance, or that blindly assumes the messages and narratives promoted by event organisers are to be discarded in favour of those of the underdogs or others who are outside the mega events' official structures. Using the theoretical insights of Benjamin and Dawdy, we gain a novel grasp of the contradictions these huge spectacles embody, and reveal how their narratives are open to contestation and questioning. This is a critical antidote to the apparent temporal certitude of mega events, that is, to question if their accounts of the past, present and future are accurate and to examine the assumption that such events are inherently socially and materially homogeneous.

Absence

An awareness of the critical potential of the lingering materials of the past is all well and good, but what if such materials are now mostly absent? Though often still physically surviving in some partial form as buried archaeological deposits, odd scraps of buildings, piles of rubble or earthworks, and through scattered plans, maps, images and documents, the task of reconstructing the physicality of mega events has been a daunting

one. That said, as Benjamin observed, it is in this very assembling of fragments, and buried and forgotten leftovers, that insights are to be made.

Gabriel Moshenska has usefully conceptualised several varieties of absence that exist in the built environment: structures that are wholly absent (e.g. destroyed and demolished and all traces removed); those relocated elsewhere; those altered or transformed beyond all recognition; those proposed but then never built; those which are works in progress, and those which are unbuilt but anticipated to arrive in the future (Moshenska and Gardner In prep.; Moshenska 2012). While I will not provide exhaustive examples of these categories for the London mega events, it is enough to say that each variety of absence exists at their sites; theirs is a history littered with abandoned plans, ruined, relocated and entirely (often rapidly) destroyed structures; and, in London 2012's case, many ongoing works in progress and still more anticipated buildings not yet begun (see Dixon 2020). Such absences can act critically in the sense that they provoke a questioning of under what circumstances their 'absencing' took place, and what happened afterwards (see Bille et al. 2010, 4). These absences, as components of dialectical images, can highlight tensions in the present of each mega event site – what was here before? What might have happened if this site was not developed? Where did an event's materials and buildings finally end up? Such questioning also offers the opportunity to consider mega events beyond being well-defined, short-term spectacles and to see them instead as a phenomenon characterised by longevity and persistence.

Absences at mega events are produced through several interlinked processes in their construction, operation and aftermath. First, their short operational lives have tended to see them built of rapidly deployed, ephemeral materials, such as plaster, canvas or prefabricated metal frameworks. Though 'appear[ing] to be very permanent' (Manieri-Elia 1979, 20) and therefore useful for creating simulacra of grand monuments or vast display spaces (see Chapter 4), this meant event structures were also easily cleared away afterwards. Even when they were made of more substantial materials, such as reinforced concrete (as with the South Bank Exhibition's Dome of Discovery discussed in Chapter 5), this did not guarantee their long-term survival. In some cases, those event structures that were meant to be temporary actually 'outlived' those that were much more solidly built.

Second, mega events physically create absences in their construction processes: they remove or radically alter existing topography, buildings and infrastructure. This can make it hard to establish a clear spatial history of their sites. Later in the book, I explore how such absencing was enacted by planners at each mega event.

Third, and in a more discursive sense, mega events create a narrative of absence when selecting their host sites and, as I have said, often portray them as empty before development occurs. This is because a (seemingly) empty park or derelict brownfield site would seem to present a more logistically, politically and financially feasible environment for development than, say, an existing, densely occupied, inner-city district. However, the reality of this perception of emptiness may be less a physical or spatial absence than one more based on an 'absence of interest' and the devaluation of an area's pre-existing economic activities, inhabitants, ecological diversity or heritage (see [Strohmayr 2013](#)).

The absences created for a mega event in one place may also spark absences elsewhere. For example, London's winning 2012 Bid (awarded in 2005) led to substantial knock-on effects in urban development on those cities that lost out. This is most spectacularly seen in New York City, where the site of the planned 2012 Upper West Side Olympic Stadium now hosts the hugely expensive and controversial Hudson Yards development ([McWhirter 2019](#)). Several scholars have convincingly suggested that failed or absent mega event projects, in spite of a physical absence of the venues or buildings themselves, still fundamentally act to reshape cities by leveraging alternative forms of investment and use of spaces that, in some cases, may be even more transformative ([Oliver and Lauerermann 2017](#); van Dijk and Weitkamp 2014).

Though often associated with failure or negativity, such absences are potentially productive, beyond real estate speculation and not only reflected in materials and object relationships (e.g. [Fowles 2010](#)). Citing examples of ruined places of the Argentinian Chaco, Gastón Gordillo suggests that spaces of absence – even when produced through destructive and extractive practices – are imbued with a 'generative, affirmative force' in the way that they are used by local inhabitants. In his examples, these are particularly employed for recreation, ritual or memorial purposes, or as a means of challenging the narratives of more dominant actors ([Gordillo 2018](#), 125). At the London mega events, destruction (or other forms of absencing) has led to creative activity where the 'negated and destroyed is preserved in a new form' ([Gordillo 2014](#), 38, 190). Several absent spaces (or absences created through their construction) have become reused for political and social goals. These include a protest camp against a development project erected in the ruins of the Sydenham Crystal Palace in the late 1990s ([Chapter 4](#)) and efforts by allotment holders to secure a right of return to the Olympic Park after their original plots were demolished in 2007 ([Chapter 6](#)).

The multiplicities of mega events

In this chapter I have outlined a critical methodology for the study of mega events and their varied temporal relationships. The following chapters draw upon this theoretical and methodological basis to analyse different aspects of London mega event sites, contents, architecture and representations. As I mentioned at the end of the introductory chapter, given the uneven availability of different materials, documents or informants for each period, some chapters draw on some methods more than others. For instance, my personal recollections of the London 2012 project cannot be easily matched with a similar source for the Great Exhibition of 1851, where I am instead reliant on archival and published primary sources where (mostly) elite accounts from organisers and others inform the narrative. This variability means that, at times, straightforward comparisons of a single type of mega event theme, structure or object are not always possible. This result is that each chapter can focus on different aspects, or stories, of each mega event. The selection of source materials and methodological approaches is intended to showcase the important similarities between each of their temporal relationships and to track their individual and collective effects on the spaces of London in which they were held.

In the final chapter of the book I return to this methodology and its advantages and limitations and, in particular, how it could be used in the study of other mega events. For now, we return to where it all started and take a trip to the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition of 1851.

Notes

- 1 Processual archaeology and the New Archaeology are often used interchangeably, though the former is usually related to efforts to use archaeological findings to make systemic conclusions about human societies in the past. In some cases, this was used to formulate laws or theories of cultural change and development using hypothetical-deductive reasoning and, in general, denotes a more 'scientific' approach to archaeology than had previously been the case. This, effectively, argued that the archaeological 'record' of artefacts and environmental data could, if correctly interpreted, give us access to almost all aspects of human culture in the past. This also sparked far greater research into the idea of archaeological context and taphonomic processes and the rise of environmental archaeology – all of which would have a significant impact on contemporary archaeological approaches. The drive to be objective, while idealistic, was nonetheless influential in creating recognition that our interpretations of the past are ultimately shaped by our existence in the present.
- 2 Though I draw in places on recollections of my experiences as a field archaeologist, I do not include the testimony of others I worked with or describe them. I also do not relate any commercial or otherwise confidential or sensitive information in relation to the 2012 project and its participants or my former employers. All opinions expressed about London 2012 are solely my own and do not reflect the position of any archaeological company I have previously worked for, nor any other entity, organisation or individual involved with the 2012 Olympic Project.

- 3 Importantly Ribeiro and Wollentz point out that: ‘humans do not have responsibility because they have agency, they have agency because they have responsibility’; this awareness is what distinguishes us from the material world and to ignore this is to also ignore the power relations that shape our existence and, arguably, to recuse ourselves from ethical responsibility if we are ‘only’ as equally as agentively (ir)responsible as objects, animals, machines or chemicals (Ribeiro and Wollentz 2020, 194–5; cf. [Malm 2018](#)).

3

1851: Rematerialising the Great Exhibition

At 12 noon on 1 May 1851, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was opened in a lavish ceremony led by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert (fig. 3.1). Six months later, at 5 p.m. on 11 October, its doors would close for the last time, the occasion marked by ‘little of order and nothing of pomp’, a rather discordant singing of the national anthem, and the final silencing of the jets of its enormous Crystal Fountain (*Morning Chronicle* 1851, 4). London and, indeed, the world, would never be quite the same again.

In this chapter I examine the Great Exhibition’s relationship to time through its site, building and contents. Each of these facets illustrates in different ways how this first mega event was not always the straightforwardly *modern* spectacle it has often been portrayed as. Though technologically advanced and unprecedented in its scale and ambition, each element of the event’s materiality, from its concrete foundations to the waste it produced, suggests that the modernity on display was uncertain and that time here was capable of going backwards as well as forwards.

This, then, is not a conventional history of the Great Exhibition that goes into great depth over its myriad organisational elements or contents. Such histories have been expertly written several times over (e.g. [Auerbach 1999](#)), and still more books and articles take a particular element, literary genre, exhibit or personality as their focus, many of which I draw upon here (for useful reviews see [Shears 2017](#); [Murphy 2010](#), 12–13).

In this rich body of scholarship, surprisingly few attempts have been made to directly follow the materiality of the Exhibition and its building together (though see [Purbrick 2016](#); [Kinsey 2009](#); with newer scholarship



Figure 3.1 The exterior of the Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace in Hyde Park (1851), from the north-east.

Source: Public Domain. Reproduced (cropped) from Nash, J., L. Haghe, and D. Roberts. 1852. *Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851*. London: Dickinson Brothers. <http://archive.org/details/Dickinsonscompr1>.

also on the materials of the *Sydenham* Crystal Palace, e.g. [Nichols and Turner 2017](#)). For instance, if we examine the Crystal Palace's cast-iron columns, as well as understanding how such iron-based construction relates to a particular societal discourse or architectural paradigm, we should also endeavour to examine these columns as material objects in their own right. Where did the ore for the iron come from? Where were they made and by whom? Who worked with them in Hyde Park? And where are these columns now (if anywhere)? Such questions attempt to recognise the Exhibition and its Palace as real things and real places, created and used by real people, each with their own lives and histories. This is in contrast to renderings of this mega event simply as a symbol of an abstracted, 'governing paradigm or analytical framework' ([Auerbach 2001](#), 98), and, most often, of modernity itself. In what follows, I attempt to 'rematerialise' the stuff of the Exhibition and to follow the diverse life of this mega event before, during and after 1851.

Origins

Many varied accounts of the Exhibition's origins have been written (see [Hobhouse 2002](#), 7; [Auerbach 1999](#), chap. 1; [Beaver 1970](#), 11; [Gibbs-Smith 1981](#)), but most agree that the idea for the event emerged as a

result of Henry Cole, a civil servant at the Public Record Office, and others' enthusiastic appreciation of earlier British and French national industrial fairs. With Prince Albert as its Chair, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) hosted national-scale design exhibitions at Somerset House between 1847 and 1849 in an effort to promote innovation and quality in British manufactures. Led by Cole, these events were also influenced by exhibitions held by the Mechanics' Institutes (technical training schools for workers) across England earlier in the century, and by numerous national fairs held in Paris since 1798 (Auerbach 1999, 9–10). The 1851 Exhibition was initially envisaged as a similarly national-scale event, but following a fact-finding visit to the 1849 Exposition Nationale in Paris, Cole developed the idea of hosting an international fair. Following positive discussions with the RSA and Prince Albert in June 1849, plans for the project proceeded apace.

Funding for the Exhibition was initially obtained through the RSA, and then through a Royal Commission formed in early 1850. This was composed of 24 members (with Albert as its President) and raised the vast majority of the Exhibition's funding through public subscription. Throughout 1850 and early 1851, the Commission recruited exhibitors and planned the event's logistics and organisation.

After much debate, the Commission decided that the Great Exhibition would be sited in the south of Hyde Park, between Rotten Row and the New King's Road (now South Carriage Drive – fig. 3.2). This was bordered by the fashionable districts of Mayfair, Belgravia and a steadily growing Knightsbridge, on London's, then, western periphery. One of the many guidebooks to the Exhibition reveals that, prior to Hyde Park being selected, 'divers[e] places were proposed', including Wormwood Scrubs, Primrose Hill, Victoria Park (Hackney), Battersea Park and 'even the [I]sle of Dogs' (Tallis 1852, 6). Upon hearing these, Prince Albert is said to have expressed that, to host the Exhibition in one of these places, would be akin to 'asking your friends to your flower garden and putting them among the cabbages' (quoted in Luckhurst 1951, 433–4).

It is significant that some of these 'cabbages' then went on to host later mega events, or were otherwise connected to their hosting. Battersea Park was used for the 'Pleasure Gardens' of the 1951 Festival of Britain for example, and the late twentieth-century redevelopment of the Isle of Dogs and surrounding East End districts would act as a significant catalyst for hosting London 2012 (as we will see in Chapter 6).¹

The site chosen, the Royal Commission's Building Committee organised an architectural competition for the design of the Exhibition structure. This was overseen by architectural and engineering luminaries,

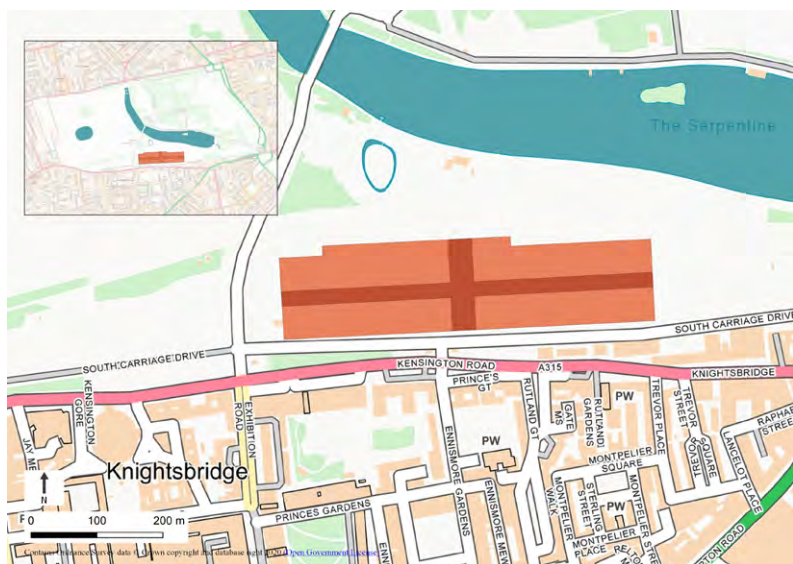


Figure 3.2 The approximate location of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park on a contemporary OS map.

Note: The darker area shows the basic ground floor footprint including the nave and axes around which the galleries of exhibits were situated.

Source: Site polygons by the author. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2021. Open Government Licence.

including William Cubitt, I. K. Brunel and Robert Stephenson, and received 253 submissions between March and April 1850. Despite this huge response, the Committee announced that not one of these entries was suitable and that they would design the building themselves. This decision seems to have been primarily due to the substantial egos involved, but its product, ‘a rather hapless design of masonry, iron and glass’, was actually a cobbled-together mixture of several other submissions (Murphy 2010, 15).

This design was unveiled in May 1850 and immediately faced widespread condemnation for its ugliness and vast bulk (fig. 3.3), and is said to have briefly turned ‘much of the nation against the Exhibition’ (Auerbach 1999, 41). Concerns were also raised that the structure would not be ready on time, given its need for an unprecedented 15 million bricks; even if these could be procured, their mortar would still be drying come opening in May 1851. However, the most significant issue with the building was its apparent material permanence. One of the conditions of using Hyde Park set by its governmental overseers, the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, was that any Exhibition building had to be a

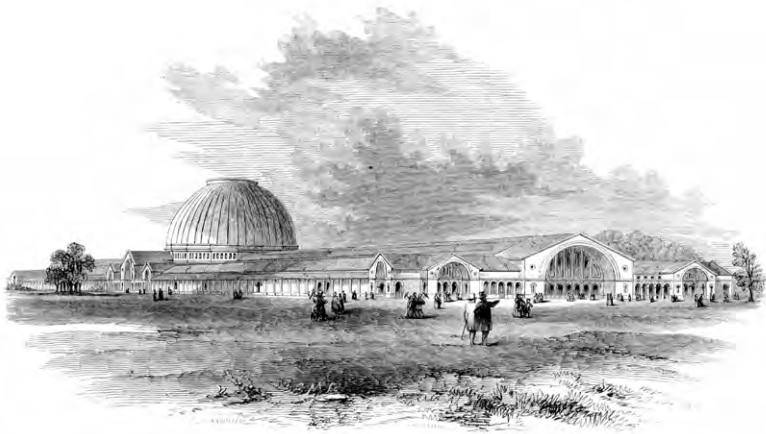


Figure 3.3 The Building Committee's original design for the Exhibition building. Source: Public Domain. Reproduced from [Berlyn and Fowler 1851](#), 24. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/44192/44192-h/44192-h.htm>.

lightweight and short-term structure that could be removed without damage to the Park; what was proposed appeared anything but temporary.

The design debacle took place at a time of rising opposition to the event more generally. Concerns ranged from residents' anxieties over 'foreigners' setting up stall in Knightsbridge, to clergymen fearing Babel-levels of divine wrath at 'so presumptuous an enterprise' even being countenanced ([Hobhouse 1950](#), 18–19).² The strongest opposition emerged from protectionists who had been bitterly opposed to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Until their abolition, these Laws had artificially inflated the price of domestic British grain and other products by levying tariffs on foreign imports. Their abolition had huge ramifications for the political and social landscape of Britain and, arguably, marked the beginnings of the global free trade movement and facilitated greater British colonial expansion (see [Young 2008](#)). As a clear demonstration of further government commitment to free trade, the Exhibition was understandably met with suspicion by those in favour of restoring protections for British producers.

The most well-known of the Exhibition's opponents was the colourful Colonel Charles de Laet Waldo Sibthorp MP. Sibthorp is most famous for decrying the fact that the Exhibition building would remove ten mature elm trees in the Park – three of these were later incorporated inside the finished structure. However, Sibthorp's true motivations were not those of an arboriculturist but those of a Tory 'ultra protestant'

protectionist (Beaver 1970, 21), who attempted to find anything he could to stop an event he described as ‘one of the greatest frauds, greatest humbugs, greatest absurdities ever known’ that he argued would impoverish British manufacturers and workers (quoted in Beaver 1970, 21). Sibthorp’s hyperbole aside, the opposition to the proposed building was of significant concern to the Commissioners, who feared the event would have to be cancelled. It was at this point that Joseph Paxton became involved; the result would be that supposed ‘symbol of the age’, the Crystal Palace (Briggs 1951, 19).

Joseph Paxton was already well known for his development of monumental glasshouses for the Duke of Devonshire at his Chatsworth Estate and his successful cultivation of the gigantic *Victoria regia* water lily (now, *Nymphaea amazonica*). Paxton was also on the board of the Midland Railway and had met with its chairman, John Ellis MP, at the newly built House of Commons on 11 June 1850. In the course of a casual discussion, their conversation moved to the difficulties of the Exhibition Commissioners and their building. Paxton mentioned that he had been toying with an idea for the Exhibition building based on his glasshouses and, later that day, showed Ellis a now-famous rough sketch (fig. 3.4). This sketch was passed by Ellis to Henry Cole who agreed that, if Paxton could work up a full plan and costs, the Commissioners would consider his design.

Having produced a full set of drawings in record time with engineers Fox, Henderson and Co., Paxton’s design was eventually accepted on 15 July. Its attractions were numerous: it would not only be cheaper and faster

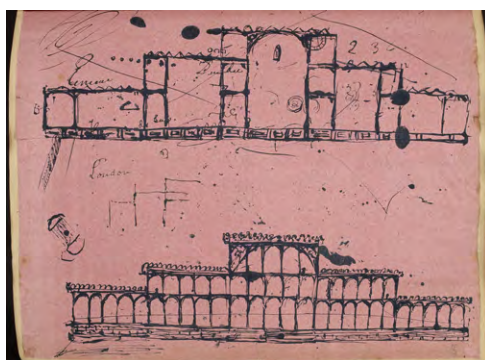


Figure 3.4 A copy of Sir Joseph Paxton’s original sketch for the design of the Crystal Palace, 1850.

Source: Public Domain. The British Library. Shelf mark: Add MS 35255, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/facsimile-of-joseph-paxtons-original-sketch-for-the-great-exhibition-from-a-memorial-of-the-great-exhibition-1851>.

to build, but, most importantly, it would be considerably less ‘permanent-looking’ than the original Committee design. Work began in Hyde Park on 30 July and was completed by February 1851. Following several months of fitting out, the Exhibition opened on 1 May 1851, and went on to draw in some six million visitors over its six months of operation, the equivalent of one-third of the British population at the time.

The heterotemporalities of the Exhibition

The Great Exhibition has come to be recognised not only as London’s first mega event, but as the origin of all subsequent exhibitionary and World’s Fair-type events that would dominate the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Exhibition established a series of recurring themes that almost all mega events would go on to imitate: monumental yet ephemeral architecture; a vast array of content and activities; an internationalism that combined peaceful overtures with imperial and national competition; and a strong tendency towards temporal management. The event’s own temporal relationships can be loosely grouped under three categories: *anticipatory time*, *ordering time* and *(in) transience*.

An *anticipation* of the future formed the Exhibition’s most obvious temporal focus. As a key driver of the event, Prince Albert’s Mansion House speech of 21 March 1850 emphasises this clearly:

[w]e are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end, to which, indeed, all history points – the realisation of the unity of mankind. ... the Exhibition of 1851 is to give us a true test of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived in this great task, and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions. (Quoted in [Helps 1862](#), 110, 112)

This sense of the Exhibition epitomising a whole epoch can be found in other near-contemporary responses to the event. For example, the narrator of Thomas Hardy’s short story, *The Fiddler of the Reels*, set during the Exhibition, opines that, ‘like a geological “fault”, the year 1851, ‘presented to us a sudden bringing together of ancient and modern into absolute contact’ (2003 [1893], 94). Although Hardy wrote in the 1890s, this story was based on his own recalled experiences of the Exhibition and, mediated through his characters, epitomises an idea of a temporal

rupture or juxtaposition connected to this mega event. This rupture, like modernity itself, was not only exciting but also potentially unsettling.

A second variety of temporal relationship relates to how the event *ordered* and organised time. In *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), Tony Bennett famously suggested that the Great Exhibition, as the prototypical modern museum, provided a cultural counterpoint to the ‘disciplinary’ technologies of the asylum or the penitentiary as theorised by Michel Foucault. The ordered displays of the Palace as a museum were seen by Bennett as a means of encouraging visitors (and particularly the working classes) to become self-regulating in their behaviour in the face of an implied, though largely hidden, elite and state power. While some have questioned the lack of participants’ agency implied by Bennett’s thesis (e.g. [Kriegel 2006](#)), it is true that, as a form of ‘rational recreation’, the Exhibition was seen by contemporary moralising reformers as a means for the proletariat to spend their free time ‘improving’ themselves, rather than enjoying London’s public houses or more lowbrow entertainments (of these, see [Altick 1978](#); [Briggs 2016](#)).

Another sense of ordering relates the event to troubles both at home and abroad in the British Empire. In the late 1840s Britain was stricken with social conflict, economic recession and debates about its relationship with the wider world. Tensions emerged not only with the repeal of the Corn Laws but also in serious challenges to its imperial strategy, particularly following the United Kingdom’s failure to ameliorate the effects of the famine in Ireland in the 1840s, with over a million dead by the time of the Exhibition. The government was also increasingly alarmed by the rise of the Chartist movement and their demands for increased suffrage and by the European revolutions of 1848. Such a backdrop has led to the Exhibition being read by one historian as a ‘counter-revolutionary measure’, primarily in its provision of a safe space for the mixing of different social classes and as a display of state power ([Greenhalgh 1988](#), 29; see also [Gurney 2001](#)).

A final set of temporal relationships concerns how the Exhibition appeared as both temporary and permanent, ephemeral yet everlasting: both *transient* and *intransient*. Despite being a short-term happening, the Exhibition would go on to become a legend in its own lifetime and remains as a well-known event in the history of London and the UK more broadly.

The Exhibition was planned to open between May and October 1851. However, to create such a vision of a future world, only for it to be destroyed after six months seemed almost too much to bear for many contemporary observers. This led to calls for the Exhibition’s retention even before it closed. On the opening day in May 1851, *The Athenaeum*

journal lamented, ‘that in less than two years the grass would again be growing greenly over the area now enclosed within the crystal walls’ (quoted by Tallis 1852, 256–7). This fear of loss ultimately led to the Palace’s survival and its triumphant rebuilding at Sydenham, as well as influencing the creation of the educational district of Albertopolis in South Kensington, both discussed in Chapter 4.

The Park before the Palace

Writing in 1874, Jacob Larwood, in *The Story of The London Parks*, imagines the Hyde Park of the ancient past, long before London was founded by the Romans:

Wild boars and bulls, wolves, deer, and smaller game, a few native hunters, swineherds, and charcoal burners, were in all probability the only inhabitants of those vast wildernesses. (1874, 1–2)

Recent archaeological excavations in the Park near to the Exhibition site suggest that at least some of Larwood’s musings were correct. On the site of the Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain (ca. 150 metres north of the Exhibition site), excavations found traces of Iron Age (ca. 800 BC–100 AD) occupation and, 450 metres north-east of the Palace, even older activity was found in the form of Mesolithic flints (ca. 10,000–4,000 BC) and Palaeolithic hand axes (ca. 900,000–10,000 BC) (Hulka 2002; Edwards 2011, 2). Archaeological work has also shown that parts of Hyde Park were occupied by Roman-era farmers from the late first century until the fourth century AD (Bradley 2003, 15–24).

Although evidence is scant for the next half-millennium, surviving documents show that in the early medieval period the area came to be known as the Manor of Eia. This was further divided around the time of the Domesday survey (1085–86 AD) into three smaller manors: Neyte, Toddington and Ebury. The latter incorporated a district named Hyde, probably named after the old English *hide*, a unit of land (Cox 1911).

The area’s use as a place of leisure began in 1536, when Henry VIII obtained the land from the monks of St Peter at Westminster in a (forced) swap for a priory in Berkshire. The area of Ebury was enclosed with Hyde to form a fenced deer-hunting park that ran from Westminster to Hampstead (Larwood 1874, 6). This began a pattern of enclosure and tensions surrounding access and usage of the Park that continues to this day.

Following its opening to the public in 1637, the Hyde section of the former deer park became a popular spot for elite socialising. This only increased after the sale of the Park to private owners during the Republican period and its subsequent return to the Crown following the Restoration in 1660. Much of this centred on a now-lost riding circuit nicknamed The Ring, which was frequented by Charles II and his entourage. Charles was also said to have considered the Park for the Royal Observatory. Although Christopher Wren ultimately convinced Charles of the merits of Greenwich instead, this shows us how rural the area still was at this time ([Wheatley 1870](#), 227).

Further reconfiguration and division of the Park took place over the next two centuries. In the early eighteenth century, to the west of what would become the site of the Exhibition, Kensington Palace and its Gardens were enlarged substantially, removing large areas of what had been publicly accessible land and, from 1800 onwards, the whole of Hyde Park itself was substantially redesigned. The majority of this took place as part of Decimus Burton's 1820s remodelling of the western approaches to London and the new royal residence at Buckingham Palace ([Arnold 2005](#), 121). Following these developments, few other substantial changes seem to have occurred until the Exhibition itself. The Park continued to host polite society and, in the early nineteenth century, military displays took place here and on the Serpentine Lake (created from 1730 onwards). Dana Arnold sees such uses as cementing Hyde Park as a 'site of spectacle and display with distinctly nationalistic overtones', a role that would only grow with its use for the Exhibition ([2005](#), 160).

Before we turn to the operational period of the Exhibition in 1851, it is useful to skip forward to bring this survey of the site up to the present. Following the mega event's closure, the Crystal Palace lingered for a few months as a 'splendid ruin' before its removal to Sydenham in 1852 ([Standard 1851a](#)). The Park then reverted to its previous usage, while rapid development of the surrounding districts proceeded apace. Huge swathes of new housing and businesses would fill what had been fields and market gardens and, with the development of Albertopolis from the 1860s, Hans Town (to the south-east) and South Kensington were nearly entirely rebuilt ([Croot 2004](#)).

Hyde Park went on to host further large-scale military reviews and a variety of official and unofficial events in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, including major protests and riots (discussed below). During the First World War a large medal-awarding investiture took place in 1915 on the Exhibition site, as well as huge pro- and anti-war rallies. The Park was more formally militarised in the Second World War, hosting



Figure 3.5 The Old Football Pitches in 2015, the site of the Great Exhibition.
Note: Looking south-east towards the Hyde Park Barracks from the location of the Crystal Palace's central transept.
Source: Photograph by the author.

anti-aircraft guns, 'Z-battery' rocket launchers, barrage balloon sites and several army camps, as well as allotments (Ziegler 1995, 29–30).

Today, the site of the Great Exhibition is known as the 'Old Football Pitches' (fig. 3.5). These pitches were built in the 1930s, along with the Serpentine Lido, after a public fundraising appeal led by the famous left-wing politician George Lansbury. This development is representative of the broadening social appeal of the Park, a trend that grew throughout the twentieth century. The Park is now also well-known for its huge Christmas funfair, its large-scale summer concerts and for its continued use as a gathering point for demonstrations and protests.

Of the Exhibition itself, no trace of the Crystal Palace remains visible. No archaeological investigation of the site has ever taken place, although nearby excavations did discover the remains of the world's first 'spend-a-penny' public toilet, built for the event (Royal Parks 2016). The only indication of the Exhibition's presence is found in a series of commemorative panels created by the artist Virginia Nimarkoh, sited on the Palace's corners and transept installed in 2011.³ Until this, no other markers appear to have been displayed, although plans for commemoration were proposed far earlier. In November 1851 'Delta', a letter-writer to *The Times*, suggested that large columns could mark the building's corners and that a large statue of Albert be erected in the centre of the site ('Delta' 1851); a pre-empting of the gargantuan memorial to the Prince completed in 1875 that remains to the west of the site.

The Palace and the Park

The Great Exhibition's relationship to London was significant: it brought new patterns of consumption and commercial activity; it forced the city to cater – figuratively and literally – for hordes of visitors; led to changes in transport infrastructure; and was a significant influence on the city's entertainment industry (see Briggs 2016). Though many of the impacts of the event were temporary, they also presaged longer-term shifts in city life. I turn now to how the mega event changed Hyde Park specifically and how it influenced the city as a whole.

Two calotypes of the Exhibition attributed to Claude-Marie Ferrier and used as part of the illustrations for *Reports by the Juries* (which detailed prizes awarded for the different categories of exhibits on display) are a useful starting point (Great Exhibition 1852a, 1852b). These two examples of this early and fragile photographic process reveal details of



Figure 3.6 The transept of the Crystal Palace in 1851.

Note: Looking north, showing two of the enclosed 'Sibthorp' elms. Calotype by Claude-Marie Ferrier. Used in the *Reports by the Juries Vol. II* (Great Exhibition 1852b, facing 789).

Source: RCIN 2800049. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021 <https://www.rct.uk/collection/2800049>

the event's operational period that are absent in more romanticised depictions (e.g. [fig. 3.1](#)).

The images were taken when the Palace was closed to visitors and have a certain eerie quality. In the foreground of the first calotype ([fig. 3.6](#)) lies Osler's monumental Crystal Fountain, a star exhibit placed at the centre of the Exhibition's four axes. Two of the preserved 'Sibthorp' elm trees (one in front of the other) can be seen in the north transept, remnants of old Hyde Park ensconced within the crystalline structure of the Palace; these survived along with one other elm situated immediately behind the photographer's position, along with several smaller clumps of trees in the building's open-air restaurant courts.

The story of the elms is normally told as one in which they are 'saved' by a change to the Palace's design. This is seen as a direct response to the criticism of Colonel Sibthorp and supporters who took the elms' impending doom as a sign that 'Hyde Park is to be desecrated' in the summer of 1850 (quoted in [Luckhurst 1951](#), 431). A *Times* editorial similarly railed against the 'pollution of our beautiful Park' (*Times* 1850). In the wake of this opposition, so the story goes, the Palace's distinctive barrel-vaulted transept was added to Paxton's design as a last-minute addition in July 1850, to 'save' the trees.

While Paxton's design was altered to accommodate the elms, the reality is complicated by the fact that much of this opposition seems to have been less about the trees' survival per se, and more about the threatened permanent alteration of the Park's long-established elite space. Furthermore, this campaign came before Paxton's design and centred around outraged objection to the brick building *originally* proposed by the Commissioners (see [Auerbach 1999](#), 43–4).

Dana Arnold has shown that Decimus Burton's efforts to reshape the area into a classical landscape in the 1820s were a concerted effort to sweep away the 'largely untended' grounds of the Park – which were still home to swampy terrain, 'ramshackle buildings' and farm animals – in favour of a neoclassical array of processional axes, rides and grand architecture as ordered symbols of royal and establishment authority (2005, 158–61). This was the vision of 'nature' that the supporters of the trees were defending, rather than the more raw or untended natural environment we might imagine today. Nature was instrumentalised in this fight, with the trees standing in for the Park's ancient place in the spatial and temporal imagination of its surrounding wealthy residents.

There were originally ten mature elm trees running across the site, but only three survived until the Exhibition's opening day ([fig. 3.7](#)). Though seemingly never commented on by historians, at least two of the

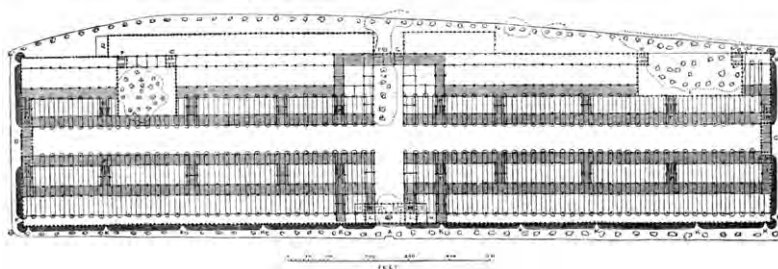


Figure 3.7 Floor plan of the Palace showing the locations of the ten original elms in the central transept and those in the restaurant courts.

Note: Only three trees would remain in the transept by the time of the Exhibition's opening; this plan appears to have been drawn prior to this.

Source: Reproduced from Berlyn and Fowler 1851, 35. Public Domain. Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/44192/44192-h/44192-h.htm>.

unlucky seven actually resisted the axe right up until late April 1851, and were cut down *inside* the building, just ten days before the Exhibition's opening (*ILN* 1851). The *Illustrated London News* on Saturday 19 April 1851 explained that when the Sibthorp affair had subsided, and construction was nearly complete, the significance and beauty of the Palace's architecture became more appreciated. As a result, the anonymous *ILN* author suggests, the majority of the elms became 'universally felt and admitted to be nuisances', '[t]heir intrusion was as impertinent as it was ungraceful [and] loud was the cry for the application of axe and saw' (*ILN* 1851). The article's accompanying illustration shows two of the trees being felled that same week (14–21 April 1851), even as exhibits were being installed around them.

In contrast to this account, in both the *Official Catalogue* and third-party guidebooks (compiled after the Palace had opened), descriptions of the three elms that were left are effusively positive. The *Catalogue* states 'to the finest of them we are indebted for the existence of the beautiful transept roof' (*Great Exhibition 1851a*, 50), while Tallis's guidebook tells us that the 'stately' elms are 'one of the most agreeable and refreshing parts of the whole view' (1852, 22). The popularity and fame of the Exhibition in its aftermath was such that the saving of the (three) trees rapidly became incorporated into its broader mythos, even though, by rights, they were 'saved' primarily from the *originally proposed* Exhibition building, whose rejection led to the design of the Crystal Palace itself.

The elms' appeal was not limited to their adoring human public. They also attracted a rampaging population of vagrant sparrows whose ordure risked sullyng the treasures below. Given the sensitivities of

firearms in so fragile a structure, this re-emergence of the Park's original denizens apparently led to Queen Victoria asking the aged Duke of Wellington for advice, who replied with the decisiveness of the victor of Waterloo and the immortal words: 'Try sparrow-hawks, Ma'am'.

Although concern for the trees was, in part, a manifestation of a defensiveness over the appropriation of an elite space, the elms' plight can also be understood as part of a contemporary unease over the impact of human industry on the natural world. Berlyn and Fowler's 1851 architectural history of the Palace and 'its constructive marvels', suggested that the transept's enclosure of this 'row of fine old elm trees', would, 'protect them in their venerable age from the thousands of chimneys that have gradually been forming a destructive circle around them' (1851, 38). Even in this, a book crammed full of technical engineering details and enthusiasm for the latest industrial technology, we still see reservations about that same industriality threatening the environment.

Sylvi Johansen has suggested that the elms also provided 'a rallying ground for those who opposed ... manufacturing interests' attempt to nationalise their position. Protecting Hyde Park and its elms became a symbol for the opponents, the space of green that they wanted to protect from the onslaught of machinery' (1996, 61). Such efforts also reflected concerns over the increasing unhealthiness of the city itself, its seeming unstoppable sprawl over the surrounding countryside and the effect of coal and smoke pollution on the health of both humans and the Earth (see [Thorseim 2006a, 2006b](#)).

Roland Barthes said that nature is always positioned 'at the bottom of history' (2000, 101); in Hyde Park it was seemingly undergrounded, contained and protected by the Palace. Nonetheless, the trees did exert a kind of spatial and temporal agency over the event's organisers. Despite being instrumentalised, the fact remains that the elms (admittedly with Sibthorp's and Paxton's help) forced the Exhibition organisers to devise a structure that would accommodate them and then a transept to contain them. This last intervention was an auspicious one, as the transept became one of the most celebrated parts of the Palace. Without it, it seems likely that the building would have been considerably more forgettable; in effect, a vast and monotonous glass shed, rather than the 'cathedral' it has often been described as.

It is nonetheless curious that the Crystal Palace was so lauded for 'saving' these three trees when it cut down seven of their fellows. This selective forgetting of the missing seven perhaps further confirms that the loss of the trees was never the main issue for the mega event's opponents. That said, without the trees' woody intransigence, it seems questionable

there would have been an Exhibition at all, given that they provided a key focal point for these opposition narratives to form and force the change of the design (Auerbach 1999, 40–4). Thus, rather than the Palace saving the trees, it is perhaps more accurate to talk of the elms sacrificing themselves to save the Exhibition from its opponents.

Following the close of the Exhibition, the three remaining elms emerged intact. Photographs in 1852 show the building being deconstructed around them and they acted as a kind of natural monument to the Palace in the absence of other markers. The trees are long-since dead, having been removed at the opening of the twentieth century (Gibbs-Smith 1950).

The Palace and the city

By the mid-nineteenth century, large public spaces in London, such as Hyde Park, increasingly served as sites for demonstrations and had become an established part of the city's landscape of civil disobedience and political agitation. In the wake of the enormous Chartist demonstration on Kennington Common in 1848 and similar mass gatherings, some of the opposition to the Exhibition resulted from an anxiety over class conflict. Despite its elite associations and classical redesign, Hyde Park had never been an entirely peaceful or ordered space.

The starkest example of this is found in the Park's north-east corner, close to Marble Arch. From the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries, this was London's main site of public execution, where hundreds were dispatched with the aid of an enormous gallows nicknamed the Tyburn Tree (which had replaced an original elm tree used for the same purpose). The end of public executions here came with the removal and transfer of the gallows to Newgate Gaol in the 1780s. Unsurprisingly, this relocation followed pressure exerted by nearby wealthy residents, as well as changing societal ideas about the function of public displays of punishment (see Devereaux 2009; Foucault 1977).

This part of the Park is today recognised as Speakers' Corner, a name given to this place of free speech in the aftermath of the energetic Hyde Park Reform League 'riots' of 1866. One historian has suggested the tradition emerged here far earlier and from the oratory of 'scaffold culture': the eloquent and politically charged last words of those hanged at Tyburn (Roberts n.d.).

After the European revolutions of the late 1840s, a fear of 'mobs' became increasingly attached to public events and open spaces like Hyde

Park saw commensurate increases in security (e.g. [Sinnema 2000](#)). For example, Kennington Common, the South London scene of the Chartist rally of 1848, was itself enclosed and had assemblies banned in 1854 ([Rosenberg 2015](#), 5). Public parks were spaces that not only permitted recreation but also offered potential arenas for people to meet in large numbers. By 1851, Hyde Park was also enclosed by iron railings and carefully monitored by park wardens and police. Despite such precautions, on the opening day of the Great Exhibition, 1 May 1851, the air was thick with rumours of riot.

The Times described security preparations for the event in noting that from Buckingham Palace westwards,

two lines of police were formed which extended to Hyde Park, along Rotten-Row, to the Exhibition ... They were reinforced by Life Guards, stationed two and two at long intervals, but those very effective line-keepers, their horses' heels, did not come much into request throughout the day. (Quoted in Chase and Levenson 2007, 125)

Such was the concern that the Queen or foreign dignitaries might be assassinated, the Commissioners had even taken the controversial step of banning public attendance at the opening ceremony, but after a significant backlash the ruling was soon reversed ([Short 1966](#), 198). Nonetheless, inside the Palace up to 600 police officers were kept on duty at any one time throughout the Exhibition's operation, though very few arrests took place during its six-month run ([Taylor 2002](#), 39).

Hyde Park and the surrounding areas did experience large-scale protests only four years later, in 1855 with the 'Sunday Trading Riots', whose violence was exacerbated by a heavy-handed police reaction (see [Harrison 1965](#)), and once again in 1866, with the aforementioned Reform League demonstration. Many other political rallies have since taken place, including a Suffragette rally in 1908 with 750,000 attendees and the million-strong anti-Iraq War demonstration in February 2003. Although such events took place long after 1851, it seems likely that the Exhibition had altered how Hyde Park was understood as part of London's social spaces, helping to change it from a suburban, elite enclave to one of the city's most radical political terrains.

Before turning to the materials and contents of the Crystal Palace, I want to turn to another of the calotypes taken in 1851 for *Reports by the Juries*, which tells us a very different story about the relationship of the Exhibition to the wider networks of London.



Figure 3.8 The exterior of the Crystal Palace from the north-west.
Note: A calotype attributed to Claude-Marie Ferrier, showing the dust wagon of Darke. Used in the *Reports by the Juries Vol. II (Great Exhibition 1852b)*.
Source: RCIN 2800047. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021 <https://www.rct.uk/collection/2800047>.

Figure 3.8 shows the north-west of the Crystal Palace in apparent isolation; there are puddles on a deserted Rotten Row and the crowns of the northern ‘Sibthorp’ elms are visible in the transept. It is not dated precisely (see Hamber 2017) but it seems likely that the image was taken early in the morning or on a Sunday, at a time when the Palace was closed to the public.

The only living creature in the calotype is a horse hitched to a cart which stands next to a wagon on which are painted the words, ‘J. Darke, Paddington’. Newspaper research reveals a John Darke of Paddington listed as a dust contractor who was convicted of a ‘common nuisance’ in 1851 (*Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper 1851*). Waste historian Peter Hounsell further relates that Darke was one of several well-known dust contractors of the time and that, along with several others (the offence taking place in 1850), he was charged because his dust heaps were stinking out the neighbourhood around the Regent’s Canal basin (2014, 71–2; Darke, having cleaned up his act, escaped a fine).

This image, unlike that of the elms in the transept, shows a different, perhaps more prosaic, side of the Exhibition, in which the Palace is just another commercial enterprise that relied upon London’s circulatory networks of waste disposal. While such networks and their materials have often been taken as an alternative means of understanding cities (see

Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000), what can be missing in such accounts is any sign of those who carried out this work. In this particular photograph, while no figures are seen, the materiality of waste disposal itself – the horse and carts – gives us a brief vision of some of those involved. However, Darke, as the owner of the business, was unlikely to be the one directly collecting or sorting this waste.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens wrote of dustmen such as Darke who made a fortune from salvaging the city's leavings (1997 [1864–5]). In contrast, for those employed as sifters on the dust heaps, the work was poorly paid, dangerous and disgusting. Hounsell relates numerous examples of women employed for this task, who picked through mountains of waste, scavenging scraps for both recycling and their own sustenance, and sieving out ash to supply brickmakers, the most valuable component of rubbish at this time (2014, 32–3). Such conditions stand in stark contrast to the glittering building of the Palace and the treasures within. This image reminds us that even the leavings of a Great Exhibition had to end up somewhere, in this case, by the banks of the Regent's Canal, along with many more tons of London's waste, to be picked through by some of the city's poorest inhabitants.

The building

The Crystal Palace not only physically contained the Great Exhibition and anchored it in Hyde Park, but it also almost immediately became a metonym for the event itself. This conflation of event and structure seems, in part, due to the Palace's elegant *ferrovitreosity*. The reduction and reconceptualisation of this event to simply a Palace of 'iron and glass' in both contemporary accounts and historiography, simplifies the Exhibition's supposed 'indescribable' interior complexity (Fisher 2012). Even though taxonomised and carefully ordered, the world of over 100,000 exhibits presented within its glass walls remained near-impossible for visitors to comprehend or visualise in totality. By containing this enormous array of stuff within a single gigantic display case, the structure of the Palace conceptually reduced it to a more manageable, albeit monumental, single form.

While the Palace may have provided a convenient stand-in for the Exhibition itself, Isobel Armstrong cautions that its architecture can also be seen as dialectical; iron and glass 'produced simultaneously an ideal, bodiless space that could not be grasped, and an empty, abstract space that presented itself as there to be filled, seized, or possessed' (2008, 9).

I shall return to the glass of the Palace, but this duality also epitomises the structure's temporal relationships. Consideration of such components and the building's construction reveals them to be both 'ahead of their time' and yet, also, somehow ancient and anachronistic; acting as both the architecture of the future and, as Douglas Murphy puts it, the 'architecture of failure' (2010).

The Palace's cast-iron columns and glass were seen by many contemporaries to embody the era of mass production and later architectural sages saw the structure as the wellspring of modernism. In 2019, for example, Norman Foster revealed that he saw the structure as the 'birth of modern architecture', and that, if he could time travel to any previous building, it would be to the Palace (quoted in Ravenscroft 2019). Interestingly, Foster echoes the sentiment of Le Corbusier who, decades earlier, had called the Palace one of 'the heralds of a new age' (quoted in Piggott 2004, 11).

Such epithets that make the Palace a retrospective portent of a modernist future are open to discussion. Creative anachronism – the projection of present-day attitudes and values on to the past – can lead to oversimplification. Iain Boyd White reminds us that architectural modernism was 'only a response to the contradictory conditions of modernity' (2004, 53); other responses were possible and other observers entirely rejected the future that was said to be embodied by the Palace, in favour of the certainties of the past. Dostoevsky famously saw the Crystal Palace as a symbol of the ever-more alienating conditions of capitalist modernity (see Berman 1983, 239–40), and the Palace's anticipatory temporality was abhorrent to John Ruskin. Ruskin particularly disapproved of the Palace's (apparent) material immutability and 'dishonesty' (Dobraszczyk 2006). Its glass panes displayed fragility, yet the slender, and mostly unadorned, iron columns held a hidden strength, whose properties were known only to the engineer, rather than being there for all to read as the stones of old. To Ruskin, stone-built structures were capable of showing 'honest' signs of both decay and a moral superiority that ferro-vitreous architecture could never possess (Otero-Pailos 2011, 94; Boyd White 2004, 48).

Whether or not the Palace was modern, 'dishonest' or an architectural dead-end, it is worth recognising that such judgements are usually based on an examination of only *two* of the building's materials: cast iron and glass. What is forgotten is that these components relied upon two other, mostly silent, partners: timber and concrete. Just as the structure could only be built through the labour of thousands of now-nameless workers, yet has often been attributed solely to Paxton's genius,

so too was it underpinned by uncelebrated tons of concrete and its fragile glass skin supported with hundreds of miles of wooden framing. I shall return to both of these materials but I, too, will begin with iron and glass.

Cast iron

When we consider cast iron today, we might think of park benches, old lampposts, drainpipes or, indeed, foodies carefully maintaining the seasoning of their antique skillets. In contrast, in the mid-nineteenth century, this was a material that seemed to promise immense new possibilities for architecture and engineering and therefore the Palace's thousands of prefabricated cast-iron components seemed imbued with the 'technological materialism of modernity' itself (Purbrick 2001, 2).

Along the half-kilometre length of the Palace, cast iron was used for 3,300 upright columns and 2,224 horizontal girders (Berlyn and Fowler 1851, 53). Each hollow column was affixed to a base plate set into concrete and, when joined together, doubled as drainpipes and a pipe network set beneath the floorboards. The majority of the cast iron was prefabricated at works owned by Cochrane and Company in the Midlands and at Fox, Henderson and Co.'s (the principal contractor) factories in Renfrew (Glasgow) and Smethwick (Birmingham). All these components were brought by train to London's Euston Station and then by cart to the Hyde Park construction site.

In discussions over the Crystal Palace's relative modernness, there remains a debate over how far such cast-iron elements presaged a move to mass-produced construction. For example, Kihlstedt argued that '[t]he building site itself was as mechanized as it possibly could have been', with the cast iron simply arriving and being bolted together rapidly and acting as scaffolding for the rest of the building (1984, 140). Much of this is true; although the columns were prefabricated in different foundries, the production process meant any matching piece could be bolted to any another without numbering or final adjustment on site.

However, Pedro Guedes' more recent research has shown that, besides the columns themselves, '[v]ery little of the building arrived at Hyde Park in a finished state' (2006, 1–2). Guedes shows that, although the columns may have been standardised, their cast-iron base plates were not. Instead, these crucial foundation pieces had to be custom-made to fit the varied height of the ground level – presumably to save on digging standardised foundations and the time-consuming survey work this would have required. Similarly, tens of thousands of complicated wrought-iron brackets, fastenings and fixings had to be cut and

hand-shaped from metal blanks in forges by metalworkers on site before installation could take place (Guedes 2006, 2).

This is not quite the Ikea-like assembly popularly imagined, but one that required considerable physical labour. Indeed, during the construction period, visitors actually commented on the factory-like atmosphere of the site (Addis 2006, 13), as a huge workforce of up to 2,260 construction workers, metalworkers and carpenters made and erected the components (Berlyn and Fowler 1851, 79). This large number suggests that the Palace's famously rapid construction was at least partially down to its substantial reserve of manpower, as much as to its technological advancements.

Regardless of the methods of manufacture and building, it is indisputable that the Palace's cast iron was seen as a material of the future by many of those who visited. *The Economist* called its use in the Palace, 'an extraordinary product of modern art' (1850), while a near-contemporary architectural historian opined that its iron construction set out 'the future direction of architecture' (quoted in Stamper 2016, 29). That said, the construction technologies of cast iron in the Palace were actually relatively mature, having been employed in numerous British industrial and transport buildings since the late eighteenth century. For example, Fox, Henderson and Co. had built an enormous cast iron-framed and glass-roofed market hall in Birkenhead in 1845 that bore a striking resemblance to the Palace's structure (Stamper 2016, 30; see Dobraszcyk 2012).

