



1908 White City

Built for the Franco-British Exhibition, only this gateway, minus its soaring pinnacles, survives

main entrance was opposite Prince of Wales Gate). It was built of glass, wood and cast and wrought iron — there was no stone, brick or mortar. Components were bulk-manufactured and then assembled on site — the first time this had been achieved on a project of any scale — and the construction time was an amazing nine months. Paxton did a deal with the contractors: they would get to recycle the materials if they lowered their construction tender price.

The palace looked ephemeral — light and airy, a fairy-tale structure — and stood on shallow foundations. However, Paxton was reluctant to see the building taken down again, claiming that if the woodwork were properly painted and guttered, the building would stand for at least 100 years. When the Great Exhibition closed in October 1851, after an estimated 6 million people had passed through, Paxton petitioned parliament to let the palace stay. It was decided to dismantle the Palace but put it up somewhere else. The second, more elaborate version, was built on Sydenham Hill in 1854 and stood for a further 82 years. Its dramatic end came on the night of November 30 1936, when the palace became an inferno and the gutters of Sydenham flowed with molten glass.

More faery palaces, this time in steel, lightweight concrete and with elaborate stucco moulding, were built all over W12 for the 1908 Franco-British exhibition. The White



1951 Festival of Britain

The Skylon, left, with the Dome of Discovery, above. The Conservative government brought in the bulldozers in 1952

City was a 140 acre complex of pavilions, ornamental gardens, lakes and funfair rides — the brainchild of Hungarian exhibitions designer Imre Kiralfy. The fantastical brilliant-white buildings stretched from the Shepherd's Bush roundabout to Wood Lane and on out to where the Westway now runs past White City housing estate. The 1908 Olympics were relocated to White City from Rome (which was bankrupt) so a stadium was added, which became a greyhound track and speedway circuit before the BBC built over it in the early Eighties.

Millions of Londoners enjoyed a day out at the White City; it became the venue for trade fairs and exhibitions from 1909 to until the mid-Thirties. But competition from Olympia and Earl's Court saw to its decline and the complex closed in 1937. All that remains are its entrance arch at the north-eastern corner of Shepherd's Bush Green, now painted green and minus its soaring stucco pinnacles, plus a pond in Hammersmith Park.

To jolly up the nation after World War II, the Festival of Britain covered the South Bank in exhibition halls, the mother of which was the Dome of Discovery. For a year, it sat just east of County Hall, where the Jubilee Line Extension has now ploughed up Festival Gardens. The creation of architect Ralph Tubbs, the Dome was of steel and pre-cast concrete, with a super-light aluminium roof

and slender, latticed support masts. Its companion piece was Powell & Moya's 90 metre-tall Skylon, named by poet Margaret Sheppard Fidler. The joke of the day was: "Why is Skylon like Britain? They both have no visible means of support."

Both Dome and Skylon were designed to symbolise a new age of hope and glamour, with their gleaming metal and glass contrasting starkly with the half-bombed, squalid, Victorian slum of Waterloo. The imminent space age was a dominant flavour: the Dome looked like a UFO, the Skylon looked poised for take-off. The interior space of the Dome was much admired — its contents less so. Many who worked on the project thought it looked best emptied of its jingoistic clutter. The incoming Tory government, which won the autumn 1951 election, ignored requests for a reprieve and sent the bulldozers in promptly to demolish the Festival pavilions, although the Dome was saved until March 1952. Will a similar thing happen when Tony Blair's Commons majority evaporates? A hundred years from now, will visitors to the North Greenwich Peninsula be puzzling over just where something called the Millennium Dome was once sited?

Catch Powerhouse::UK before someone takes the bung out on Sunday April 19. Admission costs £3; open daily 10am-6pm, Wednesdays to 8pm.