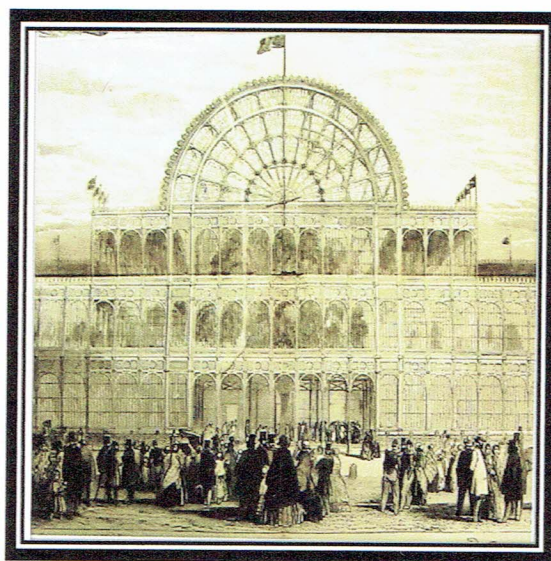


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THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851: THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME



After opening the Great Exhibition on 1st May 1851, Queen Victoria wrote in her Journal: *“This day is one of the greatest and most glorious of our lives... It is a day which makes my heart swell with thankfulness.”*

Six weeks later, on Thursday, June 12th 1851, 780 people from Lingfield, Dormansland, Crowhurst, Felbridge and Limpsfield had their own ‘greatest and glorious day’ at the Great Exhibition.

Most were agricultural labourers and their families. Most had never travelled on the new-fangled trains, or been on a steam boat; had never seen the Palace of Westminster, or Buckingham Palace.

The trip was organized by Rev. T.P. Hutton, Vicar of Lingfield, to take place on a 'Shilling Day' [Thursday]. Several yeomen and gentry, dressed in their finery, went along as marshals. The labourers and their families were dressed in their Sunday best clothes or clean smocks.

In pouring rain the various Groups were ferried by horse-drawn wagons, generously laid on by farmers and gentry from all five villages, to Godstone Station (opened in 1842 by the South Eastern Railway). There they were met by the stationmaster, Mr. John McCabe, joint organizer. When finally assembled on the platform, all were directed to the relevant carriages in the special excursion train; most travelled in the third class carriages.

When the train reached London Bridge Station they were formed into groups of about a dozen, each group led by a marshal. Each group was issued with rosettes of coloured ribbon. They walked along the wet cobbled streets to the embarkation pier below London Bridge, which had been built twenty years before.



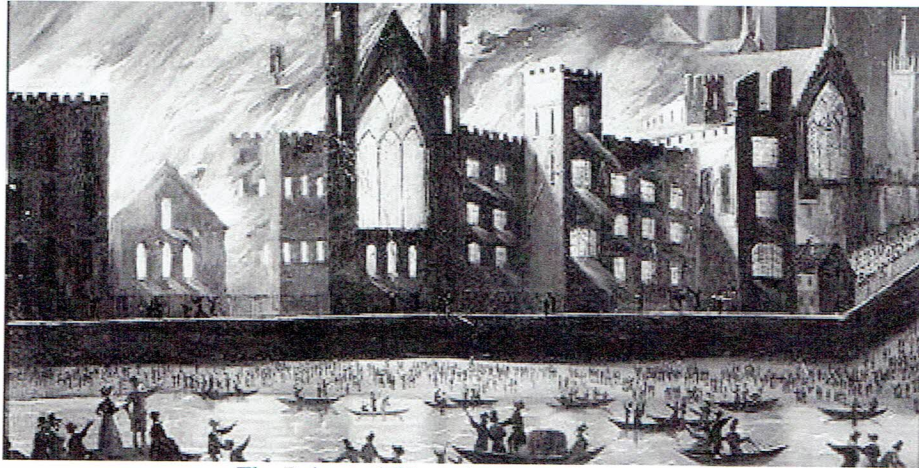
John Rennie's London Bridge, opened 1831
(built 10 years after Rennie's death – it was replaced by the present bridge in 1968)

On the steam boat ride from London Bridge to Westminster Pier the villagers saw newly built town houses, medieval church towers and spires, and the elegant halls of the livery companies. They saw too dirty tenement blocks, old docks and stairs, warehouses, cranes and filthy barges.

They heard the shouts of the boatmen and traders, the steam-driven hammers of local industry, and the clatter of the steam boat paddles.

They smelt the rank mixture of yeast, roasting barley and hops coming from the riverside breweries, smoke belching out from the many blackened chimneys, but probably the strongest smell came from the great river. The Thames was then known as 'The Great Stink'. The increasingly popular 'flushing water closets' were discharged straight into the Thames and turned the river into one vast open stinking sewer. (It would be another 13 years before the sewage was diverted downstream to Beckton and Crossness.)

The party eventually disembarked at Westminster Pier then walked, 2 or 3 abreast, to look in awe and amazement at the Palace of Westminster. Seventeen years earlier, on 16th Oct. 1834, the Palace of Westminster had been destroyed by fire, the flames almost spread to the vast medieval hammer-beam roof of Westminster Hall.



