1851: or, The adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and family.

Special Collections featured item for October 2008 by Rebecca Jennings, Library Assistant.

Henry Mayhew and George Cruikshank. *1851: or, The adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and family who came up to London to "enjoy themselves", and to see the Great Exhibition*. London : George Newbold, [1851]

Item held in Great Exhibition Collection 08/07, University of Reading Special Collections Services.

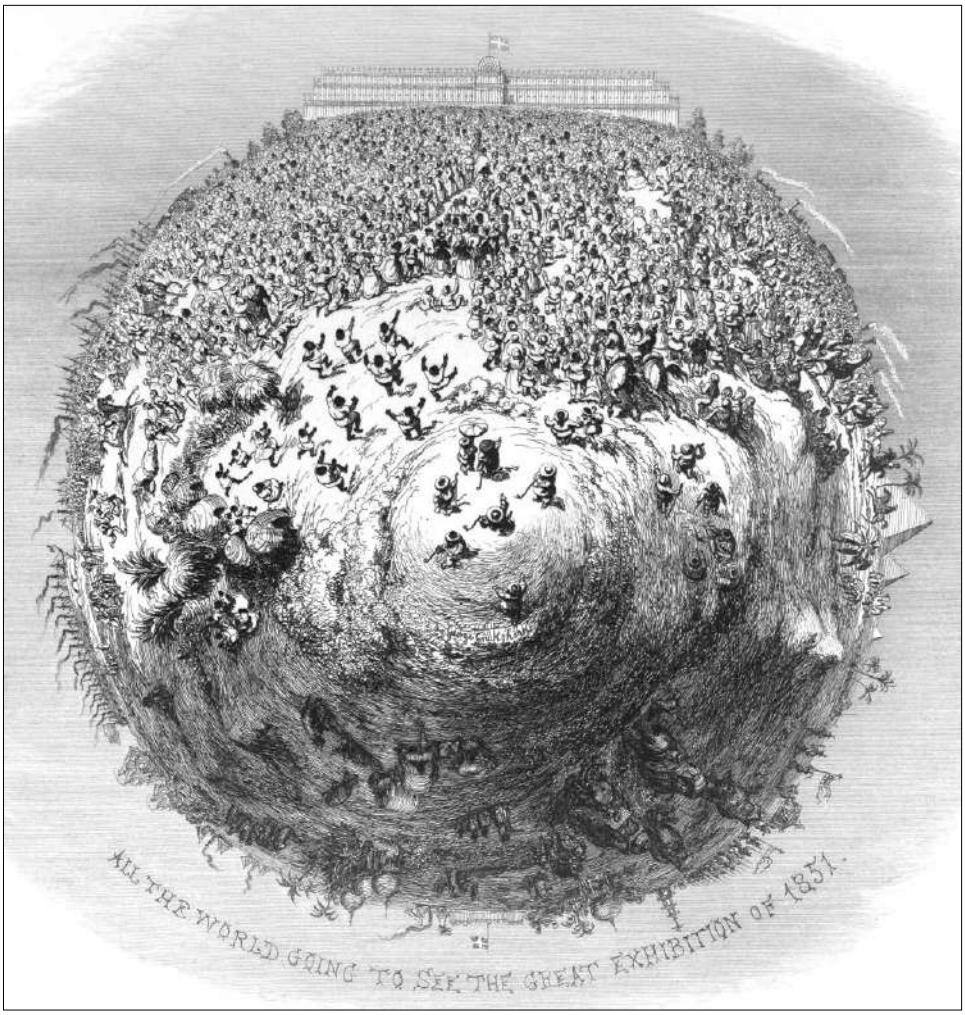
With anticipation rising over the construction of venues for the 2012 London Olympics, we can perhaps imagine the excitement in London in 1851 as Joseph Paxton's 'Crystal Palace' *[shown below]* was constructed in Hyde Park. An event such as the Great Exhibition, held in London from May to October of 1851, had never been seen in Britain before. This was an event that would showcase not only material from Britain, but from many different countries which most ordinary people could not even dream of visiting. However, more importantly, it was to be open to everyone, no matter what their class.

The Crystal Palace from the northeast
from Dickinson's *Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (1854).