Cast iron is an ancient material, having first been successfully used in the ninth century BC in China and as a structural element for pagoda construction by the eleventh century AD. What made the Palace different from these earlier uses was its sophisticated combination of multiple forms of cast- and wrought-iron technology on such a large scale (Addis 2006). Despite the material's long history, there is a reason why we no longer use cast iron for building such large structures. Though strong in compression (e.g. as vertical columns), cast iron is a brittle material in tension (e.g. as horizontal spans). This is a result of its relatively high carbon content (ca. 2–5 per cent) and, with the techniques of the nineteenth century at least, the high occurrence of impurities and cracks during the casting process. This means that weakness under tension is effectively 'cast-in', making it structurally weaker and less safe for construction than wrought iron and steel.⁴

Cast iron's quirks were already recognised by 1851, even if its risks were not yet fully understood, with *Routledge's Guide* to the Exhibition noting that, 'iron is a material which has its peculiar dangers as well as advantages' (1851, 19). There had been several fatal collapses of

cast-iron railway bridges and factory roofs throughout the 1840s and, by the time of the disastrous and fatal failure of the Tay Bridge off Dundee in 1879, cast iron had almost universally been abandoned for structural purposes and been replaced by steel (Duck and Dow 1994, 139).

As a result of cast iron's peculiarities and its rapid obsolescence, it seems reasonable to concur with Douglas Murphy's argument that cast-iron architecture became a 'failed' experiment soon after the Exhibition (2010). The cast iron of the Palace is a dialectical, material anachronism, that sits indeterminately as both an embodiment and a failure of the promises of the modernity of the event itself. Certain technologies are sometimes seen to 'sum up' whole time periods (see Asendorf 1993; Edgerton 2019) and, arguably, the iron of the Palace is a material manifestation of its event's ambiguous status as an object of modernity more broadly. This also demonstrates a general characteristic of mega events: not only are they transitory, but often so are their materials. Their initially futuristic structures, if not rapidly demolished, soon become outdated and even criticised, though, as we will see with the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, they may also endure a second life.

Glass

The Crystal Palace's 900,000 square feet (ca. 83,600 square metres) of glass panes not only led to its nickname, but, like cast iron, were also seen to underpin the building's status as a herald of the future.

The visual effect of the Palace's shimmering façades in the soot-stained, brick- and stone-built London of 1851 must have been truly remarkable. Charles Dickens, writing early in 1851, called the structure a 'tremendous pile of transparency', which, while reflecting his cynicism toward the event, nonetheless vividly captures its gargantuan yet ethereal presence (1851, 389). During its construction one newspaper noted that, 'the Palace of Glass' is 'an unprecedented fabric, to receive the unprecedented Exhibition' (*Leeds Mercury* 1850), an opinion that is representative of the huge interest that accompanied its construction. Near round-the-clock Palace-watching was sometimes also upsetting to its nearby neighbours in Mayfair and Knightsbridge. In a withering letter to *The Standard* in November 1850, a 'West-Endian' complained of a 'mob' who appeared in Hyde Park for three weekends in a row who came to 'stare, gaze and gape' upon the 'infant chrystal progeny' and 'the vast peepshow of 1851' ('A West-Endian' 1850).

Unlike the prefabricated cast iron, the Palace's glass panes were almost entirely the product of direct human exertion. Produced by glazing

technology pioneers Chance and Co., each of the 293,655 panes was mouth-blown, manually rolled out flat and then polished by hand (Hollister 1974). This meant the panes of the Palace included impurities and air bubbles, effectively capturing human breath on an immense scale – a trace of human labour trapped in the fabric of the building (Nichols 2013, 30). This alchemy-like, manual crafting process (fig. 3.9) once again complicates portrayals of the mega event as a mass-produced product of the Industrial Revolution.

An account of Chance's Smethwick glassworks in the *Illustrated London News* describes how 3,000 tons of coal and 600 tons of sand were used by 1,200 men to produce the panes (ILN 1850a). These raw materials were themselves produced through the physical labours of miners and quarry workers. A bit of digging, archivally speaking, reveals that Chance and Co. opened their own silica sandpit in the late 1840s at Heath and Reach (north of Leighton Buzzard), which is where the sand for the Palace's glass came from (Anon. 2019).

The sand in this quarry dates from the Cretaceous (within a part of the Lower Greensand Group), having been washed across a swathe of what is now England after a sea level rise around 115 million years ago, a 'result of the most significant global warming the Earth has known' (BLCG n.d., 2). Mining continued on the site up until the early 2010s,

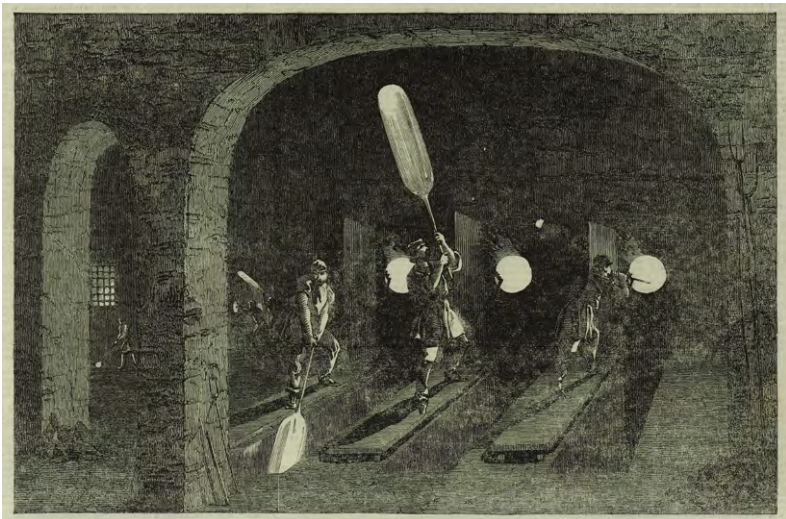


Figure 3.9 Glass-blowers creating the panes for the Crystal Place in Chance Brothers' works in Smethwick, 1850.

Source: Reproduced from *ILN* 1850a. Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland. [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

after which the pit was filled to its pre-mining contours with waste rubble, to become near-invisible in the landscape ([Central Bedfordshire Council 2008](#)). As for the panes of the Palace itself, they soon became antiquated by the introduction of lightweight, sheet plate glass, a technology already on display inside the Palace in 1851 (e.g. [Great Exhibition 1851b](#), 697–707).

When it came to the erection of the Palace, the glass was also capable of disrupting the flow of preparations for the Exhibition. In particular, accounts of a Palace glaziers' strike in late 1850 reveal the precarious reality of working on such a mega event. The 50 glaziers walked out on account of the low wages they were being paid for piece work: having to lay at least 58 panes each for just 4 shillings per day (a year after, the cheapest entry price to the Exhibition was 1 shilling). The strikers were led by William St Clair, who asked for a 5 shillings per day flat rate, regardless of the number of panes laid, as well as longer breaks. An article of 27 November 1850 in *The Standard* details the prosecution of St Clair which followed this action.

Following a brief picket, St Clair was arrested and accused of speaking in a 'menacing' manner to Mr Fox (of Palace main contractor Fox, Henderson and Co.), and of writing him a 'threatening' letter. St Clair's letter had explained that if Fox refused to negotiate with the glaziers, the strikers would publish a newspaper article detailing how the low rates of pay had, in effect, asked the glaziers to 'perform impossibilities' that would create an unsafe, 'botched' structure and lead to national embarrassment ([Standard 1850](#)). St Clair was accused of breaking a strike-busting law that forbade violence, threats or otherwise 'in any way obstructing' how another person carried out their trade or business.

The prosecution argued (on somewhat flimsy evidence) that St Clair had shaken his fist at Mr Fox, following the latter's refusal to negotiate, and intoned 'that he would make him repent it'. St Clair denied using these words or that his behaviour and the letter were threatening. After an adjournment in his November 1850 trial, St Clair was temporarily released to 'loud cheers from a large body of workmen' but, despite an appeal, was sentenced to two months' imprisonment ([Standard 1850](#), [1851b](#)).

Much has been written on the Exhibition's relationship to working-class visitors and how it ignored the labours of those who produced the materials and goods on display (e.g. [Gurney 2001](#); [Chase and Levenson 2007](#)), but this is the only account of a named worker on the Palace that I have come across. This rather desperate affair stands in contrast to the architectural histories of the Palace to date, which tend to relate to its

materiality in abstract terms: the amount of glass used; the speed in which it was laid down; or the mechanical innovations employed. One of the most commonly discussed of these devices was the ‘travelling stage’, a glazing cart that, holding two men, ran across the Palace’s gutters to speed up the installation of the panes: 76 of these machines were said to operate at a rate of 19,000 panes a week (Kihlstedt 1984, 140). Perhaps explaining these huge figures, Addis (2006, 12) relates that this glazing contraption was only brought in part way through the project and that it was developed by Fox himself. It seems likely that, though allowing for greater speed, this device led to demands for ever-greater productivity with no commensurate increase in wages and, hence, the strike of the glaziers. If this was the case, it would be neither the first nor the last time a labour-saving device increased the workload of those labouring.⁵

Even before St Clair’s conviction was complete, all the glaziers involved were dismissed and apparently replaced by ‘Frenchmen’ (Short 1966, 196). It was not so much the threat of delay or reputational damage to the Exhibition that led to St Clair’s trial, but the risk of the ‘contagion’ of his actions spreading among the other workers that led to his conviction (Standard 1850).

Timber

If the Palace’s ferrovitreosity has been both fetishised and bemoaned from Ruskin onwards, the building’s other major materials, timber and concrete, can be characterised by a near-absence in accounts of the Exhibition. Deeper investigation reveals how these materials of the past were nonetheless heavily relied upon to support those of the future.

The Crystal Palace used 600,000 cubic feet (ca. 17,000 cubic metres) of timber. It provided the frames for the roof, 200 miles (321 kilometres) of sash bars (the framing for the glass panes), protective boarding around the ground floor, 30 miles (48 kilometres) of guttering, and 19 acres (ca. 76,900 square metres) of flooring (Wyatt in Great Exhibition 1851a, 49–81). Wood therefore formed *the* major part of the overall building by a considerable margin – Guedes estimates this to be an amount 27 times greater (by volume) than the total cast- and wrought-iron components (2006, 2). Unlike the iron and glass of the Palace, the wood was initially shaped in London at the Phoenix Saw Mills on the Regent’s Park canal basin (now under a housing estate in Camden Town) before final finishing on site (ILN 1850b).

The wooden components of the Palace were essential partners to its glasswork. Glass cannot function in a building without a framework; in

this case, one that was entirely wooden because metal frames can expand and contract with heat and cold, which, in the case of the Palace, would have resulted in breakages, not to mention being extremely heavy ([Great Exhibition 1851a](#), 62).

The protection of three living trees in the transept also required the sacrifice of hundreds of their brethren for the 16 large transept arches. Each arch was made of an elaborate layering of different pieces of wood bolted together to distribute tension throughout the structure. The erection of these ribs is shown in great detail in the *Illustrated London News* ([fig. 3.10](#)), with the operation described as ‘one of the most skilful and delicate processes employed in the construction of this vast edifice’, with ‘long-shore men’ (dockworkers) employed for ‘their capacity of handling and hauling ropes, and of managing tackle’ ([ILN 1850c](#), 452). The rib raising was aided by 48 men using ‘crab engines’ (a type of hand-wound winch), with many others helping to manoeuvre these heavy



Figure 3.10 Raising the Palace transept’s wooden ribs in December 1850.
Source: Reproduced from *ILN* 1850c. Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.
[CC BY 4.0](#).

structures aloft. Prior to the lift, 30 workers with crowbars pushed the ribs along the ground on rollers and planks to the worksite (*JLN 1850c*, 454). This elaborate operation resembled the raising of a megalith or the stones of a cathedral and, once again, emphasised the sheer human force involved in this construction.

Concrete

The last material to be considered here is that which underpinned the whole edifice, the concrete used in the Palace's foundations – and which in the present day is likely to be its only remaining trace in Hyde Park.

The Palace's columns required a solid foundation for their 1,074 base plates, so its footings were dug and filled with concrete up to a maximum depth of 4 feet (1.22 metres). The underlying geology in this part of the Park is formed of the sandy gravel, Hackney Member, which was laid down after tens of thousands of years of deposition by the proto-Thames. Although it provided a good base for the Palace, this geology also sloped down across the site, meaning the west end was about 8 feet (ca. 2.4 metres) higher than the east. The floor of the building was built to follow this slope, meaning that the eastern end was lower than the western, which negated the need for steps in the centre (*Routledge 1851*, 22–3). Interestingly, the gravel aggregate used in the concrete was 'raised from a pit at one end of the ground' (*Berlyn and Fowler 1851*, 63–5). It is uncertain where this was located; such gravel quarry pits are among the most common and resilient archaeological features found in London, so this one may yet survive under the Park's turf.

Concrete has been characterised as a material that is both modern and yet 'un-modern' (*Forty 2012*). This is partly due to its nineteenth-century rediscovery and subsequent widespread adoption, having been first employed by the Romans. Unlike the development of cast iron or steel, concrete provided a construction material that was not reliant on specialist processes. No teams of trained engineers were required to cast the footings used by the Crystal Palace, merely human strength to mix its few ingredients on site, with the major proportion of its elements, its aggregates and water, coming straight out of the ground of Hyde Park itself.

As Nadia Bartolini describes it, the 'vibrancy' of concrete comes from its interactions with human agency, with the act of crafting the material into a solid form from a liquid mixture – like the glass, an almost-alchemical, 'anti-industrial' process (*2015*, 6). Concrete's seemingly simple transformation – stones and cement dust fusing with water to

harden – produces a finished substance that is normally seen as quotidian, if it is seen at all. Nonetheless, in spite of this basic materiality, by the twentieth century, concrete (or rather, reinforced concrete) had become a material of the imagination. Its pliability and malleability sparked the construction of radical architectonic forms that materialised visions of the future (e.g. [Gandy 2002](#)), not to mention countless twentieth-century expo buildings and Olympic stadia. Concrete is therefore both functional and abstract, a material of the future and of the past, and not so different from the cast iron and the mouth-blown glass discussed previously.

The extent of the Palace's foundations survival on site today is unknown, although sand quarrying in the Second World War (to fill sandbags) revealed numerous individual footings. This episode is poorly documented, but photographs taken in late 1939 and early 1940 show the footings disturbed from their original positions ([fig. 3.11](#)). In his memoir the Air Raid Precautions Commissioner for London, Sir Harold Scott, recalled that:

the site of the 1851 Exhibition was excavated to a depth of some forty feet, uncovering the foundations of the original Crystal Palace, and leaving an enormous crater. This was later filled by rubble from London's bombed buildings, which rose to a mound forty feet high; and this in turn vanished, for it was carried away to East Anglia to make the foundations for those runways from which the American Superfortresses [*sic*]⁶ carried even greater destruction to the cities of Germany. (Quoted in [Hennessy 1992](#), 16)

Space was in short supply for the thousands of tons of bomb rubble generated in London during the Blitz and any available space was filled ([Woolven 2013](#), 67). As Scott described, large amounts of this rubble were removed later in the war to construct runways for long-range bombers, with London region Civil Defence meeting minutes in 1942 reporting a huge demand for rubble from all across the city for this purpose.⁷ As Robin Woolven notes, it was grimly ironic that the more Luftwaffe bombing that took place in London and the more rubble it produced, the more bomber airfields could be built and the more Allied bombs that could be dropped, leading to the production of yet more rubble, elsewhere ([2013](#), 70).

Though pure speculation on my part, it seems possible that at least some of these Palace footings could have been accidentally scooped up and taken to East Anglia, along with the bombed remnants of homes, offices and factories, which, when crushed down and concreted over,



Figure 3.11 The concrete footings of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, uncovered during excavations for sand in 1939 and early 1940.

Source: Reproduced courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives, City of London.

formed these bomber runways, raising the curious possibility that, in its own small way, the Great Exhibition contributed to the war effort. Stranger still, an account of the later Sydenham Crystal Palace's destruction in 1936, relates that some of its scrap cast iron was sold to the major German weapons manufacturer, Krupp (Edwards and Wyncoll 1992, 42). If true, this raises the bizarre possibility that different recycled parts of the Palace 'fought' on opposing sides in the Second World War!

This episode highlights how London's mega events can become embroiled unexpectedly in conflict and in the production and reuse of enormous quantities of rubble; the sites of the Sydenham Crystal Palace, the South Bank Exhibition and London 2012 were also substantially remodelled using Blitz rubble. It also serves to highlight once again how traces of these events linger for a long time, often in radically reconfigured forms. This not only reiterates their relative temporal intransience but also introduces their material and spatial *intransigence*, and the stubbornness and persistence of their fabric for decades and centuries.

The materials used in the construction of the Crystal Palace, in both their methods of production and their use in the structure, relied heavily upon non-mechanical, manual labour processes. As with Darke and the removal of its waste, the Palace can be seen as inseparable from wider networks of production and consumption not only in its reliance on transport networks and resources, but also as a site of employment and, in the case of the glaziers' strike, a place of contestation and struggle.

Such an account does not square with the steam-driven, technologically advanced narratives that traditionally have been attached to this mega event. While it is true that the prefabrication of cast-iron elements and certain other innovations proved extremely significant for the event's construction and did influence subsequent architecture, these can be said to have been matched by a reliance on more basic materials and human muscle power. The relatively simple nature of these forgotten materials and their production, often handmade or locally sourced, challenges notions that this object was a representation of the future. These materials were based on technologies hundreds or even thousands of years old and, though important, the substantially smaller amount of mass-produced or machine-made components were heavily reliant on these older materials to operate. This demonstrates the broader fact that, rather than simply replacing what came before wholesale, innovation – be it in architecture or manufacturing – comprises only a limited part of the technological history of our world (see Edgerton 2019, xxii). The Exhibition, as part of that world, was an amalgam of well-established, older technologies and materials that held the whole edifice together,

with those parts lauded as new or especially innovative often proving to be outdated even before the nineteenth century was over (Murphy 2010). More broadly, the example of cast iron reminds us to be cautious in valorising one product or substance as more significant than another. Jutta Wimmmler calls these forgotten or less noticed materials 'by the way' products, in reference to the way they are only briefly described in histories of the modern era, which tend to focus on better-known commodities such as coffee or sugar (2020). In the case of the Exhibition, its Palace's concrete and timber, though rarely acknowledged, must also be seen as part of this modern world and not simply as incidental leftovers.

All these materials, operating in concert, literally and figuratively, also acted to save time in the Palace's manufacture and construction and, like the elm trees, helped to save the Great Exhibition. Cast iron, glass, timber and concrete produced a structure that was seen to be both transient and impermanent enough to be acceptable to the event's opponents, and allowed for its rapid construction in time for May 1851. Paradoxically, this also ensured that the structure would survive much longer than the event itself, being easily sold, disassembled, rebuilt and reopened at Sydenham by 1854. Had the building been constructed in Hyde Park as originally planned, not only would it have required, as Charles Dickens memorably put it, 'more bricks and mortar ... than the Pyramids of Ghizeh' (1851, 386), it would also have had to be demolished afterwards and lost to posterity.

The strange example of the Palace's concrete and cast iron, and their wartime recycling, further reinforces the idea that a planned temporary structure can nonetheless end up having a long afterlife that follows a quite separate path from its original mega event, as we will return to in [Chapter 4](#). Before that, let us turn to the objects of the Exhibition itself.

Among the exhibits

Of the Great Exhibition's hundred thousand-odd individual exhibits, I have somewhat perversely selected just two to discuss here: the (supposedly) priceless Koh-i-Noor diamond; and the Exhibition's numerous displays of coal.

Why these two in particular? Coal and diamonds have a particular temporal relevance to the mega event. Both are ancient substances formed millions of years ago. The former was the poster-child for the industrial age and the fuel that powered the future on display at the Exhibition. In contrast, as both contemporary observers and several later

scholars have remarked (particularly [Kinsey 2009](#) and [Young 2007](#)), the diamond came to be seen as premodern and ‘primitive’, foreign and even ‘feminine’: an undesirable and anachronistic substance when compared to the wonder stuff that was British coal. Reconsidering how such substances and objects came to be in the Palace, Louise Purbrick argues ‘is to dislodge [them] from its taxonomies and hierarchies of temporary, stationary display’ and to rematerialise them as ‘matter for world history’ ([2016](#), paras. 6, 10). Tracing these material histories lays bare the very industrial bones of our world, past and present, and prompts a greater recognition of the human lives that built it.

Thus, though only two objects out of many thousands, diamonds and coal are selected as a useful microcosm of the political, social and temporal conflicts present at the event, and for the way they embody confusions over what was considered of the past, present and future that characterise the Exhibition more broadly.

The Koh-i-Noor

Exhibited close to the East India Company’s (EIC) display in the Palace transept, the Koh-i-Noor was held in a gilded, bird cage-like case. Lit by gas jets and ‘ornamented by’ a police guard, each evening a mechanism made the diamond retract into a secure plinth, not re-emerging to its adoring fans ‘till towards noon’ the following day ([Tallis 1852](#), 150).

The diamond ‘fell into British possession’ in 1848, following the punitive imperial annexation of the Punjab in response to several rebellions in the area ([Reynolds’s Weekly Newspaper 1850](#), 2). After placing the region’s 12-year-old sovereign, Maharajah Duleep Singh under house arrest, the Governor of India, James Andrew Broun-Ramsay, made the Maharajah ‘gift’ the gem to Queen Victoria, as a mark of his submission to the British ([Kinsey 2009](#), 393–4).

This act of imperial plunder was only the latest in a long line of conflicts over the diamond’s ownership.⁸ Numerous jumbled stories of blood feuds and so-called ‘Hindu legends’ are related in contemporary guidebooks to the Exhibition (e.g. [Hunt 1851](#), 30). The recut diamond is now a part of the British Crown Jewels and set within the Crown of Queen Alexandria (last worn by HM The Queen Mother). Understandably, given the circumstances of its acquisition, there are competing calls for its repatriation to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan; so far all have been dismissed by the UK Government ([Anand 2016](#); [Harding 2000](#)).

Accounts of the diamond’s ‘countless adventures’ were eagerly described in the press, beginning with its 1848 acquisition and continuing

into 1850 and its arrival in Britain (e.g. *ILN* 1849). Excitement reached fever pitch in the run-up to its display in the Exhibition and during the event, hundreds of visitors queued for hours to gain a glimpse of the jewel. Its value in 1851 was estimated at around £2 million – or as *Punch* (1851a) would have it, worth ‘one enormous sham’ – but the diamond was often described as priceless. However, many visitors found the Koh-i-Noor’s appearance something of a let-down. Its facets failed to reflect light, even with the aid of the gas jets and, despite its size, it was cut unusually in comparison with contemporary European standards (Kinsey 2009, 392).

Besides its disappointing physical character, other contemporary criticism concerned how the jewel was being portrayed to visitors. Tallis’s guide described it as:

imprisoned like a robber in his own iron cage; the tribute of admiration bestowed upon which was not equal to that elicited by the most trivial piece of machinery, that was applicable to the use or service of man. (Tallis 1852, 32)

Such disdain reflected a feeling that the diamond was ‘out of time’ and ‘out of place’ with the rest of the exhibits in this *industrial* exhibition. While diamonds do have many useful practical applications – with industrial diamonds on show elsewhere in the Palace (e.g. *Great Exhibition* 1851a, 295) – the Koh-i-Noor seemed resolutely ancient and pre-industrial in its presentation. Unlike the extensive scientific information provided on coal (discussed below), there was no discussion of the diamond’s geological background in the *Official Catalogue*.

Diamonds are formed in extremes of high temperature and pressure in the Earth’s mantle, at depths of up to 200 kilometres. They find their way to the surface through volcanic activity and are almost pure carbon, unlike the varied chemical compound we call coal. Therefore, the frequent comparison of these two minerals is misplaced to some extent, as is the belief that, under enough pressure and heating, coal can form diamonds (Erlich and Hausel 2002, sec. 3). Most coal deposits are formed at much shallower depths than diamonds (at most, around 3.5 kilometres) and are generally no older than the Cambrian era (beginning ca. 541 million years ago), unlike the vast majority of diamond-bearing deposits, which are normally orders of magnitude more ancient and formed even prior to life developing on Earth (Thomas 2013, 13).

Diamonds have a long history in human societies. Their English name derives from the (Ancient) Greek *adamao* or Latin, *adamus* (‘I tame’

or ‘unbreakable’), though the earliest evidence for their mining and use is dated to 400 BC in India. Harlow (1998) notes that diamonds are actually quite difficult to follow across time, given their rarity. Although they are infrequently lost and very ‘hard’ to destroy, their frequent re-cutting and movement is poorly recorded (or heavily mythologised, as with the Koh-i-Noor). Diamonds may seem to be materially forever, but their significance ultimately derives from how they have been represented and ordered across time by humans.

At the Exhibition it was not enough to simply display the Koh-i-Noor as a mere raw material, like coal; it had to be mounted, lit, guarded and described. As Kinsey puts it ‘[t]he jewel was never allowed to completely or simply register as a *thing*’ (2009, 401, italics in original). Like the building that contained it, the Koh-i-Noor was always to be a stand-in or representation for something else.

In the Exhibition’s *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, the exhibitor of the Koh-i-Noor is listed as ‘HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN – Proprietor’ in Class 23: ‘Works in Precious Metals, Jewellery &c.’ This details the jewel’s apparent historical origins, fancifully suggesting that it was mined in 3001 BC and that it had once been even larger. This also states that its new ownership is ‘an appropriate and honourable close to its eventful career’ (*Great Exhibition 1851b*, 695–6). By proclaiming this the ‘close’ of the diamond’s ‘career’, the *Catalogue* associates several layers of temporal meaning to the object and its relationship to the Exhibition.

First, the implication is that the jewel has now ended up where it ‘rightly belongs’, with the world’s greatest empire and its Queen (and, by 1877, its Empress), and that the diamond’s original ownership was illegitimate, ‘forfeited’ by the ‘treachery’ of the rebellious Punjab and thus effectively retired from its wanderings for ever more (*ILN 1849*). Second, the anthropomorphising of the jewel – ‘its eventful career’ – reduces its immense but indeterminate age and the contestations over its origins to a singular temporality; with Queen Victoria as benevolent ‘proprietor’ rather than plundering imperialist, whose subordinates crush rebellions with violence and looting. This narrative is an intentional attempt to domesticate or ‘musealise’ the object (Adorno 1983 [1955], 175), to reduce it to something more appropriate to the modern, industrial Exhibition, neutralised of its cultural origins and leaving only its status as a commodity.

In contrast, unofficial contemporary accounts do not hold back from revelling in an old-fashioned moral fable of the diamond’s imperial appropriation and justifying British colonialism. The Leeds-based *Northern Star*, for example, decried the diamond as a symbol of the ‘decadence’ of India’s precolonial rulers, whom they blamed for the

ongoing endemic poverty of India (1851, 6). The *Northern Star*'s writer focussed much of their discussion on scale-model dioramas of contemporary Indian labourers that were displayed at the Exhibition near the diamond. The anonymous author took pains to denigrate and insult these figures and their equipment: 'the feeblest of bellows', 'an oxen yoked plough no better than a swine's snout', representing 'truly the barbaric east!' (*Northern Star* 1851, 6; the models can be seen in Hoggart, Norton and Trist 1852). This mockery of agricultural techniques, and the myth of benevolent imperialism that went with it, is all the more poignant given the famines in India and elsewhere under the EIC (and, later, under direct colonial rule), which were exacerbated by British inaction. In the diamond's 'home' region of the Punjab alone, 1.25 million would die from the largest 'avoidable' famine of 1877–9, with millions more perishing in those that would follow (Davis 2017, 56).

The Indian exhibits were selected and shown by the EIC rather than by the Indian people or indigenous rulers. The EIC governed the subcontinent until the Rebellion of 1858 and their exhibits, along with the diamond (with its now-royal proprietor), reiterated India as a place of resources and material riches which could be drawn upon by Britain, whose imperial munificence would ultimately benefit the 'native' population (Young 2007, 343). The expropriation of resources and the intentional deconstruction of India's manufacturing base in this period is well known (especially in favour of domestic British cotton manufacturers; e.g. Harnetty 1972) and the displays of 1851 further contributed to an idea of India being 'backward' and non-industrialised. Although Indian raw materials were on display, it was the material culture of its elite former rulers, including luxurious clothing, thrones and howdahs that took a starring role (besides the diamond). This intentionally limited idea of India and the 'East' as exotic, decadent and backward, drew on several well-known orientalist tropes (see Young 2007, 348; Said 1979, 1993), and would have been uncontentious at the time to most visitors. However, as we will see, the Koh-i-Noor, as the supposed supreme example of this Eastern mythos, when compared with coal, acted to raise unsettling questions about the British presence in India and the meaning of British 'civilisation', both at home and abroad (Young 2007, 345).

Coal

If diamonds were seen as remnants of the chaotic and ‘primitive’ ancient past, coal was the material that would underpin the world’s ordered and industrialised future. In the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* (vol. 1), exhibits of British coal are listed under ‘Section I: Raw materials’ and within ‘Class 1. Mining and Mineral Products’ and then mainly found in sub-class ‘D. Non Metallic Mineral Products – 1. Minerals used as fuel’. Nearly 60 coal exhibits are listed (not including such derivatives as coke), with examples of anthracite coal, ‘Cannel coal’ (a hard, non-staining, bituminous coal) and brown coal, all drawn from across Great Britain and Ireland ([Great Exhibition 1851a](#), 113–66).

Smaller coal exhibits, such as a ‘[b]lock of coal, raised from the lowest stratum of the Victoria coal-pit, Renfrewshire’, were shown in display cases, with larger specimens exhibited outside the Palace ([Great Exhibition 1851a](#), 129). One single block, 17 feet 6 inches (5.33 metres) long, 6 feet (1.83 metres) wide and 4 feet (1.22 metres) thick, taken from a mine near Chesterfield, was placed at the main entrance to the Palace. An even larger piece, 20 feet (6.1 metres) long, was to have been sent to the Exhibition from South Wales but, after shattering in transit, remains marooned on a wagon in Bedwellty Park in Tredegar to this day (and is now Grade II heritage-listed; [fig. 3.12](#)).

In the *Catalogue*, great detail was included on coal mining history and geology, alongside descriptions of the models of coal mines and mining machinery, also on display (e.g. [Great Exhibition 1851a](#), 142, 147, 178–83).



Figure 3.12 The huge lump of coal which failed to make it to the Exhibition in 1851 that remains to this day at Bedwellty Park in Tredegar, South Wales.

Source: Photograph courtesy of Paul Graves-Brown

Third-party accounts provided even more information, such as *Hunt's Handbook to the Official Catalogue*:

All our coal has resulted from vegetable life. That carbon which we now employ as our ordinary fuel once floated in the atmosphere as invisible carbonic acid [CO₂]: plants, resembling, in many respects, those which now belong to the great deltas and swamps of the tropics, absorbed this as their natural food. Under the influence of sunlight, which excited the vital powers of the plants, this carbonic acid was decomposed, the carbon was retained to form the woody matter of the plant, and the oxygen set free for the use of higher organizations. ([Hunt 1851](#), 22)

This detailed treatment suggests that those writing such guidebooks considered coal was of key interest to visitors. This is hardly surprising, given that 1850s Britain was reliant on its reserves of coal for heat, power, light and, increasingly, fuel for transport. Britain's addiction to coal would only continue to grow. At its peak in 1913, 200 million tons were consumed in the UK alone and another 100 million tons were exported ([Edgerton 2018](#), 81–3).

Despite a few curios, where coal-based objects were exhibited as 'Manufactures' in the Exhibition's classificatory structure – including a carved 'cannel coal' garden seat exhibited by Prince Albert ([Great Exhibition 1851b](#), 765, 777)⁹ – coal was understood primarily as a raw material, just as diamonds were primarily understood as decorative objects. This said, both materials sometimes seemed to transgress this boundary between raw material and manufacture.

The 'Real Mountain of Light'?

I have considered coal and the diamond because their shared carbon basis was so frequently noted by commentators in 1851 and by later historians. Some of those writing in 1851 portrayed coal as the 'worthier' of the two substances and bemoaned the masses' obsession with the diamond and its ancient 'oriental' associations. A *Punch* poem illustrates this in describing a comical night-time conversation between 'the Gnome of the Coal' and the 'Gnome of the Koh-i-Noor', the former imagined as a vast 'uncouth' giant and the latter as an 'Indian maid' ([1851b](#), 198).

The conversation starts with Koh-i-Noor proclaiming her beauty as far superior to that of ugly coal, to which the latter retorts with a list of his achievements: 'I travel land and sea' (as fuel for boilers), 'The loom by me

is guided', 'I cheer the poor man's hearth', 'By me the corn is reaped' and, most significantly, 'This Palace with all its wonders; Is my work of leisure whiles'. The Diamond can only manage to answer these claims with stories of how she has been worshipped and fought over, and how her 'masters are my slaves'. As Kinsey argues, *Punch's* (sexist) point in this cartoon is clear: coal is the 'manly' unsung hero of the Palace and the industrial age *writ large*, which created the Exhibition and its Palace; while the diamond is beautiful but prideful, malevolent, feminine and functionally useless, only causing temptation and conflict (2009, 409–10). While the contrast between coal's apparent usefulness and diamond's supposed decadent uselessness may seem like a neat conclusion, even



Figure 3.13 Contemporary cartoon entitled 'The Real Mountain of Light'. Source: Reproduced from *Punch*, 14 June 1851, 252. Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland. [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

today both substances complicate the Exhibition's portrayal of an industrialised, progressive present and future.

Had the Koh-i-Noor been an exhibit of coal, its appearance would have been almost irrelevant; in such a scenario it would have been judged primarily on its functional or chemical properties and, by extension, its much-vaunted historical origins would have been meaningless. What made it different was not only its aesthetic appearance, but also its signification of a mythical or romanticised past and a narrative now linked and 'corrected' by its inheritance by the British Empire. Cornelius Holtorf notes that '[t]he act of construction or manufacture is inevitably inherent in an object' (2013, 430); while the irregular facets of the diamond exposed the 'flaws' of its manufacture compared to a 'modern' diamond, they also spoke of its authenticity and its associations with ancient myth-history. Similarly, in its connotations of war and plunder and 'the Orient', the jewel seemed to embody a grand history of civilisation: both the alluring decadence of India in precolonial times and the more negative and embarrassing associations with asset-stripping, British 'plunder imperialism' (Kinsey 2009, 392). The contradiction of its ancient status, its masses of adoring fans and its dubious acquisition at what was meant to be a modern, industrial exhibition is significant: the popularity of this gaudy, flawed treasure strongly challenged the event's more sober and progressive official aims.

This obsession with the diamond among the masses exercised other contemporary commentators. For example, Tallis's guidebook features John Lemoinne, a French journalist, who discusses another *Punch* cartoon (fig. 3.13). This depicts a monumental pillar of coal captioned 'The Real Mountain of Light', where Lemoinne argues that coal is: 'the real diamond of England; and after all, it seems that the other itself is but a species of coal' (in Tallis 1852, 158). Though the diamond is dismissed and rendered simply as another piece of coal by Lemoinne, in his text there nonetheless seems to be an anxious need for the ancient world of the diamond to be denigrated and dismissed and the industriality of coal to be given proper appreciation.

In contrast to the richly recounted biography of the Koh-i-Noor, coal's past was only ever geologically described; at best, we learn from which pits individual coal exhibits were mined. Though the *Catalogue* provides great detail on the technicalities of how coal is obtained, little information is provided on those who actually mined it.

The wealth and innovations on display in the Great Exhibition cannot be separated from the horrendous conditions coal mining involved (including the employment of children under 10 until 1842 and boys over

10 until 1860 – see Franks 1999 [1842]). Writing about the so-called Gilded Age of the late nineteenth-century USA, Andrew Arnold points out that this era: ‘gained its power from coal, a decidedly unmagical, dirty, and disorderly source’, whose mining was, ‘unautomated, unmechanized, and unorganized. Coal miners dug coal out of the earth one lump at a time’ (2014, 2). In Britain, earlier in the same century, coal mining was also recognised as a dirty, dangerous and exploitative industry, while raw materials drawn from the far-flung reaches of the British Empire were even more disconnected from their horrendous working conditions (see Purbrick 2017).

As Lewis Mumford argued in 1934, ‘the animus of the miner’ is at the root of our civilisation, and this was no less true for everything on display in 1851 (1934, 74–6). Improvements in mining and raw material processing fuelled the Industrial Revolution and led to the development of contemporary capitalism (see Sieferle 2001), of which the Great Exhibition has often been seen as an early monument. In the West’s supposedly post-industrial era today, there remains little interest in those who extract the metals or other substances for our electronic devices in dangerous, violent and toxic locales across the globe (see Maxwell and Miller 2013; Crang 2010). So too was the first mega event dedicated to global industrialisation generally silent on these missing individuals. The Exhibition only ever presented a facsimile of industriality, vitrines of coal and gleaming machines went unaccompanied by the workers who supplied or made them and, in the case of colonial products and raw materials, the narratives of British benevolent civilisation and imperialism went mostly unchallenged.

A last and final dialectical image is also unearthed with the Exhibition’s coal, one which prompts another uneasy flash of recognition of our own situation. Benjamin Morgan notes that ‘climate change is now commonly understood as a Victorian problem’ (2016, 610) – by this he means that the threats we now face have their substantial origins in the steam-powered ‘progress’ that was on display at the Exhibition. Coal is now considered as outdated and treacherous as the diamond, as abhorred and as troublesome. The ‘real mountain of light’ may yet prove to have been the herald of our extinction.

Discussion

In this chapter I have shown how the Great Exhibition was not simply a mirror of its age, a stand-in for industrial modernity or ethereal meta-object, but was also an event that was riven by a complexity of relationships to time, people, space and materials. Though certain components, such

as its cast-iron columns, have received substantial attention, it is also apparent that this is a story underpinned by many, mostly silent, others, both human and non-human. From the gravel of Hyde Park and the Palace's concrete footings, to the nameless dust sifters and the ancient forests of the Carboniferous, all have had a tangible impact on the creation and operation of this first mega event, and demonstrate that its temporal relationships stretch across untold millennia.

Without the Great Exhibition there also would have been no Festival of Britain and probably no London 2012 Olympics either, given that modern Olympism was directly influenced by the late nineteenth-century exhibitionary boom that began with 1851 (MacAloon 2006, 504). Later on we will see how the Exhibition, as a dialectical image and an 'absent presence' seems to linger at these later events, both materially and as a memory, but for now I turn my attention to the afterlives of the Exhibition and its rebirth at Sydenham.

Notes

- 1 Land to the south of Wormwood Scrubs (West London) was used for large-scale exhibitions including: the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition and (as part of this event), the first London Olympic Games – the Scrubs itself hosted part of the Olympic Marathon; Victoria Park formed one of the entrances to London 2012 (via the Greenway) and operated a 'Live Site' where the Games were shown on large-screens.
- 2 Parallels with scare stories in the media surrounding London 2012 are obvious: for example, fears of an influx of 'professional' Romanian pickpockets (Rogers 2012).
- 3 See <https://www.virgianimarkoh.net/the-great-exhibition.html>.
- 4 Stronger, engineered varieties of cast iron are used today in industrial fabrication, particularly in the automotive industry.
- 5 For example: the Luddites' actions against textile machinery in the early nineteenth century; or how the burden of domestic labour performed by women was actually increased by technological 'advances' (see Cowan 1985).
- 6 The B-29 Superfortress was never used in the European theatre; the commissioner was probably referring to the B-17 Flying Fortress (G. Moshenska pers. comm. 3/2016).
- 7 LMA LCC/CL/CD/01/159 con. 27/42, Notes of Proceedings at Conference, Wednesday 18th November 1942.
- 8 The circumstances of the jewel's acquisition are disputed. Broun Ramsay's actions were actually under Parliamentary investigation in 1851 while the jewel was on display (Kinsey 2009, 404).
- 9 This still exists at the former Royal residence of Osborne on the Isle of Wight: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/osborne/history-and-stories/collection/>.

All that is solid melts: The Crystal Palace at Sydenham, 1854–2021

The huge popular appeal of the Great Exhibition ensured loud demands for the Crystal Palace's retention in Hyde Park. During the six months following the closing ceremony in October 1851 there were urgent discussions over the building's future in editorials and impassioned debates in the Houses of Parliament. Dozens of supporters wrote letters to newspapers calling for the building's preservation and over 100,000 signed a petition urging it be made a permanent feature of Hyde Park. Sir Joseph Paxton, the 'father' of the Palace and newly knighted for his role, also supported saving the building. He authored a pamphlet entitled 'What is to become of the Crystal Palace?' and suggested making it into a permanent, heated, 'Winter Park and garden', home to displays of tropical plants, geology and living birds, that would make the structure 'become a still more extraordinary and beautiful object' (Paxton 1851). Another, somewhat ambitious, scheme even called for the Palace to be deconstructed and rebuilt as a tower 1,000 feet (ca. 300 metres) high!

This scheming to keep the Palace in Hyde Park was ultimately unsuccessful but the issue of 'what [was] to become' of the Palace does raise broader questions around what the role and value of a mega event is once it is officially over and its remnants are seen as a legacy. What do we do with their structures, materials and profits? How are they conserved, remembered, destroyed or forgotten? What uses and roles do they continue to play in their host cities and how do these resemble (or diverge from) the aims of the original event? This chapter attempts to answer these questions by examining the afterlives of the Great Exhibition and its Crystal Palace at Sydenham and the many varied uses of the structure and surrounding site between the 1850s and the present day.

The Palace at Sydenham

Through the last days of 1851 and into early 1852, the Crystal Palace lay empty in Hyde Park, awaiting an unknown fate. Its exhibits having been sold off, the building's cavernous spaces were now punctuated only by the elm trees, their resident sparrows and groups of paying visitors invited by the owners, Fox, Henderson and Co. While proposals like Paxton's winter garden were under discussion, a last-ditch effort was made by supportive MPs to keep the Palace in place in a vote in the House of Commons held on 29 April 1852. This failed, with 221 votes against to 103 in support. However, in early May 1852 there was a sudden announcement that the Palace had been sold to a new commercial venture, the Crystal Palace Company, and was soon to be dismantled and moved to South London (fig. 4.1).

The Crystal Palace Company, headed by Samuel Laing, the director of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR), bought the building from Fox, Henderson and Co. for £70,000 and, by November 1852,



Figure 4.1 The exterior of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham in ca. 1855 from the Park's lower fountain basin.

Note: No features in this photograph survive today, though the route of the main avenue, seen at right, still forms the major axis of the Park. The site from which this image was taken is today the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre's athletics stadium. Source: Photograph by Negretti and Zambra. Public Domain. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program. Reproduced from: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/91021/negretti-zambra-exterior-long-view-of-the-crystal-palace-building-and-grounds-british-negative-1855-print-about-1862/>.

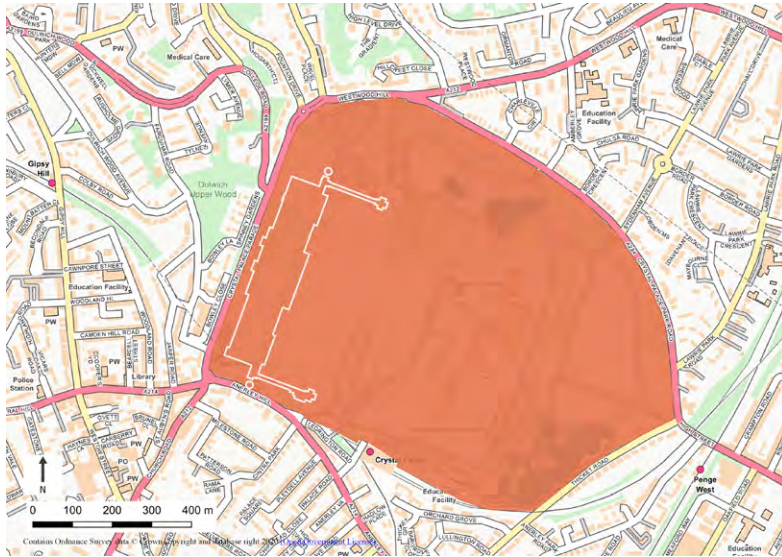


Figure 4.2 The full 1854 extent of the Crystal Palace Park at Sydenham, located on a modern OS map.

Note: The footprint of the rebuilt Crystal Palace (five times larger than at Hyde Park) is in white. This outline shows the original footprint (the north transept burned down in an initial fire in 1866 and was never rebuilt), the north and south wings and the water towers (shown as circles).

Source: Site polygons by the author. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2021. Open Government Licence.

had raised over £1 million in shares to relocate and expand it. The new site at Sydenham Hill (fig. 4.2) was provided by a member of the LBSCR board, Leo Schuster, a merchant banker who sold the Company his country estate named Penge Place. This site was attractive not only for its open spaces and picturesque location overlooking the Kent countryside, but also because the LBSCR ran nearby, providing rapid connections to London and the South-East of England. The relocated Palace was intended, at least in part, to generate profits for the railway company by enticing travellers (and commuters) to use the line and the new station that would be built here (Hales 2006, 122; Atmore 2004).

Penge Place, along with two farms (Barnard’s Farm and Swingate Farm) and several other isolated houses, still lay distant from the city and its growing suburbs (Spence 2016a). The nearby village of Sydenham was moderately famous in the eighteenth century for its ‘medicinal’ natural springs, the Sydenham Wells, which were said to provide ‘a certain cure for every ill to which humanity is heir’ (Walford 1878, 303). Much like the

later Crystal Palace Park, the Wells drew a broad clientele: King George III is recorded as having visited and taken the waters enthusiastically, though in the 1720s, Daniel Defoe warned that the patrons were ‘unruly and unmannerly’ (quoted in [Grindlay 2014](#), 5). The area was gradually developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the construction of the Croydon Canal in 1809 and the opening of the LBSCR line in 1839.

Although generally referred to as the *Sydenham* Crystal Palace, the relocated structure might more properly be called the *Penge* Palace, given that it lay within the Penge Hamlet Parish boundary. To complicate things further, the eastern portion of what became Crystal Palace Park was originally situated in the Parish of Beckenham (and was thus part of Kent). This latter division was marked with a ditch, which has since been lost, though old metal boundary posts remain visible in the Park and nearby ([Spence 2016a](#), [2016b](#)). Penge Hamlet was a detached portion of Battersea Parish and existed from the early medieval period until the late nineteenth century, despite being situated several miles from the Thames and Battersea proper. Archaeological and archive work related to Crystal Palace Park has suggested this area was only sparsely occupied until the sixteenth century, with the area’s dense woodland, heavy clay soils and steep slopes making agriculture difficult ([MOLAS 2004a](#), [2007](#)).

Much like the prior history of the sites of the other mega events in this book, Sydenham seems to have been considered a blank space for the new Palace. For example, Samuel Phillips’ guidebook to the Palace and Park reassured readers that ‘No particular topographical or historical facts are associated with these places [Sydenham and Penge]’ ([1859](#), 149). While I too am guilty of not exploring this place in much detail, this is not to see its transformation or history as *only* characterised by this mega event’s aftermath – the coming of the Palace is only a small part of this area’s long history, albeit a significant one (see [Spence 2007](#)).

In the spring of 1852, the Crystal Palace was deconstructed in Hyde Park and its components were conveyed in hundreds of wagons to Sydenham. Ground was broken in August 1852 and, under Paxton’s guidance, rebuilding and enlargement then took two years to complete. The Palace’s floor area was greatly increased in size and it gained a barrel-vaulted roof along its whole length, along with new north and south transepts and wings, while its height was increased to five storeys.¹ Outside, a vast terraced landscape emerged from the grounds of what had been Penge Place. This was arranged in a progressive order, with formal flower gardens at the top of the hill, an idealised English country garden in the middle and a wilder, woody landscape at the foot of the slope. At

this lowest level visitors were confronted with educational ‘geological illustrations’ that included real, translocated rock strata brought from across Britain, a replica lead mine, and models of recently discovered dinosaurs and extinct mammals (discussed below). The Park also contained a spectacular system of fountains and cascades, a maze and an elaborate rose garden (the Rosary).

By the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Park would accumulate myriad other features, including a football stadium and funfair rides, while the Palace hosted conferences, concerts, trade fairs and such popular events as dog and cat shows (see [Pussard 2004](#); [Huff 2002](#)). Several larger temporary events were significant national and imperial occasions in their own right, particularly the 1911 Festival of Empire, to which I return later in the chapter.

The rebuilding of the Palace and the creation of its Park cost around £1.3 million (at least ca. £124 million today),² five times its planned budget and eight times more than the Great Exhibition. This cost, along with substantial annual operating expenses, proved unsustainable and the Company was in dire financial straits almost from the venue’s opening day. In spite of this, during the Park’s construction and its early years of operation, a spirit of optimism infused the venture. This was partly due to a new-found temporal certitude: time, and a sense of permanence, being on the venue’s side. As the critic Elizabeth Eastlake put it, unlike the Great Exhibition, ‘there is no day looming like a ruthless creditor in the distance, when the lease will be up, when the ground must be cleared, when, like the baseless fabric of a dream, the glorious vision must dissolve and leave no wreck behind’ (1855, 307). Eastlake’s confident words would be challenged by the Palace’s troubled fortunes in the decades that followed and its ultimate destruction in 1936.

Several contemporaries commented on the superiority of the new Palace to the old. One guidebook drew attention to how the structure was better designed, describing the Hyde Park version’s elevations as ‘monotonous’ and ‘displeasing’ in comparison to its more graceful offspring ([Phillips and Shenton 1859](#), 10). Similarly, upon the Palace’s inauguration, the *Illustrated London News* declared that ‘Paxton’s second Palace is a greater success than his first’ (1854, 580). Such sources (and some later historians) exhibit a certain vagueness over whether this was a wholly *new* Palace, a straightforward *rebuild* or a *child* of the Hyde Park parent. To some extent it was, and is, all of these simultaneously, given that significant portions of the original structure were reused but also enormously supplemented. Once again, a temporal uncertainty occurs in trying to pin down the building to a particular period, version or epoch.

Later efforts to rebuild the Palace after its demise in 1936 confuse this even further.

Before I examine the relationship between the Sydenham Palace and the Great Exhibition in greater detail, we must account for the original mega event's other, far more famous, legacy of 'Albertopolis' and the development of the educational institutions of South Kensington.

Albertopolis

Besides attracting millions of visitors over its six months of operation, the Great Exhibition generated a profit of £186,437 (at least ca. £20.8 million today). With the support of government match funding, the Commissioners for the Exhibition used this to purchase 86 acres of land in South Kensington to create 'a Site for Institutions connected with Science and Art', which would, 'serve to increase the means of Industrial Education' (quoted in [Gold and Gold 2008](#), 304). The acquisition was championed by Prince Albert (hence *Albertopolis*), who envisioned it as a central location for Britain's learned and artistic societies and to continue the internationalism of the Exhibition ([Sheppard 1975](#), paras. 10–11; [Physick 1982](#), 19–20).

The first institution to emerge was the South Kensington Museum, which opened in 1857 (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899 – the V&A), with Henry Cole as its first Keeper. It was initially housed in temporary buildings, which, due to their corrugated iron covering and bulky forms, were soon lampooned as 'the Brompton Boilers'. These structures were later reused in the V&A's outpost in Bethnal Green (today's Museum of Childhood). The development of the South Kensington Museum's more permanent structures took place in a stop-start fashion over five decades, and construction was finally 'complete' in 1909 ([Physick 1982](#)), though further extended since. From the 1860s, more construction in the area followed: the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, the Royal Albert Hall, what became Imperial College London, the Royal College of Art, the Royal College of Music and numerous other, smaller institutions.