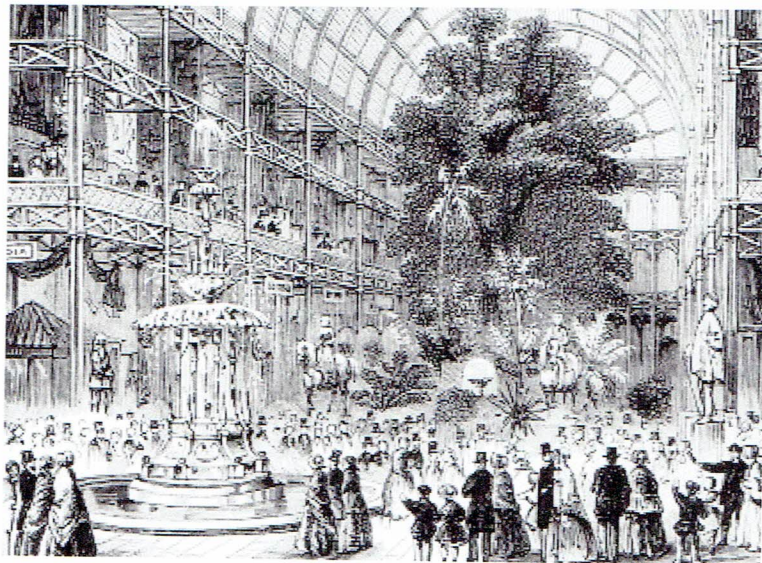
The Palace of Westminster on fire in 1834

The programme of restoration, and the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster was almost complete in 1851. Sir Charles Barry, assisted by Augustus Pugin, designed the buildings in the Gothic Revival style. Construction had begun in 1837. The Clock Tower was in scaffolding in 1851; the tower was finished in 1858.



The long line of excited walkers then snaked through St James Park, passed the newly erected front of Buckingham Palace, the official residence of Queen Victoria since 1837. They then walked up Constitution Hill to Hyde Park Corner, west along Knightsbridge until at last they reached Paxton's Crystal Palace shortly after noon.

There they were amazed by the enormous building: 1,851 ft. long, 956,165 sq. ft. of glass containing 13,000 exhibits in a series of Courts; the first international exhibition of 'Works of Industry of all Nations'.



A particular attraction for visitors from Lingfield and surrounding villages would have been a display in the Western Main Avenue by the Lingfield tanner, Mr. John Turner Kelsey of Batnors Hall. Kelsey, a churchwarden and generous supporter of the local community, made a significant contribution to the local economy. He employed sawyers, carpenters and peelers to fell and remove the bark from his oak woodlands; a miller to operate the giant mill wheel, assistants to control water from the nearby Eden Brook through sluice gates to the tan-pits and the mill; labourers to soak and stir the animal hides in the giant tan pits; and tanners and curriers to stretch and finish the tanned leather. Several local shoemakers and cobblers bought their leather from Mr. Kelsey.

The exhibition's judging panel or 'Jury' made "honorable mention of J.T. Kelsey of Lingfield, Sussex [sic] for his well-tanned crop hide, weighing 82 lbs. The tanning process had occupied the whole of 2 years." The Jury noted that "some tanners had introduced new methods of hastening the tanning process but the leather thus produced is not equal in solidity and durability. Oak bark tanning is best for sole leather. It fills more completely the pores of the hide, and prevents the great absorption of water...In recent years a steam engine has been introduced into the manufacture, to grind the oak bark."*

The *Morning Chronicle* reported the group visit on Friday 13th July: "the honest fellows appeared delighted though somewhat confounded by the vastness of the Crystal Palace and the strange collection of objects among which they found themselves...they seemed almost to stand in awe of the building; its greatness paralyzed them..."

The Times report of 13th July:

"...more perfect specimens of rustic attire, rustic faces and rustic manner could hardly be produced from any part of England."

Queen Victoria wrote in her diary of 14th June 1851:

“Quite forgot to mention that on the morning of the 12th we saw whole parishes – Crowhurst, Linchfield [sic] and Langford [sic] from Kent and Surrey (800 in number) walking in procession two and two, the men in smock frocks, with their wives looking so nice. It seems that they subscribed to come to London, by the advice of the clergymen, to see the Exhibition, it only costing them 2/6d.”

At 4 o'clock the party mustered in the great transept of the Crystal Palace for the long journey home.

They retraced their steps down Knightsbridge and across the park to Westminster. They then entered the large National School Room on Tufton St., just behind Smith Square, where the adults were treated to a glass of beer – they all sang The National Anthem.

Shortly afterwards they boarded a steam-boat back to London Bridge, then the train to Godstone. Horse drawn wagons were waiting at the station to take them home, arriving soon after dusk.

The total cost per person was **3/2d.**:-

1/- entrance to the exhibition; 1/6d for the train journey, and 8d for the River Thames steamboat. “These good folk (many of whom were accompanied by their wives and children) ...had for some months been subscribing for the trip...warmly espoused by the farmers and gentry.” (*The Morning Chronicle*).

The *Surrey Standard* reported: “Their good conduct throughout the day was admirable and proved they were worthy of the confidence placed in them”.

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*(Kelsey's mill wheel was moved from the tannery site before the recent development of Tannery Gardens and is now in the garden of Lingfield & Dormansland Community Centre.)

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