A return to Crystal Palace Station

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Introduction

Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) was commissioned by Transport for London to analyse and record the Grade II listed, Crystal Palace Low Level Station at Crystal Palace Station Road, London SE19 (National Grid Reference TQ 534123 170548; site code CYX08) (Fig. 1). The survey took place in April 2009 and incorporated work undertaken by MOLA Standing Buildings, Geomatics and Photography teams. Areas within the building and at platform level that were to be altered or demolished were identified and recorded with measured sketches, electronic survey and photographs. Along with the recording of these specific areas a wider view of the fabric of the whole building was undertaken. This fieldwork was combined with documentary archive research into the building's history, the railway companies involved in the development of links to the Crystal Palace and the history of the Palace itself to provide a comprehensive overview of the history and development of Crystal Palace Station. Understandably, Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace attracted much interest during its 82-year life from photographers, journalists and critics, and as a result it is the predominant subject in the archive material, with the station receiving little attention. Yet today the station building is our only surviving link with the Crystal Palace. The Victorian entrance building at the Low Level Station closed in 1986, a fading remnant of the glory days of the Crystal Palace with which its fortunes were closely tied. A new refurbishment scheme will reopen the ticket hall, giving the ornate building a new lease of life (Fig. 2). This article examines the history of the building from its beginnings as the first showpiece stop for visitors to the Crystal Palace through its slow decline and the present plans for its refurbishment.

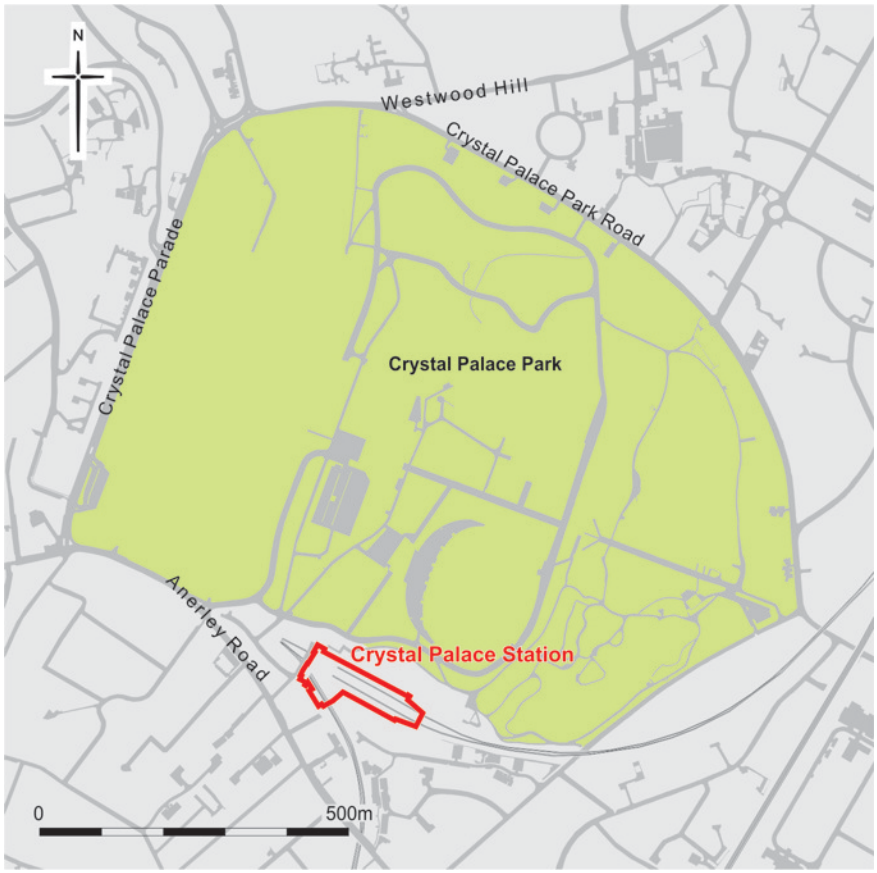

Fig. 1: site location

Fig. 2: the proposed refurbishment scheme for the reused ticket hall at Crystal Palace

The proposed development

The present station entrance building dates from 1877, replacing a wooden station which opened on the site in 1854 to serve the large number of visitors who came to visit the Crystal Palace, which was relocated from Hyde Park to Sydenham Hill the same year.