The South Kensington Museum emerged only after the establishment of another by-product of 1851 had outgrown its original premises: Henry Cole's Museum of Manufactures. This public institution was established in 1852 at Marlborough House near Pall Mall, with a government grant of £5,000 to purchase exhibits from the Great Exhibition. This Museum also incorporated collections from the School of

Design, which had existed at Somerset House since the late 1830s and had provided practical design education to industrial workers (Wainwright 2002, 25; Physick 1982, 13).³

The institutions of Albertopolis are typically seen as the direct or 'proper' descendants of the Great Exhibition, with the Sydenham Palace sometimes portrayed mainly as a lesser 'leisure' venue (e.g. Gold and Gold 2005, 71), or even a 'vulgar sequel' concerned only with 'low-brow' entertainment (challenged by Nichols 2015, 7). I suggest there is a misconception around this idea of difference between the twin legacies of Albertopolis and Sydenham, one it is important to challenge for several reasons. First, education also played a significant role at Sydenham in a form that, as we will see, was often considerably more ambitious than the traditional didactic museum displays of Albertopolis. While leisure was an important element of the Sydenham Crystal Palace, its owners saw its role as primarily in direct competition to the South Kensington Museum and invested heavily in educational elements. If the Sydenham Palace had stuck to simply being the mere pleasure garden it has often been portrayed as, it may actually have fared financially better in the long run.

It is also important to remember that neither Albertopolis nor Sydenham were *planned* legacies of the Great Exhibition in the contemporary sense of, say, plans made for the aftermath of the London 2012 Games (see Chapter 7). Both Albertopolis and Sydenham were the *unplanned* results of the Exhibition's unexpected success, and each benefitted from a combination of pre-existing initiatives, public and government enthusiasm and a degree of luck. Albertopolis' supposed origins as solely the result of 1851 are also challenged by the fact that one of the founding institutions of the South Kensington Museum, the School of Design, actually pre-dated the Great Exhibition, having originally been established in the 1830s (Wainwright 2002, 41).

In many ways the Sydenham Palace was thus more immediately a child of the Exhibition than the long-gestating Albertopolis, given not only the reuse of the building itself but also its efforts to match or even exceed the achievements of its parent. Without the Great Exhibition, the history of South Kensington would have been different, but there is nonetheless a good possibility that other cultural institutions would have emerged in that area without it. For example, plans had been made prior to the Great Exhibition to build the National Gallery on the site of Gore House, though these were ultimately abandoned (see Physick 1982, 20). While the development of Albertopolis stretched out over decades, across multiple sites and encompassed many private and public functions, the new Crystal Palace was established within three years of the Exhibition's

closure and went on to operate as a nationally significant site of public education until its destruction in 1936, despite being entirely privately funded (unlike Albertopolis).



Figure 4.3 The nave of the Sydenham Crystal Palace in around 1854, showing its bayed structure; the Fine Arts Courts and other Departments were arranged along the sides.

Source: Photograph by Philip Henry Delamotte. Public Domain. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program. Reproduced from: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/43692/philip-h-delamotte-crystal-palace-central-nave-english-about-1854/?dz=0.3747,0.3747,0.68>.

Exhibiting time

Although they were inspired by the Great Exhibition's progressive vision, the Sydenham Palace's educational ambitions were considerably bolder, representing nothing less than an attempt to create 'a comprehensive historical museum of evolution and of civilisation' (Piggott 2004, 11). The Sydenham Palace's most obvious difference is found in the far greater temporal depth presented in its displays.

The rebuilt Palace showcased the world of the future through displays of raw materials, machines and manufactures just as the Great Exhibition had. However, the new venue situated this future by presenting its visitors with a much broader array of times and places than its predecessor. Sydenham's educational extravaganza encompassed everything from recreations of ancient civilisations, the aforementioned replica dinosaurs, models of so-called primitive peoples and, later, the largest saltwater aquarium in the world and much else besides (see Piggott 2004). If the Great Exhibition was primarily concerned with anticipating and ordering the future, the Sydenham Palace was more heavily involved in temporal managerialism and, in particular, the representation and communication of visions of the past.

When it opened in 1854, the interior of the rebuilt Crystal Palace was based around a series of Courts: areas encompassing different bays within its superstructure (see fig. 4.3). The main axes of the interior were filled with plants, flowers and fountains, so much so that it was said that, '[t]owards evening the interior of the Palace appears like a vocal grove, the visitor hearing with delight the beautiful note of the nightingale, together with that of blackbirds, thrushes, wrens, and robin-redbreasts, which build and make a perpetual home of this magnificent covered garden' (Phillips and Shenton 1859, 22).

Most visitors to the Palace in these early years arrived via the Low Level Station on the Park's western periphery (a second, High Level Station opened on Crystal Palace Parade in 1865). Upon entering the Palace, visitors first encountered the Natural History Department and the 'first page of the [Palace's] encyclopaedia' (Piggott 2004, 126). The Department's curator, Robert Gordon Latham, laid out the display according to the Earth's continents (subdivided by 'Old' and 'New' Worlds), with wooden mannequins of different 'races' set against scenery, plants and taxidermised animals. The displays were ordered according to each group's supposed degree of civilisation or savagery – implied by the activities they were undertaking or the tools they were using (see Latham

and Forbes 1854). This was a 'sequence that reaffirmed the overall theme of temporal and moral development from a visitor's first steps on to the Palace's grounds' (Qureshi 2011, 152). The 'primitive' specimens were intended to be compared with the displays of modern machinery and industrial exhibits that followed, as encouraged by guidebooks (e.g. Routledge 1854). To a greater degree than implied by the displays of the Great Exhibition, the not-so-subtle inference to visitors was that they themselves represented the peak of civilisation at the heart of the world's largest-ever and most technologically advanced empire.

During this period, similar narratives of savagery and primitivism were being applied to London's working-class population, the moral and educational improvement of whom was to be supported through the 'rational recreation' on offer at the Crystal Palace. This said, the educational worth of such displays was not always appreciated, at least by some middle-class observers. When visiting the Palace in 1854 and 1855, the writer and critic Elizabeth Eastlake was scandalised by the Natural History display's mannequins and was particularly concerned about their effects on working-class visitors. She argued that the 'sight of such objects' would serve only to 'brutalise' 'the lower orders', presumably by evoking their own latent 'savage' tendencies. Interestingly, Eastlake was far more positive about the Egyptian Court (one of the Fine Arts Courts discussed below), and suggested that, although showing ancient 'idolatry', the Court's replicas of ancient sculptures would make working-class audiences 'derive from their abjectness a greater sense of the blessings of the light': the benefits of modern British Christian civilisation. In contrast, Eastlake rejected the educational value of the ethnological displays and expressed that the models should be hidden from the main part of the building. She compared them negatively with the taxidermised animals that, she said, even in death, were a far better display of God's creativity (1855, 346).

Although the Palace's exhibits were intended to present a progressive civilisational chronology, their tortuous spatial arrangement hopelessly jumbled up time and space. Displays of tropical plants and stuffed animals were punctuated by plaster screens of English monarchs, while the reassembled bark of a 3,000-year-old giant sequoia, named the Mother of the Forest, lay surrounded by replica sphinxes and was neighbour to a miniature naval museum. Out on the terraces, one could enjoy 26 'allegorical statues' depicting the 'most important commercial and manufacturing countries in the world and ... the chief Industrial cities of England and France', all situated in Italianate gardens (Phillips and Shenton 1859, 156).

Such juxtapositions might seem downright bonkers today, but this merging of times and spaces in the name of education was at the heart of the whole enterprise. This variety also extended to the myriad temporary events the Palace hosted: prize poultry shows took place in the midst of replica Greek statuary; trainee colonial officers staged a test run for a tropical expedition among the dinosaur models in 1876; and the Park's nightly firework 'pictures' portrayed famous natural disasters and military triumphs, from the eruption of Mount Etna to Waterloo (see [Fitzgerald 1896](#)).

Following the Natural History Department, the Palace's interior continued its progressive narrative by employing the art-historical canon of Western civilisation in a series of sumptuously designed Fine Arts Courts (e.g. [fig. 4.4](#)). The Courts were themed according to established civilisational and design periods, including: Egyptian, Nineveh (Assyrian), Greek, Roman, Pompeian, Byzantine, Alhambra, 'Mediaeval', Elizabethan, Renaissance and Italian. They showcased the architecture and design of each period or region, using plaster casts of sculptures and



Figure 4.4 The interior of the Roman Court (ca. 1854), one of the Palace's Fine Arts Courts. The superstructure of the Palace can just be seen at the top of the image.

Source: Photograph by Philip Henry Delamotte. Public Domain. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program. Reproduced from: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/43687/philip-h-delamotte-crystal-palace-roman-court-english-about-1854/>

re-created architecture, and were designed by experts in their respective fields, under the overall direction of the Palace's architect-designers, Owen Jones and Matthew Digby Wyatt, both veterans of the Great Exhibition (see [Moser 2012](#)).

These spaces were not exact replicas of real buildings but were intended to provide an overview of the major design elements of each civilisation or period. For instance, the Nineveh Court was, 'not a complete restoration of any particular Assyrian building ... [but an] endeavour to convey to the spectator as exact an idea as possible of Assyrian architecture', and derived its structural elements from recent archaeological discoveries ([Layard 1854](#), 52). Unlike displays of genuine fragmentary artefacts, like those in the glass cases of the British Museum, the Courts' reconstructions were immersive and, like much of the Palace and Park, lacked interpretative labels or captions. Instead, visitors simply had to walk through them to (supposedly) learn 'by eye' ([Chase-Levenson 2012](#), 467).

The Courts proved popular in their early years and drew far more visitors than London's traditional museums. Nichols suggests that, with peak attendance at ca. 60,000 on Bank Holidays in the 1850s, 'at least five times more people probably saw the plaster casts of the Elgin marbles at Sydenham than the originals in Bloomsbury' ([2013](#), 25). Though they lacked labels, the majority of the Courts had their own guidebooks written by experts, including Henry Layard (the excavator of Nineveh), that could be purchased at the Palace. Besides cataloguing the displays, these books presented detailed background information on each civilisation or period. Reading them today, one is struck by their dense and dry style, and how they appear aimed at those with a high level of pre-existing knowledge. Despite this, the Courts were intended to operate on multiple levels for different types of visitor; while the specialist or interested amateur would enjoy their attention to detail, the 'lower orders' were also expected to benefit. This was not only in terms of visual exposure to art history – in theory to improve their own taste as consumers and craftsmanship as producers ([Chase-Levenson 2012](#), 466) – but also, more moralistically, by using the rise and fall of these past civilisations as lessons from history.

Epitomising this educational and moral duality, the guidebook to the Pompeian Court (a composite of houses from the doomed Roman city), opens with Goethe's famous words on the fate of Herculaneum and Pompeii: 'Many a calamity has befallen the world ere now, yet none like this, replete with instruction and delight for remote generations' (in [Scharf 1854](#), 5). Studying these guidebooks and contemporary

periodicals, Shelley Hales has argued that the Pompeian Court was to be understood as a place of moralising caution by its creators who implied that, by continuing the tradition of the Pompeians' sinful decadence, London and the wider Empire would also ultimately fall and be consumed by disaster if their citizens did not change their ways. This reflected both the strong religious sentiment of the era and a popular obsession with Pompeii after the wildly successful reception of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (see [Hales 2006](#), 109–12).

A complex relationship to the past can be seen in all the events (and their legacies) considered in this book, but it is at Sydenham that this is most visibly conflicted. In this case, it was not the immediate past of the Palace site or the Exhibition that was temporally unsettling, but the simultaneous, pharmakonic, attraction and repulsion that these replica civilisations garnered. On the one hand, they were held up as inspirational ancestors to the modern world and, in some cases, as cultural and aesthetic predecessors to the British Empire. On the other hand, the 'idolatrous' and decadent nature of their long-dead inhabitants was seen as dangerous – for example, a considerable furore erupted over the inclusion of nude Roman and Greek statuary when the Palace opened. This uncertainty emerged at the building's inauguration, when the Archbishop of Canterbury referred to the Fine Arts Courts when leading the Queen and assembled worthies in prayer:

While we contemplate the remains of former ages and the monuments of ancient greatness, enable us to profit by the examples they afford of the instability of earthly things, and ever to bear in mind that according to Thy providence nations flourish or decay; that Thou hast to but give the word, and the richest may become poor, and proudest be levelled into dust. (Quoted in [ILN 1854](#), 583)

We must be cautious in assuming that the average visitor noticed the moralising messages of such exhibits. The supposedly apocalyptic warnings of the Pompeian Court, for example, would only have been understood by visitors who had prior knowledge of the historical event or who had purchased a guidebook and, as Hales and Earle note ([2017](#), 185), made it through 43 pages of background information! A belief in the transmissive didacticism of such displays is sometimes taken for granted by contemporary and later observers alike. It is entirely possible that the Courts had minimal educational impact on many visitors; unfortunately, we are almost entirely reliant on accounts provided by critics like Eastlake and newspapers, making it hard to discern their

broader impact on shaping visitors' perceptions of world, British and imperial history.

There are numerous other examples of the confused temporal place of the exhibits at Sydenham. The Park's famous dinosaur models, for instance, were often referred to as the 'pre-Adamite' or 'Antediluvian' monsters by both the Palace Company and palaeontologists of the time. This was presumably in an effort to situate them in a (Biblical) narrative familiar to most visitors, despite scientific evidence that these creatures had walked the Earth millions of years prior to human civilisation.

These creatures, along with the other prehistoric animal models and geological strata are now the sole survivors of the venue's educational exhibits (fig. 4.5). These displays are listed by Historic England at Grade I for their 'exceptional historic interest in a national and probably international context' as the first ever displays of geological and palaeontological reconstruction in the world (Historic England 2021). They continue to attract thousands of visitors per year, have their own conservation charity, and are studied across fields as diverse as art history, geology and children's literature (see Marshall 2007; Laurence 2019; Doyle 2008; Keene 2017). Such is the love for these models that, in



Figure 4.5 Two of the dinosaur models in the Crystal Palace Park today.

Note: These model iguanodons were based on the best estimates made from fossils at the time – palaeontologists now know that such animals would have looked quite different from these depictions, but they are recognised and treasured today for their important early efforts at science communication.

Source: Photograph by the author.

response to a an act of vandalism against the Megalosaurus in May 2020, a local Councillor for Upper Norwood and Sydenham described them as ‘part of our heritage in Crystal Palace’ and how this ‘heritage crime’ was an ‘attack on an important part of our community’ (quoted in *Inside Croydon* 2020).

The Festival of Empire

Although the Palace Company built upon the Great Exhibition’s goals of moral and educational improvement, its parent mega event also influenced later temporary events held at Sydenham, the most spectacular of which was the 1911 Festival of Empire.

The Festival was promoted as ‘the social gathering of the British family’ of the colonies and Dominions, though organisers hoped that it would also foster greater appreciation of the Empire by British audiences (Stead 1911, 1–2). Funded and organised by the Crystal Palace Company, the event was originally planned for 1910 but was postponed following the death of King Edward VII and reworked to also celebrate the



Figure 4.6 View of the 1911 Festival of Empire grounds from the Crystal Palace, looking south-east.

Note: The replicas of the parliament buildings of the Dominions of South Africa (left) and Newfoundland (right) can be seen in the middle ground beyond the terrace’s balustrade and those of New Zealand and Australia in the distance.

Source: Public Domain. Courtesy of Toronto Public Library. <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/detail.jsp?Entt=RDMDC-ARTS-PC-461&R=DC-ARTS-PC-461>.

coronation of his son, George V. In spite of public aims to celebrate the Empire and Coronation, arguably the primary motivation behind hosting the event was a desperate attempt by the Crystal Palace Company to avert financial ruin. By 1911, the Palace and Park were increasingly run-down as a result of falling visitor numbers and ever-mounting maintenance costs, and the Company was struggling to service its debts, having been placed in receivership in 1909.

The Festival sought to replicate the Empire in microcosm (fig. 4.6). Its most spectacular features were three-quarter-scale replica versions of the parliament buildings of the Dominions of New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Newfoundland and, at two-thirds scale, Canada. These were served by a 2.4 kilometre (1.5 mile) electric railway, called the All-Red Route. This provided both transport around the site and an educational fairground ride that was surrounded by scenery depicting the economic activities and daily life of the colonies and Dominions. The Festival included an athletics competition in the south of the Park, called the Inter-Empire Championship (a direct predecessor to today's Commonwealth Games), for (white-only) competitors from different Dominions and British athletes (see Gorman 2012, 154).

The most spectacular performance associated with the Festival was the Pageant of London, a theatrical celebration of the city's role in the Empire in a specially built arena. The Pageant presented British (though mainly English) history through a succession of *tableaux vivants* that lionised London as the wellspring of Britannia's genius and prosperity, with the city's ancient skyline re-created in an immense backdrop (Lomas 1911). A cast of 15,000 volunteers, along with hundreds of animals, enacted historical scenes that took in everything from the 'Danish Invasion' of England in the ninth century to 'Captain Cook Lands in Botany Bay' (the 'discovery' of Australia) in 1770. Its three-day-long programme (repeated multiple times throughout the Festival) concluded with 'An Allegory of the Advantages of Empire', in which Britannia personified 'received' her grateful subject peoples (see Lomas 1911; Piggott 2011; Ryan 1999), with London portrayed as 'the mecca of the Empire and the heart and home of the British race' (*Times* 1911a).

Besides the Company's financial motivations, the Festival's occurrence shortly before the First World War was also an attempt to reinforce a unified sense of imperial and national identity in a time of perceived 'social decline' (Coombes 1994, 189). It took place against a background of anxiety about the Empire's position, international tensions with Germany, demands for female suffrage and a growing political crisis around calls for Irish Home Rule. Daniel Gorman argues that, though

‘mounted in an era of Imperial confidence, [the Festival] reveals both the ties of sentiment that bound the pre-war Empire together and the practical differences pulling it apart’ (2012, 150). As David Edgerton notes, the election of 1910 gave a limited victory to the free-trading Liberals against growing Conservative enthusiasm for imperial and national economic protectionism, and their demands to make the UK much more reliant on the Empire for its imports (2018, 12). Supporters of the Empire began to emphasise more strongly the togetherness of its constituent members, with Britain at the head of one ‘body politic’ (Edgerton 2018, 22) – as seen in the overt use of such words as *homecoming* and *family* in the language of the Festival.

The Festival was also part of an increasingly crowded event market. The successful 1908 Franco-British Exhibition and London Olympic Games held at White City arguably provided inspiration for much of the Festival’s own mixture of education, sport, entertainment and propaganda (MacKenzie 2008, 259). However, the success of these other events also revealed the waning appeal of the Palace in the face of what *The Times* described as ‘new and vigorous competition’ (1911b, 17). Indeed, White City’s own Coronation Exhibition in 1911 attracted more than double the attendees of the Festival of Empire (Piggott 2011, 39).

To return to the Festival in greater detail, let us begin with a ride on the All-Red Route. Organisers described the Route as, ‘the most brilliant attempt to exhibit on a gigantic scale the features of a gigantic Empire’ (FoE 1911, 17–21). Its scenery displayed a vision of ‘productive’ imperialism and included an Indian tea plantation, a Māori village and a South African diamond mine. Each tableau was intended to educate visitors about ‘their’ Empire and their own place within it. The economic specialities of each colony or Dominion were portrayed metonymically through the inclusion of their most famous products, along with living people, animals, models, architecture and painted backdrops. Wool and sheep became a stand-in for Australia, tea for India, salted cod for Newfoundland and so forth. These scenes portrayed an imperial cornucopia, one that, in theory, was open to the insatiable appetite of Britain. For example, the official guidebook explains that visitors will see a ‘huge Indian tea plantation, with natives picking the leaf for our afternoon tea’ (FoE 1911, 18).

Although intended to demonstrate the variety of activities that occurred in the Empire and to ‘transport’ audiences to distant lands, these displays reduced colonised peoples to economic objects and exotic stereotypes, just as the Indian displays of the Great Exhibition had 60 years previously. The industries of the so-called White Dominions were



Figure 4.7 A postcard showing one of the tableaux from the All-Red Route, showing a so-called Native Hut, complete with replica human skull.

Note: It is unclear which part of the Route this was on, but it may have been part of the 'Malay village'.

Source: Unknown photographer, Rotary Photo. Public Domain. Scanned from author's collection.

part of the Route's scenery, but, in contrast to the simplistic portrayal of the colonies of Jamaica or Malaysia (fig. 4.7), these Dominions also benefitted from the vast replica parliament buildings dotted around the Route (with their own curated exhibits inside), making obvious their preferential imperial relationship.

The guidebook's language – '*natives* picking the leaf for *our* tea' – makes obvious an unequal power relationship that was already being questioned, seen in criticism from British people and '*natives*' alike of the display of colonised peoples from the late nineteenth century onwards (see Qureshi 2011; Britton 2010, 69–71). Despite this, Timothy Mitchell convincingly demonstrated the power of such representations for shaping a colonial and orientalist mindset in his discussion of the recreation of a Cairo street – the Rue du Caire – at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. This display constructed a vast replica street scene, complete with stalls, traders, real donkeys and a 'mosque' (which actually housed a bar), in which the Orient was set up as a 'picture' for a Western audience to consume, one (supposedly) so realistic that it was like really 'being there' (1992, 293). Such a judgement is obviously moot, given that few European visitors to such tableaux in Paris or London would have actually

visited these countries, and their perceptions would have been almost wholly shaped by contemporary literature, art and other cultural expressions (Said 1993).

The simplistic rendering of indigenous people as ‘natives’ in such a constructed, yet realistic-looking environment, was intended to make them knowable, understandable and located within a scientific taxonomical order (much like the permanent displays within the Palace itself), enacting a system of knowledge and power, grounded in a teleology of progress and racial hierarchy. As at the Great Exhibition, though rendered much more explicitly, the Other at the Festival was, at first glance, reduced to a set of commodities or materials that stood in for their entire culture.

During the Festival, a special double-page spread of photographs of the scenery of the Route were reproduced in the *Illustrated London News* under the headline ‘The Infinite Variety of Our Imperial Heritage’ (*ILN* 1911a). Although the magazine was not using the word heritage in the present-day sense, its inclusion nonetheless shows that popular opinion saw these places as ‘ours’ to consume and inherit, in terms of both commodities and spectacle. The accompanying text notes:

It would be difficult to imagine a better method of bringing home to the average Britisher some realisation of the Imperial idea, and to the truth conveyed in Rudyard Kipling’s words, ‘What do they know of England who only England know?’. (*ILN* 1911a, 241)

Though such representations were convincing, the materiality of events like the Festival often acted to undermine the certainty of colonial representations and the imperial system itself (Hoffenberg 2001, 14). Such displays were but skin deep – not least of all in the flimsy materials used to make the tableaux – and their apparent ‘truth’ was often challenged. Timothy Mitchell provides his own example when discussing how visiting Arab students experienced the Rue du Caire in Paris in 1889. The students’ astonishment, outrage and, sometimes, amusement at the ridiculousness of the effort made to create such a display challenged the idea that the world could be simply rendered as a ‘picture’, and their critique undermined the validity of the Orientalist vision (Mitchell 1992, 293, see also Coombes 1994, 188). We should not assume that all who visited similar displays at the Festival ‘got’ the message of ‘our imperial heritage’, or be too quick to assume how the ‘native’ people involved understood and interpreted them.

While those who were participants in the scenery of the All-Red Route were sometimes subject to racist abuse – suffering from passengers throwing food at them, for example (Ryan 1999, 132) – they were not simply mute or passive victims of imperial power relations. A series of contemporary *Times* articles report on 39 Māori people of the Te Arawa iwi who were worked in displays on the All-Red Route. They offer a more complicated picture of imperial relationships than descriptions of the tableaux can provide alone.

One of these articles describes how, as part of the display, a female Māori soloist, Iwa, was singing in both English and ‘their own tongue’; in another report, we are told that ‘an old grey bearded chief, Mita Taupopoki’ met the High Commissioner of New Zealand at St. Pancras Station (*Times* 1911c, 1911d).⁴ Taupopoki was quoted as saying ‘they had arrived in a strange land, which was nevertheless the Home beyond the Skies, the land which they had all longed to see’ (*Times* 1911d), suggesting that they considered themselves as British citizens – the very idea of a homecoming that the Festival was intended to promote. Conal McCarthy notes that the group had ‘voluntarily put themselves on exhibition’ and chose to ‘exploit their exotic appeal’ in order to promote Māori culture to the world while earning an income (2005, 69–70). *The Times*’ interviews and McCarthy’s research shows this group’s obvious patriotism (Taupopoki was also an official guest at the coronation of George V), and that, by putting themselves on display, they exercised considerable agency over the terms of their participation in such events.

This recognition of agency is not to deny the continued racism and inequitable imperial relationships that characterised the British Empire more generally. Neither was all reporting so sympathetic. For example, an issue of the *Illustrated London News* shows the Māori group under the headline, ‘New Zealand’s Primitive Inhabitants greet their King’ (*ILN* 1911b). Despite this racism, the Māoris’ efforts to take part on their own terms meant that they can be said to have acted to confound the Festival’s efforts to reduce them to simply another part of the backdrop to the All-Red Route; instead, they became active participants in the event and in the Empire more broadly. Such an example shows the unsettled nature of British imperial relationships and conflicting ideas of what was to be considered home or colony and who was to be seen as citizen or subject. Such unstable foundations of British imperial identity were also seen in the sometimes anxious competition between the Dominions and Britain, and was manifest through the proxy of the gargantuan replica parliament buildings spread around the Festival.

These buildings, like the All-Red Route and Pageant, were deployed as emblems of the export of British civilisation around the world. The Festival guidebook opined that '[i]t is good to see the stately legislative halls which have sprung up in lands which were unknown or unexplored when the first Mother of Parliaments came into being at Westminster' (FoE 1911, 23). However, these buildings also acted as symbols of the Dominions' increasing autonomy and contained displays organised by their governments.

Postcards of these structures (e.g. fig. 4.8) show them to be impressively realistic. In contrast, the ageing Palace stood in decrepit juxtaposition to these new 'stately' halls. The guidebook's introduction melancholically admits that the Palace is, 'somewhat faded of late', having once been 'one of the glories of London' (Stead in FoE 1911, 9, 13; see Ryan 1999, 120). However, later in this same text, we are reminded that the parliament structures are only temporary facsimiles: '[i]t seems almost a shame to put up so stately, apparently so massive, a building [the Canadian Parliament] merely to pull it down again before Christmas' (FoE 1911, 28). The guidebook also notes that only three of the Dominions paid for their own buildings, with South Africa and Australia especially singled out for their lack of 'public-spirit' (FoE 1911, 28–9). This defensive organisational attitude indicates not only the financial difficulties of the



Figure 4.8 The two-thirds-scale replica Canadian Parliament Building, located on a site in the west of the Park, close to Anerley Road. It survived as indoor squash courts until the 1950s, but no trace of this huge structure is visible today. Source: Unknown photographer, Rotary Photo. Public Domain. Scanned from author's collection.

Crystal Palace Company, but also, perhaps, a wider unease over how the Dominions in particular related to the home nation.⁵

The parliament buildings' planned obsolescence, yet feigned realness, nonetheless resembled the Crystal Palace's own temporally indeterminate materiality. The parliament buildings' realism was achieved with 'treacherous' materials (plastered canvas, steel frames and wood), that were pretending to be something far more substantial, echoing the charge that Ruskin had levelled decades earlier at the iron and glass of the Crystal Palace.

One searches in vain for any trace of the Festival in the Crystal Palace Park despite map regression showing that it significantly changed its spatial layout, with the replacement of winding paths by straight roads and the levelling of terrain. The New Zealand, Australian and Canadian Parliament buildings appear in maps up until the 1950s – the latter structure burned down in 1959 after hosting squash and badminton courts for many years. It seems unlikely that there are any significant remains of the Festival below ground, given their lightweight construction and how much the Park was altered during the development of the National Sports Centre, although a tunnel is still visible under the main staircase of the Palace's lower terrace, through which the All-Red Route would have run. The Park was also damaged by the 1967 International Construction Equipment Exhibition, which used the terraces as a proving ground for digging equipment (see [British Pathé 1967](#)).

In placing the 60-year old Crystal Palace and Park at the heart of the imperial system, the Festival was an enormous gamble by the Palace Company that spectacularly failed to pay off. Instead, it made the Palace Company's financial situation even worse, with a loss of nearly £250,000 and forced bankruptcy. While it may be tempting to see the Festival's failure as evidence for the exhaustion of any residual cultural capital associated with 1851, it is clear that nostalgia for the Great Exhibition and the system of which it was a part was far from exhausted. This is obvious in the hosting of much later and larger imperial mega events, such as the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley (1924–5) and the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow (1938), and in the nostalgia-laden efforts to revive the Crystal Palace itself, to which I now turn.

The end of the Palace

During the summer of 1911, even before the end of the Festival of Empire, the Palace and Park were put up for sale. With echoes of the aftermath of

the Great Exhibition, there was a public outcry over the Palace's fate, with fears that it and the Park would be sold off for housing.⁶ *The Times*, in support of a continued public use, noted dryly but accurately that, '[t]he financial history of the Crystal Palace Company is a story of disappointed hopes ending in disaster. If the Palace is now to be saved by the exercise of the public spirit, it will be a case of history repeating itself' (*Times* 1911b).

One suggestion for reviving the Park's fortunes was provided by the Australian government, who suggested it become an international territory, The Grounds of the Empire. This proposal envisaged the retention of the imperial microcosm of the All-Red Route for the purposes of co-operation and trade promotion between colonies, Dominions and the home nation, in recognition of their shared 'Great British heritage' (Story and Maloney 1911, 3). Another scheme, costed at £600,000, suggested the Palace become a memorial to the lately departed King Edward, as well as a 'permanent Colonial Exhibition' and, intriguingly, 'a national aviation ground' (*Times* 1911b, 17). Neither the Australian nor the Memorial scheme materialised.

As the date of the auction grew closer (28 November 1911), a meeting to discuss the public acquisition of the building was held at the City of London's Mansion House between the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Strong, and a long-standing patron of the Palace, the Earl of Plymouth, Robert Windsor-Clive (*Times* 1911e). The meeting's location was unlikely to be coincidental, given it was the scene of Prince Albert's famous speech promoting the Great Exhibition in 1850 (see Chapter 3). On 18 November, *The Financial Times* confirmed that the auction would be abandoned as a sale had been directly agreed with Windsor-Clive. He would temporarily purchase the Palace for £230,000 (and pay off the Company's debts) until enough public donations could be raised for it to be 'bought for the nation' (*FT* 1911). Following the Earl's actions and a public fundraising campaign, the Palace and Park were then sold back in 1913, and the venue was saved once again.

While acting as owner, Windsor-Clive was keen to maximise the usefulness of the Palace and Park and held an Anglo-German Festival in 1913 in an attempt to de-escalate growing international tensions. The event rather disconcertingly included a display of naval weaponry on the Park's largest lake, including a German-made wireless boat that could launch torpedoes remotely. This prototypical drone was enthusiastically championed as a means 'to revolutionise future actions in war' (*Citizen* 1913), despite the Anglo-German naval arms race and the gunboat diplomacy of the time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Anglo-German Festival

was poorly attended. The Germans considered it an *Ausstellungsschwindel* (an unofficial and insulting exhibition) and believed they had intentionally not been given enough time to prepare (Geppert 2010, 215–16).

In spite of the Festival and Windsor-Clive's efforts to promote peace, within a year the United Kingdom was at war with Germany and her allies. In 1914, the Park became a naval training base, HMS *Victory IV*, more often called 'HMS Crystal Palace'. The trainees were quartered in the surviving replica parliament buildings and even slept in hammocks among the statues of the Fine Arts Courts. Boat practice took place on the lakes, and the deck of a full-sized battleship was 'marked out on the Terrace' (Piggott 2004, 179). By the end of the war 125,000 servicemen had passed through the Palace doors. It was fondly remembered as the Old Glass Dreadnought and was later commemorated with annual reunions and the erection of a memorial bell in 1931, which remains in place.

The use of mega event sites or structures in connection with conflict seems to be surprisingly common, with the Crystal Palaces in both Hyde Park and Sydenham providing the earliest examples. More recently, we might think of the 1984 Winter Olympic bobsleigh run above Sarajevo used as sniper and artillery-spotter nests in the Bosnian War, or the Athens (2004) Olympic Park employed in housing refugees from conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria (Shubert, Mackay and Damon 2016). Though sometimes incongruous in the face of an event's original aims, such afterlives illustrate the variability that is an inherent part of a mega event's aftermath, showing the difficulty of predicting how legacies will play out over years and decades.

Following the end of the First World War, the Palace and Park were left dilapidated after operating for a brief period as the National Demobilisation Office (MOLAS 2004b, 30). In another unexpected turn of events, the Palace was then chosen to host the first Imperial War Museum. This opened in 1920, showing material that had been collected from the front lines as early as 1917 under the auspices of a 'National War Museums Committee' (Kavanagh 1994, 122–4). Originally proposed for Hyde Park, the Museum was initially rejected by Parliament who, understandably, were reluctant to commit to a scheme that would commemorate a conflict that, 'in the future we might desire as far as possible to forget' (Lord Curzon quoted by Kavanagh 1994, 87). Their concerns proved unfounded as nearly 2.5 million people visited the Museum in its first year alone.

Although some visitors felt the collection was poorly organised and disrespectful in the placing of exhibits in the remnants of the Fine Arts



Figure 4.9 An 18-inch naval gun arriving at the Imperial War Museum, Crystal Palace, ca. 1920.

Source: Photograph by Horace Nicholls. © Imperial War Museums (Q 20536)

Courts amid the ‘potted plants’ (Kavanagh 1994, 146–7), the Museum nonetheless provided an opportunity for the public to see something of the previously spatially distant material evidence of the devastating conflict. Tanks, shells, uniforms, flags, enormous naval guns (fig. 4.9) and even aeroplanes were crammed into the building. Brandt convincingly argues that the museum acted, not only as a vast collection of *matériel* but also as a de facto national war memorial for services and civilians alike (1994, 112). Alys Cundy also highlights this ‘dual function’ and, quoting George V, reminds us that the museum acted as a place to serve ‘the scientist and the historian’, as well as acting as a means of remembering imperial sacrifice (quoted in Cundy 2015, 247).

Despite its contents’ violent basis, the War Museum fitted perfectly well with the original educational aims of both the Hyde Park and Sydenham Crystal Palaces. By providing ‘the raw material from which future histories of the technology of the First World War would be written’ (Cundy 2015, 254), it replicated the long-term temporal approaches used in displays at both Palaces. Furthermore, by systematically collecting, labelling and ordering artefacts taxonomically, the Museum evoked the classes of the original Great Exhibition: raw *matériel* replacing raw materials; gemstones becoming hand grenades; silks transmogrifying into drab battledress; threshing machinery into thick-skinned tanks. The reduction of the complexity of industrialised warfare and of its savage

weaponry to the order of the museum – a ‘musealisation’ (Adorno 1983) – in the shabbily familiar Palace, acted to domesticate the horror of the conflict. Once decontextualised from the stygian battlefields of the Western Front, the residues of the conflict were sanitised, much as the products of capitalistic and colonial violence had been distanced from their means of production at the Great Exhibition and in the Festival of Empire.

The War Museum moved to South Kensington in 1924, and the Palace continued to host temporary events such as dog shows and concerts. Under Henry Buckland, the new Palace Manager, the site finally managed to make a financial surplus and by 1935 was wholly renovated (see *Times* 1957). The narrative of a decaying Palace was confounded by increased visitor numbers and new attractions, which stands against the assertions of later historians, who have sometimes taken it to be a ‘ruin of a previous epoch’, even before its actual destruction (e.g. D. Smith 2012, 31).

The Palace in the 1930s was not simply a leftover of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Though its history shaped its material form, the building remained very much an active constituent of its present. Helen Pussard has shown that the Palace’s upturn in fortunes in the 1920s and early 1930s was a result of nostalgia for the late nineteenth century: the ‘good old days’ of the now-crumbling Empire, rational recreation and its replica civilisations and concrete dinosaurs persisting as quaint throwbacks (2004, 50). What might be called a heritagisation of the past had occurred, one built around another form of creative anachronism: a desire for connectivity and communion with an idealised past in the face of an uncertain future. This, in addition to a revived scholarly and popular interest in the Victorian-era in this period,⁷ recast the Palace and Park as a manifestation of a golden age, something that, in the troubled economic and social climate of 1930s Britain, was surely desirable. At the time of these improving fortunes, it is all the more unfortunate that the Palace burned down on the night of 30 November 1936.

Ruins and rubble

The cause of the fire that destroyed the Crystal Palace remains unknown. Many competing theories exist, ranging from insurance fraud to arson, but the conflagration was almost certainly accidental (Edwards and Wyncoll 1992, 41–5). Whether caused by an errant cigarette or an electrical fault, the fire was the most dramatic moment in the Palace’s

history and a fittingly spectacular, if tragic, end for the 85-year-old structure.

The fire and the Palace's final collapse were dramatically captured by a Pathé newsreel crew who attended the site along with 89 fire engines, hundreds of firemen and police, and thousands of spectators.⁸ The narration accompanying the footage emphasises the Palace's status as both a London landmark and a temporal metonym. Against a vision of hellish flames we are told that for,

few people in a lifetime comes the chance of seeing such a gigantic blaze as the funeral pyre of the Crystal Palace. The proudest building of the last century, one of the few remaining links with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. (British Pathé 1936)

This is followed by shots of firemen dousing the fire while we hear how 'tens of thousands' have come to watch, 'and *is it worth it!*' Finally, after an un-narrated 30-second musical crescendo, we witness the collapse of the nave while the narrator exclaims, 'for 85 years the Crystal Palace has been a playground and a landmark of London. We mourn its loss'.

Some have suggested that the Palace collapsed so dramatically because the melting point of its wrought-iron bolts were lower than that



Figure 4.10 The burnt-out remains of the Crystal Palace after the fire of 30 November 1936. Looking north-east with the western water tower in the foreground.

Source: EPW052310. © Historic England. <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/en/image/EPW052310>.

of its cast-iron columns, in a reversal of the weaknesses of the latter material discussed in [Chapter 3](#) ([MOLAS 2004b](#), 30). In the newsreel and other accounts, molten glass was said to pour from the windows in vast quantities; the Palace returned to its constituent parts by a fire fuelled by the re-emergence of its miles of wooden framing – and a stiff breeze.

In oral history recordings of witnesses to the fire, interviewee responses are framed in the language of loss and mourning ([Edwards and Wyncoll 1992](#)). A traumatic and emotive narrative is familiar to our own experiences of famous destroyed or damaged heritage places. We might think of the fire at Notre-Dame in 2019, the destruction of the Arch of Palmyra in 2015 or similar events that, for many, seemed to prompt an almost visceral outpouring of horror, equal to, or even exceeding, our response to loss of human lives.

Contemporary accounts of the fire indicate a rapid mythologisation and romanticisation of the absent Palace, seen in the aforementioned conspiracy theories that took hold. One of these centred on the belief that, in anticipation of a future war, the government intentionally destroyed the Palace as too obvious a landmark for enemy bombers ([Edwards and Wyncoll 1992](#), 41–4).

In coverage of the disaster, on 1 December 1936, *The News Chronicle's* headline asked, 'Is it a portent?' (quoted by [Auerbach 2001](#), 93), implying that the Palace's destruction prophesied the destruction by air that London would face in an increasingly likely conflict. In both its popular mourning and these associations with warfare, the end of the Palace transcended its physical location, as it became not only a symbol of a previous era, but also a herald of future devastation. The fire provided a spectacular closing ceremony to an event that had opened 85 years and 7 months earlier, and ensured a continuing fascination with the history of the building and with the Great Exhibition.

Between 15,000 and 20,000 tons of rubble and scrap were left by the fire, although much of the basement levels survived, as did parts of the northern nave ([fig. 4.10](#)). The waste material took almost two years to be removed by T. H. Ward of Sheffield, who employed 70 men in the task. Ward was reported as saying that the scrap was in great demand, due to high metal prices, seemingly the result of worldwide rearmament programmes ([FT 1937](#)). Following the clearance, the Palace foundations presented a void at the top of the Park. The Palace's Manager, Buckland, proposed rebuilding almost immediately, but, before long, the nation was again at war and the venue was once more pressed into service.

During wartime the Park functioned diversely: hosting a camp for 'Dutch and Belgian Refugees and French sailors', secret radio research in

the laboratories of John Logie Baird and heavy anti-aircraft guns and a Z-rocket battery (Harrison 2014). The site of the Palace itself was used as a salvage depot for reclaiming useful materials from cars, trucks and armoured vehicles. Another Pathé newsreel from 1943 shows the vast scale of this reclamation operation.⁹ Against a backdrop of thousands of tyres piled incongruously beside the remaining ‘allegorical’ statues, we are told that, ‘[a]ll the work is done by the gentle sex’, with shots of women cutting apart cars with oxyacetylene torches (British Pathé 1943). Appropriately, for the ruins of a building long seen as a ‘palace of industry’ – despite only ever showing the materials and products of industry, never its workforce – the site was transformed into a breaker’s yard. The Palace ruins became part of Britain’s ‘war machine’ (Edgerton 2011), with workers extracting the raw material of wrecked cars and tanks to supply the insatiable demand for weapons.

The demolition of the Palace’s two water towers also took place in this period. Recalling the conspiracy theory of the cause of the fire, it was said they provided too useful a landmark for German aircraft attacking London. Although, as the *Illustrated London News* suggested in its headline of 6 July 1940 – ‘The Last of the Crystal Palace Goes to Feed the Guns’ – the value of their hundreds of tons of scrap iron seems more likely (ILN 1940). Once again, conflict and ruination became intertwined with the Palace.

To add further to this destructive topography, both during and after the war enormous quantities of Blitz rubble were dumped on the Palace site, completely refiguring the ruin’s appearance.¹⁰ This material remains on the site in the present day, up to 6 metres deep in places, and comprises material from destroyed buildings all over South London (MOLAS 2007, 3). Henry Buckland estimated around 385,000 tons of rubble were dumped on the Palace ruins.

Walking across these hills of rubble in the Park, it is possible to see the odd brick or architectural element of a bombed building emerging through grass, shrubs and mature trees (fig. 4.11), with most remnants of the Palace itself buried far below. Part of the reason behind this dumping was for the material to be used as the foundation for a new Crystal Palace. That the dumping of the rubble was understood as an intentionally ‘creative’ act is clear from a 1942 government memo sent to the London War Debris Service (responsible for disposing of Blitz rubble). It states that, ‘Sites for tips should be studied and selected. The opportunity may be taken to make up to new levels land which is subject to flooding or to improve other waste and uneven sites.’¹¹ The Crystal Palace was selected as one of the sites to be ‘improved’, showing that the dumping



Figure 4.11 Dumped bomb rubble – bricks from ruined homes and factories – on the site of the Palace today. Some 385,000 tons are estimated to remain.
Source: Photograph by the author.

was not haphazard but intentionally undertaken with the *future* in mind; in this case, to act as foundations for Henry Buckland's dream of rebuilding the Palace. Such rubble is thus now also a part of the Crystal Palace and Park's heritage.

Resurrection, interrupted

In early December 1936, just days after the fire, a committee was formed by the Crystal Palace Company to examine proposals for rebuilding. Alongside many plans for temporary events, including another Empire Exhibition, the committee sought to rebuild the Palace as an exhibition centre, 'more famous than the Crystal Palace of the past, but also more useful to the Nation'. This resulted in a scheme submitted to the Palace's Trustees in 1937 by architect Horace Parnacott, which included a 25,000-seat sports arena, a concert hall and exhibition halls.¹² When Parnacott's proposal did not come to pass (due to lack of funding), an architectural competition was held in March 1945 for rebuilding the whole Park, following its release from wartime use. Fifty-seven competition entries were received and were judged by Patrick Abercrombie, Chief Architect to the London County Council. The submissions had to meet a complex brief, including provision of exhibition halls, several theatre spaces and external facilities including a, by now, 100,000-seat stadium. A winning entry by Herbert Jackson was selected in 1946, but this scheme also failed to attract funding due to post-war austerity and the death of Lord (Maynard) Keynes, its key supporter in government (Piggott 2004, 211). Efforts were then made to host part of the 1951 Festival of Britain but failed due to the Park's distance from the centre of London.¹³

In 1951, ownership of the site was passed to the London County Council, along with £250,000 the Trustees of the Crystal Palace had earmarked for a new building. In 1952, the government's Goodale Committee then recommended the establishment of an annual British Industries Fair to promote trade, suggesting the site of the Crystal Palace, but this was once more abandoned on cost grounds.¹⁴ Despite this setback, Sir Gerald Barry, former director of the Festival of Britain, then proposed the establishment of a permanent Exhibition Centre on the Palace site in 1955 (Harrison 2014). In 1962, yet another scheme was proposed, this time by the Federation of British Industries with a £12 million plan for 'the most up-to-date exhibition facilities in the world', in anticipation of UK plans to join the European Common Market (McDowall 1962). Both schemes failed due to lack of funds.

During this period, the wider Crystal Palace Park was more successfully developed for other purposes. An enormous BBC Transmission Tower was built in 1956 on the Palace ruins and remains as one of South London's most recognisable landmarks. The National Sports Centre (NSC) was built in the southern half of the Park, opening in the 1960s. Both structures remain key parts of the site. Although the NSC is Grade II* listed by Historic England it recently faced the risk of demolition, though there are plans for refurbishment, subject to the development of a reworked business case (see [Mayor of London 2020](#)).

Another often forgotten, but important, part of the Park is the Crystal Palace Concert Bowl. It was built in 1961 on the site of the 1911 Pageant of London and, later, hosted the Crystal Palace Garden Parties. These huge music festivals were held in the 1970s and 1980s and drew thousands of concertgoers to see the likes of Pink Floyd, Elton John, Lou Reed and Bob Marley. A permanent band shell was built in 1996, which is now currently semi-derelict, but the Bowl is seen as a key part of the Park's heritage and a major fundraising campaign is underway to restore it and host events once again. The campaign makes clear the linkage of the Bowl to previous events such as the Pageant of London and the Festival of Empire and to concerts conducted by the composer Handel in the Palace. While these efforts are ongoing, successes include a crowdfunding campaign to commemorate 40 years since Bob Marley's last ever gig (in 1980) with a plaque on the Bowl's south speaker tower.¹⁵

While the failed proposals for rebuilding the Palace discussed here were mostly sympathetic to the original ethos of the venue as a site of education and leisure, two more recent schemes proved more controversial.

In the early 1990s, plans were submitted for a multiplex cinema, a hotel, bars, restaurants and a 950-space car park on the Palace ruins ([Holt 2001](#)).¹⁶ After a legal struggle lasting from 1996 to 2001, the proposal was defeated in the face of significant local discontent at its design, large scale and commercial focus. Environmental campaigners also opposed the proposal through direct action, given its proposed destruction of green space and mature trees (the latter having grown out of the Blitz rubble). These protestors, many fresh from a series of high-profile, anti-roadbuilding campaigns taking place across England, erected tree houses and tunnelled into the rubble to establish an underground bunker (see [Do or Die 1999](#)). This area of the Park is now sealed off, so it is unclear how much of this structure survives.

After the defeat of the multiplex scheme, the Park was the subject of a more sympathetic masterplan in 2007 that continues to underpin current efforts at its restoration (see [Latz + Partner/ Meadowcroft Griffin](#)

2007). The masterplan made a stronger attempt to consult with local stakeholders and placed the heritage of the Park at the core of its strategy. Significantly, this did not propose rebuilding the Palace or placing any other building upon its remains. Instead, the Park's landscapes were to be restored, historical features renovated, the footprint of the Palace reflected in tree planting and the NSC altered to better respect the 1850s layout. While outline planning permission for this was granted in 2011, the scheme could not be delivered in full due to funding constraints (CSM Strategic 2015, 11).

In 2013 a separate £500 million proposal for entirely rebuilding the Palace was announced by a Chinese corporation, ZhongRong Group, with the support of the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson. Renderings of the new Palace showed its exterior would be a near-exact replica of the 1854 building, while its interior would contain a '6-star' hotel, retail units, galleries and exhibition halls. This scheme attracted expressions of interest from noted architectural firms, including Grimshaw and Zaha Hadid Architects. Much of the detail of ZhongRong's plan remained obscure, which led to understandable suspicion among local stakeholders. Given the significant impact the venue would have on the Park and surrounding area, campaign groups organised to resist what they saw as unsustainable and unsuitable private development in a publicly owned green space. Following demands for a promised £5 million deposit and more detailed plans by the London Borough of Bromley (the Park's owners), ZhongRong backed out in February 2015.

In 2021, the future of the Park was again under discussion and, once again, the plans were contested. Elements of the 2007 masterplan were retained as the basis for a proposed limited renovation of the Park (including restoration of the terraces and the dinosaur and animal models). At the time of writing, this proposal is progressing through a planning application. More controversially, the scheme's funding requires the selling-off of a portion of currently non-publicly accessible land for housing and the removal of the National Sports Centre's car park, the Crystal Palace Caravan Site and several existing buildings. While cautiously welcomed by several heritage and community groups, concerns have been raised about the scale of the housing development (ca. 200 homes) and the fact that none will be classed as 'affordable'.¹⁷ Time will tell if this latest effort to secure the future of the Park fares any better than its many ill-fated predecessors.

Back to the future

Why is there this recurring obsession with rebuilding the Palace? What is it about the building, both as the home of the Great Exhibition and as its legacy in Sydenham, that drives such efforts?

It is difficult to explain the hold that the idea of rebuilding the Palace continues to exert over would-be developers, given it has been more than 80 years since the building's destruction. In part, this desire seems down to half-baked nostalgia, as well as a conflation of the original mega event and its building. Ike Ijeh, writing about the ZhongRong scheme, asked if such a rebuilding could ever be 'logistically, commercially or even culturally viable in 21st-century London?' (2013). Certainly, corporate interest and finance were motivating factors, but it does seem odd that ZhongRong were said to be happy even if they did not make a profit on the Palace project and, assuming this was true, it suggests their motivation may have been more complex. Rebuilding the Palace, according to Boris Johnson, was a 'beautiful idea' but definitely *not* 'an act of nostalgia' (quoted in Bushra 2021). This sparks questions as to why the proposed structure was so authentic-looking and, whether we can really believe this, given it comes from a man so fond of British history and particularly the glory days of the British Empire, of which the Palace has been taken as such a symbol. Motivational concerns aside, is it really desirable to rebuild long-since vanished structures like the Palace? Sam Jacob has argued that this is akin to digging up a corpse to produce 'zombie architecture' (2013). He suggests that:

We may mourn the past. We may feel intense sorrow at the gaping voids left in the present by things that have vanished, but we should resist the pull of these feelings of loss and nostalgia. The Crystal Palace functions perfectly well in its absence (perhaps even more so than if it were still here). Its return as a ghost, zombie or otherwise undead form of architecture should be seen for what it is: a ghoulish pull on our tender heartstrings in the service of large scale development.

