


Stephen Brandt



**THE  
TEAM  
THAT COULD  
HAVE BEEN**



The Rise and Fall of  
**Crystal Palace's  
Team of the 80s**

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## Chapter 1

# The Crystal Palace

TO START a history book on Crystal Palace Football Club, we need to get to the origins of the name of the club. It starts back in Victorian London and the Crystal Palace. The structure has been on the badge on the club's shirts for years, even though, as we'll find out, the building hasn't been around for a while. The structure was built during the Victorian era, a period of optimism and unlimited ways to be good. The Georgian era that preceded it included the Industrial Revolution and had assured Britain's position at the top of the manufacturing world. Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, became the President of the Society of Arts in 1847 and played an important part in mounting a series of manufacturing exhibitions to show off all the good in British life. It was the vision of Henry Cole, the Assistant Keeper of the Records Office, who was responsible for promoting such exhibitions.

Cole was a man of many talents: painter, author, architect, historian. In his mind, after gathering

all the information, he considered the possibility of Britain staging an international exhibition of a size not realised before. This would become the world's largest greenhouse, the Crystal Palace. Like any new proposition, there was much opposition, but once they got the naysayers to figure it out, they had to find a site to stage it. The site picked for the hall was Hyde Park, and the building had to be designed so that it was capable of housing manufacturing goods from around the world. Money had to be raised and, due to legislation, all this was done over an 18-month timeframe.

In Victorian Britain all this was possible, with a Royal Commission overseeing the process. They raised the money through public subscription, and everyone from the richest to the poorest had to contribute to the cause, raising £79,000, underwritten by £250,000 from manufacturers. The design was commissioned by architects Thomas Leverton Donaldson and Charles Barry. The engineers were the best too: Robert Stephenson and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. But the project failed and it looked as though Britain would have egg on its face.

Then Joseph Paxton came along to save the day. He was an architect who specialised in building with glass and iron. He was a self-made, self-taught man, creating the most spectacular buildings the world would ever see. Paxton started working as a gardener at Chiswick, until he was noticed by the Duke of Devonshire. Paxton became a friend, and a manager of the duke's estates.

The interest in glass and iron buildings came out of a happy occurrence, trying to find a structure for plant cutting propagation at Chatsworth.

Paxton didn't plan to become involved with the exhibition, but a discussion in London with John Ellis MP made him think otherwise. He was, however, given two weeks to put together a plan with detailed drawings. As a self-made man, he was able to do things quickly with great competence, and the first sketch was drawn in minutes. Also, the fact that Paxton could turn to British manufacturers of iron and glass to bring this to life, while getting the quality and quantity of goods, was impressive.

Paxton's design needed 205 miles of sash bars, 2,150 iron girders, 3,300 columns, 600,000 cubic feet of timbers to create the sparkle, and 900,000 square feet of glass. The supply list was amazing, to be transported from Birmingham to London. The building would cover 19 acres of land and enclose 33 million cubic feet. The cathedral-like structure consisted of nave and transepts, along with galleries. Each piece of the build had to be hauled into place via men and horses, levers and pulleys. Teams of men worked in unison, 2,000 of them on site at full steam. The panels were moved into position using trolleys that ran along the guttering pipes, all 34 miles of them. The glaziers' skilled work was followed by teams of painters. Then there were joiners, fixing the stalls for the 14,000 exhibitors – 11 miles of stalls. This was all accomplished in nine months, while nowadays

things take years to finish. And we have better tools these days.

With just weeks to go, the great Crystal Palace was home to a flock of London sparrows, enjoying the conditions inside among the elm trees. This would be a disaster, because no one would want bird droppings on the artefacts. Queen Victoria, with the Duke of Wellington inspected the problem. He said they should install sparrow hawks, solving the issue.

In 1851 the exhibition saw over six million people file through the great building. Although it didn't meet the aims of increased trade, it did bring together what would become a legacy of art and design to that part of London. Paxton wanted the Palace to stay put, as he didn't want his masterpiece to come down, so he raised over £500,000 to buy, move and expand the structure to a site at Sydenham Hill, which had commanding views of London. It was known as the Winter Palace, and it would house great art, exotic plants, temples and fountains. It would also be the showcase for great civilisations, art and architecture. It eventually became five storeys, although the capacity was half as much as it was supposed to be originally. The water towers, heating, landscaping and so much more meant the total cost reached several million pounds.

Brunel, the great engineer, became part of the exhibition. He built the water towers, each able to hold 30,000 tons of water. That load meant the foundations had to be dug very deep and Portland cement had to be

laid. Tanks that supplied water for the fountains and integrated the pumping system were needed, a feat of incredible engineering. The scale of this exhibition defied belief but not efficiency, nor success. They averaged a visitor count of two million each year for 30 years but it was still a huge expenditure to maintain.

The end came for the Crystal Palace on 1 December 1936 at six o'clock in the evening. A small fire started in a toilet and within half an hour spread throughout the building, eating away through the wood of the floors and walls. As the force of the fire blasted the glass from the structure, thousands of people gathered outside to see the collapsing of the building. Remember, spectacles create big business.

Many people saw the site as a way to make money, or to claim it for themselves. During the Second World War it was used as anti-aircraft gun emplacement and military storage. After the war, London's South Bank, rather than Sydenham, was chosen as the site for the 1951 Festival of Britain. The Crystal Palace Park was proposed to be the new home for the Festival Dome of Discovery and Skylon but was rejected. The park did attract new investment, though, as the National Recreation Centre and a concert bowl were added in the 1960s. But the site of Paxton's gem remained empty, save for a television station in the 1950s. The garden terraces and one of the Brunel water towers still stood.

In the 2010s a well-supported plan to reconstruct the Crystal Palace was abandoned. Chinese developer



Zhongrong Group failed to meet the required criteria and a 16-month deadline set by London Borough of Bromley. They had planned to restore the spirit, scale and magnificence of the original. They had top architects, Zaha Hadid and David Chipperfield, to submit proposals, but it was going to be a slow process. To date the property still hasn't been rebuilt.

For the last four years of the 1930s, uncertainty dominated. The Blitz also later made the property a landfill for the city. There were numerous imitations, including one in New York City, and the proposal by Charles Burton for a 1,000-foot Crystal Tower in London. However, by the time the palace burned down, the world of architecture had moved on.