Fig. 3: the station entrance building, with the 1980s 'birdcage', looking north

However, in the 1980s the station building was closed to the public and a new aluminium and glass entrance hall, along with a single-storey brick ticket office were built adjacent to the station to the south (Fig. 3). The plans for the station refurbishment will see the reopening and reuse of the 1870s station building and its impressive booking hall, whilst the 1980s steel and glass structure (known by the nick-name 'the birdcage'), will be demolished. Some elements, such as internal walls and fireplaces in the 1870s building and at platform level, will also be demolished or altered before refurbishment as part of the extension of the London Overground.

Historical background

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851 was a Victorian innovation, the first international exhibition of its kind. Housed in a remarkable, prefabricated iron and glass hall in Hyde Park, the exhibition lasted for four summer months, but the hall, quickly nick-named the 'Crystal Palace' seemed too good to lose.

The decision by Parliament in 1852 to dismantle the Crystal Palace began a scramble between rival railway lines of the south-east. Within two weeks a new consortium, the Crystal Palace Company, had formed and paid £70,000 in cash for the building.[1] The new company beat rival plans to move the Palace to Kew, Chiswick or Battersea in favour of Sydenham Hill overlooking south London. The chairman, Samuel Lang, had made a career in politics, railways and finance, joining the government's Railway Commission in 1845. He had also been the chairman and managing director of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR) since 1848 and was overseeing a significant expansion in the railway company, which saw passenger numbers double in the 1850s.

The directors of the Crystal Palace Company also included Frances Fuller, who had been the surveyor of the original Palace building and, as a member of the Society of Arts, active in setting up the exhibition with Prince Albert; Fuller was also a surveyor for the LBSCR. The plans were not universally popular, with critics claiming that the railway company was motivated by gain rather than the advancement of the arts, sciences and manufacturing, which was the original purpose of the Great Exhibition, and an unsafe investment for shareholders.

Despite the critics, the Crystal Palace Company promised that the fountains at Sydenham would rival Versailles and special trains would carry crowds of visitors, similar to the popular lines between Paris and Versailles. The site proposed and bought by the company at Sydenham Hill lay on a large private estate, owned by another of the directors of the LBSCR, Leo Schuster.

It becomes easy to appreciate the importance of the station at Crystal Palace when the interests of the Crystal Palace Company are considered; indeed it could be argued that the railway was a fundamental reason for the choice of Sydenham as a new location for the Crystal Palace.

The station opens

The relocated and enlarged Crystal Palace was opened to the public in 1854. In the same year a new Crystal Palace Railway Station adjacent to the grounds to the south-east of the Palace opened on a new line built by the LBSCR, which formed a branch from Sydenham Station. The design, by the

