



## THE BUILDING

A great Central Hall, dedicated to the promotion of Art and Science, was a key part of Prince Albert's vision for the South Kensington estate, which was to be developed on land purchased with the profits of the Great Exhibition of 1851. From the outset the Hall was intended to be a versatile building used not only for concerts but for exhibitions of art and of manufactured goods, and for scientific conferences and demonstrations. Its purpose was to enable the population at large to engage with the work of the surrounding museums and educational institutions.

Plans for the Hall fell into abeyance with Albert's premature death and the construction of what was to be called the Royal Albert Hall in his memory was due to the determination of Henry Cole, one of Albert's collaborators in the Great Exhibition and who was later to serve as the first director of the South Kensington museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). The design and robust structure of the Hall were inspired by Cole's visits to the ruined Roman Amphitheatres in the South of France and to his determination that the building should be placed in the hands of Royal Engineers as he distrusted architects. Detailed design of the building was started by Captain Francis Fowke and completed, following Fowke's death, by another engineer Lieutenant Colonel (subsequently General) Henry Darracott Scott.

The original intention that the Hall should accommodate 30,000 was, for financial and practical reasons, reduced to approximately 7,000. Modern Today's fire regulations have reduced that figure to around 5,500. Much of the money originally intended for the construction was diverted to the building of the Albert Memorial and work on the Great Hall was further delayed while Cole raised the necessary money by selling "permanent"

seats in the Hall for £100 each. The Hall was designed to connect at its South End a large glass conservatory, 265 feet long and 75 feet high, which overlooked the gardens of the Royal Horticultural Society which stretched down to the Cromwell Road. The conservatory itself was flanked by two-storey brick and stone arcades, one of which connected to the underground tunnel from the newly opened metropolitan railway station at South Kensington. These arcades and the conservatory contained restaurants and other public spaces and provided the principal access (except for the wealthy who arrived by carriage) to the Hall itself.

Preliminary work on the Hall by the contractors Lucas Brothers started in April 1867 and the foundation stone was laid the following month by Queen Victoria.

The heart of the Hall is the vast internal auditorium 185 feet wide by 219 feet long covered by a glazed dome constructed of wrought iron girders which, at the time of its construction, was credited as the largest structure of its kind in the world. Other notable features included the great Henry Willis Organ also, at the time; the largest in the world although, between 1921 - 1933 it was substantially modified and enlarged by the Durham-based organ firm of Harrisons. The distinctive exterior of the Hall, inspired by the architecture of Northern Italy, was built from some 6 million red bricks and eighty thousand blocks of decorative terracotta. Surmounting the exterior walls and above the balustraded smoking gallery, runs a continuous 800 foot long terracotta frieze composed of allegorical groups of figures engaged in a range of artistic endeavours, crafts, scientific and other cultural pursuits. Above the frieze runs the following text:

“This Hall was erected for the advancement of the Arts and Sciences and works of industry of all nations in fulfilment of the intention of Albert Prince Consort. The

site was purchased with the proceeds of the Great Exhibition of the year MDCCCLI. The first stone of the Hall was laid by Her Majesty Queen Victoria on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of May MDCCCLXVII and was opened by Her Majesty the 29<sup>th</sup> day of March in the year MDCCCLXXI. Thine O Lord is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine. The wise and their works are in the hand of God. Glory be to God on high and on earth peace.”

When Queen Victoria opened the Hall she was so overcome by emotion that the Prince of Wales had to speak in her place and her only recorded comment on the Hall was that it reminded her of the British constitution. Shortage of time and money meant that, at the opening, there was little of the interior decorative detail that we see today and rush matting covered the floors.

A significant echo was immediately apparent, occasioned by the vast enclosed space and the reflection of sound from interior glass roof above. Early attempts to cure the troublesome acoustic included the suspension of a canvas velarium, or awning, below the inner dome, which had the added advantage of protecting the occupants from the sun. In 1949 the velarium was removed and the glass of the inner dome replaced by the present aluminium surfaces containing absorbent material. Of equal importance to finally eliminating the echo was the suspension from the roof of the acoustic saucers designed by Ken Shearer of the Acoustical Investigation and Research Organisation Ltd in 1968/69 which provided a much earlier reflection of sound and so reduced the reverberation time. Further improvements of the acoustics and the positioning of these saucers were undertaken as a result of detailed study during the period 1998-2003 and as part of major lottery-funded refurbishment and development of the Hall.

There have been many other modifications to the building since its opening including the replacement of the hazardous gas lighting by electricity in 1888 and significantly, the demolition in 1899 of the Grand Conservatory immediately to the South of the Hall when the Royal Horticultural Society, to whom it belonged, moved to Wisley. As a result space had to be found within the Hall for the public foyer space, lavatories, restaurants, tearooms and cloakrooms that had been previously housed in the conservatory and the adjoining arcades. Accommodating the requirements of over 5,000 audience within a building never designed for this purpose created a major challenge.

This challenge, and need to meet the growing demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century shows and performers, prompted by far the most significant programme of interventions which was carried out between 1996 and 2004 at a cost of £69.1 million. The key to this Development Programme, which affected virtually every part of the building, was the excavation of a three and a half storey basement below the steps and gardens that lie to the South of the Hall (and which were purchased by the Hall in April 1993). This excavation now houses a major loading bay whereby scenery, sound and lighting equipment for a succession of performers can be loaded in from trucks underground and out of sight and brought up into the auditorium on lifts. The excavation also provided space for performers' dressing rooms previously housed under the Stalls seating. This liberated two arena foyers for use by audiences. Additional bars and lavatories were created and restaurant provision expanded. New function rooms were created at Grand Tier level and administrative offices and other non-public space concentrated behind the stage and organ. With the agreement of Westminster City Council, the road which previously encircled the Hall was stopped up, enabling the construction in traditional materials of an entirely new South Porch providing a day-time entrance to the building

where, 130 years before the conservatory has once stood. Fresh air ventilation was introduced to the auditorium, partially recreating a system designed by the Victorians that had fallen into disuse and rendered inoperative by fire regulations and other changes. The Hall's famous pipe organ was completely rebuilt and refurbished, new decorative schemes and lighting introduced in public areas and a number of investments made to support the staging and broadcast of the shows themselves.

As a Grade One Listed building every structural change had to be approved by English Heritage. Most remarkable of all, perhaps, is that this extensive programme of work was carried out whilst the Hall remained operational. It closed for just two periods of four weeks each so that seating could be replaced at Circle level and subsequently in the Stalls. Audience capacity was increased by the addition of an extra row in the Stalls.

The development of buildings such as the Royal Albert Hall is a continuing process. In 2008 one of two restaurants at Circle level was completely remodelled and in 2009 the space above the West Porch that originally housed the West Theatre, the home for many years of the Central School of Speech and Drama where, among others, Sir Laurence Olivier, Peggy Aschcoft and Dame Judi Dench trained as actors, will be converted to provide multi-use space for small-scale performance. As well as music recitals, lectures and poetry readings and opportunities for up and coming artists who could not yet aspire to the play the main auditorium, this space will also be used by children and adults participating in the Hall's important Learning and Participation programme. Other plans currently being developed include significant investments to further improve ventilation of the auditorium, to improve the energy efficiency of the building, to upgrade bars and to extend catering and hospitality facilities both for the public and for the performers backstage.