

ALEXANDRA PALACE – CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Conservation and Management Plan for Alexandra Palace comprises the following sections:

1. The Buildings
 2. Assessment of Significance
 3. Vulnerability
 4. Conservation Plan Policies
 5. Implementation of the Plan (*to be completed following stakeholder review; not included in the draft report*)
 6. The Gazetteer
 7. Research Sources
 8. Plate List and Plates
 9. Drawing List and Drawings
- Appendices

Section 1 gives a chronology of the development of Alexandra Palace, so that we can understand how it reached its present built form. The key points are:

1. The first Alexandra Palace was built as a “People’s Palace”, re-using the building from the 1862 Great International Exhibition in South Kensington, designed by Alfred Meeson with John Johnson. It took some time to fit out, due to financial difficulties, and was completed in 1873. Two weeks after opening, it burnt down.
2. Despite inadequate insurance, the Palace was rebuilt (the second Alexandra Palace) within two years. Apart from the main north and south entrance porticos, and their associated basements, none of the fabric of the first Palace was re-used. Opening in 1875, it contained a central Great Hall with a Willis organ, able to hold 12,000 persons, a Theatre and Concert Hall (3,000 persons each), exhibition galleries, a covered “Bazaar” for the sale of merchandise, extensive banqueting, dining and light refreshment facilities, and many further attractions in the Park.
3. Recurrent financial difficulties led to periods of closure. During WWI the building was used first for the housing of Belgian refugees and later for the internment of German prisoners of war. The concert hall was turned into a roller skating rink, while the Theatre was kept going by concurrent use as a cinema, and was remodelled in the early 1920s. Eventually, the BBC leased the eastern part of the Palace for their TV studios, and built the transmitter mast. While the TV uses moved to White City in stages after WWII, the Open University remained on site until 1981, leaving after the 1980 fire which destroyed the Great Hall and the western part of the Palace apart from the Palm Court.
4. The Palace was restored 1980-88 by the Alexandra Palace Development team led by Dr Peter Smith, and is now used for large live music and sports events, as well as containing an Ice Rink. Parts of the Palace, including the Theatre and former BBC studios, remain unused and in near-derelict condition.

The Palace is listed Grade II due to: the historic interest as a rare survival of a large-scale Victorian exhibition and entertainment complex, and for the surviving BBC studios where the world’s first high definition television programme was transmitted in 1936;

also the complete set of Victorian stage machinery in the Theatre. Architectural interest is associated with the surviving Victorian fabric and internal spaces.

Section 2 investigates the Significance of the Building under a number of headings, summarised below:

1. **Historic Values:** The Palace is a rare survival of large scale Victorian project built for public entertainment and educational purposes. It houses surviving remnants of BBC occupancy from the 1930s, when the studio and tower were used for the world's first high definition television broadcast. The Victorian Theatre survives, albeit in near derelict condition, but does still contain the interesting stage and a fine set of modern stage machinery. (The Museum of London possesses a set of scene gloves from this Theatre). The Palace is a much loved and well-remembered part of the broad cultural life of the capital, and had, in addition, proven its usefulness in two World Wars.
2. **Site Significance:** The Palace is an unmissable London landmark on a prominent hilltop, high above north London. It sits within c196 acres of landscaped setting. This landscaped park is in large measure as it was set out in public ownership, and freely available for use and recreation. This public access is guaranteed under Act of Parliament. The Park is also listed Grade II on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens.
3. **Architectural Significance:** Alexandra Palace's architecture is important as an example of a Victorian Exhibition Hall (a "People's Palace") and as an example of the move in the later 1860s to 1880s hiding cast-iron framed buildings behind ornamentation. The survival of the fabric is patchy and this alone reduces the building's significance. This may well explain why the building is not listed at a higher grade under the National Listing framework. There are nearly half a million listed buildings in the United Kingdom, of which 94.5% are listed Grade II.
4. **Significant or Highly Significant areas of the Palace include:** External elevations and the BBC mast; Original structural walls; Internal spaces including: West Entrance, Palm Court, West Hall (Walls), West Corridor (Walls), Great Hall (Walls), Ice Rink (Walls), Ice Rink Foyer, Theatre Foyer, Theatre, BBC Studios A and B
5. **Areas of Limited Significance include:** Interior spaces at the Londesborough Room and Offices, Phoenix Bar and Palm Court Suite, Ice Rink Café, Rooms within NE, SE and NW Towers, BBC Rooms except Studios A and B, East Buildings, South Basements, Ceiling/Roof Structures and Floors to West Hall, West Corridor, Great Hall and Ice Rink.
6. **Area of Neutral Significance, or which are Detrimental include** the Service Yard, North Basements (both Floors), Served, Bars and WCs off the Great Hall, Panorama Room, SW Tower interior, and the infill to the Balcony and Verandah outside the BBC studios.