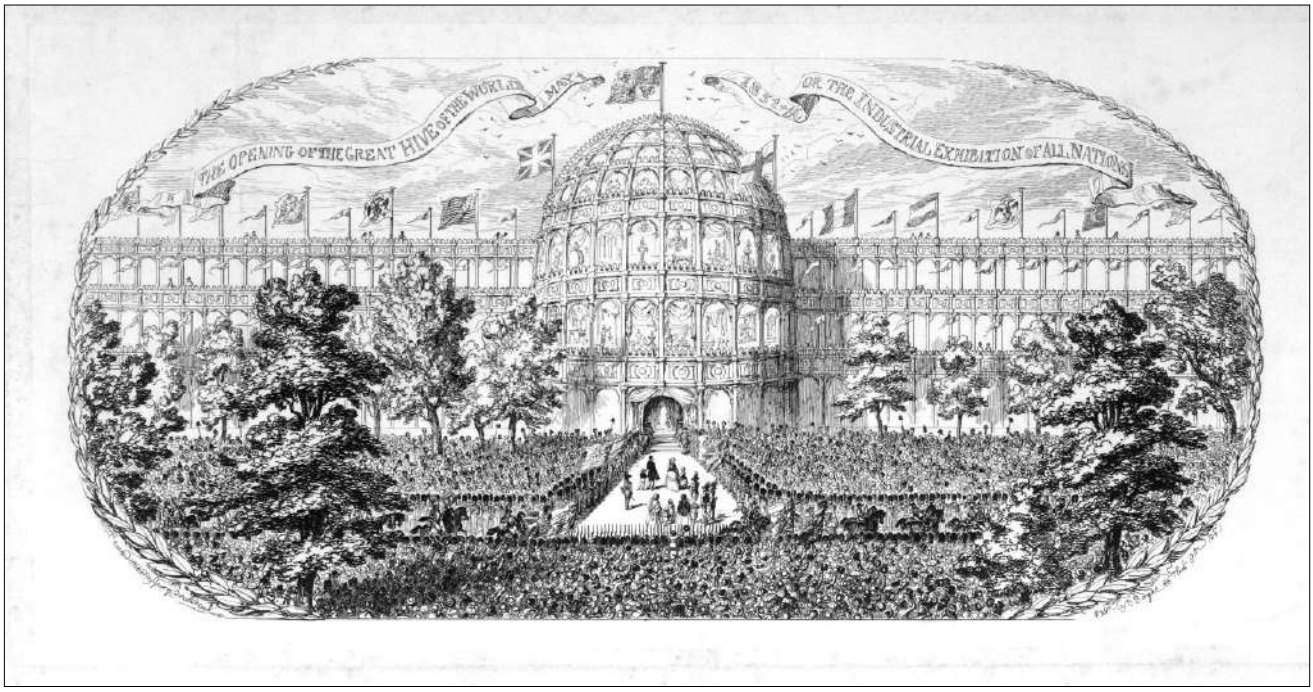
'The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations' was the brain child of Prince Albert and Henry Cole. Holding trade fairs was a well-established idea, but the Great Exhibition was a trade fair of previously unthought-of proportions. Half the space would be used to display items produced in Britain and her Empire, and the other half would contain exhibits of foreign goods, making it an international event. The location of Hyde Park was decided upon as being open and accessible, and the architect Joseph Paxton was assigned to design the building, which was dubbed the 'Crystal Palace' by Punch magazine. Despite objections to the building being put in one of London's finest parks, most people changed their minds upon seeing it completed. Queen Victoria herself described it as "one of the wonders of the world, which we English may indeed be proud of." [1]

The Exhibition inspired many publications at the time, including Henry Mayhew's comic novel *1851: or, The adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and family [title-page shown above]*. As the title of the novel suggests the story centres upon the Sandboys family as they attempt to travel from Cumberland to London to visit the Great Exhibition. Their way is constantly interrupted by problems, and Mr Sandboys only makes it to the Exhibition as it has just closed. It is primarily a humorous book full of misadventures, but it also contains some more serious descriptions of London and the Exhibition. Noted caricaturist George Cruikshank produced the illustrations for Mayhew's novel. These illustrations were

published by Bogue's of Fleet Street, London, who worked with both Cruikshank and Mayhew on several occasions. The University of Reading owns a portfolio of etchings of these illustrations which is also held in the Great Exhibition Collection. Cruikshank was born in London in 1792 where his father earned a living as a caricaturist. George followed in his footsteps and proved to be a success, providing sketches for children's games and books by 1803. His work became popular by 1811, especially his parodies of Napoleon and other contemporary political figures. He also contributed to more serious political pamphlets throughout his career. His most famous work didn't come until 1835 when he worked with Charles Dickens, drawing sketches for various stories, but most notably for the original publication of *Oliver Twist*. By 1851 Cruikshank's work had become less popular, but his sketches of the Great Exhibition are excellent and wonderfully animated examples of his work. Although created for a children's book, one can see Cruikshank's political interests creeping through, as he mainly focuses on the people who visited the Great Exhibition. In fact in some cases his sketches, whilst interesting, have little to do with the main story of the book.



