

History & Background

Crystal Palace Park

The past to the future

You are standing on an extraordinary and unique piece of London's history. To help us understand how important, we are preparing a conservation plan, which looks at the park's history, archaeology and ecology to inform the future use and restoration of the park.

History

In early times Crystal Palace Park, known in the Domesday Book as the Great North Wood, was covered in such dense woodland that even the Romans chose to bypass it when building roads into Londinium. It was so difficult to clear the land of trees that few people lived here for generations.

As the centuries passed, trees were cut down and sold as timber. In 1775 the north-eastern corner of the park was sold and developed as an estate, named Penge Place. In 1852, Sir Joseph Paxton bought the land to find a permanent home for The Crystal Palace.



The Crystal Palace

The Crystal Palace had been the centrepiece of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park: an international wonder and a triumph of technology and the ingenuity of its designer, Joseph Paxton. The Palace's relocation from Hyde Park made this area London's major cultural and entertainment centre.

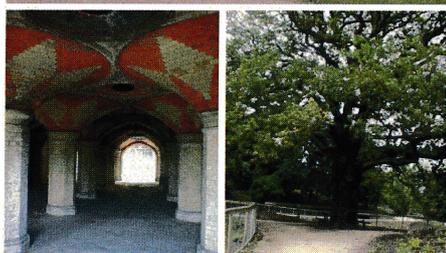
This sparked a flurry of development, with new transport connections, jobs, housing and churches. The vast new Palace dominated the tree-lined ridge and was visible from all over London and beyond. It contained arts and architecture from Ancient Egypt to the Renaissance, and exhibits from industry and the natural world. It also hosted concerts and circuses. The park spread downhill with gravity-powered water fountains and flowerbeds stocked from the greenhouses. The dinosaurs were placed in an educational landscape. For more than 80 years, the Crystal Palace and its park provided a focus and identity for the area that took its name.

In 1936, most of the Crystal Palace was destroyed in the country's biggest peacetime fire of the 20th century. During World War II the 20-acre hilltop site was used as a dump for bombsite rubble.

Historically, the park has been used for a range of social events, leisure pursuits and sports, including balloon launches, cricket, cycling, football, speedway, motor racing, concerts and athletics. This continued with the building of the National Sports Centre in the 1960s.