Section 3 investigates the Vulnerability of the Palace to change, and the Issues arising, summarised below:

1. Alexandra Palace has never been consistently well maintained, due to persistent financial difficulties since the date of its construction. Instead there have been stop gap solutions applied to various parts of the building, which have provided temporary relief at the expense of both aesthetic consistency and long-term financial planning.

This has been combined with major post-fire repairs in the 1980s which are now showing their age, and the abandonment of some parts of the Palace altogether.

2. The use of the building's occupied parts has developed to meet the changing expectations of popular leisure, as well as the perception (though not the actuality) that the Palace is difficult to reach. The original grand dining and banqueting rooms have been reduced to the Phoenix Bar (permanently open), the Ice Rink café, the Palace Suite, which is rather illogically placed in the basement, and various smaller bars which are open when events are taking place in the Great Hall and West Hall.
3. The 1980s Ice Rink is popular, profitable, and a worthy successor to the earlier roller skating rink.
4. The musical and sporting events which occur in the Great and West Halls suit the spaces in which they occur, and adequate support spaces exist. The present service yard would seem on first sight to be an extravagant use of space, but there are numerous advantages to being able to bring articulated lorries into the two halls.
5. The Theatre is derelict, and its design has never been satisfactory for audiences. The acoustics are better suited to concerts than plays. Meanwhile, the historically important stage machinery languishes. A revenue-positive, or at least neutral use for it must be found which will then establish the direction of its future repair. The adjoining Tower, Foyer and NE Pavilion provide support spaces which would also be useful.
6. The BBC Studios in the South East Wing are of great cultural significance, and there have been various suggestions as to how they might be presented as a museum. The difficulty has been in finding a way of integrating this with other uses in this area, since not all of the space would be needed for museum use.
7. The East Buildings are derelict, but retain in their layout the board room and clerks offices for the 1875 Palace. Ideally, they might regain this function – without a use, there is little incentive to repair them.
8. The Panorama Room is a tent which does not make use of the retained South West Tower and adjoining two-level arcade. A more ambitious solution is required here.
9. The Basements under the southern part of the Palace are also unused and thus vulnerable to decay. Again, a beneficial use is needed.
10. The external fabric as a whole, being exposed on a hilltop, is particularly vulnerable to driving rain and water penetration through the several acres of roof.
11. Issues of Conservation and repair are also addressed, in relation to the various materials of which the Palace is constructed; as a result of the changing legislation for Health and Safety, Energy efficiency, Disabled access, etc; and in relation to changing uses of the building.

Section 4 responds to the issues identified in the Vulnerability section, by setting out Policies for the future Management of Alexandra Palace. The policies responding to general repair and maintenance are standard good conservation practice, and as such do not require summarising here. Specific policies which identify the areas of the Palace and the level of alteration and change which they should be expected to accommodate, in view of their significance (see section 2), in order to meet any new use are appended:

4.5 Use Policies

4.5.1 Generally

Alexandra Palace should continue to keep its primary use public entertainment for sporting and musical spectator events, supported by suitable events for public participation (e.g. the existing Ice Rink), as well associated catering and other hospitality facilities.

