

1746 Ranelagh Rotunda

Canaletto's
1751 interior of
the Rotunda, in
Chelsea. It was
dismantled in 1803

The Millennium Dome is the latest in a long line of transient, fantastical structures to be built in London. Sarah Wise traces them

Built not to last

You may think that spending £780 million on yet another exhibition centre is a criminal waste of public money; that the Millennium Dome may only be around for 25 years makes it an extravagant project. But

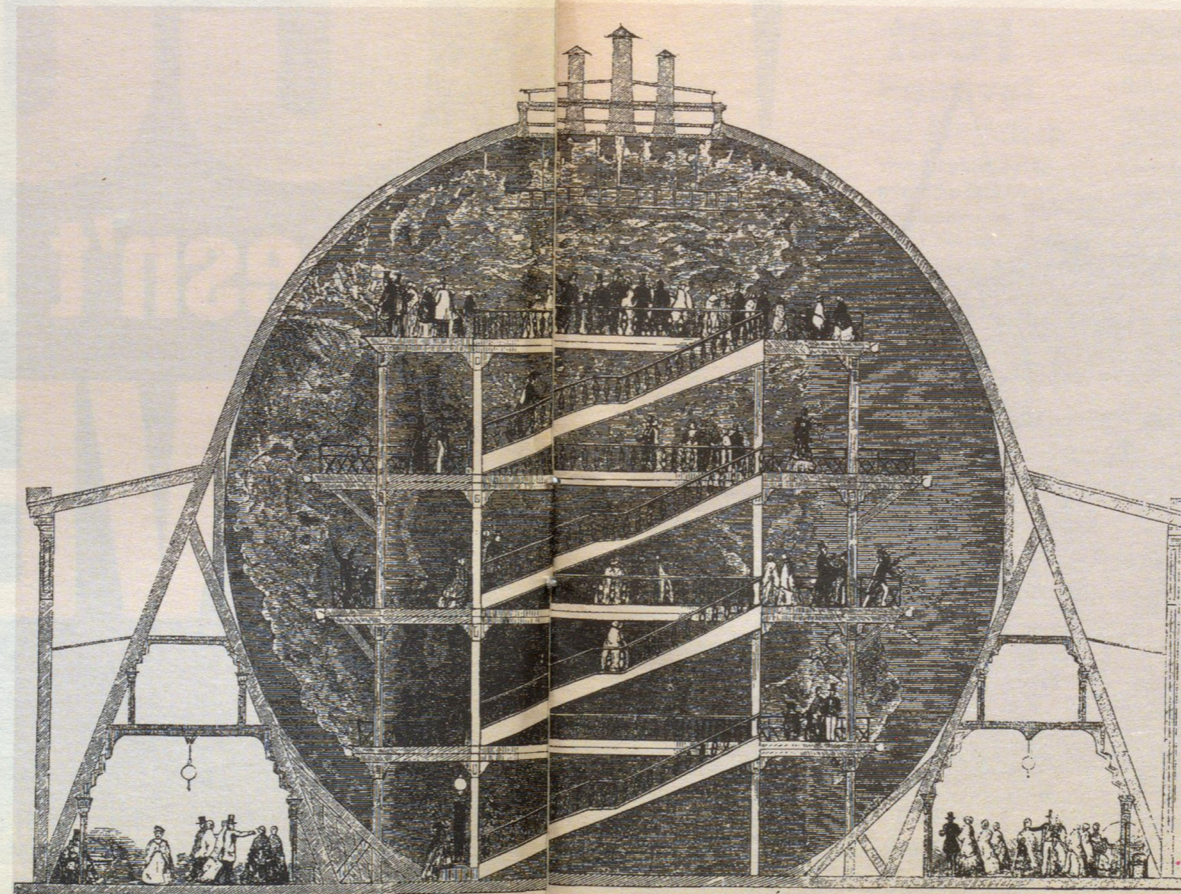
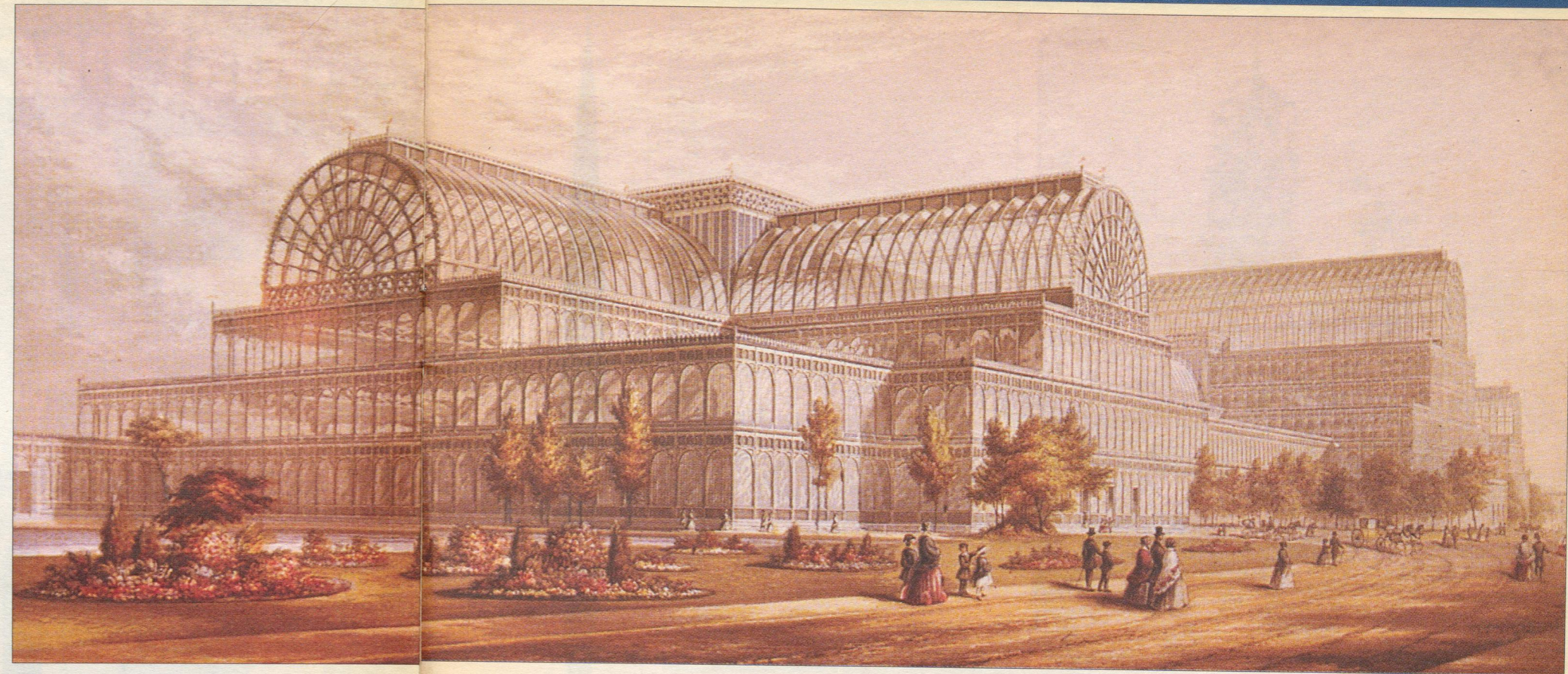
history suggests that white elephants are a London tradition, and the capital has seen the rise and fall of many impermanent pleasure domes of which no trace remains. Festivals and exhibitions often require something spectacular that can be put up quickly and cheaply, and easily demolished once its purpose has been served. That's why, instead of durable stone and brick, such structures have often been built of wood, glass, stucco and lightweight metals. The fact that some of these structures outlived their initial purpose is a credit to the ingenuity of their designers and engineers. Since April 4