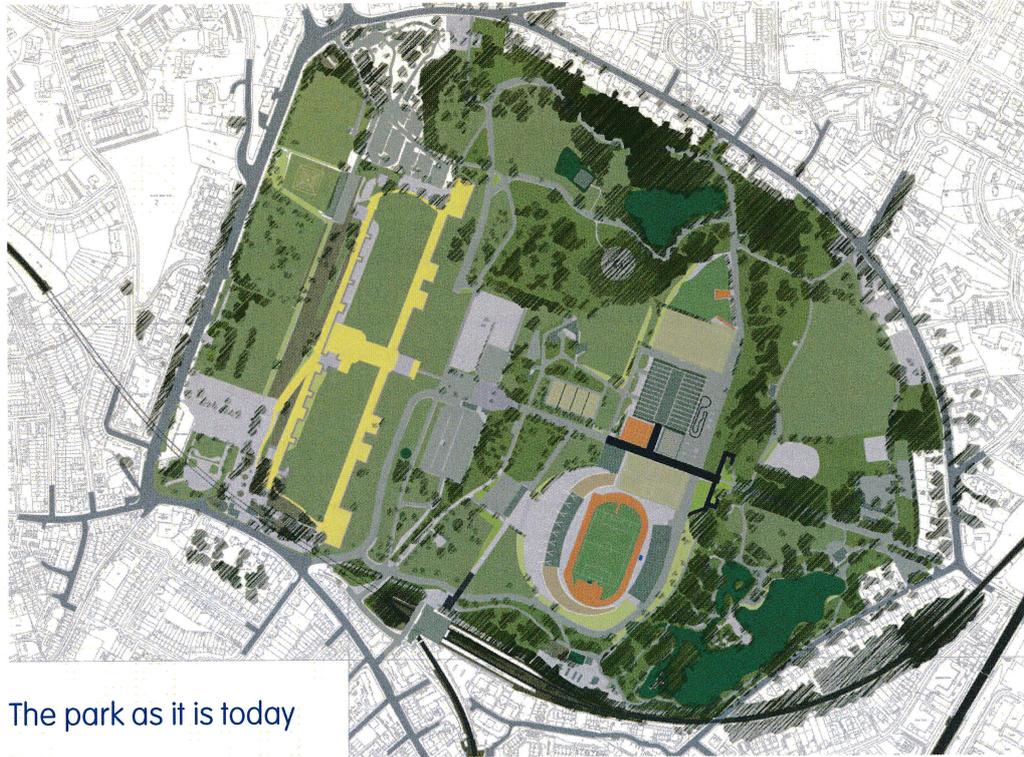
Crystal Palace Park time line

957–2004



- 957 Anglo Saxon Charter records site as wood pasture
- 1085 The Great North Wood recorded in The Domesday Book
- 1746 Barnard's Farm, later Penge Place, first shown on map
- 1827 Penge common enclosed
- 1854 **Relocated Crystal Palace opened by Queen Victoria**
- 1855 Horticultural Fete – Upper series of fountains working for the first time
- 1856 Royal inauguration of the entire system of Grand Waterworks
- 1857 Park 'completed' with the formation of the cricket ground
- 1857 The Handel Festival begins (held roughly every three years until 1926)
- 1865 Brock's fireworks display began
- 1865 Crystal Palace High Level Station opened
- 1866 December, North Transept and part of the North Wing destroyed by fire
- 1870 Maze is opened for the first time
- 1871 Houses built on park fronting Thicket Road and Crystal Palace Park Road
- 1883 More land was sold to build Ledrington Road, next to the South Tower
- 1884 Houses and shops built on Park near Crystal Palace Low Level Station
- 1893–4 The North Tower Gardens were laid out, including the Upper Reservoir
- 1894 Great Fountain basins filled in
- 1895 Cup Final played at Crystal Palace
- 1902 An amusement park with water rides was created
- 1904 The rose garden is destroyed to make space for popular attraction, called Maxim's Flying Machine
- 1911 Festival of Empire Exhibition, to celebrate the coronation year of King George V
- 1914 **Crystal Palace and grounds acquired for the nation**
- 1914–18 Crystal Palace used as Naval Training Depot: HMS Victory VI
- 1920 King George V and Queen Mary reopen Crystal Palace as home of the Imperial War Exhibition
- 1920's Motor Racing Circuit created
- 1923 Fire in South Wing
- 1933 Baird opens TV studios in South Tower area
- 1936 **30th November, Palace destroyed in fire**
- 1939–45 WWII Service use – heavy anti-aircraft site 1943
- 1952–65 London County Council ownership. Lower 70 acres opened to public
- 1952 Dinosaurs restored
- 1952 Zoo created on former Crystal Palace polo stables
- 1953 Motor racing resumed
- 1955 Early designs for National Sports Centre drawn up by Sir Leslie Martin – Architect to London County Council
- 1960–64 **National Sports Centre built by London County Council**
- 1965–86 Greater London Council ownership
- 1976 Crystal Palace Parade site 4.75 acres landscaped and opened
- 1972 Motor racing stopped, allowing more public access
- 1978 Ski slope installed. Park staff dwellings and jogging trail added
- 1986 London Borough of Bromley take ownership of site
- 1988 Maze replanted and reopened
- 1990 Steve Backley breaks the javelin world record at the Grand Prix
- 1997–2001 Plans for development on the hilltop ridge and park re-landscaping meet opposition
- 2001 Development proposals dropped
- 2003 Restored dinosaur park opens to public
- 2004 150th anniversary of The Crystal Palace relocated to the park
- 2004 Mayor of London, LDA, Sport England and London Borough of Bromley reach agreement to secure short-term future of sports facilities and allows investment in athletics track
- 2004 September – first round of public consultation to rejuvenate park and sports centre
- 2006 LDA take responsibility for the Sports Centre

What's left of Paxton's park



The park as it is today



Surviving historical remnants

Removing those areas of the park that have changed radically since the plan for the original Crystal Palace shows that virtually nothing of the original design remains in the heart of the park.



Features lost from the 1854 plan

Many of the original features have been lost, notably the Palace, Rockhills, the Italian gardens and ornamental fountains



Features lost from the 1914 plan

Notably the cycle track and sports ground have gone

Surviving remnants

The main Palace building was destroyed in the fire of 1936, but parts of the park landscapes of 1854 and later survive to this day. As part of our work to understand the heritage values of the park we are producing a Conservation Plan for the park with the help of the Museum of London.