Such plans to rebuild the Palace are, like its own original displays and events, reliant on a selective remembrance of the past to frame the future. In this, and in many other failed redevelopment schemes, this remembrance associates the place only with the nineteenth century, monumental architecture and imperial nostalgia. As we have seen, there

is so much more to the heritage of Crystal Palace Park than that: from scrapyards to dog shows, glass dreadnoughts to Bob Marley concerts, and eco warriors to family picnics. Julius Lessing, a German art historian and one of the many sources collated by Walter Benjamin for his unfinished *Arcades Project*, reflected on the Crystal Palace in 1900 that, '[i]t has taken four decades, numerous fires, and many depredations to ruin this magic, although even today it is still not completely vanished' (in Benjamin 1999, 184). Although he was referring to the wonder of the Palace while it still stood, such a sentiment is arguably as equally applicable to its ruins in the present.

With the abandonment of the ZhongRong scheme, the void of the Palace persists, an absence that, rather than being melancholic, perhaps provides us with something of a lesson. Rather than attempt a return to an idealised past, in the Palace's continued absence we are forced to value this place for how it is *now* and, in doing so, we might be able to entertain uses and interpretations that go beyond yet another shopping mall or luxury hotel.

The Crystal Palace at Sydenham in many ways exceeded both the structure of its parent building and the mega event it hosted, not only in its scale, longevity and variety, but also in the degree of nostalgia it seems to evoke. The mixed fortunes of the site – its rebuilding, gradual decline, recovery, catastrophic destruction and endless stalled resurrections – also provide a cautionary example of the folly of trying to predict what happens to a mega event and its site after it closes its doors. It is clear that the legacy of such mega events is primarily characterised by unexpected changes in fortune, compromises and luck, which should be kept in mind as I turn first to the 1951 Festival of Britain and then to London 2012 in the next chapters.

Notes

- 1 The cover image of the book shows this rebuilding in process during 1853.
- 2 Calculating the comparison between costs over such a time span is notoriously difficult. This figure is the 'real' cost, calculated according to inflation alone since 1854; the relative labour cost would be considerably higher. See <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php>
- 3 At various times, these collections had different names. Physick calls the Museum of Manufactures, the 'Museum of Practical Art' and later the 'Museum of Ornamental Art' (1982, 9), before its combination with the collections of the School of Design into the South Kensington Museum in 1857.
- 4 Mita Taupopoki was an important leader of Ngāti Wahiao of the Tūhourangi, part of the Te Arawa iwi (an iwi is the te reo word for community, people or nation, sometimes translated as tribe). Taupopoki and the other Māori at the Festival travelled around other parts of the UK,

- Australia and North America during 1910–11. See: <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2t11/taupopoki-mita>.
- 5 In minutes from 1910, the organisers discuss the struggle to gain both governmental and colonial support in funding and participation: see LSE COLL MISC 459, Volume 1: Minutes of the Festival of Empire Committee 1909–10, 518–22.
 - 6 This had already happened in a limited manner in the 1870s, with the construction of villas around the Park's edges to service the Palace Company's debts (see Kay 2008; Atmore 2004, 199–200).
 - 7 Such interest is seen in *The Times*' 'obituary' to the Palace in 1936, for example, when the building was described as a 'cherished and venerated historical document' (*Times* 1936, 17).
 - 8 See: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/great-fire-at-crystal-palace-aka-great-fire-destro>.
 - 9 See: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/car-dump>.
 - 10 Few details on this survive, though a date for the dump's closure is given as 22 May 1942, suggesting the breaker's yard moved in sometime after this (LMA LCC/CE/WAR/2/104: 19/5/1942, Tips and Dumps for Disposal – Crystal Palace Dump).
 - 11 LMA LCC/CL/CD/03/115, Memorandum on Demolition and Clearance: 5.
 - 12 LMA CPT/011, Miscellaneous Reports: Report of the Special Committee: March 1945; 18 June 1946.
 - 13 TNA WORK 25/7/A1/B3, Preliminary history: 2.
 - 14 Hansard: HC Deb 23 February 1954, vol 524 cc216–76.
 - 15 See <https://www.crystalpalacebowl.com/> and <https://www.spacehive.com/bobmarleyplaque>.
 - 16 Visualisations of one version of this scheme can be seen at: https://www.ianritchearchitects.co.uk/projects/crystal_palace_leisure/.
 - 17 See e.g. <https://londonnewsonline.co.uk/200-new-homes-to-be-built-and-sold-off-to-fund-massive-facelift-for-crystal-palace-park/>.

5

Rebuilding the past at the South Bank Exhibition and the Festival of Britain, 1951

The South Bank Exhibition, the centrepiece of the 1951 Festival of Britain, was an unusual kind of mega event. Its portrayal of the British nation was very different from that on show at the Great Exhibition or the Festival of Empire; it dispensed with these earlier events' spectacular, globe-encompassing, braggadocio in favour of a low-key and insular 'island story'. As the Festival's director Ian Cox put it, the aim was to ask:

[w]hat is it that gives the British character and British achievement such diversity? What is the link between the past and the present that gives us such faith in the future? What provides the spark for British initiative? The answer to all seemed to lie in the great variety and diverse natural resources of the island of Britain, a mixed race of people and an innate curiosity within these people which urged them to explore and discover in every sphere. Interactions between these factors, which are permanent, provide the continuity between past, present and future. (1976, 63)

The Festival was to be a 'united act of national reassessment' and a 'corporate reaffirmation of faith in the nation's future' (Cox quoted in [Stamp 2001](#), 13). The future in question was primarily framed through a new, national vision of the United Kingdom, based on the twin themes of The Land and The People. These themes structured the displays and physical layout of the South Bank Exhibition, the content of guidebooks and other publications, and provided the narrative of the overall Festival.

The Festival and Exhibition organisers sought to ground a British national identity in a reading of the past that used archaeology, geology

and history to convey messages of continuity and unity. While this projection of the present into the deep past was enthusiastically welcomed at the time, the South Bank Exhibition can also be connected with other significant, and sometimes more contested, temporal relationships. This is particularly evident in the mega event's half-hearted commemoration of its century-old predecessor, the Great Exhibition, and in its relationships to its South Bank site's past. Once the Exhibition was over, its legacy as 'the South Bank' (and later, the Southbank Centre) became connected with broader discourses around the city's wider post-war rebuilding. The event is also increasingly drawn upon as heritage today; most recently, as inspiration for East Bank, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park's cultural and education district (discussed in [Chapter 7](#)).



Figure 5.1 The South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain in 1951, showing the edge of the Dome of Discovery and the Skylon.

Source: Photograph taken by Bernard William Lee, image uploaded by HeresyOuk. [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=73637584>.

The South Bank Exhibition, as the midpoint of this book, is also a transitional stage between the spectacular and imperial short-term focus of the Great Exhibition and the more legacy-oriented event of London 2012. While the Thames-side site of the South Bank Exhibition is best remembered for its monumental Dome of Discovery or for the Skylon – a 100-metre tall, sculptural tower made of steel and aluminium (fig. 5.1) – my primary focus is on several lesser-known aspects of this event's history, beginning with its host site.

The Festival's origins

The last major exhibition held in London prior to 1951 was the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 – the largest and most well-attended mega event ever hosted in the UK, with 27.1 million visitors over its two seasons and covering an area of 121 hectares (300 acres; see [Geppert 2010](#), 146). Like the 1911 Festival of Empire at Sydenham, the British Empire Exhibition was focussed entirely on celebrating the Empire and its future development. In contrast, some 27 years later, the Festival of Britain was to make almost no references to the Empire or the Commonwealth.

London had also played host to the 1948 Olympics, following the wartime cancellation of the city's originally planned Games in 1944. Seen by some as an unnecessarily profligate expense at a time of national financial and material hardship, the 1948 Games were seen by many others as a celebration of national resilience, as a forgetting of the Nazi Games of 1936 and came to be fondly remembered as the 'Austerity Olympics' (e.g. [Clark 1948](#); [Melford 1948](#)). It is also likely that the success and popularity of these Games at a time of financial crisis made spending money on the Festival of Britain more palatable to Parliamentarians and public alike.

Another significant ancestor to the Festival was the 1946 Britain Can Make It design exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum. This showcased the diverse range of consumer goods Britain was capable of producing and had the twin aims of encouraging exports (to attract much-needed foreign currency) and, like the Great Exhibition almost a century earlier, educating the public and domestic manufacturers about modern design processes and techniques (see [Maguire and Woodham 1997](#)). This event's emphasis on promoting British innovation and invention would come to the fore even more strongly with the Festival of Britain in 1951.

The development of the Festival of Britain and its South Bank Exhibition was a product of an unprecedented, post-war, left-wing political victory. In 1945, Labour's triumph against Winston Churchill's Conservatives resulted in rapid and far-reaching social reforms in housing, education and employment, and, most famously, in the establishment of a National Health Service and massive expansion of the Welfare State. As a result, traditional accounts of the Festival's development have branded the project as socialist and, supposedly, entirely opposed by the Conservative Party and the British establishment (e.g. [Forty 1976](#)). This rather simplistic portrayal is convincingly challenged by Iain Wilton ([2017](#)), who shows that the Festival actually enjoyed a remarkable degree of support across the political spectrum. Relatedly, although it was a particularly insular mega event, its organisers also argued that its enthusiastic promotion of British identity and values would act as a potent weapon in the struggle of ideas between democracy and totalitarianism and would position the UK as a counterpoint to the superpowers of the USSR and the USA.

The post-war British economy was in a perilous state due to the end of Lend Lease aid from the USA, the loss of overseas capital and the Labour government's enormous expenditure on rearmament and the nuclear weapons programme, and yet this period is famous for the, mostly successful, nationalisation of key sectors and the reorganisation of public services ([Edgerton 2018](#), 262, 245). Among other measures was the introduction of tariffs to prevent cheap imports (including from Commonwealth countries) and significant efforts to bring foreign investment into the UK.

Like the Great Exhibition, the impetus for the development of what became the Festival came from members of the RSA. Initial plans were drawn up in 1943 to celebrate the Great Exhibition's centenary, and originally envisaged a large-scale international exhibition, similar to the 1939–40 New York World's Fair (the last global-scale mega event prior to the war). After further development by the RSA, a committee organised by the Board of Trade in 1946 argued that any such an event would have to be even larger than the World's Fair to have any international significance ([Turner 2011](#), 13). Unsurprisingly, given major shortages of money, labour and materials, the British government decided the cost was too high to justify (ca. £70 million in 1946 and at least £1.6 billion today).

Despite this setback, the government still wanted to hold a smaller, national-scale event in some form. In 1947, responsibility for its development was passed to Herbert Morrison MP, the Leader of the

House of Commons. Morrison took a keen interest in the event (which gained its Festival moniker at this point) and established the Festival Council and appointed journalist Gerald Barry as director of the Festival Office Executive, made up of members of various quasi-governmental organisations, such as the Arts Council and Council of Industrial Design. In a speech to Heads of Local Government at the City of London's Guildhall on 8 June 1949, Barry made clear that:

[t]he purpose of the Festival of Britain is to put the whole of Britain on show, both to its own people and to the world, as a token of thanksgiving for our past and as a testimony of faith in our future.¹

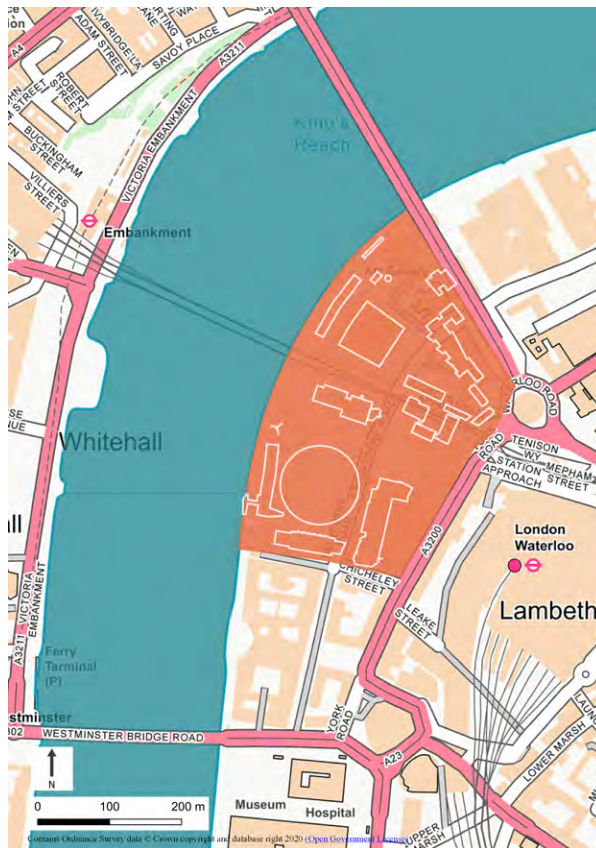


Figure 5.2 The site of the South Bank Exhibition indicated on a modern OS map. Major exhibition buildings are outlined, including the Skylon (the small three-armed structure close to the river). Further detail in [Figure 5.6](#).

Source: Site polygons by the author. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2021. Open Government Licence.

Barry envisaged the Festival, with the South Bank Exhibition at its heart, as a reaffirmation of British identity, and as a 'tonic' for post-war malaise (Barry in [Forty 1976](#), 26). Along with a Presentation Panel that made the major design decisions,² Barry planned a new kind of 'narrative' exhibition rather than an 'industrial fair' ([Forgan 1998](#), 221). Unintentionally, the style of the event would come to resemble the displays of Sydenham far more than the Great Exhibition itself, particularly in its use of replicas and educational exhibits.

The South Bank site ([fig. 5.2](#)) was chosen as the Festival's primary venue after a long process of deliberation. When plans for an international-scale fair were still afoot, the government had rejected proposals for its hosting in Hyde Park and instead offered Osterley Park, some 16 kilometres (10 miles) west of Central London. This site lacked adequate transport infrastructure and was soon rejected by the organisers on cost grounds, leading to a reconsideration of previously dismissed sites, including Battersea Park, Crystal Palace Park and the South Bank. After rejecting the preferred venue of Battersea Park, due to the large amount of scarce materials building the event here would require (although it would host the Festival's Pleasure Gardens), a cost-saving decision was made in July 1948 to build the Exhibition as part of a long-planned programme of work next to the County Hall (the London County Council [LCC] headquarters) on the South Bank.³

This was the first time a British mega event led directly to what would now be called event-led regeneration. While London's Great Exhibition, the 1911 Festival of Empire and the 1924 Empire Exhibition were all held on greenfield sites on the edge of the city or in parks, the South Bank Exhibition was built in a centrally located, densely occupied industrial district seen as in need of improvement. This practice would later become a common feature of almost all subsequent mega event development and is returned to in [Chapter 6](#) with London 2012.

The choice of the South Bank was also a result of the wartime Blitz. Around 230 hectares (568 acres) of London was considered bomb-damaged 'beyond repair', including a significant portion of what would become the Exhibition site ([Hewitt 1983](#), 264). Along with the space created by physical devastation, this area had also been selected in plans to rebuild and reconfigure London more broadly. The most influential of these was the *County of London Plan*. Like the Festival itself, this was conceived during the war and was emblematic of a desire among planners to take the 'opportunity' bomb damage presented to radically reshape urban society ([Forshaw and Abercrombie, 1943](#)). Although the aims of this scheme and its relation, the *Greater London Plan* ([Abercrombie](#)

1945), were only partially realised, its intention of moving industry out of Central London (including removing it from the South Bank), rationalising zoning, building new arterial roads and cultural venues, nonetheless had a significant impact.

The *County of London Plan*'s most immediate impact on the Exhibition was in its aim to make the South Bank into a 'great cultural centre', where Victorian and Georgian industrial premises and residential properties would be replaced with broad new streets, two theatres, a swimming pool and government office blocks. Patrick Abercrombie, the lead architect of the *Plan*, saw the South Bank as 'depressing' and 'semi-derelict', and 'lacking any sense of that dignity and order of appearance to its location at the centre of London' (Forshaw and Abercrombie, 1943, 130). Although such an opinion aligned closely with that of the Exhibition's planners, we need to be wary of reading the *Plan* as the principal driver behind the siting of the Exhibition. The South Bank was, after all, the least favoured location in the city offered to organisers, and the *Plan*'s intention for a 'great cultural centre' was already superseded by a 1948 joint Ministry of Works and LCC effort to rebuild the Charing Cross railway bridge and to provide a national theatre and a new concert hall. These plans were overtaken by plans for what became the Royal Festival Hall, which were, in turn, rapidly subsumed into the Exhibition's plans, with a final decision led by a central government-appointed Council, rather than the LCC and its architects (Stamp 2001, 23).

As well as the South Bank Exhibition, the Festival of Britain had travelling versions of its key exhibits that toured provincial cities and towns by lorry and, rather remarkably, upon the waves in HMS *Campania*, a converted aircraft carrier. Several major sub-exhibitions were also held across the UK, each of which went into greater depth on particular topics. For example, an Exhibition of Industrial Power in Glasgow, evoking the engineering exhibits of the Great Exhibition, a Farm and Factory Exhibition in Belfast and others elsewhere. Other official components of the Exhibition also took place in London, including the Pleasure Grounds (funfair) at Battersea, the Poplar Live Architecture Exhibition (an exhibit of new housing and planning based around the wholesale redevelopment of an East End district, much of which survives today), an Exhibition of Science and an Exhibition of Books. Individuals and groups were encouraged to run their own events across the four nations of the United Kingdom and to beautify their local environment for the Festival in a way that would be echoed by the Royal Coronation the following year (Leventhal 1995, 448). Numerous other events happened outside the

auspices of the Festival itself, including a South Bank: Past and Present exhibition at County Hall, illustrating the district's history.⁴

'From Mud to Festival': the history of the Exhibition site

The choice of the semi-ruined South Bank for the Festival of Britain's main exhibition has been taken as a microcosm for the rebuilding of the country itself after the war: 'a near bankrupted nation seeking a new start among desolate bomb damage' (Hutton 2014, 24). As usual, the reality was considerably more complicated. The site, though partially in ruins by the late 1940s, was no tabula rasa before the Exhibition's construction. It was nonetheless in the interests of its organisers to downplay the area's diverse past to justify its dramatic redevelopment.

This part of the south side of the River Thames, north Lambeth (originally called Lambeth Marsh), was developed in earnest from the late eighteenth century, having been sparsely inhabited prior to this and overshadowed by its busier and livelier neighbour to the east, Southwark – infamous from the late Middle Ages for its theatres, animal baiting arenas and prostitutes. Until the modern period the South Bank was often flooded by the shifting waters of the Thames, though the area was occupied (at least intermittently) as far back as the Mesolithic (see Sidell et al. 2002). As testimony to the Thames' shifting position, a 26 metre-long Roman ship, dating from the fifth or fourth century AD, was found during the construction of County Hall in 1910, just to the west of the future Exhibition site and well inland from the modern foreshore (Marsden 1994, 126–8).

The area was heavily modified in the medieval and post-medieval periods through land reclamation and the construction of the Narrow Wall, a protective earthen dyke that followed the line of today's Belvedere Road (Roberts and Godfrey 1951, 77). From the seventeenth century onwards, this part of the Surrey side of the Thames also hosted several pleasure gardens. To the east was Cuper's Gardens (also known as Cupid's Gardens), which opened in 1691 and was renowned as a lively place of merriment, with many tree-lined walks, places of refreshment and shady 'arbors' (Walford 1878, 380). Following complaints of immoral behaviour it closed in 1752 and reopened as a 'mere tea garden' (Wroth and Wroth 1896, 10). Nearby was the Belvedere Garden, which offered somewhat more sedate entertainment but eventually closed in 1785. Accompanying these was an even more disreputable, floating version; a 'man of war'

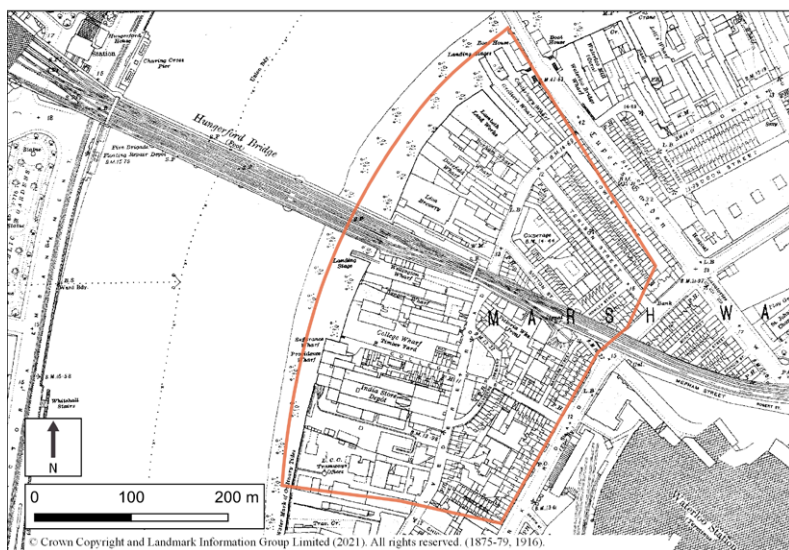


Figure 5.3 Historic Ordnance Survey maps of the Exhibition site.

Note: The upper map shows the first edition Ordnance Survey map of the area in the late 1870s. The lower map shows the last revision (published in 1916) prior to 1951. These show the gradual build-up of industry and housing prior to the development of the Exhibition site (outlined in orange). Note how far the river wall of 1916 is from this outline along the south (right) bank of the Thames – this foreshore area would be reclaimed as part of the Exhibition works in the late 1940s.

Source: © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2021). All rights reserved. (1875–9, 1916).

named *The Folly*, moored mid-Thames from the 1650s, to the north-east of the South Bank site.

By the late eighteenth century the pleasure grounds, fields and marsh were gradually replaced by industry, including timber yards, wharves and foundries, encouraged by the construction of Westminster Bridge in 1750 and Waterloo Bridge in 1817. Many homes were built around what became York Road and Waterloo Road in dense side streets, many of which survived up until their demolition for the Exhibition (fig. 5.3; see Roberts and Godfrey 1951, 7).

The most substantial structure built in this industrial period remains: the Charing Cross railway viaduct that connects to the Hungerford Bridge and Charing Cross Station on the north bank. Built in 1864, the demolitions required for this enormous brick structure had a devastating effect on the area's existing residents and forced the removal of St Thomas' Hospital in the name of 'great public utility' (*Daily News* 1860, 6). Since its construction, efforts have been made to remove the 'unlovely and unloved' viaduct and to close Charing Cross Station (Cookson 2006, 195), though both remain for now.

The Hungerford Bridge had a more graceful, though short-lived precursor: a chain-suspension footbridge, constructed by the famous



Figure 5.4 Hungerford Suspension Bridge, ca. 1845, taken by photographic pioneer Henry Fox Talbot.

Note: The bridge was demolished in 1860 in favour of the near-universally loathed Hungerford (railway) Bridge and Charing Cross viaduct that still runs across the South Bank site today.

Source: Talbotype by Henry Fox Talbot. Image ID: 767596. © Museum of London

engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and captured by Henry Fox Talbot in the pioneering early photographic image seen in [Figure 5.4](#). When it opened in 1845, this was the longest suspension bridge in the world (415 metres) and considered an engineering marvel. This served the Hungerford Market on the north side of the River Thames, which was in competition with nearby Covent Garden and, having partially burned down in 1854, went out of business, rendering the footbridge underused. Just 15 years after opening, it was torn down for the construction of the railway bridge and viaduct ([Cookson 2006](#), 186–7).

Several large industrial operations were developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on the future site of the Exhibition. The most famous of these were: the Shot Tower, built in 1826 and originally used to produce lead shot (and the only original building retained for the Exhibition); the Red Lion Brewery (built in 1836); and Coade's Artificial Stone Works (built ca. 1769). The loss of the last two structures to the Exhibition's demolition crews were particularly mourned by contemporary commentators.

The greatest influence on the development of the Exhibition site came with the Second World War and the Blitz. Bomb damage maps produced by the LCC show the devastating impact of bombing. The former Coade Works is labelled 'Damaged beyond repair', with many other large structures marked 'Completely destroyed'. In contrast, the majority of residential properties that would later be demolished for the Exhibition were marked as having damage only 'minor in nature' or that was 'not structural', despite suffering heavy bombing ([Saunders and Woolven 2005](#), map 76). Even with these varying levels of damage, a perception emerged that the entire area was irreparably ruined. The future Exhibition site was frequently described as 'blitzed', 'bombed', or covered with 'rubble' by both organisers and press (e.g. [Cox 1951](#), 7; [Times 1949](#), 10).⁵

While this is not to say the site clearance for the mega event was unnecessarily destructive, it is clear that the organisers intentionally portrayed the pre-existing site as beyond saving, despite its numerous, apparently salvageable, buildings and remaining residents. This Blitzed narrative also drew on other older narratives of slum, waste and dereliction about the South Bank. For example, the language of a *Picture Post* article ([1951](#), 11), entitled 'From Mud to Festival', relates that:

There, along the South Bank plot, was one of the dreariest faces of London's most dispiriting no-mans-lands, an abandonment of slum and confusion, dust and decay: a hopeless place. It was the tin-can

country, the Waterloo-road country, the Gully Jimpson [sic] country,⁶ the broken brickfields and the mudflats. The South Bank had nothing to lose.

Besides being understood as a grim reminder of destruction of the war, the Blitz rubble was once again seen as a substance of generative potential. As part of infrastructure preparations for the Exhibition, this waste was put to work as fill for an extension of the Thames Embankment from County Hall to Waterloo Bridge. The groundworks contractor who built the river wall, Richard Costain Ltd, was also employed to level the Exhibition site, suggesting the clearance process was tailored to match the embankment's fill requirements.

The construction of the Exhibition was thus part of a broader programme of redevelopment that relied not only on demolition but also on significant infrastructure improvements to change an entire district. In a 1952 retrospective pamphlet entitled *The Story of the Festival of Britain*,⁷ the organisers related how it was recognised that,

the occasion of the Festival might well be used to expedite the erection of suitable permanent buildings in London which would otherwise not be completed in time for the centenary; and that the reconstruction of the South Bank below County Hall was most worth bringing forth by this means.

The same document refers to the area as 'a derelict and heavily blitzed low-lying district that had become almost a slum'. This narrative of redeeming the area from ruin and waste acted as the core justification for the site's reconstruction and is now a familiar justification for urban redevelopment projects around the world. While large-scale, government-led and civic projects that necessitate the removal of existing city districts and their populations were particularly commonplace in the post-war period in European and North American cities (for archaeological approaches to this see [Mullins 2017](#); [Solari 2001](#)), such schemes occur around the world, often in the guise of culture-led regeneration (e.g. [Miles and Paddison 2005](#)), as we will see in [Chapter 6](#).

The architectural historian John Summerson poetically called post-war London '[a] city whose skyline is the bed of an ocean where the nineteenth century has foundered' (quoted in [Curtis 1996](#), 217). While in other parts of London plans were afoot to preserve ruined churches and even incorporate the new ruins into a redemptive narrative of British



Figure 5.5 View from the south of Waterloo Bridge in 1948, looking west along Belvedere Road and through the future site of the South Bank Exhibition.
Source: The National Archives, ref. WORK25/196/D1/FOB1246

resilience and identity (see [Johnson-Schlee 2021](#), 95), on the South Bank the Blitz seemed to offer a chance to start entirely anew.

The Exhibition's development was also reliant upon the removal and relocation of the South Bank's existing residents. Of all the stories of the prehistory of this mega event, accounts of these inhabitants are the hardest to find. Exact figures are uncertain, but it seems that at least several hundred people had to be relocated following compulsory purchase of the area's buildings.⁸ However, this process did not go entirely uncontested.

At an LCC-hosted meeting on 14 March 1949, the Waterloo Residents Committee expressed concern that its members, many of whom ran shops beneath their flats on the likes of Belvedere Road ([fig. 5.5](#)), were to be rehoused far from the neighbourhood to places that had no new shop properties adjacent. The Council admitted that it could not source anything better, but stressed that they extended existing leases for as long as possible prior to demolition.⁹ Turner relates that, elsewhere in the district, the exact compensation for closed businesses (including a Mrs Mackey's County Café and a tattoo parlour) and residents is unknown, but at least 20 leaseholders were evicted from Belvedere Road, along with an unknown number of rental tenants ([2011](#), 72; see endnote 9).

Despite its reputation as a bombed-out slum, for some at least, the area remained valued for its architectural heritage and nostalgic association with London's past. This was reflected not only in the South Bank: Past and Present exhibition at County Hall and in an updated *Survey of London* volume on Lambeth produced in time for the [Festival](#)

(Roberts and Godfrey 1951), but also in the words of journalists and visitors. Sam Price Myers, a teacher turned South London enthusiast, wrote in 1949 how,

[h]ere, between Waterloo Bridge and Westminster Bridge, were some streets, much bombed, of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century houses. Seen on quiet Saturday afternoons or Sundays, when I usually visited them, they held both mystery and a stimulating beauty. Who lived in them? One saw little movement; doors were seldom opened and curtains, generally of yellowed lace and closely drawn, shut out the world. Some odd withdrawn life played itself out in these forgotten streets, and, with their end, goes a vision of graceful decay ... There was something about Belvedere Road, Sutton Street, Chicheley Street and the rest that no stony embankment can replace; but we must hold on to the eternal truth that, unless we turn our faces to the future, we are lost. (1949, 76)

Price Myers saw a vibrant history lurking in 'every flagstone and sooty brick wall', a down-at-heel but defiant place that was soon to be swept away (Price Myers 1949, 97; Richards 1951a).

A forgetting of the past of a mega event site may well be a prerequisite for its hosting, but, as ever, traces of the past can linger and intrude on the present, in both individual and collective memory and physically on, or under, the ground and in the archives. At the Exhibition itself, however, far more ancient visions of the past were to take centre stage.

The Land and The People

Unlike the Great Exhibition, the South Bank Exhibition was not a mega event that focussed on games of international one-upmanship. Instead, its organisers and their political backers asked the British public to consider 'what the Land has made of the People and what the People have made of themselves'.¹⁰ This meant that, unlike the more conventional displays of British geology or history one might encounter in the Natural History Museum or British Museum, the Exhibition was to embrace a new narrative form of display under the themes of The Land and The People, with each presented in a series of sequential pavilions (fig. 5.6). Although not unlike the Courts of the Sydenham Palace (this time including labels), these pavilions were closer to the immersive format of the 1946 Britain Can Make It exhibition, in their combination of dioramas, models, slick

graphics and typography, along with modernist interior design and architectural flourishes.

The Land formed the first pavilion and theme of the *Upstream* segment of the official guidebook's recommended 'way to go round' the Exhibition, while The People was the first building and theme of the *Downstream* segment (Cox 1951, 4). These pavilions were both designed by H. T. 'Jim' Cadbury-Brown, a modernist architect who had designed part of the British pavilion for the 1939–40 New York World's Fair with Ralph Tubbs (who designed the South Bank's Dome of Discovery).

The two pavilions formed two sides of the same exhibitionary coin. The Land showed how the ancient geological landscape and resources of Britain had shaped its population's achievements and was followed by related displays on The Natural Scene (showcasing Britain's natural landscapes) and The Country, concerned with agricultural production. The People, located across the fairway from The Land, complementarily demonstrated the origin of the British and their development through waves of ancient migrations (primarily using archaeological evidence) and exploring how their utilisation of the resources of the British Isles had shaped the present. This was succeeded by cultural displays on the

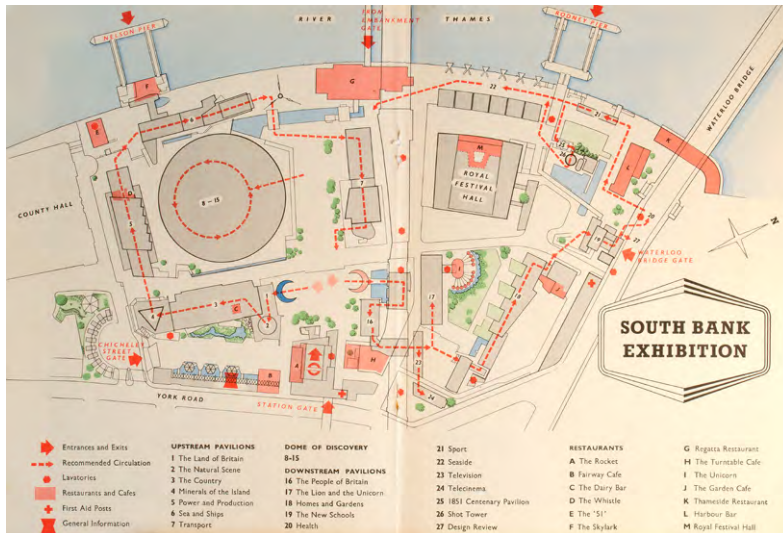


Figure 5.6 Visitors' map of the South Bank Exhibition, from the official guidebook. Note: The Land pavilion is marked at (1) while The People is opposite at (16). The other exhibits discussed in this chapter are the Dome of Discovery (8–15), the Centenary pavilion (25) and the Shot Tower (26).

Source: Reproduced from Cox 1951 (from author's collection). © Crown Copyright, 1951

character of contemporary Britain, including art and culture, manufacturing, education and health.

Visitors could begin at either The Land or The People, before returning to the other segment (Upstream or Downstream) or head to the central Dome of Discovery, the heart of the Exhibition. This building presented the results of the union of the Land and People in displays of scientific endeavour, exploration, technological progress and predictions of the future. The guidebook stressed that following the routes was recommended: '[t]he order is important', '[the] story has a beginning, middle and an end – even if that end consists of nothing more than fingerposts into the future' (Cox 1951, 8).

The Land

The exterior of The Land pavilion resembled a boulder-strewn hillside, and one entered the building through a 'sort of cave mouth' (Richards et al. 1951, 85). Although intended to look like a real hillside, using stone boulders transplanted from the Yorkshire Moors, the inclusion of an aluminium entrance 'cone' (mirrored in a twin at the entrance to The People pavilion opposite) and the raw concrete upper levels of the building acted as an intentional juxtaposition of past, present and future materials. This was also designed to make visitors reflect on their own reliance on such raw materials in the contemporary world. Once again, whether these messages were accepted by audiences is open to question, though Cadbury-Brown, the pavilion's architect, recalled that people felt so at home on this entranceway that they even picnicked among the boulders, as if on a walk in the hills (Atkinson 2012, 111).

Cadbury-Brown has been recognised as an architect who valued 'organised disorder', in contrast to more utilitarian forms of modernism, and as one who valued the mingling of the 'natural' and the 'cultural' (see Powers 2006). With this in mind, The Land's design can be understood as an effort to create a dialogue with the past that reflected on the limits of human agency and the degree of our control over the natural world. The overt integration of geological material into this structure also (unintentionally) recalled both the educational strata of the Sydenham Crystal Palace and the vast lumps of stone and coal outside the Great Exhibition.

Inside The Land, visitors encountered sections on 'The Forces of Nature', 'The Earth in Labour' and 'Episodes from the Past'. These illustrated how Britain had come to be 'the ready made island' that was

settled by its first inhabitants and how its natural wealth was ‘provided’ for the use of its people, past and present (Cox 1951, 10–11). Catherine Jolivet suggests that this vision was also an attempt to reposition war-battered Britain as ‘re-imagined as a country unblemished by attack, whose geological longevity was a testament to ancient history and inveterate national culture’ (2009, 2). The idea of a ‘ready made island’ also suggests another teleological narrative: that God, or some other force, had *always* envisaged the British emerging on these islands, with The Land’s narrative resembling the retelling of an origin myth.

In a similar way to Jacquetta Hawkes’ ‘geo-historical’ visions of the history of Britain presented in The People pavilion (discussed shortly), Victor Rotter, designer of The Land’s display, sought to take visitors on a journey through deep time and to chronicle the process of Britain’s birth, from a protean mass of geology to a contemporary nation. The geological exhibits appeared stratigraphically, with replica layers of different materials enclosing the first few rooms of the exhibit. Display panels set in replica rocks recounted the story of how:

[t]he Land of Britain was millions of years in the making. Its face tells a story of restless change of violent pressures, heat and cold, and the continuous scouring of the weather.¹¹

Other displays included a Fossil Column, an illuminated pillar of reinforced plaster with fossil designs that projected a series of 16 millimetre films on such subjects as *Fossils which come to life* (Atkinson 2012, 113–14).¹² A human connection to this raw matter of ‘our island’ is further reiterated in the guidebook:

the stones thrown up by the pioneers from their deep workings have been cracked open and studied like pages torn from a buried book, until now we know the birth pains and the growth of this motherland of ours, and how much wealth lies latent in her still. (Cox 1951, 11–12)

Unlike in the Crystal Palace’s geological exhibits, the matter of the Earth was not only a raw material to be used in industry, but portrayed as the wellspring of the British people’s existence. Unsurprisingly, just as with the exhibits of coal and diamonds at the Great Exhibition, little mention was made of those who actually extracted such materials, or indeed, of the other costs of extraction, despite the thick, and often deadly, burnt-coal smog hanging over London in this period (see Thorseim 2006b, 10).

The People

The Theme Convener for The People displays was the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes. Hawkes was an obvious choice for this role; by the late 1940s she was well recognised not only for her prolific archaeological research (in British prehistory in particular), but also for her skill in communicating history and archaeology to the public. In the run-up to the Festival, she was fresh from making a remarkable film entitled *The Beginning of History* (released in 1946). This was made for schoolchildren and presented an overview of British prehistory, including scenes of an 'Iron Age' roundhouse, filmed on a huge set at Pinewood Studios (see [Finn 2000](#); [Lorimer 2012](#)).

As well as contributing to the displays, Hawkes wrote the 'basic narrative' for the guidebook's section on The People.¹³ In her contribution, it is clear how strongly Hawkes saw the British people's past as inextricable from the British Isles' landscapes. Hayden Lorimer notes that Hawkes was also interested in the,

exciting interpretive possibilities [that] arose from a heightened sense of 'the future anterior'; where technological, utopian or artistic dreams, long since gone to ground, surface again as relics of a time to come that we can no longer fully imagine. (2012, 99)

Although Hawkes wrote the treatment for the displays and the guidebook, there was also considerable input from the designers and others (particularly James Gardner, discussed below). In her own words, she was 'an occasional consultant' ([Hawkes 1951a](#), 4), though archival sources suggest this modesty considerably undersells her work (see [100 Objects 2011](#)). The final display was intended,

to demonstrate to the public that the British people is [*sic*] very mixed in origin, and how successive groups of invaders brought their own cultures and spiritual traditions yet rapidly assumed a distinctively British character once they were settled in the island. The assumption is that this blending has proved highly fertile and has contributed to the creative energies of the nation made manifest in the whole Exhibition. ([Hawkes 1951a](#), 5)

During the same year as the Festival, Hawkes released *A Land*, a book that combined both geology and archaeology, and that used similar language

to the displays. It can be seen as a more in-depth reflection on the themes she followed at the Exhibition, in which she aimed to show:

an entity, the land of Britain, in which past and present, nature, man and art appear all in one piece. I see modern men enjoying a unity with trilobites of a nature more deeply significant than anything at present understood in the processes of biological evolution ... a land as much affected by the creations of its poets and painters as by changes of climate and vegetation. (Hawkes 1951b, preface)

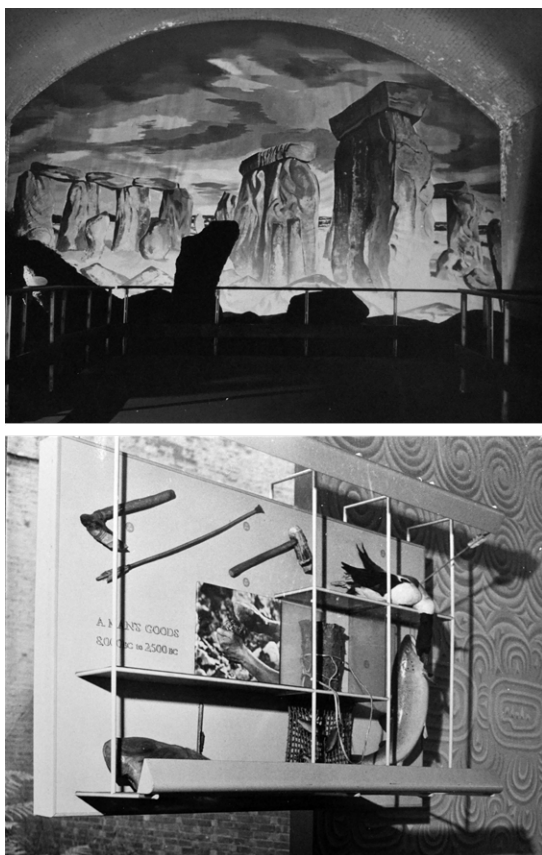


Figure 5.7 Views of the displays inside The People pavilion, at the South Bank Exhibition.

Note: Top: a mural entitled 'Stonehenge Set Piece' (created by Morris Kestleman) with a plaster megalith silhouetted in the foreground. Bottom: 'A Man's Goods 8000 BC to 2500 BC', with replicas of hunting implements, one of several such displays for each time period covered.

Source: The National Archives, ref. WORK25/216/D1/FOB5284 and FOB5272.

In the early 1950s, archaeology was hugely popular in Britain. Archaeologists such as Glyn Daniel and Sir Mortimer Wheeler featured on the TV show *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?*, which began soon after the Exhibition in 1952, while others, such as O. G. S. Crawford and Kathleen Kenyon, grabbed the attention of the public with excavations across the country. From 1947, W. F. Grimes, the Keeper of the Guildhall Museum, excavated bombed sites across London prior to their redevelopment and, most famously, discovered the Roman Temple of Mithras in 1954. Located close to the Bank of England, tens of thousands queued up every day for a chance to see the discovery. This popular interest in the past was taken up with enthusiasm by the South Bank Exhibition and the Festival's organisers. The People would be the first time that a 'scientific' archaeology display, incorporating recent research and artefacts, and curated by a professional archaeologist, was so closely integrated into a mega event.

The People pavilion was less dramatic in its external appearance than The Land, and most of its displays were concealed in the arches of the Charing Cross railway viaduct (fig. 5.7). Jutting westwards from these arches, Cadbury-Brown also constructed a small extension that he later described as 'reminiscent of the recent work by Mies van der Rohe' (2001, 63), the interior of which contained a staircase and was left mostly free of exhibits.

After entering The People through the entrance cone and across a drawbridge-like feature over a rectangular pool, visitors progressed into the railway arches through the original brickwork. The display then progressed through the history of the 'British Race' and rose gradually up a curving ramp to the first floor and Cadbury-Brown's new building. This, 'a pure grid of structure' (Powers 2006, 17), offered a dramatic aspect across to the Dome and was intended to remind visitors that the past was a means of looking out to the present and future. One then descended the stairs to sections on 'How they lived' in prehistory (fig. 5.7, bottom), moving through to 'The Romans', 'The men of the Iron Age' and then 'The Anglo Saxons', before arriving at 'The British today' in subsequent pavilions.

The People's displays were developed in consultation with Hawkes by leading exhibition designer, James Gardner.¹⁴ Hawkes' description of the exhibit in *Antiquity* (1951a, 6), written in the culture-history-based and racialised language of the time, provides a detailed summary of the contents:

The theory is that each of the periods so represented saw an addition to our racial stock with corresponding changes of culture. They can equally well be regarded as conventional chronological periods: the Mesolithic (Maglemosian), Neolithic, Bronze, Iron, Roman and pagan Saxon.

...

Looked at as a series and not only singly, these exhibits should give a good impression of the historical development of material culture and also (through the dioramas)¹⁵ some idea of man's increasing control of his environment.

No detailed layout of the exact contents of the individual displays seems to exist beyond this description but we can get a good idea of the succession of objects from the schematic plan in the guidebook, descriptions in the *Official Catalogue* (Cox 1951, 64; *Festival of Britain 1951*) and photographs and blueprints located in The National Archives.¹⁶

The opening display was entitled 'The Relics of Our Ancestors' and is described in the *Catalogue* as providing 'The Evidence' in the form of real artefacts (*Festival of Britain 1951*, 113). Blueprints and images show this section contained two 'grassy banks' where the visitor could peer through windows into the 'soil' where finds from all the periods in the exhibit were seen, seemingly, freshly excavated. One example was a stuffed rabbit (exhibit B109) and Roman Coins (B110) with the caption 'Coins in a Rabbit Burrow'. Another vitrine contained several objects labelled as:

Stone Age Flints

B101 Archaeologist's trowel; lent by Mrs Jacquetta Hawkes, 39 Fitzroy Road, London N.W.1.

B102 Mesolithic flints; University of London Institute of Archaeology (*Festival of Britain 1951*, 113)

The flint tools were from Maiden Castle, excavated by Mortimer Wheeler, the founder of said Institute of Archaeology. Confusingly, these flints were actually *Neolithic*, and indeed, the Festival Office's correspondence to the Institute specifically asks for 'six Neolithic flints', and received a positive reply from the director (Vere Gordon Childe) stating he would loan them from the Maiden Castle collection.¹⁷

Chronological errors aside, it is interesting that, along with the other finds – including a ‘Bronze Age Cist Burial’ lent by Ashford Grammar School or Roman Samian ware (*terra sigillata*) ceramics from the Guildhall Museum – these displays demonstrated archaeology as a systematic, scientific exercise (perhaps with the exception of the rabbit). The inclusion of Hawkes’ trowel, and its juxtaposition alongside this unspectacular selection of objects, demonstrates the low-key pedagogical approach of the Festival and the Exhibition more generally. Britain’s ancient roots were proven using modern science and, rather remarkably, mainly using archaeology and material culture rather than history and documentary sources. The past that was evoked and the manner of its discovery was quotidian yet (supposedly) recognisable as British culture, even if thousands of years old.

Alongside the ‘grassy banks’, were murals of rolling Wiltshire countryside interspersed with plaster megaliths replicating a section of Stonehenge (fig. 5.7, top), intended to remind people that the past and its material manifestations remain today and are connected to everyone. The guidebook further reiterated this:

Relics of all this past are now part of our island – tools, weapons, ornament, the dead still buried in the soil, Stonehenge, great tombs of the New Stone Age, the hill forts of the Iron Age Celts, the churches of the Saxons and the Normans – they are part of Britain. (Cox 1951, 65)

The same section also states that, ‘though the ancient dead are buried, it is the very blood they brought here that runs in our veins’, suggesting a *direct* biological link between the ancient past and the present (Cox 1951, 65). Though it is unclear to what extent these passages were edited by Ian Cox or others, this narrative closely resembles the displays’ fixation on the ‘racial stock’ of Britain (e.g. 1951a, 6). Hawkes’ arguments in the exhibition narrative, and in *A Land*, were not that the British people ‘today’ (i.e. in 1951) were from one, homogeneous, ancestral population, but that their contemporary and unique character was granted by ancient racial mixing as the result of successive waves of (so-called) invasions. The primary aim of *The People* was to showcase the material culture of each wave.

Interestingly, given the display’s clear end-date (i.e. with no exhibits later than the Norman Conquest of 1066 AD), the British people were also given a start date; the guidebook suggests British history only began with the rise of sea levels and the land’s isolation from the continental

European landmass. Prior to this, we are told that ‘primitive hunting and fishing men ... were the only people here’, who were tellingly not included among these ancestors (Cox 1951, 65).

Today, understanding of population movement has become more nuanced, particularly with the assistance of genetic research, and, though still subject to debate, changes to the makeup of the population of the British Isles are generally not seen as a series of sudden invasions, or otherwise forced, for the main part. Even more significantly, the traditionally understood concept of race has been conclusively proven to have no basis in scientific reality. Genetic evidence suggests that, although several, long-term migrations to what would later be called the British Isles did take place in the Neolithic, these first farmers were almost entirely replaced by populations descended from the Eurasian Steppe in the Bronze Age (e.g. Olalde et al. 2018). In contrast, the coherence of a singular ‘Celtic race’ or a unified Anglo-Saxon invasion has been widely dismissed (though more gradual processes of immigration and smaller scale conflict did take place in the early medieval period). To some extent, Hawkes was correct in asserting the diverse makeup of the ancient populations of the British Isles, but was limited by the dominant understandings of race and genetics of her time, and by the oversimplified belief that these groups had an unambiguous and direct genetic and cultural link to contemporary populations.

Following ‘The Evidence’, The People showed the periods seen by Hawkes to be the most defining points in British history, and detailed in her description above. These included no discussion of the role of Scottish, Irish or Welsh populations in British history, the Reformation, the influence of post-medieval immigration (such as Huguenot refugees), the Transatlantic slave trade, colonial immigration, or even the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Although the choices behind this focus on history only *prior* to 1066 are probably not solely down to Hawkes, they would seem to relate to her own suspicion of industrialisation as ‘a barbarian invasion’, and her association of English identity as inherently rooted in an ancient rural countryside and as quite separate from the ‘Celtic’ fringes of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (quoted by Habermann 2018, 259). It is also tempting to link such absences to the wider political environment of the 1950s and the Festival.

In 1951, the dominant political emphasis was on a British nation state that would stand alone in the world as a political and economic alternative to the USSR and the USA. Furthermore, Edgerton points out that in its (winning) 1945 election manifesto, Labour made no mention of Wales, Scotland, Ireland or the Empire (2018, 219), and it was common

for 'British' and 'Britain' to be used interchangeably (and incorrectly) with 'English' and 'England' more generally. Similarly, it is possible that, by ending, rather than beginning, with 1066, this narrative was a further attempt to move beyond the usual traditional obsession of English monarchical succession and elite history, a historiography famously lampooned even before the war in *1066 and All That* (Sellar and Yeatman 1930).

It may also be that Hawkes and the other organisers did not consider that more recent periods or subjects were 'properly' archaeological, given their later/post-medieval status. However, even as early as 1953, O. G. S. Crawford felt able to argue that '[t]here is no period whose remains are not susceptible to archaeological investigation', and, cheerfully, that, '[f]uture archaeologists will perhaps excavate the ruined factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the radiation of the atoms bombs have died away' (1953, 15, 19). Hawkes herself devotes several chapters in *A Land* to the post-medieval period and considers the Industrial Revolution in a chapter on 'Land and Machines', despite her suspicions (1951b, 199–200).

Hawkes was aware of the temporal limitations of the displays and acknowledged that missing this last millennium was 'simplistic'. However, her argument was that it was the 'fertile mingling' of these earlier 'invasions', and 'man's increasing control of his [sic] environment' that were the key moments that made Britain the country it was today (1951a, 6–7). The language of the guidebook and Hawkes' writings reiterates just how nationalistic and introspective an enterprise this pavilion and the whole Festival was, a fact somewhat at odds with commonplace pronouncements that the event was socialist and progressive. This is not to suggest Hawkes herself used ideas of 'rootedness' in a jingoistic or racist sense (see Habermann 2018, 261); indeed, she clearly saw immigration and ethnic diversity in a positive light. However, suggestions that the current population of the UK is directly descended from a pure 'stock' of ancient peoples or 'invasions' are simplistic and dangerously misleading. Nonetheless, such claims continue to be made in the present and a politically charged era of renewed nationalism and with a similarly intense popular interest in archaeology.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the dangers posed by using archaeology to 'prove' that contemporary national borders and populations had ancient and unchanging roots were already well recognised, as was the radical potential for archaeology going further than simply reasserting the traditions and agendas of the present. In a major 'Conference on the Future of Archaeology' held at the University of

London Institute of Archaeology in 1943, the discipline was even portrayed as ‘a science of how to manage the future’ (Peers quoted in [Moshenska 2013](#), 133; [CFA 1943](#)). The Egyptologist Elise Baumgartel, who had fled from Nazi Germany also cautioned at this event that, ‘We must remember the dangers of the misuse of archaeology’, referring to the Nazis’ misrepresentation (and fabrication) of archaeological discoveries to support their lies about so-called Aryan ancestors and to justify their genocidal territorial expansion. As a counter to such misuses, Grahame Clark, a pioneering Mesolithic and scientific archaeologist, also emphasised the potential for archaeology to create an internationalist and unified history of humanity (in [Moshenska 2013](#), 136), and presented quite a contrast with the narrative of The People display some eight years later.