The first of the sketches *[shown above]*, featured at the very beginning of the book, is very representative of the way in which many of the British saw the Great Exhibition, and indeed Britain itself. The Crystal Palace is situated at the top of a globe, indicating Britain's place in the world, with many people of all nations crowding towards it. Around the edges of the globe symbols of other cultures whose work was displayed at the Exhibition are visible. To the right of the picture, pyramids and people on camels represent visitors from Africa, and Asia is represented at the bottom by people on elephants and Indian-style buildings (however the Union Jack is flying on the buildings to indicate that it is under British rule). To the left, America is represented by ships bringing people to visit the exhibition. Other peoples are also represented in similarly stereotypical ways, with people from Turkey shown smoking hookahs, and Africans emerging from crude huts. Here Cruikshank seems to be mocking the view of many Britons that the Empire was dominant and superior to the rest of the world in the nineteenth century. While the Great Exhibition did showcase items from other parts of the world, it was for the most part a way of showing off items manufactured in Britain and other parts of her Empire. It is also true that people did visit the Exhibition from abroad, however not in the vast numbers indicated by the sketch. Although there are no figures for the numbers of foreigners who visited, the vast majority were from Britain.



As depicted in this second sketch by Cruikshank *[shown above]*, the Great Exhibition was opened by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on 1 May 1851. It was attended by over 25,000 people who gathered inside for the opening. Only those who had purchased season tickets (that is, the upper classes who could afford them) were permitted to attend the opening

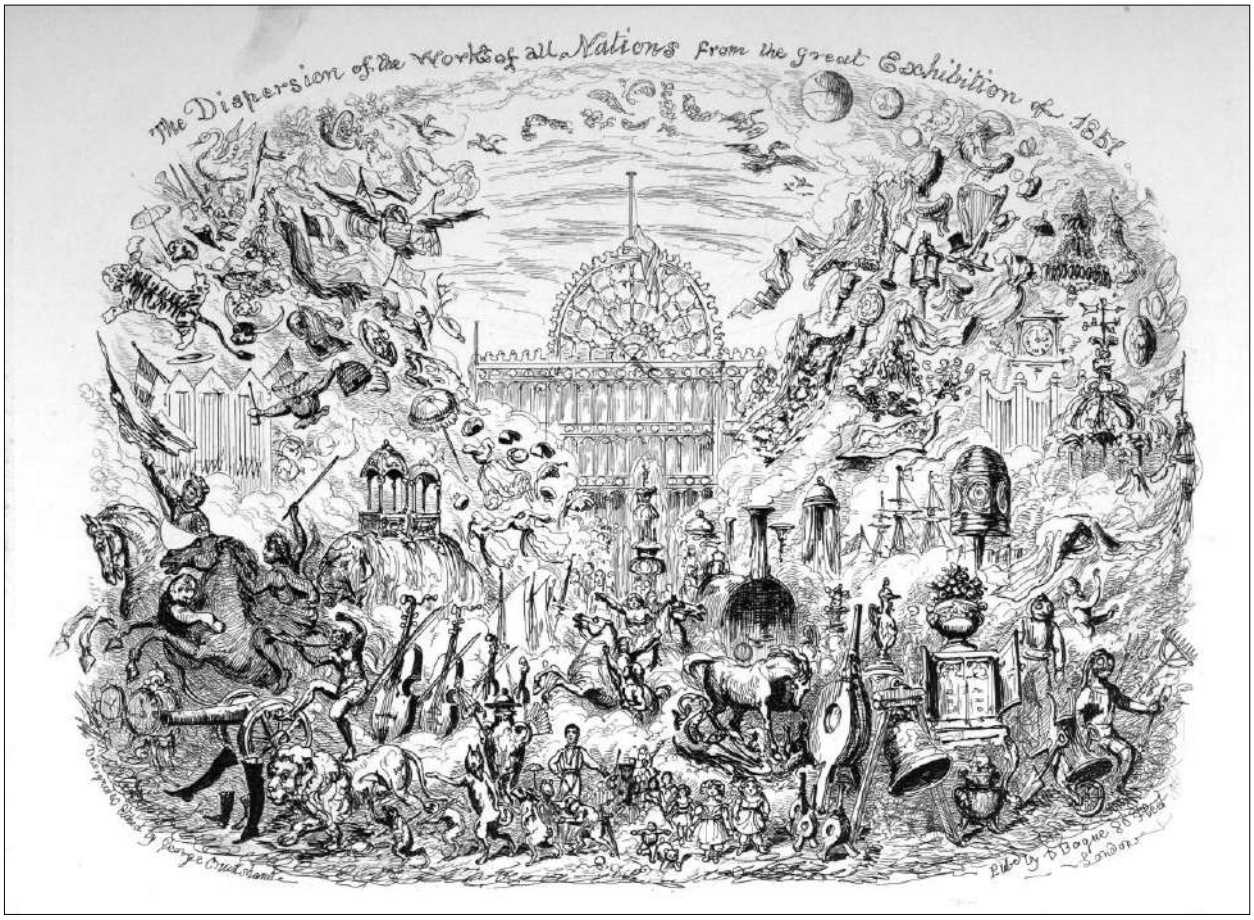
ceremony; however, many more people gathered outside to see the Royal Family. The sketch itself shows the arrival of the Queen as the royal party approach the entrance of the Crystal Palace. The crowd cheer the Royal Family and fly flags from various different nations. There had been great concerns about the crowds getting out of control, but as in the sketch, the people were well-behaved, and in the novel Mayhew describes that "for miles around all wore a holiday aspect".