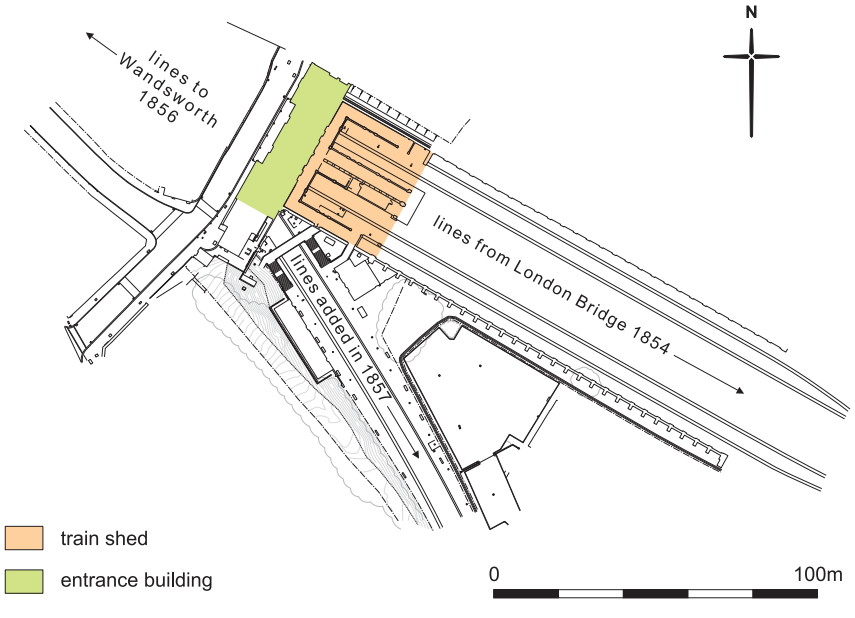

Fig. 4: overall site plan

engineer Jacob Hood, was intended to handle the large volume of visitors expected to the Palace, and comprised a long train shed set in a cutting, and an entrance building at ground level to the north, prefiguring the layout of the present station (Fig. 4). The train shed contained four platforms, each with a set of stairs up to the ground-level entrance building at the west end of the station. Rooms at platform level were situated beneath the stairs, providing gentlemen's lavatories and storage space (Fig. 5). The western end of the train shed, over the stairs and abutting the entrance building, was much taller than the eastern section over the greater part of the platform, although both the western and eastern sections were roofed. The taller western portion of the original train shed remains roofed today, while the rest is unroofed and only the outer walls remain.

Fig. 5: the northernmost platform in the train shed, looking west; the tunnel passes below the entrance building and areas below the stairs provided gentlemen's lavatories and storage space

Fig. 6: the station from the west, showing the tunnel beneath and the line to Wandsworth

The entire train shed formerly featured an island platform with an east–to–west spine wall, solid at platform level in the western portion, but arcaded within the long eastern portion. However, the openings of the arcade were closed by metal railings in order to maintain the division of the island platform along its entire length.

From our survey of the entrance building and documentary research it seems that the vaulting and tunnels were there from the first to allow trains to pass below the entrance building and continue into a tunnel to the north-west (Fig. 6). This anticipated the extension of the London Bridge line to Wandsworth, opened by the West London and Crystal Palace Railway (WLCPR) in 1856, two years after the station's opening. The two lines on either side of the central island platform were thus continued beneath the station towards Wandsworth in 1856. Two other lines, running up to platforms alongside the north and south walls of the train shed, terminated at Crystal Palace. These were presumably in order to cope with large crowds coming from London Bridge during special events at the Palace. Return services to Crystal Palace station ran from London Bridge via Sydenham and could include the variable entrance charge to Crystal Palace at a total cost ranging from 2s 6d for 3rd-class travel on a cheap 'one