Discovery

At the centre of the Exhibition was the Dome of Discovery. This huge reinforced concrete structure displayed contemporary innovations through exhibits of inventions, tales of discoveries and examples of British exploration of the land, sea, sky and outer space. Once again, a narrative of a British exceptionalism featured strongly, but, unlike in The Land or The People pavilions, it was primarily focussed on scientific methods and technological progress, rather than on particular periods or artefacts. David Edgerton sees such exhibits as emblematic of a wider ‘invention chauvinism’, and muses that, given the sometimes hyperbolic narrative of British innovation at the time, the average citizen ‘could [have been] forgiven for believing that Britons had been the sole inventors of jet engines, radar, television, [and] atom bombs’ ([2018](#), 188).

Exploration of the past and a need to situate the British in time did not escape the attention of this scientific nationalism. As part of the Dome’s Earth section, ‘Archæology’ was said to be the latest field for exploration of ‘the library of the past’ of our planet ([Cox 1951](#), 46). Instead of repeating the use of the ancient past of the British Isles as in The People pavilion, the Dome’s exhibits centred on the discipline’s contemporary fieldwork projects and its cutting edge methodologies (despite the peculiar arcane use of ‘æ’ throughout the exhibit). The major emphasis was on work conducted overseas at sites such as Mohenjo-Daro in Pakistan and the city of Ur in what is now Iraq. Such an overseas focus characterised several of the exhibits in the Dome, in contrast to the majority of the rest of the Exhibition, where links to foreign countries

– not to mention the Empire or Commonwealth – were barely mentioned. Under the cover of ‘Discovery’ colonial narratives re-emerged – albeit briefly – and resurrected the ‘civilising’ rhetoric of the Festival of Empire seen earlier. This was also seen in other displays of the British ‘contribution to the welfare of mankind’ and the Dome’s exhibits on improving agriculture, water supply and communications around the world (Cox 1951, 43).

In the guidebook we also find a section on the Dome’s displays of the ‘mineral wealth’ of the Commonwealth. It describes how the ‘riches’ in the colonies benefit the home nation, and how skills and equipment honed on some of Britain’s, by-now ‘worked out’, mineral reserves were being turned to overseas work (Cox 1951, 46). Similarly, in a section of the Dome (confusingly also called ‘The Land’), the guidebook explains how the ‘great witness of British Exploration by land is the Commonwealth of Nations’ and how, ‘Our sons and daughters have left Britain and set up their own homes overseas; our adopted children are coming into their own estates’ (Cox 1951, 43). Such language appears strikingly similar to that of the Festival of Empire some 40 years earlier, emphasising colonial benevolence and British expertise. As in 1911, the resources of these distant places are portrayed as there for the taking and any sense of local expertise or labour involved in their extraction is absent in favour of a narrative of pioneering British boffins.

An extraction of the wealth of the human past was treated no differently from the resources in the Dome. In discussing the three famous archaeological sites of Mohenjo-Daro, Ur and Minos (Crete), they are described as:

just three of the lost achievements of the past that the method and imagination of British archaeologists have brought to light again to aid us when we pause to think about the progress of mankind. (Cox 1951, 46)

The pottery artefacts for the Mohenjo-Daro exhibit (a complete beaker and several ceramic sherds), like the flints discussed above, came from the Institute of Archaeology and Mortimer Wheeler’s late 1940s excavations (Wheeler 1968).¹⁸ The choice of these sites reflected both earlier and ongoing colonial relationships: Mohenjo-Daro was within the British Dominion of Pakistan; while Ur in Iraq was a former British client state with British military forces still present in 1951. With Minos, although the British Empire had had little involvement with Crete since the late nineteenth century, Britain effectively acted as an ‘imperial’

archaeological power there (Trigger 1984, 363–4). Britain had the influence, ability and power to excavate what and where its archaeologists liked through a combination of private and state capital and political clout (for example, Arthur Evans' famous excavations at Knossos, also on Crete, from 1900). Such a global reach was positioned as a heroic and progressive enterprise in the guidebook and in the Exhibition and, again, was described as benefitting all of 'mankind'.

The Dome's exposition of British archaeologists' continuing ability to conduct research in the most ancient civilisations of the world, even after the beginning of de-colonisation, was a significant gesture. This is now likely to be seen as a form of archaeological 'scientific colonialism' (see Nicholas and Hollowell 2007), but these showcase excavations provided another modern and future-oriented conduit to show British ingenuity and were presented as the equal to nearby displays of polar exploration or the development of atomic power.

Victorian ghosts

While geology and archaeology provided a source for both national identity and modern scientific pride, these were not the only temporal narratives at play at the South Bank Exhibition. While the Festival of Britain was originally conceived of as a means to celebrate the 100-year-anniversary of the Great Exhibition, it can often seem as if the only link between the two events was the date itself, given the relatively few signs of this Victorian ancestor actually on show.

Commemoration of the Great Exhibition had originally been intended to feature far more heavily in the Festival, with extensive research carried out by a group called The Great Exhibition Centenary Official Committee in the earliest planning stages.¹⁹ However, by the late 1940s, in an era still characterised by severe post-war austerity, there was a desire to promote a 'New Britain', which resulted in a greater emphasis on the future rather than on celebrating the recent past (Hewison 1995, 50). It is therefore understandable that the Festival's organisers would seek to downplay the old world of the Victorian era (and its Great Exhibition) along with its *laissez-faire* political attitudes (Kynaston 2007, 9). More pragmatically, as Herbert Morrison later revealed (discussed by Conekin 2003, 86), the governing Labour Party's decision to hold the Festival on the centenary was, at least in part, simply a pretext to gain the support of the monarchy and to sate the more 'Sibthorp-like'²⁰ elements of the Conservative Party who might oppose it.

Despite an apparent lack of enthusiasm among the Festival's organisers, the South Bank Exhibition did still manage to commemorate the Great Exhibition with an 1851 Centenary pavilion, a small building located next to the Shot Tower. The Centenary pavilion (an architectural mock-up of which is seen in [Figure 5.8](#)) is described by the guidebook as recreating in miniature, 'model form, the original Crystal Palace and its Royal Opening in 1851' ([Cox 1951](#), 5). The interior was designed by James Gardner (designer of The People pavilion) and consisted of a large model of the Hyde Park Palace and a diorama of the 1851 Royal Opening with '50 figurines representing Queen Victoria, the Prince Consort [Albert] and other personalities'.²¹ Approximately 1,100 times smaller than the original structure, the pavilion was nonetheless said by the *Architectural Review* to have been, 'charmingly designed, with just enough period character – faintly ironical without being disrespectful' ([Richards 1951b](#)).

Somewhat ironically, the scale model of the Palace, the diorama and the pavilion outlasted the rest of the Festival by at least a decade. After the closure of the Exhibition, several attempts were made to relocate the Centenary pavilion to the 'real' ruined Palace at Sydenham and the LCC purchased it from the Festival organisers in 1952. However, by 1961 the structure was corroded and it was finally demolished. The Palace model fared better and was displayed in County Hall until at least 1961, and later re-emerged in the collection of the Museum of London (along with its 'figurines'), where it remains in storage.²² The desire in the



Figure 5.8 An architectural model of the 1851 Centenary pavilion that was erected at the South Bank Exhibition. The pavilion was a replica of the original Crystal Palace that housed a small display on the history of the Great Exhibition (seen mocked up at centre).

Source: The National Archives, ref. WORK 25/197/D1/FOB1475 (cropped).

immediate aftermath of the event to preserve such materials seems to suggest at least some appreciation of the Victorian event by the later 1950s, and a recognition that the original mega event lacked any commemoration other than the ruins in Sydenham.

The Centenary display formed a pair of exhibits with the Shot Tower, the latter saved from demolition after public outcry over the threatened loss of this last trace of the old South Bank. The Tower's pinnacle was used in the Exhibition as the location of a powerful searchlight and also housed a radio dish, which bounced signals off the surface of the Moon that were relayed to the Dome of Discovery (Cox 1951, 85–7). The Tower was also described as having 'a small exhibit showing the development of the South Bank site', though no further details of the contents of this seem to be recorded beyond the listing in the guidebook (Cox 1951, 86–7), the *Official Catalogue* (Festival of Britain 1951) or in the Festival archives.²³ Thus, the absent past of the South Bank does finally seem to have been recognised – although it is possible this was something of a last-minute addition, given the original plans to remove the Tower.

The Shot Tower with its small historical exhibition, positioned next to the replica Crystal Palace(s), were the token Victorians in an otherwise modernist landscape. Like the Centenary pavilion, the Shot Tower survived the Festival by a whole decade, then, despite having Grade II statutory protection, it was demolished for the construction of the Queen Elizabeth Hall. This signalled the final end of the old South Bank and the beginning of today's cultural quarter, Southbank.²⁴

The end of the Exhibition

On 5 October 1951, just five days after the close of the Festival of Britain and the Exhibition, Prime Minister Clement Attlee dissolved his government and called a General Election for 25 October. This was an attempt to increase Labour's slender Parliamentary majority just 20 months after the previous election. Despite winning around 220,000 more votes than the Conservatives (on an 82.6 per cent voter turnout), under the first-past-the-post system, the Labour Party lost to a resurgent Winston Churchill, who won with a majority of 26 seats.

The new government wasted no time in removing what some of its members had seen as a 'folly' on the South Bank. The new Minister of Works, David Eccles, stated that he was 'unwilling to become the caretaker of empty and deteriorating structures' on the site (quoted in Philips 2004, 103).

Eccles then developed plans to use the site temporarily as a garden to celebrate the upcoming Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

Some have seen the removal of the Festival and Exhibition venues as part of a wanton, Conservative-led, 'cultural vandalism' (e.g. [Forty 1976](#)), but this is somewhat misleading. Like the Great Exhibition 100 years previously, the South Bank Exhibition was always planned to be temporary and, beyond Abercrombie's earlier vague aspirations for a 'great cultural centre' and the Festival Hall, there was no preplanned legacy programme. The cost of demolition was split between the LCC and the government, who continued to develop plans to construct new Civil Service offices close to County Hall. Almost everything on site was levelled in 1952, with the exception of the Telecinema (later part of the National Film Theatre), one of the Exhibition's restaurants and the Centenary pavilion and Shot Tower.²⁵ Those exhibits not returned to their owners were sold at an auction in the converted agricultural exhibit, which was encircled with barbed wire to prevent theft. Curiously, the live chickens that had been shown in this building were slaughtered the day after the Festival closed and then sold to the demolition workers for 10 shillings each ([Times 1951](#)).

The Exhibition site would remain undeveloped until the construction of the Shell Centre from 1957–63, the headquarters of the major oil company, Royal Dutch Shell. This was on the site of The Land pavilion, as Johnson-Schlee puts it, '[e]ither appropriately or ironically' recalling its geological displays ([2021](#), 103). The Shell Centre later underwent comprehensive redevelopment, including the demolition of much of its original structure, for a complex of new residential towers, completed in 2020. The Centre's emergence was a result of the failure of the original 1950s plans for government offices, which were unpopular with the public and written off as unaffordable ([Hutchinson and Williams 1976](#), 160).

During the 1960s, a host of newer cultural institutions sprang up around the Charing Cross viaduct, with a permanent National Film Theatre constructed by 1957, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room built on the site of the Shot Tower in 1967 and the Hayward Gallery opening the following year.

Of all the buildings left (however briefly) after the Exhibition, it is the Skylon that continues to attract the most interest – in part due to its uncertain final resting place. Some suggest it was dumped in the Thames or the River Lea soon after the end of the Exhibition. Others believe that, along with the roof of the Dome of Discovery, the Skylon was melted down by George Cohen and Sons' scrapyards in Canning Town (close to

today's Olympic Park) and partly turned into commemorative letter openers (BBC 2011a, 09:50–17:04).²⁶ The comedic ignominy of these once futuristic buildings being turned into what, today, might seem old-fashioned and extraneous items, once again provides a striking example of the unexpected trajectories of mega event materials. Much like the components of the Great Exhibition and the Sydenham Palace, these scarce remnants continue to persist long after their event is a distant memory.

Legacies

Almost no trace of the Exhibition is left on the South Bank, with the exception of the Festival Hall. Interspersed between the later cultural venues and Jubilee Gardens – a park on the site of the Dome of Discovery – one encounters a barrage of pop-up entertainment at different times of year, including a Bavarian Beer Garden, a cow-shaped inflatable comedy venue and vast Christmas Markets. Within the railway arches – the only other intact architecture used by the mega event still standing – a steak restaurant and bars occupy volumes that previously hosted The People displays.

Since the late 1990s, the area has been increasingly commercialised as a result of rising tourist numbers, particularly following the development of the London Eye in 2000 (a 135-metre high observation wheel) and the refurbishment of the Royal Festival Hall in 2005. The Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery and the Royal Festival Hall and much of the exterior spaces are owned and administered (in 2021) by Southbank Centre, an arts and cultural charity. The Centre (excluding footfall to the separately owned Eye, British Film Institute and National Theatre) is now the fifth most visited tourist attraction in the UK, with over 4.3 million visitors in 2019.²⁷

The cultural institutions that emerged on the Exhibition site – particularly the LCC-built Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Purcell Room and the Hayward Gallery – have been recognised as among the most significant examples of modernist architectural heritage in the UK. In spite of this, their concrete aesthetic has seen them threatened at various times with demolition and unsympathetic wholesale redevelopment (Aelbrecht 2017). Surprisingly, not only have recommendations for their heritage listing been repeatedly rejected by the UK Government – despite English Heritage calling them ‘the finest collection of post-war public buildings in England’ (quoted in Madgin et al. 2017, 589) – but in 2014 they were also

made 'immune' from any future listing by the Secretary of State, which was renewed in February 2020. In contrast, the earlier, softer, modernism of the Royal Festival Hall (extended between 1962 and 1965) appears more appreciated and was granted Grade I listing in 1981.

The Southbank complex has been subject to contested plans for redevelopment and remodelling almost since its establishment. In 2013, plans were made to build a Festival Wing, joining the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Hayward Gallery, to better connect the different buildings and to increase event and rehearsal space. This Wing was planned to lie to the east of the Queen Elizabeth Hall and above the Hayward but it faced strong opposition from English Heritage, the Twentieth Century Society and the National Theatre, given its large scale and dominant glass design. The most sustained and successful opposition came from skateboarders, who used the Undercroft space beneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

The Undercroft was always intended as a public space by the original designers of the Hall (the London County Council and then Greater London Council Architects Departments) and has played host to skateboarders since 1976 and is the 'oldest recognised and still skated skateboarding space in the world'.²⁸ Despite the skaters' long-standing presence, this space was called 'underused' by Southbank Centre and earmarked for new restaurants and shops to help fund the wider scheme. After the threat to the Undercroft was revealed in 2013 (along with plans to create a replacement purpose-built skatepark under Hungerford Bridge), the skaters launched a campaign, under the name of Long Live Southbank, to prevent the site from being developed. This attracted 150,000 signatures in support and resulted in a large number of objections being submitted to Southbank Centre's planning application. The skaters' plight was eventually recognised by the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and led to an agreement in September 2014 to scrap the development plans and to retain and expand the skateable space in the Undercroft.

During this campaign, under the banner 'You can't move history: you can secure the future', the skateboarders made sophisticated use of arguments more often found in intangible and architectural cultural heritage debates (see [Madgin et al. 2017](#)). They demonstrated that their presence was not only legitimate, but also a key contributor to the social valuation of the spaces of the South Bank and its appeal to many different stakeholders. The skaters and their allies drew on both the materiality of the site and the practices (of skateboarding), which enabled them to defend a vibrant and living heritage space ([Madgin et al. 2017](#), 596; [LLSB 2015](#)).

After the Festival Wing plans were abandoned in 2014, a smaller amount of Heritage Lottery funding was secured to revitalise and conserve the Hayward Gallery, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room. No substantial new structures were built, instead the focus was on restoring and conserving the existing buildings. Completed in 2018, this also left the Undercroft and other public spaces intact and improved, and won plaudits for its sensitivity to the original architecture (e.g. [Moore 2018a, 2018b](#)).

Despite its structures' absence, the heritage of the Exhibition has played some role in influencing the design choices that have been made here – particularly with the celebration of the 50th anniversary in 2011 when new venues, cafés, pop-up uses and improved public spaces were implemented and then made into popular permanent features ([Aelbrecht 2017, 338](#)). The history of the Festival and its Exhibition is also remembered in a series of small-scale displays – The Story of '51 – located in the Royal Festival Hall, while Southbank's website and brand identity continues to draw on the Exhibition's legacy in promoting the destination. Although the line of travel between the 1951 Exhibition and the subsequent development of the contemporary arts and cultural venues on the site was not a direct one – much like the Great Exhibition and South Kensington – it is undeniable that the mega event set an important precedent, along with Abercrombie's (and others') earlier redevelopment plans. As will be discussed in [Chapter 7](#), a strong desire to draw upon the nostalgia associated with the Exhibition and the South Bank is seen in the ongoing East Bank project in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

The heterotemporalities of the Exhibition

The South Bank Exhibition marked an important change in London's hosting of mega events. While superficially resembling the Great Exhibition (and sometimes the Sydenham Palace), the Exhibition rejected the all-encompassing scope of the earlier event and venue in favour of an autochthonous, national-scale discourse. The Exhibition as 'one continuous interwoven story', as Ian Cox memorably described it, attempted to create a new, post-imperial, heritage narrative, one in which the material evidence of the origins and ingenuity of the British 'race' was employed to suggest a deep-rooted national identity. Unlike London's earlier mega events, this identity was now firmly grounded in the soil of the British Isles rather than by 'ruling the waves'. Geology and archaeology in particular served as the primary means by which a heterogeneous, yet

nationalistic, vision of the British people could be demonstrated, one encompassing ‘the evidence’ of both their ancient origins at home and their heroic explorations abroad.

Such material was also employed to reiterate the ‘primogeniture’ of the British to an ancient British Isles, said to be ‘ready made’ for them millions of years ago. These displays set up the nation as extending far back into prehistory, grounded both literally and figuratively in the land, yet inseparable from the blood of its people. Though the British were understood as having emerged from a ‘mixed stock’, this was a narrative spatially bounded by the White Cliffs of Dover and temporally delimited to the early history of England alone, and the totemic date of 1066 AD. It remains open as to how widely this island story was accepted by the visiting public, and although simplistic narratives that equate Britishness with whiteness (and Englishness) still persist, in the decades following the Exhibition such assumptions were challenged by the recognition of more recent and continued immigration to the UK, not to mention extensive new archaeological evidence about these islands’ ancient inhabitants (e.g. [Devlin 2018](#)).

The South Bank Exhibition also had a significant impact on the transformation of the centre of the city, even though London itself barely featured in the displays. Understandably, given the national theme of the event, a more generalised British natural and cultural history was favoured over the still-persisting local past and present of north Lambeth. This was also the first time in London’s history of hosting mega events that the supposed slum conditions of a host site were used as justification for developing an event, but it would not be the last.

Thus, instead of trying to define a distinct, singular legacy of the Festival of Britain and the South Bank Exhibition, we should think of the complex heritage of this event as at the core of what persists in the absence of its physical traces. Like its low-key commemoration of the Great Exhibition, this Festival heritage is not always agreed upon nor is it uncontested – rather than a statement of historical fact, it comprises a set of values and remembrances that are adapted to the needs of the present.

Turning now to my last case study at the Queen Elizabeth Park and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we will once again see how competing visions of the past, present and future are invoked in the name of transforming the future of London and the UK.

Notes

- 1 LMA MCC/CL/GP/02/286 Meeting of Head of Local Government of England and of Wales Held by the Lord Mayor of London at the Guildhall, London 8 June 1949. Text of Speeches: 3.
- 2 This panel was advised on content by 18 advisory panels containing experts in their field, who suggested exhibits, means of display and design (LMA ACC/3743/E/006 The Story of the Festival of Britain: 7).
- 3 LMA ACC/3743/E/006: 5–6.
- 4 See TNA WORK 25/244 and PRO 30/76/266 for the Colonial Art exhibition and LMA LCC/CL/GP/02/072 for the South Bank Past and Present exhibit.
- 5 LMA ACC/3743/E/006: 6.
- 6 Gully Jimson is the protagonist of a 1944 novel, *The Horse's Mouth*, by Joyce Cary, about an unscrupulous struggling artist who lives in a run-down area near the Thames (see [Christensen 2011](#)).
- 7 LMA ACC/3743/E/006: 6.
- 8 The 1939 Register Data, though not including all streets, includes almost 250 individual households listed for major streets, including Belvedere Road, Belvedere Crescent, York Road, Manners Street, Tennison Street and Howley Place/Terrace (from <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/maps/51.503694%20-0.116907>). Counting the number of obvious residential properties on a pre-exhibition OS map vs the first National Grid Edition produced after the Festival, shows the disappearance of around 280 houses. But this misses those subdivided into flats or apartment blocks, so it is likely to be a substantial underestimate of the population, even following destruction of property in the war.
- 9 LMA LCC/CL/GP/02/081, 14/3/1949 Committee report of the South Bank Sub-Committee: 1–2.
- 10 LMA ACC/3743/E/006: 5.
- 11 TNA WORK 25/153/C2/SB12A-Gen/21P, South Bank – Origins of the Land Pavilion – SB12A Drawings by V. Rotter: England's Climate [incorrect label].
- 12 Original blueprints can be seen at TNA WORK/25/153/C2/SB12A-Gen/12N, South Bank – Origins of the Land Pavilion – SB12A Drawings by V. Rotter: Display Units.
- 13 TNA WORK 25/256/G1/C2/435, Jacquetta Hawkes. Basic Narrative of 'People of Britain' Section of *Thames Bank Guide Book*.
- 14 Gardner was employed in the war as a camouflage artist and designer of a wide array of government poster campaigns. He'd been involved heavily in the Britain Can Make It exhibition and went on to become one of Britain's most respected exhibition and museums designers. His work can be seen at: <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/brightondesignarchives/1998/01/01/james-gardner/>.
- 15 Several of these survive to this day in the Jewry Wall Museum, Leicester – see <http://attic-museumstudies.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/what-to-do-with-historic-displays.html>.
- 16 e.g. TNA WORK 25/153/C2/SB12B4B/4N, South Bank – Origins of the Peoples Pavilion – SB.12B. Drawings by James Gardner: Arches Display – General Layout.
- 17 IOA 1950-51 – FoB A, 26/10/1950 Re. proposed free loan from Normanton; 3/11/1950 Loan receipt from IoA received by M. Richardson.
- 18 IOA 1950-51 – FoB B, 12/03/51 Archaeology – Dome of Discovery: 2.
- 19 LMA ACC/3743/E/006: 3.
- 20 Colonel Sibthorp's opposition to the Great Exhibition is discussed in [Chapter 3](#).
- 21 LMA LCC/CL/GP/02/079, 18/2/1952 South Bank Site – 1851 Centenary Pavilion.
- 22 LMA LCC/CL/GP/02/079, 25/8/61 Report from Architect of Council to General Purpose (Special Development and Art Sub-committee). The model and figurettes manufactured by Cockade Ltd. can be viewed online at: <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/search/#!/results?pageSize=35&page=1&search=AND%3Bmaker%3BCockade%20Ltd>.
- 23 No material on this was found, despite extensive searching in the London Metropolitan Archives and National Archives, and it does not appear in contemporary reviews of the Exhibition that I have found.
- 24 LMA GLC/AR/HB/02/0233, 10/04/61 Letter from Clerk of the Council to Secretary of HM Minister of Housing and Local Government; 01/06/61 Memo re. Shot Tower demolition.
- 25 LMA LCC/CL/ESTAB/02/079, 4/01/52 Conference on South Bank Exhibition Area – Interim Development.

- 26 An image of such a letter opener can be seen at: <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/letter-opener-festival-britain-1952-1778589136>.
- 27 See <https://www.alva.org.uk/details.cfm?p=423>.
- 28 <http://www.llsb.com/theproject/>; See also: 'You Can't Move History – But You Can Secure the Future' (2015, dir. Winstan Whitter) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNOh3gSMZGw>.

6

Games Time: London 2012 and the absent present

Mud. Oily water. Centuries-old timber, half-rotten and rimed with frost. A sharp smell of creosote permeating through my mask that reminds me of painting my gran's shed a decade previously. It is early December 2007 and my colleagues and I are digging on the site of the future Olympic Park in Stratford, East London. Ensnared in protective suits, gloves and respirators, many archaeologists worked here between 2006 and 2009 to document the traces of the past before the Games could be built. My experience of working as an archaeologist on the main London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games site, had an unexpectedly significant effect on my career and eventually led to the writing of this book. This chapter and the next emerge from this and bring my consideration of London's mega events up to the present day.

Reflecting in the years afterwards on my very small part in 'Making the Games' (as the contemporary slogan went), I began to think about how this mega event had engaged with a broader conception of the past and time more generally, beyond the buried remnants we found. I became interested in the event's use of temporal narratives that often seemed to end rather too neatly with the utopian visions of the Park of 2012 and its planned legacies. Such storytelling deployed the language of renewal and regeneration, where new legacies would be created upon the Games' host site, evoking an almost biological sense of (re)birth and heritability. However, such a future required an Other that could set it apart; the immediate history of the pre-Olympic Park provided this in the form of a supposed industrial wasteland.

While it is true that the future Olympic Park's 226 hectares (560 acres) in the Lower Lea Valley were no paradise at the time of the Games Bid (from 2003 onwards) – it contained derelict buildings, heavily



Figure 6.1 The former Olympic Stadium in Stratford, during its conversion from Games Time operation in 2014 to London Stadium (looking north-east from The Greenway footpath).

Note: The Stadium is located on the site of the Marshgate Trading Estate, whose businesses had to move out in 2007 after being served with a compulsory purchase order to allow construction to begin. The ArcelorMittal Orbit sculpture and viewing platform is seen on the right.

Source: Photograph by the author.

polluted ground and watercourses, and it was bordered by some of the UK's most deprived districts¹ – the charge of wasteland was a substantial oversimplification. What follows in this chapter and the next, is an attempt at a counter-archaeology of this wasteland and a re-examination of the Olympian present and future the narrative helped to create. The transformation of the Games site and stories of its past, present and future created a deeply contested terrain, where differing visions of time clashed with one another. In this dialectical landscape the incongruities and contradictions of Stratford's history – pre- and post-Olympics (fig. 6.1) – were continually resurrected and reinterred, forgotten and remembered, and acted to support and to challenge the legitimacy of the mega event.

The emergence of London 2012

London's bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games emerged from a 1997 British Olympic Association feasibility study, and

followed an earlier failed attempt to secure the 2000 Games for Manchester. The feasibility study originally envisaged bidding for the 2008 Games, but emphasis soon shifted to 2012 after a realisation that the UK could not beat the better-prepared efforts of Paris or Beijing (Masterman 2012, 30–1). Plans for a London Bid survived in limbo for several years in the face of political debacles connected with other UK cultural and sporting mega projects in the early 2000s – particularly the over-budget Millennium Dome, the tortuous rebuilding of Wembley Stadium and the withdrawal of London’s Bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championship.

It was only following the success of the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester that plans for London 2012 attracted broader political support and funding, leading to further studies estimating costs and practicalities in 2002 and early 2003 (Lee 2006, 5–8). It was at this point that Stratford and the Lower Lea Valley were suggested as the preferred site, having, what Mike Lee (the Bid’s Director of Communications and Public Affairs) called, ‘a vast corridor of wasteland’ that was seen as perfect for development (2006, 6). Along with a broader swathe of the East End, this area had already attracted funding through the Mayor of London’s London Development Agency (LDA) and was linked to the estuary-spanning Thames Gateway regeneration project (see Cohen and Rustin 2008; Lee 2006, 13). Stratford was also favoured due to its excellent transport links by rail, London Underground and road, and for its proximity to City Airport and the, soon-to-be opened, Channel Tunnel Rail Link.

In May 2003, London 2012 Ltd was formed to put together a Bid to host the Games with the backing of central government and the Mayor of London, the latter eventually brought £900 million in LDA funds to the project (and more from a Council Tax precept on the city’s residents). This also integrated the hoped-for mega event into the city’s pre-existing Lower Lea Valley ‘Opportunity Area’, as part of London’s overall spatial development strategy, *The London Plan* (Mayor of London 2004, 249). The Bid document was then submitted to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in January 2004, while outline planning permission was granted for the Stratford site in October 2004.

The IOC announced the final decision on which city would host the 2012 Games on 6 July 2005 in Singapore. London’s Bid had initially faced eight others: Madrid, Moscow, New York City, Paris, Havana, Leipzig, Rio de Janeiro and Istanbul. The latter four were eliminated in a first-round vote in 2004. At the July meeting, Sebastian Coe – the London Bid’s Chairman and former gold medal-winning Olympian – is credited as

having swayed the odds in the city's favour, in spite of stiff competition from Paris. Coe delivered a rousing speech and appealed to the Olympic movement's youth-oriented agenda by filling his supporters' chairs with East End schoolchildren. The IOC awarded the Games of the XXX Olympiad to London, with a majority of just four votes over Paris.

After the Bid was won, and in the grim wake of a devastating act of terrorism on London's transport system only a day after the Singapore meeting (7 July 2005), planning and developing the Stratford site and the other London and UK locations proceeded apace. Demolition and clearance began at Stratford in 2006 with the construction of two tunnels for 'undergrounding' the area's power pylons, seen as having long-'blighted' the area (e.g. [London Assembly 2009](#), 21). The LDA then took vacant possession of the remainder of the Park area in the summer of 2007, after existing residents and businesses left following a compulsory purchase order (CPO). The initial budget for the Games, including all venues, was around £2.4 billion; this rose to a final total of £8.77 billion (excluding private/sponsor contributions and not including funding later allocated for legacy development; [BBC 2013](#)).

Development was overseen by the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA), a non-departmental governmental body that also acted as planning authority for the site (a task that would normally fall to existing local governments, such as the London Borough of Newham, in which much of the site is located). The ODA's work included: the clearance of nearly all existing structures; the remediation of contaminated ground and watercourses; and construction of permanent and temporary stadia, an International Media Centre and the Athletes' Village. This was accompanied by new infrastructure that included river walls, bridges, two combined heat-power stations and numerous other facilities. Once construction was complete, responsibility for the site and for running the mega event moved to the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG). The Olympic Games then operated from 27 July to 12 August and the Paralympics from 29 August to 9 September [2012](#).

The Games' legacy phase began immediately after the Paralympics closed, with emphasis on the redevelopment of the Park into a mixed-use, residential, commercial and leisure district that would retain the major stadia and large areas of green space. This work was originally administered by the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), established in 2009. Plans evolved from the vision of legacy present in the original Bid and in the planning applications and became the 'The Olympic Legacy Masterplan Framework' (e.g. [DCMS 2008](#); L.B. Hackney et al. 2009;

Davis 2020, 840). The OPLC was then wound up and replaced with the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) on 1 April 2012. The LLDC, which has more extensive powers over land and planning than its predecessor, continues to administer what is now called Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, as well as parts of several bordering districts. I return to both the operational phase of the mega event and this legacy in the next chapter but, for now, turn my attention to the history of the site and the construction of the Games.

Games Time

As I have shown with the Great Exhibition and the South Bank Exhibition, mega events' temporal relationships can be Janus-faced. On the one hand, they exhibit progress, showcase new technologies, promise happier and more convenient lives, and attempt to promote peace and unity. Sometimes such promises and predictions are even achieved. Technological advances, for example, frequently move rapidly from the exhibition hall to the home or workplace, with the gizmo of tomorrow becoming the unremarkable labour-saving device of today (though accessibility to such novel technologies is often uneven: see Graff 2020, 99).

While this future-facing temporality would, at first glance, seem to dominate mega events, clearly this can be matched or exceeded by their close connection to visions of the past. This can be a past that is lauded, curated and repackaged as heritage, or, alternatively, it can be simply an inheritance taken for granted, say, in the historical conditions that made a host site available. A third category of relationship denigrates what came before and entirely transforms the past's traces, both materially and representationally, using the language of threat, mockery and abjection – as encountered in descriptions of the pre-South Bank Exhibition site as a 'slum' and in the Great Exhibition's and Sydenham Palace's portrayals of people, places and technologies as 'backward' or 'primitive'.

While all three varieties of temporal relationship were present with London 2012, the Games' development was also deeply tied to more presentist notions of timeliness, particularly around deadlines, overruns and anachronisms. While all construction projects are concerned with finishing *on* time, for reasons of budget and reputation (and, in this case, obligations to the IOC), what was unusual with London 2012 was how its different phases of preparation were overtly made into chrononyms. The initial period of demolition and decontamination (including the archaeological works) was named 'Demolish, Dig, Design' and lasted up

until 2008. This was followed by ‘The Big Build’ and the construction of all venues and infrastructure in the lead-up to summer 2012. Finally, the immediate weeks before the mega event and its operational period were named ‘Games Time’. Within each phase, various milestones were reported on: the number of buildings demolished; the volume of contaminated soil ‘washed’; the miles of cabling laid; and so forth (e.g. [ODA 2007a](#)).

Of all these chrononyms, Games Time in particular defined an exceptional temporality. Not only did this phase lead to greater marketing and promotion of the event as excitement built, it also resulted in special measures being put in place to ensure its smooth running. These involved a locking-down of the Games’ venues and spaces and a tightening of rules. The latter included: the Olympic Route Network, a set of priority lanes on London’s roads reserved for LOCOG and IOC officials; and increased security measures, including the significant deployment of private security guards, police and military assets. Both measures were bitterly contested at the time (e.g. [Smallman 2012](#); [BBC 2012a](#)).

Although Games Time was only officially ascribed to this short operational period, I suggest that, as a form of temporal managerialism, this term usefully characterises the project’s broader lifespan. Bastian et al. suggest that ‘time produces and performs some realities while shutting down others, precisely through the way it organizes and constitutes social life’ (2020, 290). Time is produced and enacted through a combination of the discursive and the material; ideas about what is timely or anachronistic direct our actions and, in turn, these attempts are reflected in our experiences. In this sense, seeing Games Time as a broader effort to control temporal relationships and to deliver the event recognises its insistence on producing contemporaneity in the face of threatened anachronisms. As we will see, these anachronisms emerged from the site’s history and previous uses, along with its remaining inhabitants and industries, and often took the form of temporally and spatially abject, waste materials or wastelands. Once the past and the (pre-Games) present was dealt with, a process of new temporal construction could begin, one that positioned the mega event as the basis for the brighter future that would surely follow.

Wasting time

By 2012, the Games’ Stratford site had been portrayed as a wasteland for almost ten years. Even today, this overwhelmingly negative portrayal of

the prehistory of the project lingers as legacy development continues; the 2020 Park *Management Plan* states that prior to the Games, the area was 'largely abandoned' (LLDC 2020a, 57). This wasteland discourse portrays the area – and particularly its usage from the mid-twentieth century up until the Games – as almost totally characterised by dereliction and pollution and, in its more extreme variants, as uninhabited and underutilised. The catechistic-like repetition of *wasteland* has gone some way to it becoming an unquestioned truth, in spite of considerable evidence that calls its reality into question.

The assertion of this 'truth' of the wasteland was, in part, based on the material conditions on the ground. The wasteland discourse particularly highlighted the extensive pollution of the area's watercourses and soil, areas of demolished or closed businesses and the historical uses of the site for waste dumping and recycling. While all these activities had taken place and significant areas were polluted, this narrative took these as the sole representatives of the entire district, and in the process, ignored all remaining areas of employment, inhabitation and leisure and community spaces (including a market, allotments, a church and a cycling track).

Although the wasteland discourse drew on the materiality of the Park's waste (contamination, rubbish, dereliction), its power lay more narratively in the representation of such substances and activities as all-pervasive, and seeming to encompass even the active places of work and inhabitation. For example, while some existing businesses on the site recognised the need for the environment to be 'regenerated', they were shocked when their own, relatively new and modern, industrial premises were also deemed part of this 'waste' and they realised they would have to leave as a result (Davis and Thornley 2010, 95).

The wasteland discourse became more pronounced after the Olympic Bid was won in mid-2005. This intensification related to the need for the LDA to make a legal case for the CPO for the site to move forward – making the required argument that the benefit from such action would outweigh its negative impacts (Davis and Thornley 2010, 92–3). The LDA's *Statement of Case* for the CPO argued that besides issues of contamination, 'the majority of the [Compulsory Purchase] Order Lands are characterised by remnants of past uses', and that the area was 'unused and under-used' (Eversheds LLP in Davis and Thornley 2010, 92).

Such language only increased as time went on. The 2004 Bid *Candidate File* talked of 'restoring' the land (London 2012 Ltd 2004, 2), but by the time demolition began in 2007, the area was described as 'brownfield', 'largely derelict and contaminated' and envisaged as being brought 'back into public use as a place for people to live, work and play'

by the mega event (ODA 2007b, 3–4). This was in spite of all of these activities already taking place there. In the ODA *Guide* to the 2007 planning application for the Park we similarly read:

The Olympic Park is situated in an area of great potential scarred by decades of neglect. A network of waterways run through an area of poor infrastructure, derelict buildings and contaminated land. Electricity pylons dominate the landscape. (ODA 2007c, 4; similar statements can be found in ODA 2007d, 7; ODA 2011a, 33; ODA 2011b, 2)

In particular, the industrial history of the site sat uneasily with what was planned. Juliet Davis, who conducted the most detailed research on the pre-Park's businesses and residents during the CPO period, suggests that, in the development of the site for the Games,

[o]ngoing industrial uses [were] portrayed as traces of a dying life, of traditions that should perhaps have been extinguished long ago and that would certainly have no future in the context of regeneration. (Quoted in Davies et al. 2017, 7)

At least some of the Games' planners did recognise the site's past and present-day industrial significance, and that it was not wholly barren or isolated prior to the CPO and summer 2007. For example, the Environmental Impact Assessment of the Games' overall planning application notes:

The proximity of road, rail and water transport has long supported a concentration of industrial uses, which have been accompanied in recent years by newer industrial, office and residential uses. (ODA 2007e, 6)

Nonetheless, other official releases and documentation continued to reiterate claims to the site's supposed emptiness. A document created as part of the 'Learning Legacy' series – intended to showcase the project's best practice in construction – relates how two tower blocks of University of East London student housing in the Park area were 'long disused' when they were demolished in 2007 (Carris 2011). This was despite the fact that over 400 students were told to leave them in June 2005 and allegedly, according to one report, 'under threat of court action' (COHRE 2007, 172–3).

The LDA and ODA were rarely challenged on this overwhelmingly negative narrative by the media or politicians, who also frequently described the site as a ‘wasteland’ (e.g. [BBC 2007](#); [Oliver 2012](#)), ‘derelict’ and ‘run down’ ([Beard 2006](#)), and the hat-trick of ‘derelict contaminated wasteland’ (Jowell in [LOCOG 2012](#), 9). In the face of such negativity, numerous grassroots campaigns unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the eviction of residents and campaigned for a right of return, for example, for residents of Clay’s Lane housing cooperative and users of the Manor Garden Allotments (see [Husni-Bey 2012](#); [Hatcher 2012](#)).

How and why did this conception of the past and present of the Games site come about? Was the wasteland really so *wasted*? And, indeed, how did Games Time’s relationship to the recent past and present contrast with other, pre-existing, relationships to the site? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to consider the site’s longer history.

The history of a ‘wasteland’

To understand why mega events are hosted on particular sites, we need to remember that the factors that make them attractive for these spectacles, such as availability of space, low land costs and so forth, are usually the direct result of the previous uses of that site. Stratford was, counterintuitively, attractive for the 2012 Games precisely because of its industrial history and the spatial, material and political constellations that had emerged as a result. This meant that it was well connected, home to marginal and cheap land, and close enough to the city to be accessible, yet far enough away for activities that could not take place in more densely occupied city spaces.

Writing about the unbuilt venues of Paris’ multiple failed Olympic Bids, Ulf Strohmayer talks of ‘a dynamic and unstable rapport between existing spaces, anticipated spaces and actually emerging spaces’, each tied up in mega event planners’ conceptualisations of the spatial history of a would-be host site. Strohmayer further points out that industrial spaces in Western cities are often seen as holding little value today and, as a result, provide spaces that are ‘increasingly “rare” in overheated urban property markets, and that are seen as usefully ‘empty’, given their apparent ‘absence of heritage sites, buildings and pre-existing cultural value’ ([Strohmayer 2013](#), 187–8, 190).

Such a description certainly resembles the situation with London 2012 and Stratford, where the Games’ developers had little interest in incorporating heritage sites or pre-existing buildings into their plans

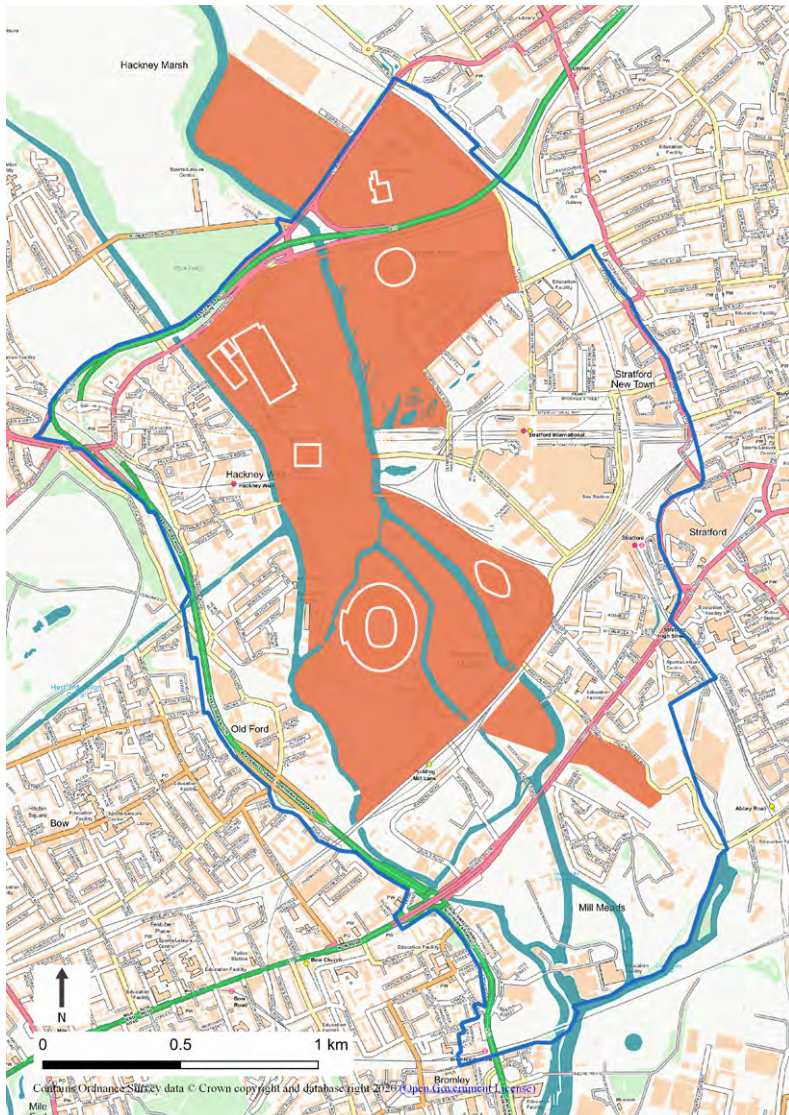


Figure 6.2 Map outlining the area of the Olympic Park at the time of the Games in orange.

Note: The original Olympic Park is now incorporated within the wider LLDC area, marked with the blue line. The stadia and former Media Centre that remain in the Park are marked with white outlines. Many newer buildings have since been constructed as part of legacy developments and are not shown here.

Source: Site polygons by the author – boundaries are approximate. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2021. Open Government Licence.

(only one building was retained – a former warehouse). While temporary Olympic and Paralympic venues elsewhere in the city were placed in front of traditional icons of the capital's heritage (including Beach Volleyball at Horse Guards Parade in Whitehall and the Equestrian Arena at Greenwich Park), it is significant that the majority of events took place on the cleared 'brownfields' of the East End.

Stratford's shifting fortunes as industrial powerhouse, post-industrial wasteland and Olympic Park are strongly linked to its relationship to the River Lea and surrounding marshes. The Lea (sometimes spelled Lee) rises north of Luton in Bedfordshire, before flowing almost 80 kilometres (ca. 50 miles) south to the Thames, cutting a broad valley across London's eastern periphery. The Olympic Park lies at the centre of the Lower Lea Valley (fig. 6.2), which encompasses the river's last 8 kilometres (ca. 5 miles) and its connection to the Thames at Blackwall.

At various points along its length the Lea splits into a confusion of braided streams, with those running through the Olympic Park and nearby known as the Bow Back Rivers. The Lea's course and floodplain formed after the end of the last Ice Age, some 11,700 years ago, initially as a result of glacial and permafrost meltwaters (and has shifted course many times since). The river's course has also undergone extensive human-led manipulation, with the addition of artificial channels and the reclamation of its surrounding marshlands taking place over at least the last two millennia.

The earliest human use of the Lea Valley is attested by the discovery of flint tools just to the north of the Games site, from the Lower Palaeolithic (dated to sometime between 337,000–301,000 BC; Powell 2012a, 17). Fragments of Mesolithic (ca. 10,000–4000 BC) flint were also found within the Park's boundaries during the Olympic archaeological excavations, although conclusive proof of occupation dated to this period was not seen. Stronger evidence was found of Neolithic (ca. 4000–2200 BC) activity on a site used for a Games Time car park on Stratford High Street – a potential timber trackway or platform jutting into a former river channel was found associated with a large, probably ritually deposited, flint axe (fig. 6.3). The Lea Valley would have presented a rich living environment in prehistory as a result of the river and its floodplain; paleo-environmental evidence shows that it would have provided abundant fish and game, along with fertile land for agriculture.

The first clear evidence of the settlement of the Park area comes from the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1500–1000 BC). Excavations in 2007, immediately south of the Aquatics Centre, found traces of several



Figure 6.3 A Neolithic hand axe found during preparations for the Games in 2008. Note: Found by my colleague Veysel Apaydin during the Olympic excavations in 2008, south of Stratford High Street, seen here shortly after its discovery (in a contemporary camera phone image). It was associated with a possible ‘ritual’ wooden platform or trackway that jutted into a stream channel. Source: Photograph by the author.

roundhouses, field systems and stock enclosures. This settlement continued on this site through later prehistory, with evidence of multiple phases of rebuilding until the Iron Age, including four human burials. It is worth remembering that, during the latter phases of this rustic riverside inhabitation, some 2,300 kilometres (ca. 1,430 miles) away, the Ancient Olympics were just getting started at Olympia in Greece (776 BC).

With the coming of the Roman invasion in 43 AD and the founding of London, 6 kilometres (ca. 3.75 miles) to the south-west, this site and the wider valley floor continued to be used for agriculture. A major Roman road crossed Hackney Marsh and the Lower Lea and a large bridge is thought to have been located somewhere within the boundaries of the present-day Park, though no sign of this was found during the Olympic excavations (see [Brown 2008](#) for a review).

The Olympic excavations revealed little evidence for post-Roman settlement but documentary evidence provides a little more insight into the period. In the Domesday survey of 1086 AD, reference is made to eight separate mills on the Bow Back Rivers, including the Pudding Mill (in the south-west of the Park), Saynes Mills (immediately to the south of the Park’s boundaries; see [Wroe-Brown et al. 2014](#)), and Temple Mills in the north-east.

As a discrete site, Temple Mills is one of the few Park areas where a combination of documentary and archaeological evidence shows a sustained history of environmental modification and rapid industrialisation; both

hinting at the future that awaited the wider Park area. The first written references to Temple Mills appear in the twelfth century, when the Order of the Knights Templar constructed an initial water mill here (Fairclough 1991, 116). This structure – along with several other adjoining mills constructed later – was rebuilt numerous times throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods (i.e. post-1485), and changed ownership multiple times. The medieval mills' location is uncertain, and no conclusive signs of them were found during the Olympic excavations unfortunately (Bower 2008, 32; Douglas and Spurr 2009, 28). The area continued to be used for industrial and other purposes up until the Games, including housing, a pub (the White Hart, demolished in the 1990s), allotments, a landfill site and for defence during the Second World War and the Cold War – all of which are returned to later.

During the post-medieval period, more extensive modifications were made to the Bow Back Rivers as the area further developed (see Bower 2008; Clifford 2017). Besides being a crucial source of power for milling, the Lea provided a significant transport corridor prior to the development of rail and reliable road transport. This meant produce could easily be brought into London from the rich agricultural hinterland of the Upper Lea Valley and down to the city (see Glennie 1988; Powell 2012a, 111). Similarly, the Lea's navigable connection with the Thames at Blackwall allowed the transshipment of raw materials upstream to Stratford's industries and, in turn, for goods to be sent downstream and further afield (see Fairclough 1991; Clifford 2008, 2017; Lewis 1999; Marriott 1988, 1989; Gardner 2016).

The industrialisation of the areas around Stratford Marsh, as a centre of the Parish of West Ham (originally a part of Essex, but incorporated into Greater London in 1965), began with the mills described above. By the eighteenth century in Hackney Wick, Temple Mills and around Stratford High Street, a relatively self-contained first wave of textile and related industries emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many of these were involved with silk and calico weaving and dyeing and were followed by numerous chemical and manufacturing works by the early nineteenth century (Powell 1973, 76–7; Marriott 1988, 124).

As late as the 1870s, the first Ordnance Survey maps (fig. 6.4) show that, besides the aforementioned areas around Temple Mills and Stratford High Street, much of the future Park remained as marsh and pasture. By the 1890s the area was considerably more built-up, as distilleries, further chemical works and factories were rapidly erected on reclaimed land ('made ground': e.g. Powell 2012a, 125). The growth of these industries



Figure 6.4 Ordnance Survey maps showing the development of the area from the late nineteenth century onward. Note: The orange line is a simplified outline of the Olympic Park during the Games – the locations of the main permanent Olympic venues and Media Centre are outlined in black. Source: Lines/polygons by the author. 1st edition, 2nd revision 1:2500 County Series and 1st edition National Grid 1:1250 maps © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2021). All rights reserved (1869–81, 1915–16, 1948–51).

continued up until the mid-twentieth century, as the Lower Lea Valley became famous for its industrial innovation (see [Lewis 1999, 2011](#)).

Stratford and the Lower Lea were also (and remain) crucial nodes in London's water supply and sewage infrastructure. As well as the construction of several reservoirs, this period also saw the completion of the Northern Outfall Sewer in 1861. This major piece of infrastructure still cuts across Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and functions as a walking and cycling path named, perhaps euphemistically, The Greenway. This continues to collect waste from a number of smaller interceptor sewers north of the Thames and conveys it via Abbey Mills pumping station to treatment at Beckton and thence to the Thames itself. The Northern Outfall was a key part of Sir Joseph Bazalgette's famous Main Drainage works – the improvement of London's sanitary infrastructure in response to repeated water-borne disease epidemics and the 'Great Stink' of summer 1858.