Just as the Sandboys family did, many people of various classes travelled from all over Britain to visit the exhibition. Cruikshank's sketches of Manchester and London in 1851 are of course exaggerations of the situation. However, it has been said that the Great Exhibition marked the beginning of people in Britain travelling for leisure purposes. [2] Many people set up local clubs so that members could save up their money and then arrange excursions to the Exhibition as a group, thereby negotiating cheaper train fares and lodgings. Some working men's associations set up similar schemes, as did railway agents, including Thomas Cook, who later made a successful business from such excursions. In the above image Manchester is shown to be completely empty, and signs in shop windows indicate everyone is in London for the Great Exhibition.

The image of London shown above illustrates the fears that London would be overcrowded. Many were concerned about the number of people who would be staying in London during the exhibition, and fears of a working class uprising resulting from this were rife among the upper classes. The image depicts hoards of people on foot or in coaches heading towards Hyde Park for the Exhibition. Around the edges people are hanging out of windows, indicating that lodgings are packed full, and signs proclaim that the Exhibition is full or that people should "Pray go back! All roads leading to ye Exhibition are blocked". Signs of disorder can be seen in the picture with people shown drinking and climbing up lampposts. However, as with the grand opening, fears of disorder went unfounded.

Such fears were most prominent in the approach to the first of the 'Shilling days'. It had been decided that everyone, no matter what their class, should be able to visit the Great Exhibition. Consequently, from 26 May, the entrance price was reduced to one shilling from Mondays to Thursdays. As Cruikshank's sketch *[shown above]* illustrates, vast numbers of working class people were expected for the first of these Shilling days on Monday 26 May. The sketch reflects concerns that such people would not be able to behave properly, and extra barriers and policemen were put in place to stop any trouble. In the end far fewer people attended the Exhibition on the first shilling day than had been expected. As Henry Mayhew commented, they were probably "busy working for their bread". Those of the middle and upper classes probably stayed away for fear of working class mobs! Attendance gradually increased, especially over the summer, which was when most excursions had

been arranged for. By the end of the summer the Great Exhibition was welcoming more than one hundred thousand visitors each day.



In total, the Exhibition attracted over six million visitors from a variety of classes. The Exhibition was closed on 15 October 1851, and as Cruikshank's final sketch *[shown above]* for *1851: or, The adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and family* shows, the items on display were dispersed, many returning to the country of their origin. However, the Great Exhibition did leave a lasting legacy. The Crystal Palace itself was taken down in 1852 and rebuilt in a modified form at Sydenham. It remained there, continuing to provide a place of entertainment and exhibition for the people, until it burnt down in 1936. Surplus funds from the Great Exhibition project were used to promote science, art and industry across Britain, and also to buy 87 acres of land in South Kensington to house remaining exhibits. This area now houses three of London's biggest museums, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. The Great Exhibition also marked the beginnings of amusement for the masses, and people began to use Britain railways to travel for other excursions, to visit famous monuments, or take trips to the seaside. This marked a significant change in Britain by encouraging people of all classes to broaden their horizons. We can only hope that the London Olympics in 2012 will leave Britain with another such valuable legacy.

References

1. Gibbs-Smith, C.H. *The Great Exhibition of 1851*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1950, p. 17.
2. Auerbach, J.A. *The Great Exhibition of 1851: a nation on display*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 137.

Additional reading

- Purbeck, L. (ed.) *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Disciplinary Essays*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, **www.oxforddnb.com**, biographies of George Cruikshank and David Bogue.