Powerhouse:UK has been taking architectural transience to the limit with its four silver inflatable mini-domes puffed up in Horseguards Parade. The rubberoid exhibition space was commissioned by the DTI to showcase British commercial creativity. In the same spirit, here's a showcase of London's forgotten but once much-loved houses of fun.

No self-respecting member of the 18th-century *beau monde* failed to pay a visit to the Ranelagh Rotunda, a huge domed amphitheatre in the Ranelagh Pleasure

Gardens, Chelsea. Wood had been taboo in London since the Great Fire, and only its isolation from other buildings allowed architect William Jones to construct it in the material. Opened in 1742, the Rotunda was a multifunctional building, and its versatility meant that it could host masquerades, fairs, concerts (an eight-year-old Mozart performed one of his own compositions there) and vast dinner parties. Over 2,000 people could — and did — cram inside its 137 metre circumference, entering by four arches, each aligning with a point in the compass. The Rotunda's inner wall was lined with two tiers of private boxes, while the ground floor housed temporary, easily removable ale houses, gaming booths and a small forest of potted firs and orange trees. From the ceiling, painted with allegorical figures, dangled bunting and floral festoons. (The jollity was interrupted on May 11, 1764, when there was a servants' riot in response to the gentry's attempt to end tipping. Swords were drawn, and there were a number of injuries.)

Ranelagh Gardens started to lose status at the turn of the century and The Rotunda was dismantled in 1803 (Chelsea Bridge Road runs just east of its former site). The 19th-century middle classes preferred their leisure to be more "improving", or at least to appear so. James Wyld II, one of the era's many eccentric entrepreneurs, bought a 10-year lease on

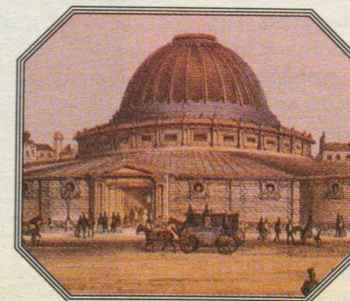


1851 Crystal Palace

At the end of the
Great Exhibition,
the palace, above,
was removed from
its temporary home
in Knightsbridge

1851 Wyld's globe

The Monster Globe
of Discovery,
taken down in 1861



Leicester Square and in the summer of 1851 built The Monster Globe of Discovery there. This wood and iron dome, completed in two months, contained a spherical chamber with a map of the world painted on its walls, on a scale of 10 miles to an inch. Erupting volcanoes were shown in orange, deserts were yellow and jungles bright green — all to be admired by the light of the Globe's gas jets. A complex system of staircases and galleries allowed visitors to peer at the map for what was billed as "a shilling's worth of universal knowledge".

The local residents were furious that their square was host to this bizarre structure, which attracted thousands of visitors. When the model of the world had run its course, Wyld went on to present a number of panoramas on the inside wall of the Globe, including a view of the Crimean War, updated daily with painted impressions of the latest troop positions and scenes of skirmish. But despite 10 years of public popularity, the residents' objections ensured that the Monster Globe was dismantled when the Wyld's lease expired in 1861.

Wyld had been cashing in on the success of the Great Exhibition 1851, which brought into being Joseph Paxton's giant greenhouse, christened The Crystal Palace by *Punch*. The Exhibition had required a temporary structure that could be easily removed, largely because the residents of Knightsbridge would not stand for their park being built over (the palace's