Besides the sewers and reservoirs, another major infrastructural arrival was the Northern & Eastern Railway in 1840, cutting across the southern and eastern edges of today's Park. As a consequence of this and other lines, an enormous railway locomotive and carriage plant was constructed in 1847 and sited where Stratford City and the Westfield shopping mall are located today. Operating until 1991, the 'Stratford Works' constructed over 1,700 locomotives and thousands more carriages and wagons.

By the mid-twentieth century, partly as a result of bomb damage from the Second World War, the area's industries began to decline ([Bower 2008, 82](#)). During the war, at a site called Bully Fen in the north of the Park (the site of today's VeloPark), a major anti-aircraft gun emplacement was set up, along with a radar installation. This is said to have been the first set of guns to shoot down Luftwaffe bombers during the Blitz, and its foundations were uncovered during the Olympic excavations (see [Brown et al. 2012](#)). The area was then used extensively as a Civil Defence Corps rescue training 'village' during the Cold War, from 1953 until 1968, where volunteers practised rescuing and caring for casualties in simulations of nuclear bombing ([fig. 6.5](#); see [Gardner 2020b](#)).

From the 1960s, rapid deindustrialisation affected large areas of the East End. The area was hit hard by the closure of the docks as a consequence of containerisation, competition with larger ports closer to the sea and underinvestment.² This led to a loss of 150,000 jobs amid a much wider and severe contraction of London's industrial base by the early 1980s (Davis in [Davies et al. 2017, 30](#)). By the late 1990s, despite large-scale commercial investment in some former dock areas, particularly in the north of the Isle of Dogs to create new service industries (including



Figure 6.5 Members of the Rescue Section of the Civil Defence Corps practise rescuing ‘casualties’ (volunteers in stage make-up) from a mocked-up, ‘ruined’ building at Bully Fen Rescue Training Ground in 1964.

Note: The Corps were a civilian voluntary organisation who trained to rescue and care for casualties in the aftermath of atomic (and later hydrogen) bomb strikes on the UK. This building, along with 20 or so other specially constructed ‘ruins’, formed a ‘village’ located on the site of today’s VeloPark on the east bank of the River Lea.

Source: London Metropolitan Archives, City of London. Reproduced from LMA SC/PHL/02/BOX 1259 (photo 64/3479) – Bully Fen – Civil Defence Comp. Finals Class – detail.

the financial district of Canary Wharf) facilitated by the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), large parts of the East End suffered from high levels of poverty and unemployment and were earmarked for ‘regeneration’ (see [Butler and Rustin 1996](#)).

The development model used to redevelop the Docklands would later inform the Mayoral Development Corporation of the post-Olympics and its LLDC, who act as the planners and developers of today’s Queen Elizabeth Park and surrounding area. Though credited with rapidly transforming the shuttered docks into a service industry-based success story, the development corporation model has also been seen as being anti-democratic (bypassing the planning functions of elected local authorities), failing to address poverty and inequality, and favouring the development of businesses and employment to which existing residents were mostly originally unqualified (discussed in [Brownill and O’Hara 2015](#)).



Figure 6.6 The last available full revision of the Ordnance Survey map of the area prior to the Games' construction (published in 1995), showing the Park area within the orange line; the main permanent Olympic venues and Media Centre outlined in black. Source: Lines/polygons by the author. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2021). All rights reserved (1995).

Continued deindustrialisation contributed to a perception of the Lower Lea Valley as being in a state of decay by the 1990s and, by the early 2000s, the Olympic Bid was seen by the then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, and the Greater London Authority, as an opportunity to leverage resources to revitalise the district (Mayor of London 2004, 139). However, the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries also saw the growth of new industrial premises in the future Park area (fig. 6.6). Container and cold storage warehouses emerged on the Stratford Works site and a new business park was built on Lloyd's Shoot in the late 1980s and 1990s (the site of London Stadium, formerly the Olympic Stadium), along with new roads and bridges. In 2007, prior to the enactment of the CPO, Juliet Davis documented 284 operating businesses across the site (in Davies et al. 2017, 17). These employed over 5,000 people, mainly in light and manufacturing industries and waste disposal. Additionally, 450 people lived at the Clay's Lane housing cooperative (built in 1977), 400 students in University of East London student housing and 35 Gypsy and Traveller families at two long-term sites (COHRE 2007, 172–3). Allotments and green space also remained in use up until the CPO and summer 2007, to which I return later.

Remediating the wasteland

We must be wary of reifying this industrial past, or of engaging in voyeuristic nostalgia for a place that, by the early 2000s, undoubtedly faced significant environmental and social challenges. I also do not seek to portray those who lived and worked there simply as passive victims of a sinister plot to remove them by the mega event planners. Nonetheless, by recalling this history, I mean to contextualise and complicate the story of changes brought by the mega event and its own representations of the past. Among the biggest temporal risks the mega event faced in the smooth running of Games Time – in this case, threats to the project *from* the past – were the site's buried archaeology and its industrial contamination. These buried traces were difficult and costly to remove but their mitigation was seen as necessary for the delivery of the project; a cleansing of the past was needed before the future could arrive.

Hydrocarbons, heavy metals, chlorinated solvents, cyanide, asbestos and radiological material were among the profusion of contaminants disinterred during the Games' construction. Although the Park's top layers and some of its watercourses were comprehensively cleaned during construction, such was the extent of these materials that contamination

is likely to remain in the metres beneath these upper strata and their underlying Human Health Separation Layer, a series of clean soils, gravel and Terram geotextile (e.g. [Atkins 2016](#), 7–8). Dealing with this pre-Olympic legacy required vast acts of environmental intervention: the washing of 2 million tons of soil; the burying of some watercourses and the ‘daylighting’ of others; the treatment of groundwater; the relocation of people and animals; and the eradication of invasive species, such as Japanese Knotweed.

The boom time of the Lower Lea Valley in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is described by historian Jim Clifford as ‘the storm of industrialisation’ for good reason ([2017](#), 8). It was during this period that large numbers of chemical-based manufacturers moved in, along with tanneries, slaughterhouses, timber yards, engineering and manufacturing firms (see [Powell 2012a](#), 170–8; [Marriott 1988, 1989; Davis 2016](#)). Many of these industries produced hazardous by-products and, until the latter part of the twentieth century, they were often poorly regulated, leading to the despoliation of the local environment. In this regard, the area is similar to many other brownfield development sites with a long history of industrialisation across the UK and elsewhere.

Historically, this area was valuable to London’s so-called noxious trades; activities that were unacceptable in more built-up areas to the west, and particularly animal processing and chemical-based work. Their success in the Lea Valley was down to the Metropolitan Buildings Act of 1844 that banned these ‘offensive’ trades from within 50 feet of residences, which had the effect of driving them to the outskirts, where the prevailing wind (and watercourses) would carry away their odour and wastes. The majority of the future Park area lay outside London’s municipal boundaries until the 1960s, meaning that such trades were even less regulated than in the city proper. This pollution did not always go unchallenged and as early as the 1860s, complaints were being made about noxious chemical odours and fouled waterways ([Davis 2016](#), 430; see [Clifford 2017](#)).

I already briefly mentioned that the site acted as a node for water and sewage infrastructure, but it was also a key part of the city’s refuse economy discussed earlier in the book with Darke at the Great Exhibition. The ashes and garbage of the east of the city were brought here to be dumped or recycled on numerous ‘shoots’ (refuse dumps) that were established throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The West Ham Dump, and nearby Abbott’s Shoot, covered the area of Temple Mills that now lies beneath the Velodrome with up to 9 metres of ash and household rubbish from Hackney. Similarly, Lloyd’s Shoot



Figure 6.7 An aerial view of the southern area of the future Olympic Park taken in 1929, looking north-west.

Note: The pale, parallelogram-shaped area of land mostly without buildings (top, centre), is Lloyd's Shoot (a refuse dump) and the site of London Stadium (the former Olympic Stadium). The large industrial complex on the right of the image and north of the railway lines is Carpenters Road, now the site of the Aquatic Centre and the Stratford Waterfront segment of East Bank.

Source: EPW026722. © Historic England. <https://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/en/image/EPW026722>.

received metres of rubbish mounded on what is now the site of London Stadium between 1900 and the 1940s (fig. 6.7).³ Such dumping not only removed waste from East and Central London, but was also an intentionally generative act of landscape engineering. By reclaiming marshy terrain with waste, further industrial construction and activities could take place on the newly 'made ground'. In turn, such sites would provide the foundations of the Olympic Park. While these activities and materials undeniably polluted the site and were, by the 2000s, understood as material proof that the area needed 'cleaning up', such land reclamation shows that in the past these activities were not *only* seen as a menace but also as valuable and profitable.

Waste is not a singular concept and what is understood as a waste material has changed dramatically over time, as have understandings of issues of environmental risk and protection (see [Moore 2012](#)). While certain substances can be dangerous, unpleasant or unsightly, waste is not an unquestionably negative or unproductive substance, so much as a social categorisation. What is considered to be waste, or wasted, versus what is valuable, depends not only on a material's or a place's physical characteristics, but also on the motivations of those making the judgement and their ability to marshal representations and resources to support their arguments and actions (see [Cooper 2010](#); [Gille 2012](#); Gardner In Review). The contaminants of the pre-Olympic Park were indeed often dangerous – and had been since they were produced and buried – but it is nonetheless reasonable to ask why it took until the Olympics for the site to be deemed in need of 'cleaning up', or why it was more important than the thousands of other such sites across the UK? The answer is that waste is also politically situated.

Although now understood negatively for their risks to human health, the waste materials of past industries of the Olympic Park are also evidence of the extraction of value and positivity. These by-products resulted from successful industrial production and the realisation of value from networks of materials, people and capital that stretched far beyond Stratford and produced the modern world; after all, '[o]nly by decomposing does consumption give the product the finishing touch' (Marx in [Martin 2016](#), 210). In waste historian Tim Cooper's view, waste is ultimately in a dialectic with development: the history of industrialisation and modernity more broadly shows that progress requires a waste of space or 'useless' and undervalued materials and bodies upon which to operate, a blank space to fill or to 'eliminate' ([Cooper 2010](#), 1120). With the early twenty-first-century development of the Olympic Park this tension was materialised. On the one hand, the place was seen as trashed and abject in its wasted-ness, on the other hand, this waste was an opportunity, producing a space laden with generative potential, which the mega event could work upon and transform.

Archaeology

During preparations for the Games, the Olympic Park's industrial contaminants were ruthlessly pursued, destroyed or entombed, so that future generations could not accidentally re-excavate them. In contrast, other buried remains of the past were far more carefully sought out,



Figure 6.8 Archaeologists at work in the Olympic Park.

Note: Top – archaeologist in protective equipment on the site of the Aquatics Centre in early 2008. This is one of four human inhumation burials recovered (along with one goat burial), all dating to the Middle Iron Age (ca. 400–100 BCE). Bottom – the early nineteenth-century ‘gun punt’ found on the site of the Olympic Stadium being recorded by the author and colleagues in late 2007.

Source: © MOLA.

documented and curated by teams of archaeologists and finds specialists. For many of my colleagues and me, working on the Olympic Park excavations was one of the first major jobs of our archaeological careers. It continues to be remembered (usually over a pint) for its long days, bad weather and mud, as well as for its surprising discoveries, good company and occasional fun. Rather than detail the findings of this archaeological work, which are extensively discussed in the post-excavation reports (e.g. [Douglas and Spurr 2009](#)) and final site monograph ([Powell 2012a](#)), I

want to consider the process of archaeological excavation itself, and the role archaeology and archaeologists like myself played in ‘building’ the mega event literally and figuratively.

Two major development-led contractors undertook the archaeological work: Museum of London Archaeology Service and Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd, working together in a joint venture known as MOLAS-PCA. The research investigated 121 small evaluation trenches and conducted eight much larger-scale, open-area excavations, alongside extensive environmental survey and building recording. Sites were chosen for investigation in areas where the new construction works would have a destructive impact on below-ground remains, or historic standing buildings, and in areas of potential identified from desk-based and archival research (as is standard in all UK development-led archaeology). The excavated area comprised only around 1 per cent of the Park.

Given the industrial contamination, archaeologists and other ground workers wore disposable protective overalls with latex gloves in addition to normal protective equipment. In the most contaminated areas, they also wore half-mask respirators, used monitors to check for low oxygen levels and toxic gases and carried emergency escape breathing apparatus (fig. 6.8, top).

The most memorable site I worked on was next to a part of the river system known as the Old River Lea and its junction with the (now-infilled) Pudding Mill River. This is now by the north-west side of London Stadium’s hospitality suite, but in 2007 it was the yard of Parkes Galvanizing, a firm established here in the 1960s who left with the CPO. The trench was unusual as, beneath 5 metres of ‘made ground’, lay an early nineteenth-century rowing boat (fig. 6.8, bottom). Given the remarkable preservation of the vessel (some 70 per cent complete) it survived our efforts to extricate it from the sticky mud and was eventually donated to the University of Bournemouth – unfortunately it was destroyed in an accidental fire in 2018 (Archer and Spurr 2009; Dave Parham pers. comm. 20/4/2020).

The boat was covered in a layer of coal tar for waterproofing – a carcinogenic by-product of coal-gasification – which we carefully cleaned using our trowels to reveal shiny copper roves (fastenings), which fixed planks to the frame of the vessel. In the centre of the boat, we discovered tiny spheres of lead shot, not unlike that once made at the South Bank’s old Shot Tower (Chapter 5). This held the key to the much-repaired vessel’s final purpose, as a ‘gun punt’ for hunting wildfowl on the rivers (see Goodburn in Archer and Spurr 2009, 32–46).

It was often muddy and cold work, requiring the constant removal of rising groundwater with pumps and buckets. An image of us archaeologists diligently sponging out this vessel went on to become the most reproduced image of the whole Olympic archaeological project and features as the front cover image of the site archaeology publications (Powell 2012a, 2012b). On this and the other archaeological sites in the Park, archaeologists were directly involved in recording and removing traces of the past, but, at the same time, we were instrumental in helping to 'create' that past by measuring it, codifying it and reconciling the material with our interpretations. As with all archaeological work, this 'preservation by record' created a 'translation' of the boat and its environs into something less tangible than the original material (Wickstead 2008, 1–2). By the simple act of drawing it on a plan, first using a pencil and tape measure, then later in a computer program, the boat lives on in some proxy form, despite its ultimate demise.

Besides this translation, these records helped to inform a broader narrative about the history of the Pudding Mill River and this part of the Park (see also Gardner 2016). While archaeology does create new knowledge of the past, it is also an industrial process of production between excavator, tools, finds and environment and one situated in wider social, economic and political networks (Gardner 2020c). In other words, as archaeologists we were not simply observers or archivists of 'the past' but also active participants in the preparation of the site for the mega event in the present.

During late 2007 and throughout 2008, the future Olympic Park was in a kind of limbo between being demolished and not yet regenerated. We worked at the intersection of the old and the new while the Park was a mass of construction and remediation facilities, torn-up roads and spoil heaps, plied by huge dump trucks and 360-degree excavators. I found it difficult to get to grips with its vast scale at the time and it was only in the years after the Games – and when I had managed to pinpoint the areas in which I had once worked – that I began to reflect on the total transformation of the site. This made me think about what we as archaeologists contributed to the mega event and its legacy: was our position wholly benign or objective, or was archaeology's role more ambiguous?

The past as PR

Archaeology on construction projects – mega events included – operates as part of the planning system in the UK whereby the developer of a site

must pay for the investigation of archaeological remains. This funding model, in place since 1990, is generally called developer-led archaeology, or commercial archaeology, and comprises the majority of archaeological work undertaken in the UK (vastly exceeding any state or university funded work; see [Historic England 2015a](#)). This means that this work is understood and accepted as part of the construction sector in its own right, rather than an act of last-minute ‘rescue’ or salvage.

This ‘archaeology industry’ is, in effect, an extractive one: it records and then ultimately removes the traces of the past to facilitate planning permission for development ([Gardner 2020c](#)). This granting of planning consent to build is the ‘product’ and main purpose of development-led archaeology, rather than the creation of knowledge of the past ([Gardner 2020c](#), 21); and which makes such ‘commercial’ archaeology a significant part of construction projects: the content or significance of the discoveries that it makes are usually treated by developers (though not by the archaeologists) as a distant second to the granting of permission for a project to go forward. While such a description may seem controversial, I do not mean to suggest this commercial archaeology is low quality or a box-ticking exercise; if anything, the standards of developer-led work can often exceed that of academic projects (at least, in my experience). Rather, I want to make the point that archaeological companies and archaeologists are involved in a world of deadlines, economic considerations and political decision-making to extract materials and render a service to developers.

Turning back to London 2012 with this in mind, it is interesting that press releases at the time of the 2012 Games’ excavations suggested the archaeological companies were ‘invited’ to dig here to make discoveries (e.g. [ODA 2008a](#)). While this may seem like a semantic irrelevance, an important corrective is needed. MOLAS-PCA were not ‘invited’ to excavate simply as an act of altruism; they were awarded the contract as part of a standard tendering process under planning regulations.⁴ It is important to recognise this, as the archaeological work was not simply a magnanimous ‘add-on’ gesture by the developers of the Games, but was part of the overall site preparations that was legally required during the ‘Demolish, Dig, Design’ phase.

As well as being a planning requirement, the archaeological works provided a public relations boost to the mega event, with discoveries helping to frame the project in a positive light. The attitude of Atkins, the main heritage consultants working for the LDA and ODA on the Park, epitomises this in a report entitled ‘Digging Olympic Gold’ (n.d.), which discusses their role overseeing the archaeological work programme:

Used effectively, archaeology can help to avoid damage to potentially significant finds and make sure that everyone – from developers to the local community – views a project favourably from the start and long after the work is done.

Archaeology performed a variety of useful services to the Games, not only physically removing the remnants of the past but, in doing so, providing a series of positive stories throughout its development. A selection of press releases from 2007 to 2009 (now preserved via The National Archives' captures of the ODA's website) are instructive in this regard.⁵ These archaeological discoveries were first communicated on 28 November 2007, while I and the other archaeologists were still working on the site. This first press release was entitled 'Archaeological work on Games site finds evidence of the first Londoners and Romans':

Digs on the site of the London 2012 Aquatics Centre have revealed evidence of an Iron Age settlement. Fourth-century pottery and a Roman coin has also been found on the Olympic Stadium site. ... The first Londoners lived in thatched circular mud huts on the site that will boast a Zaha Hadid-designed Aquatics Centre but in the Iron Age would have been a small area of dry land in a valley of lakes, rivers and marshes. The first Londoners lived by and fished in what is now the River Lea and parts of the pots they would have used to cook their fish have also been discovered. The Aquatics Centre will be beside the river which is currently being widened by eight metres as part of a programme to restore the ancient waterways of the Lower Lea Valley. (ODA 2007f)

The recurrence of the term 'first Londoners' and attempts to link the environment of prehistory to Zaha Hadid's Aquatic Centre suggest an effort to make this past fit within the Games Time framework. While efforts to link past and present in such stories are common (see [Ascherson 2004](#)), in this case the release is slightly clumsy, given that London was not founded until the AD 40s and several miles to the west.

A linking of past and present was repeated in a release from March 2008, describing how 'archaeologists have uncovered the skeletons of early Eastenders buried in graves dating back to the Iron Age on the London 2012 Olympic Park' (ODA 2008b; [fig. 6.8](#), top). Tessa Jowell (then Olympics Minister) is quoted as saying: 'The "Big Dig" on the Olympic Park offers a unique opportunity to witness and understand the fascinating history of this part of East London from ancient to modern.'

These releases also used archaeological findings to suggest the Games' transformation was in keeping with the area's deeper history. In the initial 2007 release, the link between archaeology and regeneration is emphasised by the ODA's then Chief Executive, David Higgins:

We are taking this opportunity to tell the fascinating story of the Lower Lea Valley before it is given a new lease of life for the Games and future generations. It is a story of change and transformation dating back centuries. (Quoted in [ODA 2007f](#), para. 6)

This emphasis on temporal continuity, renewal and normalisation of change is also found in the archaeologists' own presentations:

the change represented by the construction of the Olympics is absolutely in keeping with all the change that's happened in the Lea Valley beforehand – it's just happening in a shorter time period. (MoLAS-PCA project officer in [ODA 2009](#) 0:1:52)

The phenomenon of using archaeology and heritage as a form of PR for development projects like this is by no means unusual, and the use of archaeological findings as a way of legitimising development has been widely studied by archaeologists and heritage scholars (e.g. [Holtorf 2007](#); [Hutchings and La Salle 2015](#); [Rocha 2020](#)). For example, Maggie Ronayne provides an example of a highway-building scheme in the Republic of Ireland (2008). In this case commercial archaeological involvement focussed on the discovery and 'preservation by record' of the ancient past and was seen by some to have deflected attention from the project's controversial destruction of local people's homes and workplaces.

My analysis of these press releases is not intended to suggest that the use of archaeology at London 2012 was 'wrong', or in any way misleading. It is understandable that a developer would want to portray their project positively and the enthusiasm the ODA displayed about the archaeological work was genuine. It is also worth recognising that individual archaeologists and archaeology companies usually have little or no control over such press releases, with developers and their consultants selecting what is released and when. When working on the site, we were sometimes aware of TV crews or photographers watching us from the periphery (or, on one memorable occasion, Boris Johnson and Sebastian Coe). The archaeologists' work was therefore not simply an act of historical or scientific due diligence, but was also performative – our presence and what we were doing materially demonstrating that change had occurred in the past and that it

was still occurring, 'just ... in a shorter period'. The archaeological findings we made helped to frame the transformation taking place and, in particular, established a continuity grounded in events that had occurred hundreds or even thousands of years earlier.

After the last of these press releases, little more was heard about the archaeology until 2012 and the launch of the official archaeological report, *By River, Fields and Factories: The making of the Lower Lea Valley* (Powell 2012a), along with a short 'popular' book (Powell 2012b). There was little other discussion of the archaeological findings, except that, seemingly independent of the ODA or LLDC, at least one of the archaeological companies has since displayed finds and undertaken public engagement work related to the discoveries (e.g. Almeida 2016).

The archaeological work on the Games project can be seen as 'a socio-political actor in itself', generating effects that went beyond the individual discoveries (Zorzin 2015, 117). This kind of archaeological knowledge and the value claims it enacts (in this case, a sense of legitimacy from the past), operates as a commodity within contemporary urban development (McClanahan 2014, 206–7). Thus, the recovery of traces of the past at the Games were valuable not only for the scientific knowledge they generated, but also, arguably, for what they facilitated in the present and the future: planning permission, PR and the creation of temporal and social legitimacy.

Such use of the past to legitimise changes to the area, often in enthusiastic and positive language, contrasts starkly with the discourse of the wasteland I discussed earlier. However, between these extremes lay a different portrayal. This was a temporal narrative articulated in far more positive and presentist terms and seen primarily in the work created by photographers, artists and activists (and even a few archaeologists) in their engagement with the site's last uses, workers and inhabitants prior to the Games' construction.

Life in the 'wasteland'

The archaeological works at the Olympic Park could consider only a limited selection of the overall area and specific periods, primarily as a result of limited time and budget. Decisions about what sites or periods were to be documented also resulted from pre-existing national and regional archaeological research priorities. These emphasise research aims according to the 'significance' of the subject of archaeological study, with rarity, surviving condition and aesthetic and age values tending to

dominate (see [Historic England 2015b](#); [English Heritage 2008](#); [Thomas 2019](#); [MOLAS 2002](#)).

There are always exceptions to such priorities, but at a project level the investigation of the ancient past is usually favoured over the very recent past or the present. At London 2012 the majority of heritage investigations focussed on sites and material that pre-dated the Second World War. However, it would be unfair to suggest that the archaeologists somehow missed or intentionally avoided more recent periods. In other words, this focus on older material is effectively built in to the UK's planning processes and heritage legislation. That said, some more unusual archaeological interventions did take place. For instance, Emma Dwyer and colleagues (for MOLAS-PCA) examined the electricity pylons and infrastructure of the pre-Olympic Park prior to their removal and 'undergrounding' for the Games (see [Dwyer 2007](#)). This work showed the development of the area's power infrastructure in the context of East London's industrial past and crucially recognised the pylons not simply as a blight but as a significant and functioning part of a contemporary landscape. Such work did not find its way into press reports or public outreach activities. The final archaeological monograph predominately portrays the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries of the area as a comparative 'low point' that the construction of the Olympic Park 'transformed and regenerated' ([Powell 2012a](#), 221).

Besides the archaeological investigations, there were ODA-funded efforts to engage with the heritage of some of the communities by the Park. These included an oral history project with older residents of bordering boroughs, along with an artist-led project that engaged local people in recording soundscapes tied to specific places in and around the Park (see [ECH 2010](#); [L. Harrison 2011](#)). The ODA also sponsored archaeological community engagement sessions during the excavations (e.g. [ODA 2008c](#)).

These efforts were significant in interrupting the idea that the area was simply a wasteland to be cleansed (particularly responses in [L. Harrison 2011](#)), but most of these activities appear as acts of temporal remembrance to a long *passed* past, rather than drawing attention to the inhabitation and work that had continued here up until summer 2007. While previous industries were recalled in interviews with former employees (for example, Clarnico's long-since shuttered sweet factory), it seems no interviews were conducted with workers or residents who lived in the Park up until the end and who had to leave after the CPO.⁶

In comparison with the detailed archaeological reports, such evidence for life on the site in the pre-Games period is dispersed and

sometimes hard to come by. Much of my research for this book took place only after the conclusion of the Games in 2012, so I am heavily reliant on the efforts of a broad array of photographers, artists, activists, researchers and others.⁷ Through this diverse and varied material, it is possible to see alternative representations of life before the Games came. Such material can be seen as a form of counter archive that challenges the idea that this period was characterised by dereliction and emptiness or, indeed, spatially and temporally ‘wasted’.

The work of photographers Marion Davies and Debra Rapp and geographer Juliet Davis provides comprehensive documentation of the area’s businesses prior to the Games Time transformation. Originally undertaken as two independent photographic projects (and as Davis’ doctoral research), their efforts led to collaboration and a major publication in 2017 entitled *Dispersal*.

Davies and Rapp’s photographic projects, in their own words, had set out to frame ‘England’s industrial heritage before it disappeared forever’ and to ‘document a visual history of a place and community that was about to vanish’ (in Davies et al. 2017, 33). Their work shows the variety of workers and workplaces that continued to operate in the lead-up to the CPO in 2007. They captured images of 70 businesses (out of a total of 286) across the future Park in places such as the Marshgate Trading Estate, now the location of London Stadium (fig. 6.9).

This work also questioned ‘how it [the area] was represented ... as a defunct and decaying wasteland in east London, somewhere that was “ripe for redevelopment”’ (Davies et al. 2017, 1). Rapp and Davies’ images, paired with Davis’ research into the conditions and histories of the businesses, demonstrated that some 70 per cent had existed on the site for a decade or more and that many showed continuing growth right up until the CPO. They met galvanisers, belt makers, set designers, salmon smokers, car repairers and many others and showed that the site was still economically active, despite the area’s supposed post-industriality.

Davies, Rapp and Davis also demonstrated the aftermath of the CPO and the *dispersal* of these businesses after they received compensation from the LDA. Davis’ research in particular showed that, while many companies did manage to relocate successfully, others found new premises hard to acquire and a number went out of business. This account also shows the difficulties of re-establishing customer bases and an arguably justified belief among some owners that their compensation payments were too low, given the enormous uplift in value of their former sites as a result of the mega event (Davies et al. 2017, 3).



Figure 6.9 An operative working in Parkes Galvanizing Ltd.

Note: This was one of the businesses located on the site of the Olympic Stadium (now London Stadium) that had to leave as a result of a CPO in 2007. Parkes had been in operation on this site (close to the location of the boat in [figure 6.8](#)) for over 50 years. This image by Marion Davies featured in *Dispersal* (Davies et al. 2017).

Source: © Marion Davies 2017.

Dispersal dramatically challenges the representation of the site as a wasteland, repopulating it with a remarkable array of enterprises, and reconfirming it as one of London's remaining industrial heartlands. However, its photographs and research was not the only attempt to provide a more balanced representation of the area's recent past and present. A broad array of activists and researchers documented the impacts of the Games by investigating, for example, the effects of the CPO on the residents of the Clay's Lane housing cooperative (e.g. [Hatcher 2012](#)), the alleged pollution released during construction and the lack of affordable housing construction. Opposition to these impacts and activist-led investigations were shared through online networks such as Games Monitor (gamesmonitor.org.uk) and the Counter Olympics Network (counterolympicsnetwork.wordpress.com/), sites that remain active.

Several oppositional efforts drew upon what might be seen as heritage discourses; an insistence that the (pre-Games) past and present was worthy of retention within the future Games site and the promised legacy. Much of this work actually sought compromise and accommodation with what was planned, rather than being a widespread or blanket opposition to the Games. These campaigns drew attention to different site users' longevity of occupation, autochthonic connections to the area and

the close sense of community that existed here. In this vein, it is instructive to consider the efforts of the Manor Garden Allotments plot holders (via the Manor Gardening Society – MGS) to remain on the site.

The allotment holders campaigned to save their 1.8 hectare (4.5 acre) site at Bully Fen, close to the Velodrome and the aforementioned Second World War gun emplacement and Cold War training ‘village’ site. These allotments were established in the 1920s on land donated by Sir Arthur Villiers, Director of Barings Bank, through the Eton Manor Charitable Trust, and were intended to provide space for poor East Enders to grow their own food cheaply. In their campaign against the removal of the site, the allotment holders made the argument that their plots, having transformed a marginal and marshy site adjacent to a landfill (Abbott’s Shoot/West Ham dump), were a valued community asset that was explicitly seen by their users as ‘a precious part of Lea Valley’s heritage’ (in *Hackney Independent* 2006). The allotment holders’ campaign failed and they had to move out in September 2007 – the plots were swept away soon after. After an initial promise of two replacement sites within the Park did not materialise, the allotment holders were eventually offered a ca. 1 hectare location at Pudding Mill Lane and a sister plot, off-site, in Waltham Forest (MGS 2016).

The allotments at Bully Fen appear to have gone unrecorded by the ODA-funded archaeological and heritage investigations, with the exception of study of the Second World War pillbox gun emplacements and a radar installation that had been repurposed as garden sheds (see *Brown et al.* 2012). There is a strong argument that urban allotments, beyond simply providing spaces in which to grow food, are also important for their community and heritage value, with such spaces increasingly under threat in cities such as London (e.g. *Acton* 2011). Independent photographers, such as Peter Marshall, documented the plot holders’ final seasons on the allotments (fig. 6.10). In portraying the plants, sheds and the plot holders, some of whom had worked on them for decades, Marshall and others evocatively challenged the idea that the place was empty or valueless.

Significant numbers of artists also documented the pre-Games site and the construction project. Their work sometimes took place just outside the site’s 11-mile long fence (see *Gardner* 2013), while others worked as ‘insiders’, as part of ODA-backed residencies and projects. The latter were sometimes criticised by some of the former and by more activist-minded academics for ‘collaborating’ in what they saw as the Games’ ‘neoliberal’ co-option of the arts to legitimise its presence (discussed in detail by *Zaiontz* 2013). If we accept this dichotomy of

inside and outside, while rejecting the simplistic ‘collaborationist’ insinuation it suggests, we can see the 2012 Games’ artist in residence Neville Gabie as very much an ‘insider’ to the project, but one who created some of the most nuanced portrayals of the site and its history.

In *Great Lengths*, the final publication of his Games work (co-produced with curator Sam Wilkinson), Gabie reflects that ‘regeneration which wipes out or ignores the past is at best unwise’ (2012, 125). A series of challenges to the Games’ future-focussed vision are found throughout the archive of work he created during his tenure between September 2010 and December 2011. Gabie’s work with the Games also reflects his long-standing interest in time and measurement and he frequently emphasised temporal connections between the site, its materials and its people, past and present. He sought to create ‘a conversation about what had happened in the Park – its history, how it functioned, who the people were currently at work on the construction site, and what their relationship was to that place and that context’ (Gabie and Zaiontz 2016, 107). In particular, he powerfully juxtaposed the temporal measurement and ‘record-breaking’ language of the Olympics and Paralympics with the experiences of workers and others who produced the new landscape in Stratford (Grennan in Gabie 2012, 11–12). Such work blurred notions of ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the preparations for the Games and compared the apparently quotidian with the



Figure 6.10 Plot holders in the Manor Garden Allotments in 2007, prior to the CPO. Source: © 2007 Peter Marshall mylondondiary.co.uk.

extraordinary, both in his own performative efforts and through the lives and bodies of the site's workers.

In *43.6 minute mile* for example, Gabie attempted to walk in a straight line across the Park from south to north. This seemingly mundane task took months of planning, endless security clearances, inductions and health and safety meetings to achieve, even in a diverted form. It took almost three hours to traverse 3.5 miles, a distance an Olympic marathon runner might cover in just 15 minutes.

The artist's interest in the everyday production of the new Park is most arrestingly captured in a piece called *Freeze Frame* (fig. 6.11). In this photograph Gabie posed Olympic Park site staff on the west bank of the River Lea including security guards (with sniffer dog), landscape gardeners and ecologists in a semi-recreation of Seurat's iconic painting, *Bathers at Asnières* (1884). Gabie then reproduced the image as a double-page spread in *Metro* on 26 January 2012, a UK freesheet newspaper that, at that point, had a circulation of 1.3 million.

At first glance, Seurat's depiction of Asnières, a Seine-side Parisian suburb, resembles the Lea Valley with its shallow slopes, bridges and background of industrial buildings.⁸ However, Gabie notes that it was the computer-generated representations of the *future* Olympic Park found in ODA publicity materials that had sparked his recollection of Seurat's painting. This recollection from the future to the past hints at a wider tension in his choice of this juxtaposition:

France embracing the republic, an urban public park populated by workers, factories in the background, the economic drivers of the 19th century. Compare that to a post industrial landscape using sport and leisure to reinvent itself, described as the new 'park for the people' in east London. (Gabie 2012, 33)

In Gabie's and his collaborators' work presented for 'Unearthed: The creative remains of a brownfield site', further, alternative, historical connections to the area can be seen. This took the form of an exhibition documenting the former ACME artists' studios on Carpenters Road (the former Yardley's cosmetic factory), which was demolished in 2004 and became the site of the Games' temporary Water Polo Arena and is the planned location of V&A East (see Chapter 7). 'Unearthed' tracked down many of the artists who had worked in the building, recorded their memories through oral testimony and collected photographs of their studios and the work they had produced (including Gabie's time there two decades earlier). These stories and works were then exhibited in another



Figure 6.11 Neville Gabie's *Freeze Frame*.

Note: Workers in the north of the Olympic Park posed similarly to Seurat's 1884 *Bathers at Asnières*. Photographed in the Olympic Park in 2011, everyone in the photograph was involved in creating this landscape, either as landscape gardeners, designers, engineers, water restoration, security staff and dogs – and one would-be Olympic rower. The Olympic Velodrome can be seen at right on the eastern bank of the River Lea. The site of the anti-aircraft guns, Civil Defence Corps 'village' and Manor Garden Allotments is also on the eastern bank, in the space visible between the two bridges.

Source: © Neville Gabie, ODA Artist in Residence during the construction of the Olympic Park London, 2010–12.

former Yardley's premises at 150 Stratford High Street – which was also being redeveloped and was excavated by archaeologists in 2008 (including myself: see [Wroe-Brown et al. 2014](#)).

Unearthed was not simply a neutral archive of the history of the ACME studios between 1987 and 2001; it was also positioned by Gabie as a reflection on 'lost' East End history and as a place whose location in this urban 'edgeland' helped inspire his work and career and that of many others (see [Gabie 2012](#), 3–5). The exhibition also drew out the materiality of the building itself. In oral history recordings, the artists vividly recalled the 'smell of talcum powder' that remained in the former cosmetics factory, and commented on how the site and its industrial materials influenced their work (Kite in [Gabie 2012](#), 146).

Archaeologist James Dixon, a member of the Unearthed curatorial team, had previously documented the Carpenters Road Yardley building for the Museum of London Archaeology Service prior to its demolition.

Dixon's experiences of this process, and his own relationship to this space as one of its last-ever occupants, also featured in the exhibition. In 2004, Dixon was there to record and measure the details of the structure under the criteria of archaeological and architectural heritage 'significance' described above (Dixon 2004). However, during this process he felt he 'had only got to grips with the bricks and mortar, not with the people who had once occupied it' (Dixon in Gabie 2012, 150). It was only through *Unearthed* and his interviews with some of the 70 former occupants featured in the exhibition, that he could mentally repopulate the site and situate himself within its history.

Gabie ultimately found the experience of being part of the Games a difficult one, and he recognised that he could be accused of becoming 'censored' or 'co-opted' in the service of the mega event. Nonetheless, his practice, along with the many other artists who considered the earlier stages of the Games' demolition and construction processes (e.g. Powell 2009; Knowles et al. 2009; Gill 2007), further complicates portrayals of the mega event's development and its tendency to *tabula rasa* urbanism.

The hour approaches

In this chapter I provided a view of London 2012's site in Stratford that encompasses both its deep past and its contested future. In moving from prehistory to the near present, the preparations for and the building of this mega event created a dialectical relationship between an official, managed 'Games Time' and alternative temporal visions. These tensions are made manifest in the tangled intersection of the district's new and old landscapes, its materials and inhabitants, and their contested representations. The landscape of London 2012 and its aftermath can be understood as an amalgam of what came before rather than as a total replacement, a layered melding of humans and non-humans, discourses and recalcitrant materials.

This returns me to the issue of the 'truth' of the past on this site and the question of the reality of the wasteland. It is true that parts of the Park were, literally, built on waste materials. Substances now seen as contaminants were also the by-products of industry and sometimes valued in their own right, particularly as landfill material. The pre-Olympic Park acted as an essential part of the city's functioning: the management and purification of water; the disposal of sewage; the provision and distribution of electricity; the recycling of materials; and

the burying of rubbish. Such places remain essential for the city to operate, no matter how unpleasant or anachronistic they may seem. Waste as a category is infused with ‘conceptual leakage’ and exhibits a tendency to ‘revenge’ and reappearance (Martin 2016, 209, 215). Its physical remains rarely stay buried forever and the means of managing waste will never be made entirely absent (e.g. Tarr 1984). Such activities are simply better hidden or ‘outsourced’ to the city’s hinterlands – be it the edge of the greenbelt or even further afield. Despite our tendency to disregard waste as forgotten or unpleasant, such ‘[r]esidues remind us that the past cannot be ignored’ (Boudia et al. 2018, 168). They will remain as a fragmentary chemical and material legacy for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

Many of the traces of the activities considered to have ‘wasted’ the pre-Park landscape remain, if one knows where to look. The power cables once strung from the pylons that ‘dominate[d] the landscape’ were buried in deep tunnels with their two headhouses in the south and north of the Park disguised by a cloak of public artworks but betrayed by a crown of razor wire. As we will see in the Chapter 7, remnants of demolished buildings can also still be found. The top layers of contamination of the site have been removed and its users and inhabitants live and work safely, as long as they do not delve too deep; beneath the Human Health Layer, time-travelling by-products of the Industrial Revolution still lurk.

Just what was it about the recent past that was unacceptable? Although the wasteland discourse was neither homogeneous nor always consistently applied by the mega event’s backers, at its core it was nonetheless a profoundly temporal argument. Ascriptions of wasteland, underutilisation and dereliction were fundamentally about what activities were seen as acceptable in the present and for the future of this landscape, and which were seen as decaying holdovers from the past. The presence of contemporary industry and inhabitants contradicted the simplistically positive, or redemptive, *future* promise of this mega project (cf. Butler 2007, 17), one that promised a wholly post-industrial, clean and orderly landscape. To create the Games therefore not only required the removal of the physical traces of this older past – such as contamination and old buildings – but the creation of a whole new Olympic-oriented history, one in which the project ‘saved’ the area from this dirty history and promised a better future. The creation of this new chronology was assisted by emphasising an older archaeological past, one safely contained in reports, museum storage and press releases. This meant the mega event could

establish itself in the deep time of the Lea Valley before the decline of the ‘wasteland’ had set in.

As we take our seats for the opening ceremony of the Olympics in the next chapter, my focus shifts to what comes after the spectacle and how recent mega events are remembered. Much like the aftermath of the Great Exhibition, questions of ‘what is to be done’ re-emerge as time moves inexorably forward, into this latest London mega event’s operational and legacy periods.

Notes

- 1 Considering the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation of 2007 to 2019 for example: 2007 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100411141238/http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/neighbourhoodrenewal/deprivation/deprivation07/>; 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833947/1oD2019_Research_Report.pdf.
- 2 Against this wider background of dock closures and deindustrialisation, the site of today’s East Village development in the east of the Park (the former Athletes’ Village) was the scene of a significant industrial dispute in 1972. At Chobham Farm container depot an act of unsanctioned ‘secondary’ picketing took place in support of dock workers. Five shop stewards were arrested for being in contempt of a court order and were incarcerated in Pentonville Prison – the ‘Pentonville Five’ (Steel 2013). This sparked off a massive wave of strike action as all major UK ports shut down and miners, factory workers, market workers and bus drivers walked out in solidarity. In response to plans for a National Strike set for 31 July – and after 30,000 trade unionists marched on Pentonville – the government relented and released the five men. This was recognised at the time as the most significant victory for organised labour in the UK since the 1926 General Strike, although this episode in the Park’s history is almost completely forgotten.
- 3 LMA ACC/2558/MW/SU/02/0260 Nobs Hill Cottage, Marshgate Lane Management: EC260E. References to dumping around Temple Mills and the White Hart are made in documents connected to the site’s use as a Civil Defence Training ground, e.g. LMA LCC/CL/CD/05/109, 15 April 1953 Opening of Bully Fen Rescue Training Ground; and the use of the West Ham tip in McDougall 1936, 173–4. Mention of Lloyd’s Shoot at (K)Nob’s Hill and the stadium site can be found in LMA ACC/2558/MW/SU/02/0260.
- 4 At the time, the requirement for archaeological mitigation fell under Planning Policy Guidance Note 16. See: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/ppg16>. See also Darvill et al. 2019.
- 5 Now archived at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/*http://www.london2012.com/.
- 6 Two exceptions are found in Mapping your Manor, with recordings of Lance Forman, whose business was on the site of the Olympic Stadium and another with former residents of Clay’s Lane housing estate: see <http://www.mappingyourmanor.com/location/monier-approach>, and <http://www.mappingyourmanor.com/location/temple-mills>. The Museum of London undertook photographic recording of Clay’s Lane Estate, though this seems to have been undertaken independently from the Games project: <https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/776193.html>.
- 7 Research comprising work by social scientists, photographers and artists can be found in chapters in Naik and Oldfield 2009 and Powell and Marrero-Guillamón 2012. Of equal importance are the array of blogs that documented the Park’s construction process, especially the pseudonymous Diamond Geezer (e.g. http://lndn.blogspot.com/2007_07_01_lndn_archive.html) and activist websites such as www.gamesmonitor.org.uk and www.gamesmonitor.org.uk/archive/. See also Gardner 2020a.
- 8 Seurat’s painting can be viewed at <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/georges-seurat-bathers-at-asnieres>.

7

Legacy or heritage? Making time in the post-Olympic city

On Friday 27 July 2012, the opening of the Games of the XXX Olympiad was marked with the ringing of a giant bell in the Olympic Stadium by cyclist Bradley Wiggins, that summer's Tour de France winner. Commentators told a 900 million-strong TV audience that the Olympic Bell had been cast 'down the road' in Whitechapel, in the same foundry that created Big Ben and the Liberty Bell, hinting at the key role the Industrial Revolution would play later in the performance. The bell also tolled for the zero hour of Games Time and signalled the beginning of a temporal shift from the *before* to the *after* of the mega event.

In [Chapter 6](#) I showed how the variegated and contested history of the Games site was used to build new visions of the present and of the future. Observing this process revealed the Park to be a dialectical landscape, one caught indeterminately in between times, where the past refused to remain passed and the future was always just over the horizon. The transformation of this site was not only produced by those who planned, built or opposed the mega event, but also through the remains of industry and buried archaeology that challenged a smooth transition from wasteland to Olympic and Paralympic future.

In this chapter, I move to the Games' legacy and consider what happens when this long-dreamt-of future finally arrives ([fig. 7.1](#)). An event's operational period may be eclipsed by an afterlife that lasts decades or even centuries longer than the original spectacle. Phil Cohen talks of London 2012's 'narrative legacy' as being one of its most significant remnants in the 'ways in which specific conflicts and contradictions internal to the host society are stage managed so as to give an impression of national unity and pride' (2013, 26). In [Chapter 6](#) this was seen in Games Time's efforts to situate the mega event site's history



Figure 7.1 A view across Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park looking southwards to London Stadium (the former Olympic Stadium).
Source: Photograph by the author, taken in 2013.

in a progressive chronology and in a narrative of temporal continuity. In this chapter, I continue to explore the intersection of past, present and future in this place, but I focus in greater depth on intermingled ideas of heritage, legacy and inheritance that emerged as part of the Games' afterlife. I begin with the return of the past at the Olympic Opening Ceremony and then turn to the ongoing development of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park to explore what the future might hold.

'The isle is full of noises'

Focussing on the Olympic Opening Ceremony in a chapter that otherwise examines the aftermath of a mega event may seem odd at first glance. However, it is useful to take a closer look because of how this performance acted not only as an opening for the Games but also as a closing of what had come before and, indeed, as a prelude to what came after. By this, I mean that the Ceremony (and the Paralympic Opening Ceremony) marked the beginning of the end of Games Time; all previous preparations, all the focus on wasteland, the remediation of the earth and the building milestones had led to this moment. Just a few weeks after the ringing of the Olympic Bell, the exceptional time of the mega event would be over and a far more temporally uncertain period would arrive. The Ceremony

also marked a shift in the way narratives of past, present and future came to operate in Stratford and in the event's spatial relationships to London, as a site that was no longer a peripheral wasteland, out of time and place, but instead a landscape laden with expectations and competing visions for what was to come next. By creating a new vision of British history and identity, the Ceremony also cemented the idea of this mega event as a place in which cultural heritage would take centre stage rather than only play a supporting role, a process that continues today as Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park develops.

Olympic and Paralympic opening ceremonies offer their hosts a gigantic opportunity to present themselves to the world. These spectacular performances provide a free-form, exhibitionary counterpart to the measured and regulated time of the sporting competition. Such ceremonies are akin to an Exhibition's historical and social displays compressed into a digestible and compelling two or three hours. Unlike the Olympic and Paralympic sports taking place according to strict rules amid visually unremarkable interiors and under the auspices of an 'apolitical' International Olympic Committee (IOC), the opening and closing ceremonies are a chance to extravagantly 'perform' the nation to an audience of hundreds of millions.

A large amount of academic literature has been written about such ceremonies, with a particular focus on the Summer and Winter Olympic Games of the last three decades, as performances grew ever more grandiose and nationalistic (but whose origins lie in the first-ever opening ceremony at the 1908 London Games). Many of these studies recognise the significant symbolic role played by visions of a national past (e.g. [Luo 2010](#); [Baker 2015](#)). Others discuss the important role of heritage, particularly with regard to the creation and marking of group identity (e.g. [Silk 2015](#); [Klausen 1999](#); [Hamilakis 2007](#), chap. 1; [Piccini 2012](#)). This use of the past is often related to a discussion of gender, representation and indigeneity, particularly at Games in settler society contexts such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics and the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics (e.g. [Forsyth and Wamsley 2005](#); [Daddario and Wigley 2008](#); [Billings and Angelini 2007](#); [Adese 2016](#)). In a broader concern for the temporalities of such ceremonies, others have linked them to ritual or spectacle and as a break from the strictures of everyday modern life ([Derksen 2013](#)). John MacAloon famously argued that the opening ceremonies are intended as,

rites of separation from 'ordinary life', initiating the juxtaposition of national symbols and the symbols of the transnational, Olympic, 'human' community. (1984, 252)

MacAloon does acknowledge that Games organisers find it increasingly hard to achieve such an engineered liminal 'rite' given the rise of nationalism in the background to the event, ever since the 1930s. This does make Olympism's claims to apoliticism and universality harder to sustain.

Olympic opening ceremonies, much like the Crystal Palace's Pageant of London and the South Bank Exhibition's displays of *The Land and The People*, attempt to draw together multiple historical periods and, in doing so, tend to simplify or elide alternative narratives. Angela Piccini relates how, in Vancouver 2010's opening ceremony, First Nations people and imagery from different times and places were utilised in conjunction with presentations of the building of the modern nation of Canada (2012, 297). At first glance this appeared to be multicultural and inclusive, but the organisers' use of Indigenous peoples was very much on the mega event's own terms, and their potted history avoided any mention of Vancouver's bloody colonial past; the 'message was that Vancouver was cosmopolitan, multicultural, future-facing' (Piccini 2013, 615; see also Adese 2016).

The mixing up or exclusion of the more 'difficult' elements of the past at opening or closing ceremonies is not surprising, given their role as focal points for national narration; their selection, editing and appropriation processes rework history, materials and memory to support a story of the host nation as a form of unified heritage discourse. Holtorf (2012) has argued that audiences seem rarely perturbed by such 'creative accounting' (or indeed, creative anachronism) in the presentation of such heritage discourses, as long as a narrative is coherent and uncontroversial. Indeed, there is a strong argument that heritage narratives are inevitably dominated by those stories we most 'want to hear' and believe, at the expense of those that make us feel awkward, ashamed or angry (e.g. Lowenthal 1985).

Turning now to the content of the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, it is clear that the narrative on display made an effort to provide a 'mosaic' version of British history (Baker 2015, 416), and attempted to tell a unified, if simplistic, national story using a multitude of voices that would appeal to both global and domestic audiences.

Director Danny Boyle divided the Opening Ceremony into a series of tableaux, with its initial parts being overtly historical followed by more thematic segments portraying national achievements such as the National Health Service and British contributions to the world, such as the World Wide Web (see LOCOG 2012). The Opening Ceremony was entitled *Isles of Wonder* and drew heavily upon text and imagery from Shakespeare's

The Tempest as well as on the long-standing British ‘island story’ narrative – previously encountered at the South Bank Exhibition in [Chapter 5](#). This potent combination presented a playfully eccentric and pageantry-filled narrative that told the story of the British people, past and present. Although it encompassed a far broader variety of characters and themes, the similarities with earlier historical displays – as at the Festival of Empire in 1911 and the displays of the Festival of Britain – are significant. Like these earlier events, the Opening Ceremony’s choices from the history of these islands were presented as ‘defining moments’ that were formative in the creation of the contemporary United Kingdom ([Schofield 2009](#)).

The first segment of the Ceremony, ‘Green and Pleasant Land’,¹ opened with an extraordinary vista at the centre of the Olympic Stadium: a recreation of a pre-industrial British (though actually stereotypically English) countryside, where people of all ages and ethnicities worked the fields, danced around maypoles, played cricket and picked apples ([fig. 7.2](#)). As in the Pageant of London 101 years earlier, real animals featured



Figure 7.2 A rehearsal of the opening scene of the Olympic Opening Ceremony, ‘Green and Pleasant Land’.

Source: Photograph by Matt Lancashire – Flickr: P7252638, [CC BY 2.0](#), Wikimedia: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20437036>.