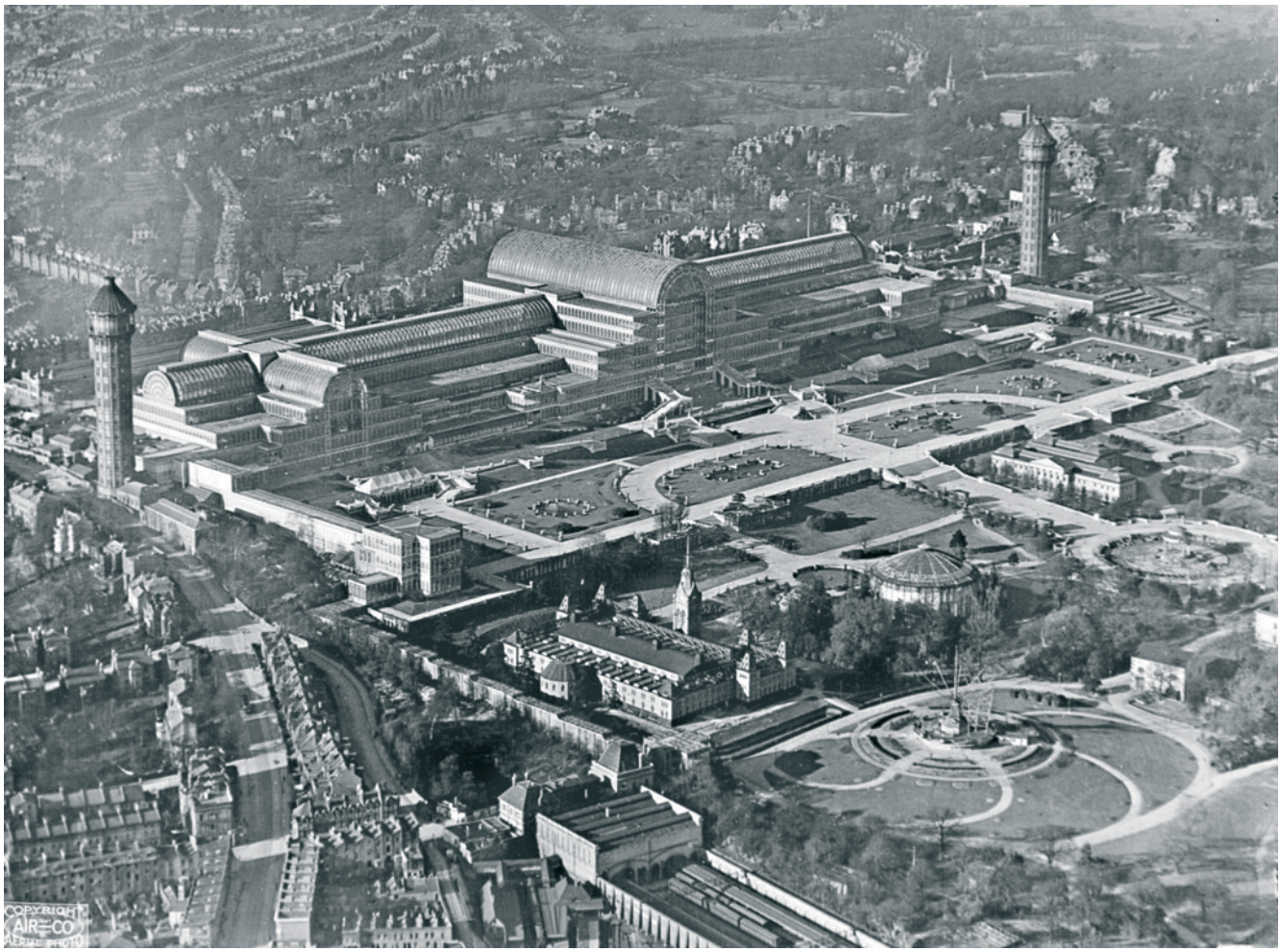

Fig. 7: an aerial photograph taken *c.* 1930, with the station at the bottom of the picture; the railway colonnade can be seen between the station and the south wing of the Palace

shilling day', to 6s 0d for 1st-class travel on a peak 'five shilling day'.[2]

Two further lines and platforms, complete with a footbridge, were added to the south of the train shed by the WLCPR in 1857. These lines also passed beneath the station entrance building, forming a direct line between Croydon, Crystal Palace and Wandsworth. The WLCPR lines were at first leased and then bought, by the LBSCR, in 1860.

This first phase of the building is poorly documented. An article published in *The Builder* in May 1877 describes the original entrance building and ticket hall as being of "timber construction". Delamotte's plan of Crystal Palace that appeared in the 1854 guide shows that the long and narrow south wing of the Palace terminated in a building labelled as "entrance from station", situated some 200m north of the station.[8] The station was connected to this entrance by a glass-roofed brick walkway called the "Railway Colonnade" in the 1854 guide, enabling passengers to take a direct route from the station under cover, into the south wing of the Palace. The railway colonnade can be seen in the aerial photograph *c.* 1930 (Fig. 7**).**