4.5.2 Great Hall

The present use is suitable, but the Great Hall could be enhanced by:

- Improved acoustics, perhaps involving alteration to the fabric roof liner.
- Completing the enclosure to the Organ.
- Providing better control of daylight through the roof and upper windows on both sides of the hall.

4.5.3 West Hall; West Corridor and Associated Spaces

The present use is suitable.

4.5.4 Panorama Room, SW Tower and Adjoining Spaces

- i. The present use is a wasted opportunity; a new structure, the full height of the retained south elevation should be constructed to provide accommodation on two stories, perhaps with additional mezzanines. Banqueting, conference and an element of hotel use would be suitable.
- ii. Providing a fully beneficial use here would justify the improvement and continuing maintenance of this part of the building.

4.5.5 The West Entrance, Palm Court and Adjoining Spaces

These rooms provide the main entrance to the Palace, and the Palm Court should act as a foyer to various activities in the West Hall, Panorama Room and present Service Yard Areas.

- i. The Palm Court needs heavier use to feel properly occupied. At present, it achieves this only when a large scale event is in progress.

4.5.6 Service Yard and NW Tower Areas

- i. It seems a pity to give over a fair part of the ground floor to service functions.
- ii. The present north yard (and its basement access, with lifts), and the escape "bridge" from the north portico offer an opportunity to reconsider how the Great Hall and West Hall could be serviced, which might release the present Service Yard for a revenue raising activity.

4.5.7 Ice Rink and Adjoining Areas

- i. The present use is not threatening to the fabric of the building; it is profitable and should continue.

4.5.8 Theatre, NE Tower and Adjoining Spaces

- i. The acoustics of the room suggest (classical) concert use, if the Theatre were refurbished. This would also allow preservation of the historic stage machinery, which would not be required for actual regular use, though it could be presented from time to time.
- ii. The adjoining spaces would, if refurbished and remodelled, provide suitable accommodation for rehearsal and changing rooms and these might extend into the support spaces by the East Entrance.

4.5.9 **East Entrance and Ice Rink Foyer and Adjoining Areas**

- i. The ticketing and security booths in the Foyer should be removed, as should the mini golf and toddler circuits.
- ii. The space will serve as the Foyer for the Theatre/Concert Hall, as well as for the present BBC Studios area, and should be treated accordingly. At present, it is under-used.

4.5.10 **BBC Studios Area and SE Tower**

- i. The Studios A and B should be preserved, restored and open to the public.
- ii. The remaining spaces should be refurbished, where possible regaining the correct historic room proportions, for use as banqueting, conference or exhibition space, with associated support spaces.

4.5.11 **North Basements**

- i. In time, when the Panorama Room and/or BBC areas have been refurbished, the Palace Suite should be transferred and the space used for Great Hall support functions.

4.5.12 **South Basements**

- i. The present lack of use is not sustainable in the long term. Traditionally, kitchens were placed here to serve the dining facilities above, and such a use could be reconsidered.
- ii. It might also be beneficial to have a public route through the basement to link the east and west parts of the Palace together under the Great Hall.

4.5.13 **North Yard**

- i. The present use is unthreatening, and could be increased.
- ii. Alternatively, the main traffic route through the park, including the bus route, could be replanned to run through the North Yard, with bus stops at each end of the Palace. The section of road passing the south front of the Palace could be removed, allowing much better connection between the Palace and its Park.

Section 5, concerning the implementation of the plan, has not been included in the draft we have sent to you. We will write it when we have received feedback from you, the Trust and the other stakeholders, and have made any amendments and revisions to the facts set out in the plan as may arise in that process. At the end of the consultation process, when the way the policies we have proposed are to be enforced or otherwise acted upon has been agreed, and the document, including the section concerning implementation has been completed, the Conservation and Management Plan will be formally adopted by the Trust, and will be used to steer the future maintenance, use and any future alterations to Alexandra Palace.

The remaining sections give a detailed description of the building in section 6, the Gazetteer, and other supporting information, as well as references to other information about the building.