– 40 sheep and 12 horses, along with chickens, cows, goats and sheepdogs – while people ‘worked’ the land. A choir of children sang ‘Jerusalem’, England’s unofficial national anthem, while pre-recorded video clips showed the other home nations where youngsters sang the traditional national songs of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.² The singing continued as a troop of top-hatted gentlemen stared intently at an enormous tree on a mound at one end of the Stadium. After the choir reached the hymn’s most famous line – ‘until we build Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land’ – Caliban’s lines from *The Tempest* were spoken by Kenneth Branagh, playing Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the famous engineer: ‘Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not’. This marked the beginning of the ‘Pandemonium’ segment and the coming of the Industrial Revolution.

Branagh and 50 other top-hatted Brunels danced and gestured as if measuring up the land and plotting its transformation, while the giant tree was lifted upwards to reveal a crowd pouring into the Stadium from beneath the earth. The turf and the pastoral idyll were gradually removed to show a palette of steel-greys, as oil-smearing labourers replaced farmers. Gears and machinery appeared from below the ground and



Figure 7.3 A rehearsal of the ‘Pandemonium’ segment of the Olympic Opening Ceremony: the greenery of the pastoral idyll is replaced by an industrial landscape.

Source: Photograph by Matt Lancashire – Flickr: P7252685, [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/), Wikimedia: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20437014>.

seven enormous chimney stacks rose skyward (fig. 7.3), while the Brunels danced in a mechanistic rhythm. Suffragettes then appeared, marching across the landscape, followed by soldiers dressed for the First World War.

This segment, having built to a musical and emotional climax, closed with 'molten metal' being poured into a circular mould on the Stadium's floor to cast a gigantic Olympic Ring which was then hoisted aloft to meet four counterparts already floating above. As the rings combined, the commentator observed that, 'what was struck in the foundry was of the highest quality', reiterating the significance and pride surrounding Britain's industrial past introduced earlier with the Whitechapel-made Olympic Bell. The segment ended with the Olympic Rings showering sparks across the arena as an enormous cheer rang around the stadium.

Like the South Bank Exhibition's depictions of archaeology, the Ceremony's performance was inevitably a selective history, although with many interwoven themes. While the South Bank's People display ended British history at 1066 AD, the Olympic Opening Ceremony showed nothing prior to the late eighteenth century, with the majority of the historical segment dedicated to the heroic engineers 'building Jerusalem'. It did hint at the hardship of the workers and to the environmental damage of industrialisation – with the commentators reminding us that Milton invented the word Pandemonium to name the capital of Hell – but this scene ultimately emphasised the importance of a coming together for a greater cause, the casting of the Olympic Rings. While they obviously stood for the event itself, the rings were also symbols of 'forging' the common bonds of an idealised British nationhood.³ This updated island story was predicated on the idea that the dramatic changes of the Industrial Revolution shaped the nation and its people, and produced today's sociocultural and physical landscapes.

While the Industrial Revolution segment undoubtedly spoke to a UK-wide experience, the earlier parts took what appeared to be a traditional English history and heritage as representative of a broader Britishness,⁴ and was redolent of The People exhibits of the South Bank in 1951. In particular, the 'green and pleasant land' scenes of maypoles and cricket (generally speaking, seen more as English traditions than as Welsh, Northern Irish or Scottish ones), and the singing of 'Jerusalem' took centre stage. This seemed, at first glance, to represent a long-standing romantic idea of an England with literary and artistic roots that stretched back several hundred years. However, Catherine Baker notes that not all was as it seemed in this segment. This green and pleasant vision of the country, however Anglo-centric, was, she says, 'self-consciously

imaginary, referencing classic novels for children rather than any lived past (we all “believe” – but only believe – that it existed once ...)’ (2015, 413). In the *Media Guide* we indeed find notes that in this scene ‘is the Britain of *The Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie-the-Pooh* ... that we all believe existed once’ (LOCOG 2012, 20).

I am obviously biased (as a Scot), but it is debatable that such landscapes or customs were taken as quintessentially British (i.e. as UK-wide characteristics) as the organisers may have hoped. Taking just the geographical aspect for example, arguably British landscapes are most famous for their huge variety rather than their homogeneity – think of Welsh mountains and valleys, Northern Irish lakes and rivers, the Highland peaks or the Yorkshire moors, among many others. This is not a criticism of the Ceremony, given its limited time and the competing demands it had to fulfil, but it is to note how difficult it can be for mega events to ‘condense’ heritage in such a way that could ever be acceptable to all audiences and avoid oversimplification.

While industrialisation was seen as disruptive and juxtaposed to a mythical British (mainly English) idyll in the Ceremony, that disruption was eventually represented in redemptive terms, ‘be not afraid’. In spite of the hardship and pandemonium the Industrial Revolution caused, it was ultimately portrayed as a positive transition that changed the world, and Britain, for the better.⁵ The communal forging of the rings materialised this ‘progress’ as an act of national pulling together, held together by one of the big men of history, Brunel. Just as with the contamination that was cleaned up or remained safely buried below the Human Health Layer, below the Ceremony and the Stadium floor, this spectacle placed industrialisation’s duality at its heart: destructive, dirty and chaotic, yet ultimately producing the likes of Brunel, mass employment, increased living standards and wealth and a recasting of British identity.

This nuanced understanding of British industrial history stood in contrast to other presentations of the local industrial past. The former Olympics Minister Tessa Jowell introduced the Ceremony *Media Guide* by noting that the Stratford site was to be transformed into ‘the biggest new park in Europe for 150 years’ and thus was ultimately a reversal of Boyle’s narrative. This would be a *deindustrialisation* achieved by building the ‘green and pleasant land’ of the Park and would see the excision of the ‘pandemonium’ of the industrial East End, epitomised, as Jowell put it, by the ‘old fridges and debris piled high where the Stadium and other venues now stand’ (in LOCOG 2012, 9).⁶ The divergence between rhetoric about places that, five years previously, had offered employment for several thousand people, and the valorisation of the Industrial Revolution in the

Ceremony is stark. As will be discussed shortly, the favouring of such an idealised heritage narrative over historical accuracy or lived experience seems to characterise several of the temporal relationships that emerged in the Games' legacy more broadly.

The Ceremony was variously described by reviewers as a celebration of Britain's 'self-mockery' and its ordinary people, rather than of 'giants and supermen' (Barnes in [BBC 2012b](#)); as 'madcap, surreal and moving' ([Gibson 2012](#)); and, as 'leftie multi-cultural crap' by one Conservative MP (Burley in [Watt 2012](#)).⁷ One US commentator argued that it showed the anxieties of a nation trying to 'redefine itself ... after nearly a century of managed decline', hinting at the fact that, as at the Festival of Britain some 70 years earlier, the legacy of British imperialism was all but absent in the Ceremony (see [Faiola 2012](#); [Oettler 2015](#)). One of the Ceremony's few nods to this was the brief appearance of a model of the MV *Windrush* being carried in to the Stadium by people of African-Caribbean background, to signify Britain's post-war immigration and diversity.

Significantly, the budget for the Olympic and Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies was doubled in 2011 after the then Prime Minister David Cameron expressed concerns. The Sports Minister at the time, Hugh Robertson, explained that the decision was due to the realisation,

that this is a great national moment, [and that] ... it will go to a global audience of four billion pounds [*sic*], so we think that the money we have invested today will in fact drive greater economic and tourism benefits for this country at a time when the world is looking at us. (Quoted in [BBC 2011b](#))

When challenged in this interview on the fact that core departmental and local government budgets across the board had been slashed by centrally prescribed 'austerity', Robertson replied that the Ceremonies were an opportunity to give, 'a much better impression of this country', and to make those from overseas feel that, 'we want to come back here, do business and spend tourism money' (quoted in [BBC 2011a](#)). Thus, beyond nostalgia, there was clearly a political desire to display a Britishness that would draw on the past to sell the country to overseas investors and tourists, in a way not dissimilar to the efforts of the Great Exhibition some 161 years earlier, or indeed, at the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Sociologist Michael Silk has argued that the multiculturalism of the Opening Ceremony, while not 'crap', was nonetheless a veneer for what was (and remains) a deeply conditional approach to national

identity and citizenship in this country (2015). Namely, to be accepted as truly British, one must stay within the bounds of concepts of nebulous 'British values', and where belonging is cogent on a loyalty to the state's acceptable version of national identity, a critique which has also been applied to other Olympic opening ceremonies (e.g. Forsyth and Wamsley 2005).

A supposed British tolerance for difference and dissent was also undermined by events occurring just outside the Park on the evening of the Ceremony on 27 July 2012, with the mass arrests of 182 protesters on the regular Critical Mass bike ride for the crime of not notifying the police of their intention to demonstrate. This came after regular harassment of photographers and journalists by private security and the police throughout preparations for the Games (Milmo 2012; Marrero-Guillamón 2012). This too is a 'heritage' common to mega events, when official messages and values are strongly protected against perceived threats (see also Gardner 2013; Zaiontz 2013).

It is also significant that those involved in the widespread riots in London and other English cities in the summer of 2011 cited the government's enormous spending on the Olympics (ca. £9 billion) against massive cuts to youth programmes and a growing sense of disenfranchisement caused by 'austerity' as among the reasons for their actions (see Muir and Ferguson 2011). The riots clearly unsettled the government and, as with the panic over the Chartists shortly before the Great Exhibition (discussed in Chapter 4), they contributed to an increased security apparatus for the Games (Hopkins and Norton-Taylor 2011). The rioters' apparent 'mindless criminality' was also directly contrasted by some of the media against the hopeful, progressive vision London 2012 was said to present (e.g. Prince 2012: 'what a difference a year makes'), and with the mostly young rioters cast as anti-progressive criminal mobs by the then Home Secretary Theresa May (BBC 2011c; see Drury et al. 2019).

The Olympic Ceremonies saw the Park become a national and global space, temporarily abstracted from its host city and its history in favour of an updated island story of British identity. This narrative drew on many of the earlier ideas and tropes of those events discussed earlier in this book and, like them, did not go entirely uncontested. However, after the party was over these broader national stories seemed to quickly fade, at least in the environment of the Olympic Park, where more locally situated temporal imaginaries re-emerged, with an emphasis on the future and the promises of legacy.

From legacy to heritage

The most obvious traces of the mega event in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (its name since 2013) are the Olympic and Paralympic venues and their surrounding infrastructure. Traces of the pre-Games past, conserved as heritage or otherwise, are harder to spot, though fragments can still be found if one knows where to look. Before looking at how these remnants, and those of the Games, are used and valued in the Park today, I want to reflect briefly on how strategies of defining and creating heritage are conscious aims of mega event legacy planners, and to explore how concepts of *legacy* and *heritage* have become intermingled in the aftermath of London 2012.

The terms legacy and, to a lesser extent, heritage are critical to contemporary mega event planning. Both words pertain to ‘dealing with’ time and, specifically, with what is ‘left’ to the future and the degree of control we exert over this process. A complex, and sometimes confused, relationship exists between what is considered a legacy and what is seen as heritage. This is something that first struck me as I read the London 2012 *Candidate File*, a document submitted to the IOC in 2004 to support the city’s Olympic and Paralympic Games Bid ([London 2012 Ltd 2004](#)).

The *Candidate File* is written in French and English (the official languages of the IOC) and in it, one frequently notices the French translation of legacy as *héritage*. This similarity with the English word heritage, although it has a different meaning, reminds us of the origins of the concept of ‘a legacy’ – in effect, a last will and testament and the inheriting of possessions or wealth by nominated *legatees* following a person’s death. The French translation of the English word heritage itself is *patrimoine*, as in the English patrimony – valued holdings or assets and the right to inherit them, also connoting parentage and lineage. Both heritage and *héritage* derive from the same Latin root of the word for heir: *heres*. English words like legatee and legacy (and the French, *legacie*) are derived from the Latin *legatus*, originally meaning the person or official who administers the deceased’s will, with the idea of property being left as a legacy coming from an Old Scots usage in the mid-fifteenth century.⁸

As well as revealing legacy and heritage’s close synonymy in French and English (and Scots) and their shared basis in notions of heritability, this detour into etymology reminds us that both words are temporally dependent on how they are applied in practice. It is not necessarily clear-cut – in either language – which one should be applied to something that we *intentionally* leave behind, versus that which

applies to something we inherit *unexpectedly* or otherwise have no control over. An attempt to leave an intentional legacy is an effort to create and define value, to leave something *for* those in the future to receive and, in doing so, to ensure remembrance of the deceased leaver and their achievements. Besides a planned legacy – the intentional choice of what to leave as an inheritance – there are unintentional or *unplanned* legacies, which can sometimes be positive. For example, Albertopolis was not a planned legacy of the Great Exhibition, yet it went on to be a highly successful educational and cultural district that remains and prospers today. However, these unplanned mega event legacies can also be negative or unwanted: debts, underutilised ‘white elephant’ venues, property speculation, gentrification and political backlash, among many others. These unexpected legacies suggest a more unpredictable sense of heritability where, despite our best attempts, certainty about the future left by a mega event remains elusive. This has significant implications for what becomes considered as heritage.

Although we may carefully conserve materials, buildings or objects to ‘save’ them for the future, it is not easy to predict what others might value in that future, and mega events are no different in this regard. For instance, while we might preserve an object that we consider meaningful today, future generations may simply discard it as an irrelevance. Conversely, things we discard or casually destroy today, may become prized items in the future (see [Harrison et al. 2020](#)). In other words, while we may plan to preserve a specific type of heritage related to a mega event, say, a sporting artefact or an exhibition building, it is difficult to account for (a) how successfully such remnants will fulfil their roles as heritage – how they might be valued in the future – and (b) how external factors may disrupt these plans in the years and decades to come (e.g. changes in a political situation, financial ruin, redevelopment, disasters).

This does fail to acknowledge situations where heritage emerges more unexpectedly. For instance, few in 1854 (or 1936) would have expected the burnt-out foundations of the Sydenham Crystal Palace to be the subject of plans to conserve its fabric rather than to rebuild it. This also leads to questions over how more traumatic mega event legacies can also become heritage. The phenomenon of ‘negative heritage’ is well documented and encompasses both official acts of commemoration, curation or preservation (perhaps most notably in the World Heritage Site listing of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland) and unofficial or grassroots interventions, including public-led memorialisation, protest and other activities (e.g. spontaneous excavation, [Moshenska 2015](#), 85).

Recent sporting mega events have expressly commemorated traumatic occurrences associated with their predecessors. For example, the terrorist murder of members of the Israeli Olympic team and a German police officer at the Munich Games of 1972 was commemorated during London 2012, and is marked by several physical memorials around the world, including at the Munich site itself (PA 2012; Keh 2017).

Some mega event sites act as a focal point for trauma not directly related to an event. For example, in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, close to the Aquatics Centre, there is a memorial artwork to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, entitled *Since 9/11*, made from part of one of the towers of the World Trade Center. This suggests that such sites are capable of hosting translocated and traumatic heritage commemorations.⁹ Some mega events themselves have led to violence and injustice in relation to their construction and operation, including displacing populations and gross human rights abuses (e.g. COHRE 2007; AP 2016).¹⁰

This sense of unexpectedness, connected to both desired and undesired – and sometimes traumatic or unwanted – memories and materials, suggests the convergence of legacy and heritage at mega events. While legacy is generally understood by mega event planners to mean only those intentional and predictable acts of leaving something for the future, many mega event scholars now apply the term to ‘all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by [an] event that remain longer than the event itself’ (Preuss 2007, 211, my italics), and, ‘a dream to be pursued rather than a certainty to be achieved’ (Rogerson 2016, 498).

Given this divergence between those who favour planning and certainty and those who recognise complexity and uncertainty, it seems sensible to consider mega event heritage and legacy not as separate concepts but as an intertwined *inheritance*. This term seems to better capture the unevenness and unpredictability of what a mega event leaves behind and both its imagined and unimagined futures. In its connotations of the variability of genetic mutation and heritability, this term also blurs distinctions between a mega event’s intentional and unintentional legacies, and both the official and the accidental or unofficial heritages and changes in their valuation over time.

Returning now to the aftermath of London 2012, it is clear that while planned legacy developments continue to proceed apace, there are numerous instances where the line between planned and unplanned, and heritage and legacy, is increasingly blurred.

An Olympic inheritance

It is fair to say that London 2012's planners have striven, often very successfully, to create a positive post-Games environment and to mitigate against risks of failure or unwanted legacies. This is based, in part, on an aversion to the risks of 'white elephant' venues and debts, which are so common in the aftermath of Olympic Games. Therefore, such legacy-making efforts are understandably unlikely to tolerate the more unplanned effects or divergences I have discussed. Inevitably, the power to imagine and shape legacy is not evenly distributed. This includes the uses of heritage and the representation and performance of the alternative temporal visions I have briefly alluded to. Legacy planning is ultimately about ensuring the delivery of the future as envisioned by organisers and governments, which, though enacted in the name of the public good, may not always be welcomed by everyone (Davis 2019).

Keeping in mind the idea of inheritance, official heritage in the post-Games Park seems to be understood as a fixed resource or asset *from the past* that can be used to build the future by today's planners, rather than something *of the present* that is open-ended, more loosely defined and capable of change. This can be seen in the way the word is used in a variety of official reports and legacy-planning documents. For example, heritage appears 12 times in a 2013 LLDC document that sets out the updated Legacy Masterplan. Entitled *A Walk around Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park*, this broadly set out the post-Games development and builds on the earlier *Legacy Masterplan Framework* (LLDC 2013; LDA 2009). In particular, heritage occurs four times in connection with the Olympics and Paralympics (i.e. as the remains and memories of the mega sporting event itself):

It will be a place where the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic heritage provides the impetus for a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, anchored by sports and active living

...

The Olympic heritage will live on in the spectacular setting of the South Park, framed by the Stadium, the Aquatics Centre, the ArcelorMittal Orbit, and a vibrant waterfront of retail and leisure uses. (LLDC 2013, 12, 33)

The majority of uses of heritage in this document relate to a broader conceptualisation of East London's industrial heritage as a primarily

aesthetic category – ‘new buildings inspired by the area’s industrial heritage sit alongside refurbished older buildings’ (128) – or the use of existing styles of brick-built buildings for example (38). Reference also occurs to the ‘diverse’ heritage of the Lea Valley (33) and, in another example, the introduction discusses how the Park will be ‘rooted in the ethos and fabric of East London’s diverse and vital communities’ (6), suggesting a building on existing traditions and relationships. In several different contexts, the Games themselves are reaffirmed as the most important agent of positive change to the area:

The investment of the 2012 Games and the commitment of the Masterplan to improving connectivity at a local level means that for the first time the site has the opportunity to transform from an industrial backwater to a connected and central part of East London. (LLDC 2013, 146)

In all such statements legacy and heritage are intermingled – often at the expense of strict historical accuracy. What is interesting is how the word industrial can sometimes be used positively – particularly in an aesthetic, architectural sense – and on other occasions is used in more negatively, as in ‘industrial backwater’. This Janus-faced approach to an industrial past recalls the valorisation of the Industrial Revolution in the Opening Ceremony, yet also embraces the wasteland discourse I discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

The idea of an industrial aesthetic is also seen in more recent detailed planning documents for specific neighbourhoods. These draw upon ideas of the industrial past and a generic idea of East End creativity and its ‘rich’, ‘industrial heritage’, for instance in descriptions of architecture and layouts (e.g. East Wick and Sweetwater n.d.). Similarly, in detailed LLDC planning policies, such as the *Local Plans* discussed below (the first in 2015 and the latest from 2020), heritage is integral to spatial development. Again, this is overwhelmingly in terms of ‘built heritage assets’ and related to surviving historic buildings and a generalised aesthetic, rather than broader or unofficial notions of what constitutes heritage value, such as pre-existing uses of surviving buildings or the memories of those who live (or lived) here (LLDC 2015, 2020a). It is mildly ironic that many such industrial buildings existed in the Park prior to 2007 but were demolished for the mega event, although these documents also apply to the wider LLDC area where others still persist. Ultimately, this is a skin-deep idea of industry in which industrial jobs or production are mostly absent. Such a retention of an industrial ‘look’

without the industry itself is now a common occurrence in many urban redevelopment schemes in London and elsewhere (e.g. [Penrose 2017](#)).

Beyond the mixing of legacy and heritage in the language of these plans, on the ground itself we find a more complicated picture. Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park remains home to many of the Games Time venues and a recognition of sporting heritage is found in the names of new residential streets and place names, particularly in the former Athletes' Village (e.g. Anthems Way, Celebration Avenue). A small amount of heritage interpretation material is also found in the Park, which highlights the Games' construction and operational periods and, in particular, the success of Team GB competitors through a specific trail leaflet (see LLDC n.d. a).¹¹ Related to this, at several hand-cranked 'sound stations' placed throughout the area, one can hear the sound of, for example,

the crowd on super Saturday as heptathlete Jess Ennis, long jumper Greg Rutherford and 10,000 metre runner Mo Farah win Team GB a breath-taking three golds in 46 minutes. (LLDC n.d. a)

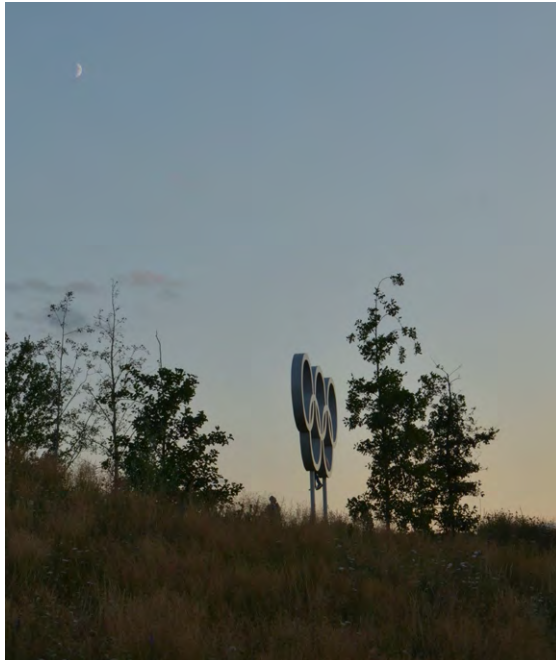


Figure 7.4 An Olympic artefact: the Olympic Rings in the Park today.
Note: The large-scale installation of the Olympic Rings, close to the VeloPark. A similar installation for the Paralympic Agitos is on the west bank of the River Lea.
Source: Photograph by the author.

There are significant Games artefacts in the form of the large-scale installations of the Paralympic Agitos, Olympic Rings and the Olympic Bell (fig. 7.4). These aside, recent Games heritage receives little further attention in the Park, although the LLDC has said that plans are afoot for further interpretation as the area develops and interpretive trail leaflets do exist for artworks and wildlife in the Park (LLDC information officer, pers. comm. 12 March 2021; LLDC n.d. b, n.d. c). For now, an emphasis remains on the future of the new neighbourhoods and forthcoming educational and cultural venues of East Bank.

There is little representation of the history of the area prior to the mega event, with no signs anywhere in the Park of the Games' archaeological discoveries and very little on its more recent industrial history. There are a few plaques embedded in the Park's benches that proclaim 'Fantastic Facts', with a few specifically related to the industrial past, such as how dry cleaning was invented in Stratford (Design Council 2012). Ten 'History Trees' at the Park's entrances have large bronze and steel rings around their canopies with inscriptions (that are nonetheless difficult to read and high off the ground) concerning local history, but they are intended primarily as artworks and, to some extent, as a reminder of the Games. Like the 'Facts' plaques, the trees were created as part of the original operational phase of the Games rather than as a specific legacy project.

Another nod to the past is found in further street names that recognise significant historical areas, personalities and industries associated with the site. These include: Alfred's Meadow (referring to King Alfred's defeat of the Danish who rowed up the Lea in 894 AD); Parkes Street (after Alexander Parkes, the Hackney Wick-based inventor of Parkesine, regarded as the world's first plastic); and Knights Bridge (after the Knights Templar at Temple Mills).¹² The toponyms of the five main new districts of residential development in the Park also mark links to the area's past: Chobham Manor (a medieval manor); Sweetwater (referencing the Clarnico sweet factory); Marshgate Wharf (remembering Stratford Marsh); and Pudding Mill, expressly 'after the area's historic connection to the Pudding Mill River' (OPLC 2011). The fifth, East Wick, refers to its geographical position east of Hackney Wick. These names were chosen after a public competition, with one of the judges and (then) Olympic Legacy Minister Bob Neill noting that: 'We are keen to make sure these aren't artificial communities that have just been plonked down. These are things that are grown and are connected with the existing background of east London' (quoted in BBC 2011d). Other places in the Park are named after historic features, again drawn from public competitions. For example, local schoolchildren named the Tumbling Bay

playground after a mill stream that archaeologists excavated at Temple Mills. This would suggest, at least among some, a desire to recognise that this place was not a totally blank slate or that the regeneration project could completely erase traces of the past.

Beyond these fairly subtle markers, an apparent lack of official interest in the past might be seen as an effect of the policy context in which legacy and planning are situated. The LLDC's most detailed vision for legacy planning is set out in their *Local Plan*, created as part of their statutory role as a local planning authority. This shows their 'strategy for the sustainable development of [the] area as a whole, including the general amount, type and location of new development it [the LLDC] considers could take place and the policies to which applications for planning permission should conform in order to meet these objectives' (LLDC 2020b, 7). The *Local Plan* (informed by the Mayor of London's broader-scale *The London Plan*) defines heritage using established categories of 'natural' and 'cultural' heritages, with the latter mainly associated with buildings or historic features (as we saw with the archaeological excavations). The glossary to the 2020 *Local Plan* defines a 'Heritage Asset' as:

A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. Heritage Assets fall into two categories, designated (such as Conservation Areas and Statutory Listed Buildings) and non-designated (such as Locally Listed Buildings and those of Townscape Merit). (LLDC 2020b)

This planning guidance is ultimately informed by the England-wide *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF), which itself takes heritage primarily as places designated on archaeological or built-fabric merit, and defines heritage assets as encompassing 'sites and buildings of local historic value to those of the highest significance, such as World Heritage Sites which are internationally recognised to be of Outstanding Universal Value' (MHC & LG 2019, 54). These formal definitions of heritage, while important for material conservation purposes, have been widely critiqued by both academics and policymakers (including by UNESCO) for failing to account for alternative understandings of heritage valuation grounded in lived experience, memory and intangible practices (e.g. Harrison 2013; Smith 2006; Schofield 2014; Byrne 2008; Rey-Pérez and Pereira Roders 2020).

Given that the *Local Plan* is a legal document, it would be unrealistic to expect its planning guidance to diverge from London-wide or national-level instruments such as the NPPF, or to take in these broader understandings of heritage without significant policy changes. That said, there are ample (so-far unrealised) opportunities here for providing more in-depth heritage interpretation or activities that are unaffected by planning policies, such as information boards or public outreach activities.

While there are continued LLDC efforts to promote arts and culture in the Park under a dedicated *Arts and Culture Strategy* (LLDC 2014), there would not seem to be, at the time of writing, a unified heritage or historical interpretation strategy (LLDC information officer, pers. comm. 12 March 2021). That said, outside the Park itself, the LLDC has supported others' efforts at heritage interpretation as a partner, including funding contributions to the development of the new Lea River Park, a series of six joined green spaces linking Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park to the Thames and referencing industrial heritage in places. A series of booklets was commissioned that tell fictional stories written by young people based around the industrial history of the river.¹³ The LLDC also contributed funds to the Canal & River Trust-led restoration of Carpenters Road Lock near to London Stadium (the former Olympic Stadium; e.g. Canal & River Trust 2020). It is clear that the LLDC is willing to fund others' work but seems reluctant to engage directly with significant heritage interpretation itself.

A management plan for the Park, created in 2020, does include a section on heritage that is slightly broader and, again, is significant in using the idea of the industrial past as a means of juxtaposing plans for legacy. This plan summarises how the concept of heritage is deployed both in the day-to-day operation of the Park and in the development of new neighbourhoods and is worth quoting at length:

By the time of the proposed creation of Olympic Park much of this land had been given over to a largely unplanned mix of temporary light industrial uses including the infamous 'fridge mountain'. There was no structure or identity to this landscape and there was little or no access to the waterways which are now one of the defining features of the Park landscape. Havens of green such as the Manor Garden allotments provided small beacons of relief within this hostile landscape.

To talk of the heritage recognises the enormous changes which have occurred in the last ten years following the creation of the Park, enabling the re-discovery of the natural and landscape features such as the rivers and canals which define the local area within a dramatic man made landscape. Strategic views along the waterways and through the landscape to the venues and other features such as artworks are a defining and carefully managed feature of the Park, providing reminders at each visit as to how the Park and surrounding areas are changing. They are one of many ways in which the success or otherwise of how the Park is being managed can be measured. (LLDC 2020a, 57)

The opening of the second paragraph – ‘To talk of the heritage’ – seems slightly defensive: suggesting the legitimate heritage of this place is effectively understood as inseparable to the Games and the Park as enablers of the future. This narrative, invoking rediscovery, recalls the press releases seen in [Chapter 6](#), where the mega event acted to ‘save’ the past from its neglect. By including the well-used negative tropes of the ‘fridge mountains’ and ‘hostile landscape[s]’, and the idea that there was ‘no identity’ to this landscape, it pits the legacy development as a redemptive ‘historic’ moment against that which came before. As Phil Cohen described to me, ‘[f]rom this perspective heritage, if not history, began in 2012’ (personal communication).

These LLDC statements support the idea that heritage and legacy are being merged, though not in the sense of inheritance I suggested previously. Rather, the history of the project and its own achievements are almost instantly ‘heritagised’ even before the legacy development is complete. For example, in a guide to the Park’s sustainability aims ‘Inheritance’ is used as a section heading about building on the achievements of the ODA and LOCOG (predecessors of the LLDC) to develop a ‘greener’ future (LLDC 2012, 36). As the aftermath of the Games ‘deposit[s] its own layer of narrative’ on London, Phil Cohen suggests that legacy is valued in and of itself as heritage without the need for a deeper history (2013, 159–60).

Evidence for the legacy project’s self-belief in its own ‘historicity’ is supported by several planning and management statements, written as if *from the future*. The Greater London Assembly’s (GLA) 2012 *Olympic Legacy Supplementary Planning Guidance* includes an extraordinary vision from the year 2030:

[T]he investment and change triggered by London's hosting of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games has not only helped create a successful, new part of the city but also helped renew all the communities that surround it. It is no longer a place at the periphery of London that suffers from its industrial past, cut off from surrounding communities and a tear in the city's urban fabric. Stratford is bustling with shoppers and office workers, busy with visitors from across London and the world. It is a destination and one of the best connected places in London – internationally, to the rest of the city, and most importantly to the revitalised neighbourhoods around it.

Each of which has its own character. Hackney Wick and Fish Island are a lively mix of homes and new enterprises, in canalside apartments and revived Victorian yards. Pudding Mill Lane is a new mixed use community and Bromley by Bow and Sugar House Lane combine to make a family oriented neighbourhood straddling the River Lea. On the north side of the park, Leyton and Leytonstone have new shops, new homes, and new links to Stratford.

Twenty years after the Games, it's now one of the best places in London to live and work – the best legacy there could be from the 2012 ... [sic]. (formatting, ellipsis and missing last word in original; [Mayor of London 2012](#), 3)

The text is curiously worded and, to some extent, perhaps reflects a divergence between a triumphalist (Johnsonian) Mayoral and GLA vision of the area and a LLDC-specific one (though the latter was, and is, overseen by the former). An LLDC-authored *Sustainability Guide*, also written in [2012](#), has its own vision from the future:

It's the year 2030. Welcome to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Arrive by bike, dock at a secure parking station and begin your exploration on foot. Stroll along the canal paths and watch children kayaking, water taxis returning locals from the city and fishermen sitting on the shaded banks. Take in the view of London's iconic skyline from the panoramic heights of the ArcelorMittal Orbit's viewing platform. Admire the sweep of the Velodrome's curving timber roof across the park, and look down at crowds parking their bikes and hopping off buses as they arrive for a concert at the Stadium.

Explore the community gardens, walk along the wetlands, or wander among the new homes, capped with green roofs, solar panels, and clever ways to catch rainwater. Discover the buildings – as smart as they are stylish – built from sustainable materials, and designed to use energy and water sparingly.

OR JUST RELAX IN THE PARK WITH A PICNIC, LISTEN IN TO AN OPEN-MIKE [*sic*] SESSION AND WATCH THE VIBRANT COMMUNITY THAT LIVES THERE GO BY. (uppercase in original; LLDC 2012, 7)

Though different, both statements emphasise the idea of diversity, vibrancy and connectivity to the city – though pleasant to walk through, it is also easy to escape from. These publications were released some nine years ago (at the time of writing) but are not dissimilar to the visions outlined in the 2020 *Local Plan* discussed above. This is not to critique the laudable ambitions and optimism contained in such strategies, particularly with their commitment to improved wellbeing, sustainability and the environment of East London. Rather, I suggest that this emphasis on a near-utopian vision of the future relies on a continued narrow understanding of the area's past.

As I have shown in earlier chapters, mega event organisers are deeply concerned with their event's own place in time and are keen to leave a mark upon their host cities and societies, either as a direct result of their operation or through legacy development. Robert Moses (the infamous New York city planner), who was involved in the preparations for the 1939–40 New York World's Fair, had a habit of describing its site, even before its completion, explicitly in terms of future generations 'looking back' to a barely conceivable, unsavoury, industrial past:

In another quarter of a century, old men and women will be telling their grandchildren what the great Corona Dump looked like in the days of F. Scott Fitzgerald, how big the rats were that ran out of it ... and how it was all changed overnight. (Moses 1938, 12)¹⁴

This example can be related to Moses' notoriously megalomaniacal ambitions, but mega events' envisioning of the future – particularly when expressed through legacy planning – does seem to invite grand statements and a desire for historical recognition by future generations. Given the tone of the LLDC and Mayoral statements 'looking back' from 2030 and the reiteration of a 'hostile landscape' said to characterise the area's recent industrial past in its management plan (LLDC 2020a, 57), the

discourse underpinning legacy in the Park is also concerned with an imagined future nostalgic telling of ‘how it was all changed’, albeit not quite ‘overnight’.

Spolia

What of other, unofficial or unrecognised, traces of the past that linger in the Olympic Park? If they exist, are these also a kind of heritage and legacy? As we have heard, the site’s long association with waste and pollution actually made it more attractive for hosting the mega event, given its low land prices and marginal location. However, beyond an abstract association with refuse or contamination in the planning documents just discussed, waste materials still underpin the Park of today (fig. 7.5). The carefully designed landforms that sweep dramatically up the side of the Bow Back Rivers are formed of millions of tons of cleaned soil, remediated during the Games’ construction. Such material was also used as fill to reconfigure pre-existing landscape features. For example, at



Figure 7.5 Visitors in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park sit atop its remediated landscapes.

Source: Photograph by the author.

the Olympic Stadium site, 9,500 cubic metres of cleaned material was taken from what had been Lloyd's Shoot (and later, the Marshgate Trading Estate) and compacted to permanently infill the Pudding Mill River (ODA 2011c). Today only the (dammed) stream inlet is left at its former connection to the River Lea, close to London Stadium's hospitality suite (fig. 7.6).

In earlier chapters, we saw how waste infused the landscapes of London's previous mega event sites, particularly with the bomb rubble dumped on the sites of both Crystal Palaces and in the Thames embankment for the South Bank Exhibition. At mega events further afield, similar reuse of waste material has taken place. For example, at the site of Expo '86, in Vancouver, crushed industrial buildings and waste were used to build up finished ground levels, ultimately creating valuable real estate and a public park (McCalla 2014). Similarly, the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games' Homebush Bay site capped, decontaminated and reused polluted industrial ground (Krinkle 2001, 145). Intriguingly, London 2012's efforts to deal with waste on its site were not the first to occur in the area. An historical account of the Borough of West Ham, written in 1936, proudly notes how the Borough Parks Department converted part



Figure 7.6 The dammed opening of the in-filled Pudding Mill River at its junction with the River Lea.

Note: Looking south along the Pudding Mill's former course with the former Olympic Stadium at left (now London Stadium). The curving concrete river walls were installed as part of 1930s flood prevention efforts.

Source: Photograph by the author.



Figure 7.7 Crushed concrete fragments in the facings of the Olympic Park's new bridges.

Note: This reused aggregate was created from the demolition and crushing of the area's pre-existing buildings and infrastructure as part of the Games project.

Source: Photographs by the author.

of Abbott's Shoot at Temple Mills into a 'playing field for children' – now the site of the Velodrome (McDougall 1936, 174).

Besides the Olympic Park's remediated landforms and infilled rivers, we can see other, more subtle, reminders of the prehistory of the mega event. While these remnants are resistant to rehabilitation as heritage given their obscurity, they nonetheless provide some of the only signs of the pre-Games period in today's landscape. The most common of these traces is rubble from the 215 buildings demolished for the Games' construction and most visible in the large quantities of crushed concrete, brick and stone fragments that fill gabions that form the facings of the Park's new bridges (fig. 7.7). This fill and other 'site-won' material was a by-product of the on-site demolition and crushing of the former landscape, with a remarkable 98 per cent of all demolition waste (434,203 tonnes) reused within the Park (BioRegional 2011, 35–6).

That 98 per cent of what was demolished still remains, albeit dramatically transformed, is a startling statistic. It is a testament to the ingenuity of the Park's engineers and contractors, but also to the usefulness of these materials – the wasteland was not entirely wasted after all. These atomised fragments were not all that was reused: 319 tons of reclaimed granite setts now form paths throughout the Park, with more

than 5,000 individual blocks probably taken from the Victorian street excavated at Temple Mills.¹⁵ Larger granite kerbstones have also been recycled into stepping stones (fig. 7.8). Stripped of the industrial wasteland's negative connotations, these materials are now employed to demonstrate the mega event's 'greenness' through saving energy and materials.

Such transformation could be seen as a kind of *sublation*, a transmogrification that negates the original object yet still preserves something recognisable of its character. In the case of these fragments, a recognition of their origin does not lead to resolution or synthesis (as in Hegel's original German term, *aufhebung*) but to yet another dialectical image: 'wherein the old is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance' (Buck-Morss 1989, 146; Pensky 2004, 195). In other words, simply the act of noticing fragments of rubble in an Olympic bridge helps to reveal how the past remains as an active constituent of the present, with the idea of a completion or final resolution challenged by its persistence.

Lucas Bessire describes the 'potent banality of rubble' (2018, 115), its ability to unsettle the present even in such disaggregated and



Figure 7.8 Granite kerbs reclaimed during clearance and demolition, reused as stepping stones in a playground in the east of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

Source: Photograph by the author.

(seemingly) quiescent piles and layers as those in the Park (see also [Gregson et al. 2010](#)). It is in this banality, in the half-forgotten places of the mega event's site, that this rubble becomes a counter archive that speaks not only of shame over the recent industrial history of the area, but also reveals the means by which it was transformed. Though only recognisable to those who seek them out, the dramatic reprocessing of such materials may, at first glance, seem to make them indistinct and mute; we cannot easily know from which factory, home, road or wall this particular brick or concrete fragment arose. Helmut Puff's argument supports this: '[r]ubble is material without significance; it is matter destined to be removed. By contrast the term "ruins" evokes traditions, visual codes, and a wealth of significations' (2010, 254). Yet, it is hard to reconcile such a statement with the potential latent in the crushed and reprocessed remnants that I have just described, both as raw material for new construction and as a disruptive archive.

To explore this further, it is useful to connect this rubble with the concept of *spolia* – the conscious gathering together and reuse of architectural materials in a new context. This term is usually applied where decorative or structural architectural elements are incorporated from demolished or destroyed buildings into another construction (see also [Graff 2017](#)). Greenhalgh notes that true *spolia*, in the sense of removing and intentionally curating and inserting older fragments into newer buildings for aesthetic or ritualistic purposes, is actually fairly rare. In the classical and medieval periods of Europe, the majority of such activity was undertaken for more pragmatic reasons, the reuse of existing materials being cheaper and less labour intensive than producing or transporting new ones ([Greenhalgh 2011](#), 79–81). Like the post-fire dumping of Blitz rubble at Sydenham to create foundations for an (unrealised) new Crystal Palace, the reuse of reclaimed and recycled building materials in the Olympic Park is, at first glance, a practical measure rather than ritualistic. This was primarily about delivering the 'greenest ever Games', where a strategy of 'designing out waste' during construction was integrated at the project's earliest stages in a commitment to sustainability and recycling (see [Moon and Holton 2011](#); [Carris 2011](#)). Yet, in other ways, this was far from an act of pragmatism. Carefully deconstructing buildings for reuse or recycling is considerably more labour intensive and expensive than knocking them down with machines or razing them using explosives. This demonstrates an intentional curation and stockpiling, and a commitment to ideology, in this case a need to perform 'greenness' and sustainability. Additionally, the Park's reclaimed granite setts and kerbstones were also seen as an

aesthetic 'link to the industrial past of the area, allowing the character and warmth of the Stratford site to be preserved' (BioRegional 2011, 29).

While such materials are not often seen as a traditional heritage artefact or medium, they nonetheless have the capability to spark questioning about their origins and the processes by which they came to be there. Again, this is not to overemphasise their importance, few visitors to the Park are likely to notice or care about lumps of concrete under a bridge. However, this material is also one of the mega events' inheritances and, in its sheer bulk presence, one that is capable of complicating the temporal certitude of past, present and future. At some basic level it tells us not only that something else was once here, but that it is still here, and that it, in its own radically altered way, remains useful in the present.

Ancestor worship

Moving from the role of heritage in the Park – whether official or unofficial, noticed or ignored – I now turn to visions of the future and what is planned for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park as legacy development continues to the 2030s.

Considerable development has already taken place within the Park's boundaries, following a staged post-Games reopening between 2013 and 2014. Several of the new neighbourhoods are well established and include new schools, community facilities and shops. A major new office district, named International Quarter London, is being built in the east of the Park and now hosts offices for several government departments and quasi-governmental bodies, including Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Financial Conduct Authority and Transport for London. Future plans are for the continued development of residential and such commercial/office areas, both within and outside the Park boundaries, a Creative Enterprise Zone in Hackney Wick and Fish Island and the delivery of East Bank, a 'cultural and education district' (see LLDC 2020b).

East Bank is the largest and most spectacular element of the Games' legacy programme. Its main site is at Stratford Waterfront – north of the Aquatics Centre (fig. 7.9) – with other locations situated close to the ArcelorMittal Orbit and in part of the former Olympic Media Centre (now called Here East). East Bank will host buildings for several well-known London cultural and higher education institutions, including: a major new campus for University College London (UCL East); an outpost of the V&A museum and an associated collections facility (V&A East); new BBC studios; a performance and training space for Sadler's Wells theatre; and



Figure 7.9 The main site of East Bank, Stratford Waterfront, adjacent to the Aquatics Centre, seen to the left (east) of the River in 2016. Construction has now begun.
Source: Photograph by the author.

the relocated University of the Arts London's (UAL) London College of Fashion. The first parts of the district are scheduled to open in 2022.

East Bank, as 'a new piece of city' (UCL 2017, 20), will further dramatically transform the Park and Stratford and is intended to create over 2,500 new jobs, 10,000 student places and bring £1.5 billion into the local economy (LLDC n.d. d). Like its Olympic predecessor, East Bank relies on a variety of forms of 'place-making' to situate itself and, significantly, draws on a heritage of earlier educational and cultural venues and mega event history from across London. This establishes the new district within a family tree that begins with the Great Exhibition, and takes in South Kensington and then the Southbank Centre and its (partial) origins in the Festival of Britain. Given this interesting overlap with the other mega events in this book, I want to explore this ancestor story further, along with East Bank's relationship to the history of the Park.

East Bank is actually the second official name for this project, one used since the scheme's 'relaunch' in 2018 (discussed below). Originally revealed in December 2013, the project was known officially as 'the Culture and Education District' but became almost immediately referred to as 'Olympicopolis'. This nickname was employed by the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who sought to link the project to *Albortopolis*, arguing that the new district, 'draws on the extraordinary foresight of our

Victorian ancestors', and specifically, the institutions of South Kensington that developed in the wake of the Great Exhibition ([Mayor of London 2013](#)). As we saw at Sydenham, Johnson is fond of drawing on British history, but although Olympicopolis was sometimes described as 'his vision' ([Soundings 2016](#), 17), it seems unlikely that the Mayor's nostalgia for the Victorians was the sole reason for this link to the aftermath of the Great Exhibition.

To some extent, making this connection was obvious, given that Albertopolis is seen as a key example of an event-led regeneration legacy project that has been compared with the Olympic legacy-driven redevelopment of Stratford (e.g. [Evans 2020](#), 52). V&A East is obviously an ultimate consequence of the original South Kensington Museum, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), but the journey from the Great Exhibition to the development of South Kensington was circuitous and took decades to come to fruition. In contrast, legacy planning at London 2012 was built in to the Olympic Bid from day one, though admittedly not originally containing plans for an educational district. Furthermore, we should be cautious in equating the decades-long development of institutions in an elite suburb close to the centre of London in the 1850s to the process that is taking place in the very different context of twenty-first-century Stratford.

Following the launch of Olympicopolis in 2013, detailed planning work took place among its constituent cultural institutions and the LLDC, and a masterplan was released in 2016. The project was originally costed at around £1.1 billion and funded by a mixture of LLDC capital funding and borrowing (ultimately overseen by the GLA), property sales and leases, local authority contributions, investment from institutional tenants and central government funding (including a £100 million grant to UCL and £51 million to the remainder of the scheme). Costs continue to rise as the LLDC's and the institutions' income is reported to have fallen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to concerns about the long-term viability of the project (e.g. [Knott 2019](#); [London Assembly BPC 2021](#)).

One of the major funding instruments for Olympicopolis was an adjacent large-scale housing development, including two 47-storey tower blocks; the income from these property sales would have part-funded the construction of the museums, universities and other buildings. Curiously, these blocks proved unexpectedly troublesome to an icon of London's traditional heritage in the shape (literally) of St Paul's Cathedral. Problems arose after it was realised that, when completed, the towers would have emerged behind and above the Cathedral's dome and would

have disrupted its distinctive silhouette when viewed from a legally protected sightline running from King Henry's Mound at Richmond Hill, some 22 kilometres (13.6 miles) to the south-west (fig. 7.10). This view was already said to have been 'damaged' by the ODA-approved, 42-storey Manhattan Loft Gardens tower, built on the site of Stratford Railway Works (Khomami 2016; Wainwright 2018). This sightline was created in the early eighteenth century when St Paul's was built by Sir Christopher Wren and, in theory, was part of London's spatial planning guidance that, somehow, was missed during the Manhattan Loft planning process (Mayor of London 2015, 89).¹⁶

This 'revenge' of Wren seems to have caught the planners of the billion-pound Olympicopolis project off guard. The eruption of distant heritage sensibilities, primarily through petitions and protests led by a campaign group (see Friends of Richmond Park 2017), necessitated a complete rethinking of the whole scheme and the size of the towers. This was because, for the project to remain financially viable, a similar number



Figure 7.10 St Paul's Cathedral from King Henry's Mound.

Note: This photograph along the protected sightline was taken from King Henry's Mound in Richmond, 15.6 kilometres (9.7 miles) south-west of St Paul's. The Manhattan Loft tower can be seen behind the Cathedral's dome in Stratford, 7.2 kilometres (4.5 miles) further north-east. The potential disruption of this protected view by the proposed Cultural and Education District (Olympicopolis, now East Bank) led to its complete redesign.

Source: Photograph by Allen Harris, 2017. CC BY-ND 2.0. Flickr: <https://flic.kr/p/DsdDqx>.

of apartments would still have to be sold. The solution was to cut the two tall towers in half and make them into four shorter buildings. This meant that the footprint available for the cultural venues at Stratford Waterfront was significantly reduced in size, and prompted a radical redesign of the buildings for V&A East, the BBC, Sadler's Wells and UAL.

The changes in plans also appear to have led to a rethink about the wider branding of the project. In particular, the succeeding (Labour) Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, broke from his Conservative predecessor and ditched the Olympicopolis nickname in favour of a more progressive ancestor, the East Bank. Khan said that East Bank was 'inspired' by the South Bank's institutions and their 'transforming a location through [providing] world class art and learning opportunities' ([Mayor of London 2018](#)). The LLDC similarly reiterates that:

The ambition of the project is recognised in the name – East Bank – which will complement London's major cultural and education centres, such as the South Bank, the cluster of museums and academic institutions in South Kensington and the Knowledge Quarter around King's Cross and Bloomsbury. ([LLDC 2021](#))

Like Albertopolis and Olympicopolis, the logic of this new connection is obvious. Both East Bank and the Southbank Centre can be said to have emerged from the aftermath of two successful London mega events, both are built on former industrial areas and in places that had been portrayed as slums or wastelands in need of regeneration. However, much like Albertopolis, we should remember that the South Bank was not transformed overnight after 1951. Evidence for the direct 'authorship' and influence of the South Bank Exhibition on the contemporary Southbank is arguably even weaker than at South Kensington, given that an original 'cultural centre' function for the south side of the Thames actually came from Patrick Abercrombie and his *County of London Plan* in 1943.

A cynic might see this renaming as a case of petty politicking in which past mega events are variously seen to be more or less appealing to Conservative or Labour politicians (and, arguably, voters). However, as I hope has been obvious throughout this book, both the Great Exhibition and the South Bank Exhibition (and their aftermaths) tend to confound efforts at their representation, even today. Making direct comparisons between them and East Bank is simplistic, given that neither of these ancestors ever had an originally *planned* legacy programme in anything like the way London 2012 did. Portraying today's Southbank Centre or Albertopolis as straightforwardly intentional legacies of the Festival of

Britain or the Great Exhibition is misleading and another example of creative anachronism. The East Bank planners might be better off remembering the Sydenham Crystal Palace and its almost immediate bankruptcy and struggle to live up to its predecessors as a cautionary tale of how difficult achieving 'successful' legacy can be.

While the institutions of East Bank do engage with local communities, their emphasis on heritage still tends to bypass the local history of the area, focussing instead on their own institutional history and origins. For example, UCL places special emphasis on its history of admitting students regardless of faith or gender, seen on branding around the UCL East site at the Park with the tagline: '[a] heritage of disruptive thinking', 'since 1826' (see [Gardner 2022](#)). The LLDC and these institutions do foreground their new East London location (with UCL and the V&A specifically targeting collections work and public outreach to East End communities), but tend to focus on a more generalised East End as a 'trailblazer in design and creativity' ([UCL 2018](#)) and a 'vibrant creative hub' ([V&A 2021](#)), rather than reflecting the local industrial history of Stratford, the site itself or the Games' development.

The overall intention with the East Bank appears to be to create a destination within the Park and East London whereby the area is no longer primarily associated with the Olympic and Paralympic Games, but is to be understood as a wholly new part of the city ([Mayor of London 2018](#)). These new museums, universities and concert halls are also an attempt to make good on promises for legacy beyond providing sporting venues or housing. However, as Graeme Evans points out, in doing so East Bank appears to take pre-2012 as a 'cultural wasteland' and ignores any pre-existing industrial and creative heritage in favour of 'a Guggenheim style import ... without a vernacular reference' ([Evans 2020](#), 67).