The LBSCR had an unopposed monopoly on rail travel to the new Crystal Palace until 1865, when a subsidiary of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway, named the Crystal Palace and South London Junction Railway[3] opened a second station, much closer to the Palace itself on its western side. The new station was called the 'Crystal Palace High Level Station', the LBSCR station becoming the 'Low Level Station'. An impressive brick and tile vaulted subway that ran beneath Crystal Palace Parade and connected the High Level Station to the Palace, is all that remains of this second station today, as it closed in 1954 and was demolished in the 1960s. However, when it opened much was made of the ease with which both 1st- and 2nd-class passengers could alight and proceed to the Palace, when compared to the "*crush and confusion that usually occur on crowded days*",[4] the long ascent up the glazed walkway from the Low Level Station was also avoided.

By the 1870s the numbers of visitors to the Crystal Palace had begun to decline and in 1877, at a Mansion House meeting, Frances Fuller announced a programme of regeneration for Crystal Palace, with a £2 million investment. It was after that that the existing entrance building to the Low Level Station was built, designed by Frederick Dale Bannister and Whitney Mannering, LBSCR engineers, which replaced the timber structure of 1854.[5]

The layout of the 1877 station entrance building

Externally the 1877 building took the form of a central hall, with a two-storey pavilion at both the north and south ends (Fig. 8). A large *porte-cochère* or canopy extended over the width of the

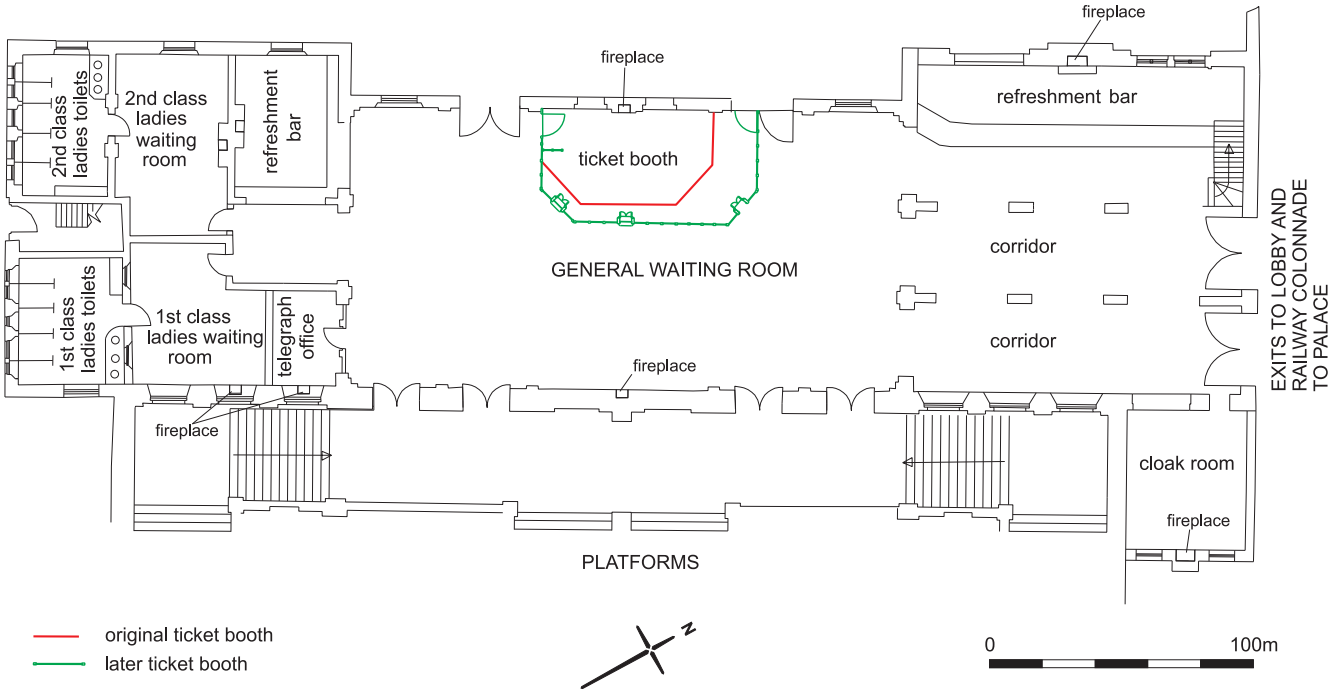

Fig. 8: the internal layout of the station entrance building, according to the 1875 architectural plans