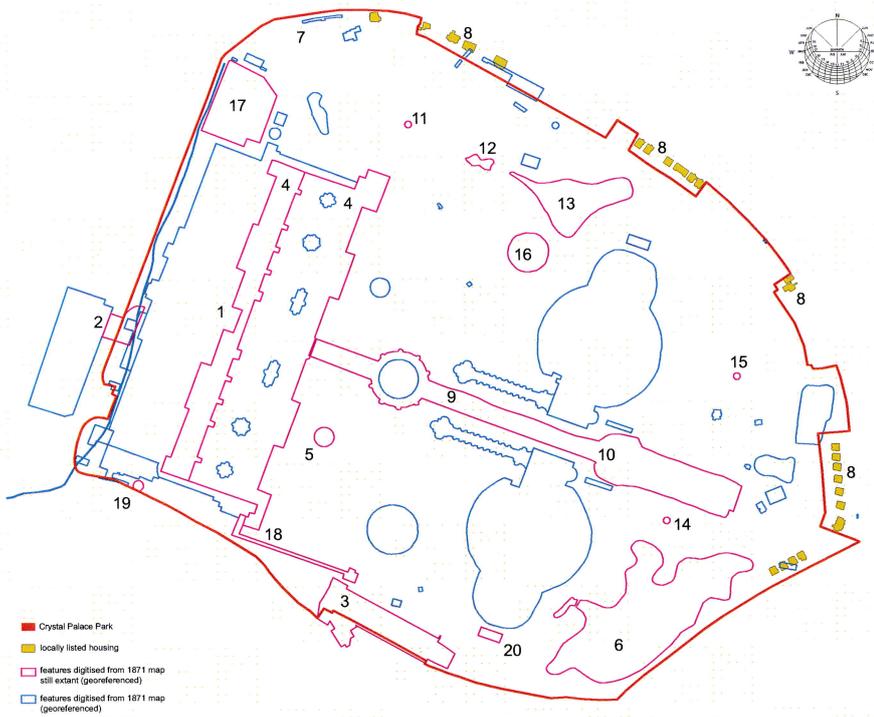
The work so far has identified the following surviving remnants:

- 1 Remains of the Crystal Palace on the Upper Level Terrace – Tower bases, Aquarium, School of Engineering, buried foundations, vaults and cellars
- 2 The vaulted High Level Station subway that led visitors through from the station to the main body of the Palace. The station has since been demolished
- 3 Lower station
- 4 Upper & Lower Terraces and stonework; six sphinxes and other statues
- 5 Site of the more southerly of two circular fountain basins accessed from the Lower Terrace, on either side of Grand Centre Walk
- 6 'Tidal Lake' including geological strata, lead mine and prehistoric monsters (dinosaurs)
- 7 Rockhills House gatepiers
- 8 Housing on fringe of park
- 9 Bust of Sir Joseph Paxton
- 10 Grand Centre Walk running through the park
- 11 Site of The Crystal Palace ground's 'English Landscape Garden' and 'Archery Ground'
- 12 Site of pond first shown on OS map of 1863 (Kent). It now has the concert platform in its centre
- 13 Site of Intermediate Reservoir
- 14 Unconfirmed site of 'Gymnasium'
- 15 Site of 'Cricket Ground'
- 16 Site of North Mound. Central area with footpaths as six 'spokes' and footpath around circumference. Maze recreated by Bromley Council in the 1990s following the original design and using hornbeam hedges. Reputed to be one of the largest in the country
- 17 Reservoir has now been covered but is still in use as a reservoir (the modern construction is contained within the older structure)
- 18 Site of the Crystal Colonnade linking the Lower Level Station to the Crystal Palace. Parts of the truncated back wall remain
- 19 Locally Listed South Tower base, by Brunel
- 20 Site of large rectangular fountain to the south of the South Basin. Foundations and coping stones are still there, along with a cast-iron fountainhead

What this means

With all this rich history we need to think about what we want to conserve or enhance and how we can make best use of the park's precious resources. Ideas include:

- **Interpretive trails** – looking at nature, history, architecture or landscape
- **Victorian Engineering discovery** – an interactive educational centre celebrating great technological achievements in an engaging way
- **Wild about the Park** – the natural history of the park
- **Botanical centre** – recreating Paxton greenhouse
- **Events space** – concerts, opera, theatre
- **Flexible exercise space** – sports, fitness trails, dog walking



Features identified from Ordnance Survey 25" map (1871 revision of 1862-8 survey)