At the (re)launch of East Bank in 2018, Justine Simons, London's Deputy Mayor for Culture and Creative Industries, suggested that:

East Bank represents the most significant single investment in London's culture since the legacy of the 1851 Great Exhibition, and will shape the cultural life of the city for the twenty-first century and beyond. (Quoted in [Mayor of London 2018](#))

This indicates that, despite the rebrand, connections with the Great Exhibition persist and that previous mega events remain important for justifying and legitimising investment and development in the new district. It is not inconceivable that, with a future Mayor, yet another mega event forebear will be found.

What this rather strange tale tells us is that there appears to be a desperate need for a sense of legitimate ancestry. References to an 'industrial' aesthetic or a 'vibrant' East End creativity may be useful, but these institutions' primary references lie with their own origins or in worthy 'ancestors' to the west rather than in the history of Stratford. As with the construction of the Park, other traces of the past, both material and immaterial, have a habit of complicating matters. In particular, the unexpected destruction of the original visions of Olympicopolis by the temporally and spatially distant heritage aesthetics of Richmond show that the future of mega event legacy can be hard to predict, especially when it comes to the past!

The legacy of legacy

In this chapter I have suggested that London 2012's relationship to heritage is multi-faceted, drawing on a complex variety of temporal relationships and imaginings of past, present and future. For example, the 'island story' of the Olympic Opening Ceremony, though socially progressive, in some ways resembled the selective history of the South Bank Exhibition some 60 years earlier. Unlike the ancient past portrayed in that event, the Opening Ceremony put the disruptive change of the Industrial Revolution at the heart of the national character, yet in the heritage discourses that underpin the development of the Park itself, this same past is all but absent.¹⁷ Instead, the mega event's legacy is focussed on creating new heritage narratives that attempt to transcend its immediate temporal and spatial location.

The one constant that remains in the Park are the material traces of its history in the form of landfill, rubble and reused materials. These spolia, out of all the examples I have discussed, present the strongest challenge to efforts at utopian place-making and remind us (if we know where to look) that the mega event is itself an artefact of a complex history; one born of innovation, optimism and creativity for sure, but equally a product of compulsory purchase, demolition and contestation.

As I approach the conclusion of this book, it seems that London's previous mega events intrude ever more into the present and their influence grows greater as time passes. Something about the present is driving us back into the arms of these earlier events. Unlike the half-embarrassed commemoration of the Great Exhibition at the South Bank in 1951, East Bank sees earlier mega events as ancestors and as resources from which to draw legitimacy. Besides these imported origin stories, the

legacy of the mega event itself has also been transformed into a form of heritage in its own right, even (at the time of writing) before construction is complete.

In the final chapter of this book, I want to reflect further on how London 2012's legacies – both planned and unplanned – compare with those that emerged from earlier events and to speculate on how the afterlife of the Games will play out in the decades and centuries to come.

Notes

- 1 Analysis of the two segments discussed was undertaken by watching the Opening Ceremony live on 27 July 2012 on the BBC (with commentary) and again on YouTube, with commentary provided by the IOC's Olympic Broadcasting Company – assisted by use of the *LOCOG Media Guide* (LOCOG 2012). It can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4As0e4de-rl>.
- 2 'Jerusalem' is a hymn based upon lines from William Blake's preface to the poem 'Milton' (1810), later set to music by Hubert Parry. This Ceremony segment took its title from the hymn's famous line that referenced 'dark satanic mills', famously seen as a juxtaposition of the idyllic English past with the destructive nature of the Industrial Revolution to bodies and landscapes alike. The other nations' songs were 'Flower of Scotland', 'Bread of Heaven' (Wales) and 'Londonderry Air' (Northern Ireland).
- 3 Or, more correctly, 'founding'. Foundries cast metal (like the columns of the Crystal Palace) while forging relates to metal that is shaped by hammers and other tools in a forge or furnace (for instance, wrought iron).
- 4 Such national terminology is frequently confused or misapplied by observers from both within and outside the UK. Here I use *British* (and thus 'Britishness') in its most commonly understood sense: describing inhabitants (or characteristics) of *all* four nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Some writers use the word 'English' – incorrectly – as interchangeable with 'British', while 'England' is frequently mistakenly used to refer to the entirety of the United Kingdom. 'Britain' is used as a synonym by some to mean the whole United Kingdom but is done so incorrectly, as 'Great Britain' only refers to the grouping of England, Scotland and Wales, and *not* including Northern Ireland.
- 5 The writer of the Opening Ceremony, and Boyle himself, were inspired in this by Jennings' collation of contemporary accounts of industrialisation from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in his book *Pandaemonium* (Jennings 2012).
- 6 The fridge mountain mentioned was actually on the other side of the Park site. There is an argument that such fridge mountains were created through a policy failure of the governing Labour Party in the early 2000s, which failed to enact legislation to comply with a 2002 European Directive on safe recycling of CFC-containing fridges (Brown 2002). The site of the Stadium was, in reality, home to the Marshgate Trading Estate and the majority of the Park's active businesses and employees, prior to the enactment of the CPO in summer 2007, as discussed in Chapter 6.
- 7 Aidan Burley MP, is better known for being sacked as aide to David Cameron after his attendance at a Nazi-themed stag party in 2011 (BBC 2014).
- 8 It also has related older meanings of ambassador or envoy; the verb *leg* means to collect or gather: see <https://www.etymonline.com/word/legacy>.
- 9 *Since 9/11* is a memorial artwork created by Miya Ando. Its steel columns are trusses from one of the Twin Towers donated by the Port Authority of New York (owners of the WTC site) and remain much as they were when the buildings collapsed. Ando's sole intervention was to polish a single steel panel on one of the trusses 'to reflect the artist's vision of hope for a better future' (Since 9/11 n.d.). Other acts of translocated commemoration in the Olympic Park are unofficial. Schuppli discusses an important example of memorialisation 'in exile' related to an iron ore mine implicated in the genocide of the Bosnian War. After the war, the mine was said to have provided raw iron for the steel of the ArcelorMittal Orbit at London 2012. A dispute

with new owners (ArcelorMittal) centred on issues of access to the mine site for families and the company's undelivered promise to build a memorial themselves – the Orbit was then adopted as a 'Memorial in Exile' (see Schuppli 2012).

- 10 Most infamously, the 1968 Mexico City Tlatelolco military-led massacre of hundreds of demonstrators protesting government repression, ten days prior to the city's Summer Olympics opening ceremony. The perpetrators allegedly included a special paramilitary unit set up to defend the Games, named the Olympia Battalion.
- 11 See for example: <https://britainsbestguides.org/tour/queen-elizabeth-olympic-park-tour/>.
- 12 See https://parkipedia.co.uk/index.php?title=Why_is_it_called...%3F.
- 13 See <https://createlondon.org/event/the-odd-guides/>.
- 14 Corona Dumps was the real-world location of Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes that played a central role in his *The Great Gatsby* (1925).
- 15 This calculation is based on Powell 2012a, 199–202 and my participation in surveying and excavating these setts in 2008.
- 16 This unexpected U-turn seems curious given the fact that the Manhattan Lofts were approved by the LLDC, despite this vista of the 'Strategically Important Landmark' of St Paul's being identified and conserved under the *London View* framework (Mayor of London 2008, 259, 2015).
- 17 The author is part of a team that has created a new heritage trail for the Park that will launch in 2022 – The Groundbreakers. This can be accessed at <https://www.livingmaps.org/groundbreakers>.

8

Discussion: The contemporary archaeology of mega events

Walking through Flushing Meadows–Corona Park in Queens, New York City, in September 2014, I happen across one of the more subtle reminders of the 1939–40 and 1964–5 World’s Fairs that took place here. Close to the 1964 Fair’s jaw-dropping centrepiece, the Unisphere, are a series of etched black granite panels set into the pavement (fig. 8.1). These, I later learn, are the creation of artist Matt Mullican, and show the maps and buildings of each of the site’s two mega events alongside depictions of the futuristic innovations they put on show and representations of the past



Figure 8.1 The Unisphere, the most visible remnant of the 1964–5 New York World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, Queens, New York City. Matt Mullican’s etched granite panels commemorating the 1964–5 and earlier 1939–40 Fairs can just be seen in the foreground.

Source: Photograph by the author.

from which they emerged. It was only by chance that I happened to look down, but there on the panels, among the glittering mica-flecked black granite, I catch sight of a familiar silhouette: the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. I almost didn't notice at first, but the regular lines of the cast-iron columns and the curve of the transept are unmistakable against Hyde Park's backdrop of trees (fig. 8.2).

This chance find across the Atlantic amid the remnants of two even larger mega events is a reminder of the wide temporal and spatial influence of the Great Exhibition. Though almost literally stumbling across it in Queens caught me by surprise, the Exhibition's inclusion, alongside depictions of several other famous early mega events, is unsurprising. In each chapter I have shown the persistent influence of this first mega event upon those that followed, and how it continues to inspire the hosting of yet others and, indeed, continues to reshape London itself. The Exhibition and its Crystal Palace, represented in these panels, at first glance, seems to be the clear-cut Victorian ancestor to all that came after, including the spectacular World's Fairs; a neat lineage of ever-improving and increasing mega event development.

However, while the Exhibition was clearly influential, and is rightly recognised as such, it seems unlikely that Mullican intended his representation as an unquestionable monument to the progress of mega



Figure 8.2 Detail of Matt Mullican's (1995) untitled etched black granite memorial to the 1939–40 and 1964–5 New York World's Fairs, depicting the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park.

Source: Photograph by the author.

events or as a 'stand-in' for their complexity. One writer on his work discusses how his practice ruminates on 'the very nature of reality' and how 'the distinctions that we make between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, are artificial, constructed by language and history and media to imbue the culture with a false sense of stability and rationality' (Peipon 2014). Mullican himself has said that he is concerned with a categorisation of the world – in this case, a categorisation of the 'family tree' of mega events – and he draws attention to how these ordering processes are a product of our own subjectivity and our different experiences of temporality (see Mullican and Ribas 2008; Holman 2016).

In recognising such subjectivity, it is clear that while these mega events are often said to be modern or progressive showcases of the future, they can just as equally be understood as manifestations of the past. As Mullican's memorial subtly suggests, exploring them does not reveal a timeline of old to new or primitive to advanced, but instead a multiplicity of stories, materials and places that simultaneously encompass the deep past, the complexity of the present and the uncertainty of the future.

With each of the London examples in this book I have shown that, although organisers may have planned to create narratives of progress, national identity or legacy, each mega event complicated or even subverted their messages and produced a broad range of different relationships with their host city and society. The reason for this is found in mega events' inherently open-ended temporal nature; their ability to incorporate and represent multiple time-frames and to reshape understandings of past, present and future, not to mention their tendency to stick around after they officially close. Comparing how three mega events emerged in and transformed London over 170-odd years has drawn out several significant themes that would not have been visible in isolation. In this final chapter I revisit some of these connections, and characterise the mega events' enduring impacts on the city and beyond. I also reflect on my methodological approach before concluding with a discussion on the role of mega events today and for the future.

The time of mega events

Besides tracing the effects of mega events on London itself, the major emphasis of this book has been on the variety of temporal relationships that produce, and are produced by, each of the city's spectacles. I have demonstrated a series of recurring themes, including: a tension between contemporaneity and anachronism; the establishment of ancestor or

origin stories; the promise and creation of imagined futures; and a concern with legacy, heritage and inheritance. In each chapter I explored: how organisers and others represented, used or elided the history of each mega event host site in London; how their workers, construction materials or displays were imbricated in networks of extraction, production, consumption and waste; and how events attempted to create a sense of imperial and national identity. Within such an array of temporal connections – a mega event's *heterotemporalities* – several distinct themes emerged. Some of these themes are the result of organisers' and participants' efforts to control time during event planning and operation, while others are emergent phenomena that unexpectedly resulted from each spectacle's unique combination of materials, participants and spaces.

In and out of time

The first theme centres on a *planned* effort at temporal boundary marking, with mega event organisers attempting to ensure that their events are *in* and *on* time. This includes attempts to manage competing manifestations of timelessness and timeliness, contemporaneity and anachronism, and historicity and heritagisation. Such concerns reflect a tension that I have discussed as being fundamental to all mega events, that is, their relationships with competing conceptualisations and representations of the past (and its material traces), the present and the future.

In some cases, attempts at keeping on and in time may seem relatively subtle at first glance. For example, at the Great Exhibition a vision of technological and social progress was implicit in its organisation, rather than overtly displayed in a timeline of progressive development, in contrast to the Sydenham Palace or the South Bank Exhibition. Yet, as Prince Albert, the event's patron, noted, the event was intended 'to give us a true test of the point of development at which the whole of mankind has arrived ... and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions' (quoted in [Helps 1862](#), 112). The overall 'message' of this event (and the presentation of the UK within it) was that it be recognised as at the cutting edge of technology and development. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), any challenge to this present- and future-oriented temporal supremacy – strikers, mobs or sparrows – was met with fierce opposition.

At Sydenham ([Chapter 4](#)), a more explicit marking of what can be called civilisational time took place, with far more emphasis placed on the past. The varied displays of natural and cultural history in the rebuilt

Crystal Palace and its surrounding Park were intended to illustrate the difference ‘between stasis and progress, between barbarism and civilisation, between the inferior and superior civilisations of the world’ (Levell 2000, 29). Though often presented in a bewildering mishmash – at least from a twenty-first-century perspective – the venue owners and organisers of events such as the Festival of Empire were deeply concerned with creating and maintaining stable chronologies that showed a clear line of travel from the ancient past to the technologically advanced future.

The South Bank Exhibition of the Festival of Britain in 1951 was also dedicated to ‘summing up’ the nation and its people. Although it emerged from a very different political and social environment to the Great Exhibition and its Sydenham aftermath, the temporal narratives on display were similarly concerned with situating the British people in a chronological framework, though this time almost totally separate from the Empire or the rest of the world. Unlike its predecessors, the South Bank Exhibition organisers’ more radical vision was to enmesh the nation’s continued development in a deeper timescale, one that stretched back millions of years yet, at the same time, would provide ‘fingerposts into the future’ (Cox 1951, 8).

Although a very different mega event from these predecessors, London 2012 was also invested in establishing a sense of timeliness and temporal order. The clearest manifestation of this, under Games Time, was the removal and transformation of anachronistic remnants of Stratford’s recent past. This resetting of the urban chronometer created an entirely new origin story for the district, in which ‘the past’ began with the mega event’s own development, in a process almost immediately reformulated as ‘heritage’. This vision was not entirely homogeneous. The Olympic Opening Ceremony and plans for East Bank continued to draw on older narratives: notions of industrial innovation; the character of the British people; ‘the island story’; and even London’s earlier mega events.

A core part of all of these forms of temporal boundary management was the juxtaposition of different time periods. While sometimes taking the form of an overt creative anachronism – projecting contemporary ideas, values or situations onto the past – this varied substantially between each mega event. For example, at the Great Exhibition the ancient elm trees enclosed by the Hyde Park Crystal Palace were seen not only as complementing the modern human ingenuity of the building, but also as a saviour of an older vision of ‘nature’ connected to the Park’s elite origins. Similarly, organisers attempted (with only partial success) to insert the aged Koh-i-Noor into a present-day story of benevolent British colonialism, rehabilitated from its semi-mythical Oriental origins and imperial looting

and placed in a more appropriate 'retirement' in the collection of Queen Victoria.

At Sydenham the displays of ancient civilisations and the Festival of Empire provided a more direct object lesson by using replica artefacts of the human and geological past, scientific discoveries and imperial trade to shape contemporary British identity. This was presented not only in the aesthetic and design education of the Fine Arts Courts, but also in the venue's provision of moralistic 'warnings' from history against decadence and idolatry. However, we must bear in mind that it remains unclear how far audiences understood or cared about such messages.

Object lessons based on comparisons of past and present were also strongly in evidence in 1951 at the South Bank. In *The Land and The People* displays, the past acted as a resource for the creation of a new post-imperial narrative of Britishness. The 'blood' of millennia-old ancestors was said to still run in the veins of its visitors, just as ancient coal deposits powered modern British industry. At the same time, in the futuristic environment of the Dome of Discovery, the mysteries of world civilisation were revealed by the latest pioneering British 'archaeological' research. Although their creators, such as Jacquetta Hawkes, admitted they were sometimes simplistic, these displays drew on the past as an active constituent of the present and of the future, and as a crucial partner in underpinning the progressive narratives of the event.

Temporal juxtaposition was also apparent at London 2012. Once again, archaeological discoveries were used to establish a lineage from prehistoric times to the present, with the Games portrayed as simply the latest change to take place in Stratford. Both here and at the South Bank Exhibition, a bright future was contrasted with a far more negative local past. The (supposed) slums of the blitzed South Bank were to be swept away and improved, while a post-industrial 'wasteland' in Stratford would be replaced by one of the biggest new parks in Europe.

In all such juxtapositions, the mega events' organisers and promoters seemed keenly aware of the power of temporal narratives to reinforce their events' messages and legitimacy. In this, they valorised certain elements of the past as evidence, ancestors or lessons from history, while simultaneously denigrating, mocking or destroying other, less-desirable, inheritances of the 'primitive', slums or waste. However, it is also apparent that organisers' efforts at temporal management did not always go to plan.

Time out of joint

While attempts to manage time are seen at all of the events in this book, I have shown how organisers' best-laid plans often went awry through the emergence of alternative temporal narratives or relationships. This frequently led to a pharmakonic, unsettled questioning of what was to be considered *of* the past and what was *of* the future, and the breakdown of carefully built temporal boundaries of sites, materials and participants. Such interruptions to linear and managed mega event time were sometimes caused by those who directly opposed or criticised events, while in other cases they emerged independently of direct human agency and from a mega event's assemblage of non-humans. In both cases, the materials of the past and the imaginings of the future appeared to constantly 'intrude' upon the present (Graff 2020, 164).

Such temporal disjunctures often had the effect of interrupting events during their operation. This is perhaps most amusingly seen with the sparrows of Hyde Park dirtying the Exhibition's 'priceless' contents after their roosts were unwittingly included within the Palace superstructure. In other cases, it is only in retrospect that incongruities or contradictions within the events emerge as dialectical images. In particular, certain materials and displays undermined a mega event's portrayal as technologically advanced or as progressive and a vanguard of the future. For example, though later seen as a 'herald' of architectural modernism by the likes of Le Corbusier, the Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace was built on 'ancient' foundations of concrete and timber and significant parts of the structure were handmade on site.

Other forms of temporal dissonance are found in each event's legacy period. The Sydenham Crystal Palace and Park's kaleidoscopic range of uses included everything from sporting competitions, cat and dog shows, military bases and concerts to dumping and protests. None of these uses were planned as legacies of the Great Exhibition. Each 'new' function also disrupted and permanently altered the Crystal Palace Company's original plans for 'rational recreation'. The most temporally disruptive of these unplanned legacies came with the many attempts to bring the Palace back from the dead after it burned down, and to reimagine it for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such attempts to put things back as they were in the 1850s created the largest (threatened) anachronism of all and often led to enormous opposition. In spite of the Palace's 85-year absence at the time of writing, the building's ruins and the wider Park now provide an arena where different histories and memories of the past and competing visions of the present and the future continue to be debated.

The South Bank Exhibition seems to have maintained a more united temporal narrative than its predecessors. In part, this is down to its national focus and a narrower remit than the encyclopaedic aims of either the Great Exhibition or Sydenham. Yet the Exhibition's presentations of contemporary British identity were not without complications. A series of anachronistic Victorian ancestors, in the form of the Shot Tower and the Centenary pavilion seemingly included only as a 'pretext' for the event, seemed incongruous in the face of the modernist and forward-facing messages of the other displays. The years that these ancestors lasted on the South Bank, long past the Exhibition's close, while the ultra-modern Skylon and Dome of Discovery were melted down into letter openers, also reminds us that the value and appreciation of a mega event is far from agreed upon, and that its legacies can be unpredictable. It would take decades of development and investment for the South Bank to become the 'great cultural centre' originally envisioned by Patrick Abercrombie in the early 1940s and, as the battles over the skaters' Undercroft and refusals to list the Southbank Centre more recently show, no single or agreed-upon heritage narrative connected to this mega event exists.

The Games of 2012 were also riven with temporal ruptures and complications. I discussed earlier how the event required an industrial Other to juxtapose against its post-industrial future. As I showed in [Chapters 6 and 7](#), this pre-Olympic past could never be made entirely absent. While those who lived and worked on the site before the Games were condemned to a 'wasteland' by organisers, politicians and journalists alike, they nonetheless continued (and continue) to appear in the works of artists, photographers and others. While official efforts to contain this prior history appear to be ongoing, in this legacy phase new efforts are being made to reimagine the Games' redevelopment of Stratford as a form of heritage in its own right. Such work is nonetheless subtly disrupted by the lingering material remnants of the past, and it is to these that I now return.

Rubble, waste and conflict

While official narration of each of London's mega events was sometimes challenged by competing visions of the past or the future as discussed above, it is also the case that certain materials and activities seem to 'haunt' all the events. These time-travelling traces – industrial contamination, rubble and rubbish – are only partially under human control as they lurk beneath buildings or escape into the wider environment. Sometimes these act as surprisingly generative and useful

substances – as fill or spolia – while at other times they are understood as unsightly or dangerous.

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), even Crystal Palaces produce rubbish, as hinted at by the sometimes ambiguous relationship mega events have with waste and their host cities' 'bodily functions' more generally (also recognised by [Graff 2020](#)). The siting of major water and sewage infrastructure at Stratford did not prevent the building of the Olympic Park and neither did this site's centuries-old role as a repository for the city's rubbish. By reclaiming Stratford Marsh, the dumping actually helped to provide the foundations for industrial development and the later building of the Games. Although less evident at the South Bank Exhibition, figurative ideas of waste and dirt drove the redevelopment of the district as a form of 'cleaning up' an unacceptably industrialised Victorian remnant located opposite the city's symbolic heart in Westminster.

At least three of the sites discussed in this book have a curious connection to bomb rubble; either providing foundations for the events or dumped on their sites after they closed.¹ For instance, perceptions of the South Bank as blitzed and ruined made it appear the perfect site for the Exhibition in 1951, yet the event studiously avoided any discussion of a conflict whose rubble lay just beneath its shining buildings as fill for the new Thames embankment. The sites of both Crystal Palaces also became repositories for vast quantities of bomb rubble, long after their original events or buildings closed or were destroyed. In Hyde Park its presence was brief, with a majority of the rubble removed to facilitate the creation of yet more rubble in Germany and occupied Europe as the foundations of bomber runways in East Anglia. At Sydenham, however, the process of 'rubbling' was not geared towards producing destruction at distance, but to rectifying the trauma of the 1936 fire and to facilitate the creation of a new, even bigger and better structure. In this sense, the material of rubble appears simultaneously as the product of destruction and the answer to it. The promised new Palace never materialised, yet its 385,000 tons of rubble foundations remain quietly waiting.

Each mega event also exhibited broader connections with conflict and contestation more generally, beyond the Blitz and the Second World War. This is seen in the mass removal of former inhabitants or businesses through compulsory purchase, as with the residents and workers of the South Bank and the London 2012 sites, with such legal instruments acting as a form of state-backed, structural 'violence' (e.g. [Gray and Porter 2015](#)). More overt connections with warfare and conflict (or attempts to prevent them) are obvious in the Sydenham Palace's roles as the site of

the doomed 1913 Anglo-German Peace Festival, as a naval base and in its hosting of the first Imperial War Museum. In other cases, conflict (or at least its threat) is demonstrated in anxiety over mobs or Others; for example, the thousands of soldiers guarding the opening of the Great Exhibition or the mass arrest of protestors outside the gates of the Olympic Park during the Games' Opening Ceremony.

Why do these events display this intermingled tendency towards waste, rubble and conflict so frequently? In some cases, it is down to the 'structural inheritances' at sites that make them attractive for mega event use (Dawdy 2016a, 40). For example, we saw how Stratford Marsh had long been a useful place for both noxious trades and waste management and disposal because of its watery and isolated geographical position far from Central London. In the case of the bomb rubble on the sites, there was a need to quickly and safely clear material to keep the city moving during the Second World War; this led to its movement from the dense city centre to less built-up areas like marshes, and the filling of already-bombed sites or, indeed, burnt-out Crystal Palaces (Woolven 2013). The role of several of these mega event sites as training grounds or encampments or locations of weaponry during the Second World War is also explainable due to their peripheral yet strategic locations around the city, their relative low-density and open spaces enabling anti-aircraft defence and military and civilian exercises. At Bully Fen, near the Olympic Velodrome in Stratford, this use continued into the Cold War, as late as 1968, with the nuclear bombed-out training 'village' for the Civil Defence Corps (see Gardner 2020b).

It does strike me as odd that waste, rubble and this connection with conflict should come up quite so often. Coincidental or not, this reminds us that mega events can be spatio-temporal chameleons, rapidly shifting function and meaning from sites of abjection, ruin and waste to ones of creativity, celebration and hope (and sometimes back again). More prosaically, this tendency to use marginal or peripheral sites not only makes it relatively easy to predict where future events are most likely to be located, but also enables us to begin to see more general patterns in mega event effects on host cities.

For example, not only do these events dramatically and rapidly transform previously undesirable sites into new 'utopian' landscapes, but also – crucially – in the process a destructive and disruptive 'violence' becomes normalised as a legitimate means to achieve this transformation. The risk of seeing mega events or mega projects as a 'cure' for 'urban ills' such as pollution or poverty (see Butler 2007; Gold and Gold 2005, 270), is that other, pre-existing or contradictory understandings of the value of

these places can be ignored. The invocation of ‘wasteland’ and ‘slums’ is a key part of this. While not denying the significant benefits that can come with mega event investment – for example, the restoration of ecosystems at London 2012 – it is clear that a capacity for destruction and disruption in the name of progress or regeneration is one of their most common characteristics.

The long lives of London’s mega events

One of the core arguments of this book has been that a mega event should be understood as a long-term phenomenon rather than simply as a one-off, temporary intervention in a host city. This signature of longevity applies to recognising not only the persistence of their buildings or material but also to the aforementioned important social, cultural and political effects. While such events may only be open for a few weeks or months, their influence reshapes the places and societies in which they are built; in effect, they change the past in the present, as well as shaping what happens over succeeding decades. In writing this book, I have come to realise just how much London has been changed by its mega events. This is not only in reference to how whole districts were demolished and rebuilt, but also how the mega events provoked new conceptualisations and assumptions about the city, new (and old) uses of its spaces and resources, the shaping and reshaping of identities and new forms of heritage valuation and curation.

Longevity and London

Longevity is manifest in several different ways at each mega event. First, event buildings and contents physically survive for years after they close. Even in the absence of materials or buildings, an event can continue to exert influence – that long-since vanished ‘palace of iron and glass’, the Crystal Palace, is a case in point. Besides these traces, fragments of the landscapes that they destroyed or altered can also linger. These may be relocated, reused or buried, yet they nonetheless persist, just like the sole surviving Clarnico warehouse in today’s Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park or the marker posts of Penge Hamlet in Crystal Palace Park. The places from which each spectacle drew its raw materials can still bear the scars of the mega event’s creation. The glass of the Crystal Palace came out of an enormous hole outside Leighton Buzzard that only now is being infilled, while the twisting red steel of the ArcelorMittal Orbit sculpture in the

Olympic Park was said to be the product of iron ore mines on six continents (see [Schuppli 2012](#)).

Mega events' signature of longevity is also manifest in the changes in urban environments that follow in their wake. While others have usefully theorised this as 'mega event-led regeneration', this primarily refers only to intentional processes of urban development brought about by 'legacy planning' and the immediate social and economic effects of such efforts (see A. [Smith 2012](#)). Besides this more intentional leveraging of events to spark residential or commercial development, there are also far longer and less-planned consequences upon the city. The Great Exhibition provides an instructive demonstration in this regard and across a variety of city locales and spatial scales.

At Hyde Park, the Exhibition emerged on a site that had long provided a space of elite recreation at the city's edge. Though a causal link is not definitively proven, it seems as if the construction of the Exhibition pre-empted a social opening-up of the Park to a much broader range of uses and users. This is seen in the adoption of the Park for large-scale protests and rallies soon after 1851, though this was also grounded in the older history of the site and the Tyburn gallows. Although the Park was returned to its original state after the Exhibition, it undoubtedly also led to a shift in focus to the city's westward periphery, with the development of Albertopolis at South Kensington as a direct (if originally unplanned) result of the mega event and the rapid growth, increased density and diversification of the surrounding districts.

At Sydenham, the rebuilt Crystal Palace resulted not only from the Exhibition but also from the railway mania of the 1840s and pre-existing networks of industrial capital in London and the UK. The country estate of Penge Place was transformed into a hugely popular destination as a means of drawing passengers on to the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway line. This not only brought tens of millions of visitors but also many thousands of new residents to a rural area, to the extent that the whole district soon became named 'Crystal Palace'. While it is likely that the growth and spatial transformation of areas like Sydenham and South Kensington would have taken place anyway as part of London's wider late nineteenth-century growth, without the Great Exhibition, both areas would look very different today.

Other urban transformational processes led to the reconfiguration of the South Bank and to a series of broader knock-on effects in the wake of the Festival of Britain. Again, it is hard to prove a singular, causal link, but it is tempting to speculate that the culture-led regeneration sparked by the South Bank Exhibition inspired the later, far more radical

transformation of former Thames docks from the 1980s onwards. The planning model that delivered the regenerated Docklands can also be seen as an important trailblazer for the delivery of the Olympics in Stratford and its current Legacy Development Corporation.

Although London 2012 left many positive effects on the city and the UK, the legacy of the Games remains contested. Some argue that, among other negatives, the mega event prompted property speculation, processes of gentrification and a lack of replacement employment in East London (e.g. [Bernstock 2014](#); [Burrows 2017](#); [Cheyne 2016](#); [Davis 2019](#)). The mega event in Stratford drove much wider processes of urban development, with large amounts of new housing and other developments continuing to be built up and down the Lea from the Park in the Games' aftermath. The emphasis on the redevelopment of the city's eastern quarter that began with the Docklands in the 1980s is now being sustained and expanded with London 2012's legacy.

Heritage and inheritance

As I write in late 2021, it has been nine years since London 2012, while the 70th and 170th anniversaries of the Festival of Britain and the Great Exhibition have just gone by. With each passing year, one might have expected these mega events to gradually fade from the popular imagination, if not from academic study. Instead, the influence of London's past mega events seems only to grow. Each year sees new books, articles, research projects, novels and artworks emerge devoted to them, along with plans for new mega events in the UK that cite them as important antecedents, from the Great Exhibition of the North in 2018, to plans for Festival*UK 2022 ('Great Brexhibition', [Doyle 2018](#)).

Besides this popular and scholarly interest, it is clear that events are now valued as forms of heritage. It does not seem to take long for a mega event to become heritagised. As I noted in [Chapter 3](#), plans were suggested in late 1851 to erect a permanent marker to the Exhibition in Hyde Park, even before its building was moved to Sydenham. Though I have cautioned against reading mega events as stand-ins for whole time periods or paradigms (quite apart from their own, often-simplistic, portrayals of history), it is undeniable that many others have used them for this purpose. For example, the Crystal Palace of 1851 has been portrayed in several different forms as the epitome of Victorian society (e.g. [Beaver 1970](#); [Briggs 1951](#)), while the 1951 South Bank Exhibition is frequently seen as emblematic of a post-war left-wing consensus and a celebration of the birth of the Welfare State. Putting events in this

summative or epitomical role, both during their operation or as ancestors, is a powerful but potentially risky means of serving the agendas of the present. For example, in 2013, upon launching ‘Olympicopolis’, Boris Johnson noted the ‘foresight of our Victorian ancestors’ in their turning the Great Exhibition into the success of Albertopolis ([Mayor of London 2013](#)). Referencing this ‘foresight’ was an intentional and significant gesture that continues to underpin the development of the district as an important part of the legacy of London’s latest mega event. Rebecca Graff’s work on the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Jackson Park, Chicago, has similarly shown how contemporary projects draw on connections to earlier mega events. She notes how Chicago leveraged the Fair as a heritage resource in its failed bid for the 2016 Olympic Games and continues to do so in the ongoing mega project of the Obama Presidential Library ([Graff 2020](#), 167).

In exploring such different forms of heritagisation in relation to mega event legacy, I discussed the idea of inheritance in [Chapter 7](#). The idea of an unpredictable heritability – encompassing legacies that are both planned and unplanned – offers a more nuanced way to think about a mega event’s long-term presence in a city such as London. Inheritance recognises that, when we create a mega event, we can only ever partially predict its long-term effects, in spite of any promises of planned legacy. The saga of the protected view from Richmond to St Paul’s, which forced the reworking of Olympicopolis (discussed in [Chapter 7](#)) shows us that even the best-laid plans may not always turn out as expected.

Revenance

Related to inheritance is a recurring tendency to plan to rebuild, reimagine or restore previous mega event structures and sites. This revenance – coming back from the dead – seems to particularly afflict the Crystal Palace. In the failed scheme to redevelop the Sydenham Palace with ZhongRong between 2013 and 2015, Boris Johnson and others drew heavily on the supposed glories of the Victorian past to justify the planned development. Critics argued that this was a weaponised nostalgia, and that the positivity attached to the heritage of the structure and the Great Exhibition was being abused in the ‘service’ of the expropriation of a public park, not to mention as an oversimplification of the site’s complex history (e.g. [Jacob 2013](#); [Murphy 2014](#)). Using mega events as resources for heritage and nostalgia in support of new urban development obviously has significant implications for how they continue to operate in the present and is particularly relevant when it comes to thinking about their

future worth for their host cities and societies. Before returning to this, and to the value of mega events more widely, I want to reflect briefly on the methods I used in this book and what a contemporary archaeological practice brings to the study of mega events.

Archaeological approaches to mega events

Throughout this book I have examined mega events as an assemblage of many varied components and participants, and as time machines that produce different temporal relationships. By assembling a constellation of mega event scraps and remnants as dialectical images, I have sought to better understand their continuing influence in London and the contemporary world. At a practical level, this involved fieldwork, photography, mapping, archival research and comparative analyses between different events, their contents, participants and landscapes. Using contemporary archaeology, I paid particular attention to how the spaces and materials of the past continue to operate in the present, whether recognised as heritage or not.

This method allows for a close attention to processes of (de)materialisation and production and consumption, that is, how things and places are made, used, reused and discarded (and sometimes dug up again), as well as their string of interactions with humans and non-humans along the way. This has led me in some interesting directions: the abandoned gigantic lump of Great Exhibition coal in Bedwelty; the curious persistence of not one but two miniature Crystal Palaces (the South Bank Exhibition's 1851 Centenary pavilion and the scale-model Palace inside it); and the complex recent history of the Olympic Park. In taking account of each event's material and immaterial longevity, I have been able to map out their different temporal connections in unprecedented detail and to observe the significant spatial and social changes they have wrought upon London. Rather than face a lack of material, I have been consistently overwhelmed by just how much survives on and in the ground, in archives, newspapers and artworks – a whole other book could be written from the many scraps of research that didn't quite fit in to this one!

Despite the richness of the source material, there are nonetheless limitations to my research. Before reflecting on these, I want to reiterate that I do not see mega events as singular moments in time but as assemblages made up of millions of spatio-temporal interactions, myriad connections that we can only view from the standpoint of the present. To

be able to comprehend and write about such complex phenomena, we necessarily tell simplified stories, informed by the partial evidence we have (see Lucas 2001, 152–62, 2010, 352). In the process, we tend to smooth off some awkward, stop-start complexity in favour of a simpler narrative. This book is therefore guilty at times of focussing on some elements of a mega event at the expense of others. For example, although I discuss Albertopolis in [Chapter 4](#), clearly more could be said about how that part of the Great Exhibition's legacy compares to the Crystal Palace and Park in South London. In many parts of the book I have opted to focus on lesser-known stories, in this particular case on the often-neglected history of the Sydenham Palace.

Methodologically speaking, this book brought together different theoretical and practical approaches and built on the diversity of engagements with the recent past and present offered by contemporary archaeology. As I noted at the beginning, this inevitably means that some approaches are better suited to some sites or materials than others, and accordingly different chapters draw on ethnography, archives and archaeological methods and materials to different degrees. Rather than attempt an artificial direct comparison of specific types of objects, buildings, ceremonies, themes or participants, I used a diverse array of each mega event's assemblages (such as dustcarts, replica ancient buildings, bomb rubble, archaeologists, the Olympic Bell and many more) to illustrate the differences and similarities of their temporal relationships. For this variety I make no apologies: weaving together different approaches to a diversity of sources allowed me to create a far richer picture of each event and its relationships to time than a purely archival, ethnographic or archaeological approach would have permitted. While this has necessitated greater or lesser emphases in some areas and recognises that a single book could not hope to capture the totality of even just three mega events, by taking an approach that, at times, strays off more well-trodden historiographical paths, I hope to have brought something novel to their study.

I have focussed on a limited number of mega events to assess their long-term impact on one city across a ca. 170-year timescale. This has necessarily meant that many other London events have been excluded or are referred to only in passing. For example, the mostly forgotten second Great Exhibition of 1862 (The International Exhibition), the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition, the Franco-British Exhibition (and first London Olympics) of 1908, the Empire Exhibition of 1924, the 1948 Olympics and the Millennium Experience of 2000. Greater comparative analysis of more of these events in the future would offer further evidence

for understanding London's relationship to the mega event genre. The tracing of connections between London's three Olympic Games would be especially fascinating (building on the important work of [Penrose 2012](#)). Deeper archaeological comparison with a variety of international comparators would also yield important insights into commonalities and differences between mega event temporal relationships (for example, the New York World's Fairs discussed in this chapter).

Mega events' remarkable material and cultural longevity is in part due to the way they are remembered and valued, so more detailed work on how heritage, legacy and inheritance connect to identity, memory and memorialisation at mega events also needs to be done. Future mega event contemporary archaeology would benefit from greater engagement with ethnographic methods developed in critical heritage studies (e.g. [Hollowell and Nicholas 2009](#); [Butler 2007](#)), from the efforts of public archaeologists working in recent time periods with participatory approaches (e.g. [De Nardi 2014](#); [Moshenska 2010](#)) and specifically with large-scale cultural events (particularly [White 2020](#)). Using such methods with contemporary populations would create a greater understanding of how people respond to the spatio-temporal shifts that come from the creation, operation and aftermath of mega events.

A strength of my research has been its rich use of archival resources to complement more traditional archaeological approaches. It is clear from this experience that archaeologists of the contemporary world can benefit strongly from adding documentary and visual research methods to their more traditional toolkits. This to say nothing of the potential of archives of archaeological fieldwork as 'a site of translation between the material past encountered during excavation and the production of archaeological knowledge as an intellectual exercise' ([Baird and McFadyen 2014](#), 15). My work in reconsidering the archaeological findings and labour that helped 'build' London 2012 was especially productive in this regard. Examining the fieldwork of the development-led archaeology industry in this more ethnographic sense offers a rich territory for greater understanding of archaeological involvement in urban development more generally and how archaeologists are seen to contribute to society (see [Gardner 2020c](#); [UKRI and Watson 2019](#)).

It is well recognised that there is a tension in using and writing from archives (e.g. [Steedman 2006](#)). They are the result of uneven processes of collection, chance survival, composition and ordering and they rarely provide the definitive answer one may be looking for. In acknowledging the gaps, inconsistencies and biases of archival materials, I have tried to see these differing forms of absence as traces in and of themselves, and

ones that prompt new ideas and approaches rather than as hindrances. Where are the missing streets and residents of the 1940s South Bank? Who were the people in the scenery of the All-Red Route? Did the scrap iron of the burnt Crystal Palace really get recycled into Nazi bombs and shells? I have managed to fill some of these gaps but, in many other cases, they led only to yet more questions, or occasionally to a dead-end after days spent searching for records. This book then, like the archives it draws on, could never present a final or complete account of London's mega events, yet I hope that its approach and its findings, like the South Bank Exhibition, can provide some 'fingerposts into the future' for those who follow.

The role of mega events

What are mega events for? Why do they exist at all? Should we continue to host them? All big questions and ones that, so far, I have largely skirted around. This book, though critical in places, is not intended to present a judgement on the successes or failures, legitimacy or efficacy of the events it discusses. Nonetheless, my investigations have yielded insights that may be useful when considering the role of mega events in contemporary societies more broadly and for how London may host mega events in the future.

Common justifications for hosting a mega event include: promises of economic growth; their usefulness in defining national or ethnic identities; their 'soft power' and boosting of a nation's credibility and 'brand' (e.g. [Black 2007](#)); the educational opportunities they present; and even their potential as 'counter-revolutionary' measures ([Greenhalgh 1988](#), 29). These are all significant, but I suggest that, at their core, mega events are ultimately about marking time. They attempt not only to sum up a whole civilisation, empire, nation or people, but also to materially enact change and, often, to show explicitly how time moves from an ancient past to a hoped-for future.

This marking of time explains the overall attraction behind hosting a mega event, it is a characteristic underpinned by the genre's inherent temporal flexibility. By this I mean that not only do mega events allow cities, nations and empires to compete with one another in a controlled environment – sometimes as a form of 'war by other means' (e.g. [Udovički-Selb 2012](#); [Finlay and Xin 2010](#)) – but they also present an attractively blank canvas on which to pin pre-existing narratives, stories and heritages. Each event draws heavily on a juxtaposition of past, present and future, new and old, primitive or advanced. It is this *openness* to the inclusion of

different societal, spatial and temporal narratives that drives the variety of uses mega events have found in London and other cities.

This conceptual flexibility should guarantee that mega event hosting will continue for the foreseeable future, including in London and the UK, despite increasing worldwide scepticism of the cost and impact of holding them. In 2015, for example, residents of both Boston and Hamburg rejected their city leaders' proposed 2024 Summer Games bids and similarly, in 2013, Munich held a referendum which saw a decisive 'no' vote against hosting the 2022 Winter Games. These particular Winter Games were subject to further controversy, given that the only cities that did bid, Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Beijing (which won), are both led by authoritarian regimes. For several years there was also a trend towards both exhibitionary and sporting mega events being held in countries with poor human rights records (particularly Dubai's postponed Expo 2020 and Qatar's 2022 World Cup) while being shunned by hosts elsewhere. The recent 'wins' by Paris for the Olympic Games in 2024 and Los Angeles for 2028 may mark yet another change of direction, this time towards sustainability.

This reflects changes at the IOC after the 2014 adoption of its *Agenda 2020*, which mandates: a stronger emphasis on a credible, open and fair bid process; gender and other equality initiatives; attempts to control the costs of bidding and developing the Games; legacy investment; and environmental responsibility (IOC 2014, 2020). Tokyo's postponed 2020 Summer Games were awarded before this shift was fully enacted, so it will not be until after Paris 2024 that we will be able to assess the full impact of the *Agenda* on host cities. For example, LA 2028 proposes zero new construction and hosting all its events in pre-existing venues (see Owen 2020). Such changes will clearly have a significant long-term impact on host cities, particularly at spatial and material levels. If London 2012 had used only existing venues, such as Wembley Stadium, instead of constructing the Olympic Park in Stratford, this would have clearly resulted in a very different type of mega event and legacy from what we see today.

It is hard to make firm predictions when it comes to the future role of mega events in London. A 2009 bid to host either the 2018 or the 2022 World Cup included plans for matches to take place in the Olympic Stadium, but those events were awarded to Russia and Qatar respectively. Plans are already afoot to bring the Olympic and Paralympic Games back to London for 2036, mainly using existing venues and primarily with the aim of boosting British medal success (Majendie 2019) – it remains to be seen how realistic a proposition this is. Although it is not a mega event per

se, plans for Festival*UK 2022 (a working title) have ruled out any sites in London. It is seen by many as a Festival of Brexit, but it is unclear what the event will actually be about (as of late 2021).

I personally remain ambivalent about the value of hosting mega events. Their vast expense has often proven ruinous to their hosts, their benefits are easily overstated (see [Zimbalist, 2015](#)) and they can be extremely disruptive to both existing communities and the wider urban environment. This is not to suggest that we should never host them – mega events have much to offer: they strive to promote peace and reconcile differences between nations and groups (with admittedly varying degrees of sincerity); they attempt to create better, more pleasant and healthier cities; they bring in large amounts of public and private investment (which can be both a blessing and a curse); and they promote visions of a more hopeful future. Clearly, promised benefits must be subject to critical scrutiny but, overall, these are admirable, if idealistic, goals. Any future decisions on hosting mega events in London should be based on a careful consideration of those events that came before and must recognise that the inheritances they leave in their wake are both unpredictable and persistent.

Conclusion

Back in Queens, New York, and beyond the granite panels and the Unisphere I find the Queens Museum. This neoclassical building is one of the few remnants of the 1939–40 World's Fair; back then it was the New York City Building and showcased the work of the city's government. It was always intended to be a permanent building for the Park that had emerged from the Corona Dump and, after 1940, was occupied by an ice rink and a roller skating rink. Curiously, the skaters were soon replaced by diplomats when the building became the temporary home of the United Nations until 1950, where several major decisions were made that continue to have a significant impact, including the resolution to partition what was then the British Mandate of Palestine into two states, Israel and Palestine. Plans were even proposed to make this site into a permanent World's Capital and home of the UN, which were rejected in favour of the iconic current location on Manhattan's East Side ([Mires 2015](#)).

Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, as the site of two World's Fairs, somehow feels like an amalgam of *all* the London mega events I have discussed ([fig. 8.3](#)). There is the faded twentieth-century modernity of the Festival of Britain and the South Bank in its spatial layout and



Figure 8.3 Scenes of Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, September 2014.

Note: Clockwise from top left: a remnant of the 1964–5 Fair’s Court of the Universe; the New York State Building; the Van Wyck Expressway over Flushing Creek on the Park’s eastern edge; Queens Museum (New York City Building); Citi Field (home of the NY Mets) just outside the Park, with original 1939 lampposts; artefacts of the 1939–40 Fair inside the Museum; the site of the League of Nations Building from the 1939–40 Fair. Source: Photographs by the author.

surviving architecture, its optimistically buried time capsules and its streamlined statues. There is the ruination and overgrowth of Sydenham and the surprise of low-rise residential neighbourhoods cheek-by-jowl with vast monuments to the future. Finally, the site's huge scale, the sleek venues of the Billie Jean King Tennis campus, the NY Mets stadium and the cultural venues of the Queens Museum and the Hall of Science all remind me of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

It is true that this World of Tomorrow looks slightly tired. Paint is flaking, garbage blows around, Flushing Creek is polluted and the vast concrete structures of the Grand Central Parkway and the Van Wyck and Long Island Expressways loom over the Park. However, it is clear that this is a place that remains much loved: families with picnics are everywhere; tourists gawp at the glory of the Unisphere; and the demand for hotdogs and ice cream seems insatiable. In the Museum, a lovingly arranged display of World's Fair ephemera occupies a quiet room upstairs from the displays of contemporary art and the famous scale-model *Panorama of the City of New York* from the 1964 Fair (fig. 8.3), while the gift shop still offers a vast array of (both) World's Fairs-branded souvenirs.

I came to Flushing Meadows–Corona Park originally with a view of making a far more in-depth comparison than I have outlined here: to compare London's events with New York's. I spent weeks in the quiet embrace of the New York Public Library's Manuscripts and Archives Division, searching through hundreds of boxes for a disparate array of material, mainly related to the 1939–40 Fair. On one day I would seek out the history of the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company and their dump at Corona, on the next, the blueprints of an educational exhibit entitled 'old New York', only to stumble across plans for an entire replica Dutch town on Flushing Creek sponsored by Heineken. In the Park itself, I searched (mostly) in vain for any trace of these places on the ground, but ended up finding, other, more unexpected traces, such as Mullican's artwork. In the future, perhaps all this might make it into a book of its own. Yet, besides being fieldwork more than anything else, this transatlantic interlude made me reflect on my own connection to mega events.

This research started by accident. Leaving university, I needed a job quickly and wound up digging at the Olympic site in Stratford, a place I had never visited and that I had barely heard of, despite having lived in London for years. Nonetheless, the few months that I spent working there ultimately set me on the path that led to this book. Seven years later, in the familiar yet unfamiliar surroundings of Flushing Meadows, I reflected that mega events not only have a tendency to stick around as ruins or artefacts, but that they sometimes also stick around individual lives.

Writing this in 2021, another seven years on, I think I have finally figured out that what draws me to these mega events is their sheer scale. I am sometimes cynical about their organisers' motives, their illusory worlds of canvas masquerading as stone, their moral and financial bankruptcies and their frequent denial of historical and social complexity, but I still cannot help but feel a grudging respect for the ambition involved, no matter how hubristic. Matt Edgeworth memorably writes that the prospect of an archaeology of the very smallest and largest scales of human creations – the nano and the mega – both 'fascinates and appals at the same time' (2010, 146). It is this sense of temporal and material immensity, and a sublime feeling of immeasurable depth that comes with it, that draws me in. Mega events are simultaneously of the future and the past, laden with nostalgia and amnesia, monumental and ruinous, loved and hated. Their obnoxious presence yet inscrutable absence invites research, impromptu expeditions and the inexplicable desire to spend one's summer in an archive. It is my hope that, in comparing the roles of three spectacles in a single city over two centuries, this book convinces the reader of the value of the contemporary archaeology of mega events and, at the same time, captures something of their enduring and enigmatic appeal.

Notes

- 1 Though it is not wholly clear if Second World War bomb rubble was dumped *within* the boundaries of the site of the Olympic Park itself, it seems highly likely this did occur, given the fact that enormous quantities of Blitz debris (up to 3metres thick) were deposited on the majority of Hackney Marsh, EastMarsh and Leyton Marsh to the immediate north (partially seen in [figs.6.2](#) and [6.6](#)). The latter two sites, though outside the Park proper, did provide Games Time temporary car parking and training venues in 2012.'

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'This is a meticulously researched, inventive and compelling read. Gardner employs an expansive methodology to weave together a multitude of perspectives on the three case studies, which are fruitfully contextualised within evolving backdrops of war, colonialism, class, time and place. The book is an invaluable resource for multi-disciplinary researchers of mega events and an enjoyable read for the generalist.' – Laura McAtackney, Aarhus University

A Contemporary Archaeology of London's Mega Events explores the traces of London's most significant modern 'mega events'. Though only open for a few weeks or months, mega events permanently and disruptively reshape their host cities and societies: they demolish and rebuild whole districts, they draw in materials and participants from around the globe and their organisers self-consciously seek to leave a 'legacy' that will endure for decades or more.

With London as his case study, Jonathan Gardner argues that these spectacles must be seen as long-lived and persistent, rather than simply transient or short-term. Using a novel methodology drawn from the field of contemporary archaeology – the archaeology of the recent past and present-day – a broad range of comparative studies are used to explore the long-term history of each event. These include the contents and building materials of the Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace and their extraordinary 'afterlife' at Sydenham, South London; how the 1951 Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition employed displays of ancient history to construct a new post-war British identity; and how London 2012, as the latest of London's mega events, dealt with competing visions of the past as archaeology, waste and heritage in its efforts to create a positive legacy for future generations.

This book offers significant new directions for the study of mega events in its comparison of how three mega events changed London over three centuries. Drawing on a varied selection of theoretical and methodological frameworks and a rich array of sources, it demonstrates the great potential of contemporary archaeology for re-examining recent processes of urban transformation.

Jonathan Gardner is an archaeologist and heritage researcher based at Edinburgh College of Art. He has a strong interest in how the materials of the past continue to influence the worlds of the present. Previously he worked as a commercial archaeologist in London, including on the Stratford site of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

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