approach road to the west (removed in the late 1960s and replaced in the 1980s with a smaller equivalent). Yellow stock London bricks were used in Flemish bond with red brick string-courses and sandstone dressings (Fig. 9). Each pavilion was divided internally into smaller rooms on both the ground and first floors. But there was no direct access between the two pavilions above ground level.

Both north and south pavilions are ornamented with stone cornices and string courses, Corinthian-style brackets and stone window surrounds, complete with Corinthian capitals and green marble roundels. The north pavilion is the larger of the two with a mansard roof (a recent replacement for the original, removed in 1976).

Architectural plans dated 1875 at the Network Rail Archive, York, show the internal layout and intended functions of the rooms of the entrance building (Fig. 8), although it seems that slight changes were made to the design during construction. The ground floor of the north pavilion contained a refreshment room with a long bar and a staircase leading up to a first-floor dining room. Adjacent to the ground-floor refreshment room was a sloping double corridor that led crowds to and from the ticket hall or general waiting room (Fig. 10), via a cloakroom (no longer extant), and through north-facing double doors to a lobby and then through the colonnade up to the Palace itself. The first-floor dining room in the north pavilion came with a kitchen, scullery, larder, and caretaker's bedroom, while the basement vaults contained beer and wine cellars.

At first glance it seems that the ground floor of the north pavilion and the broad double corridor acted as a funnel, moving large numbers of visitors swiftly into and out of the link to Crystal Palace; in reality the arrangements do not seem to have favoured efficiency and speed. The cloakroom, which would need to be accessed when both coming and going by those dining upstairs, was placed in the corner of the corridor nearest the doors to the Crystal Palace link, thus preventing the corridor from being strictly divided into traffic lanes. Also, the refreshment bar was oriented to attract customers as they passed by in either direction. In addition, there was a second refreshment area to the south, better placed to serve travellers in the general waiting room (Fig. 11). These

Fig. 9: the station entrance building, looking south east, with the north pavilion in the foreground

Fig. 10: the double corridor that led to the railway colonnade and up to the Palace, looking north, with the refreshment room on the left

arrangements give the impression of a place designed (consciously or not) to encourage milling about and spending money in the station, rather than any attempt to facilitate rapid movement between Crystal Palace and the trains.

The ground floor of the south pavilion was divided into spaces including the second, smaller refreshment room, separate 1st- and 2nd-class ladies' waiting rooms, both with their own lavatories, and a telegraph room. As for the smaller refreshment room, the public would order and pay for their refreshments while standing in the general waiting room or ticket hall, being served over counters, whilst the room itself was only accessible to staff. The first floor of the south pavilion contained an apartment for the station master and his family, accessible only from outside, by a single door in the south wall of the building.

A fireplace was included in the centre of each long wall of the ticket hall, that to the east in the public area of the hall being much larger and more elaborate than the other to the west; this public fireplace has been removed, possibly during the 1980s refurbishment. The smaller one to the west was inside a timber ticket office against the west wall (Fig. 12). This office was constructed of a timber frame, with panels of angled planks forming a herringbone pattern. It survived in very good condition, complete with internal counters and drawers and three hatches through which passengers bought tickets. The booth replaced a slightly smaller structure, which had apparently been original to the 1877 building, but the exact date of the later booth could not be ascertained. However, it is known that the ticket booth was originally painted dark green to match the usual livery of southern railways and the LBSCR.[6] At the time of writing, efforts are being made to find a railway society or museum interested in salvaging this small piece of railway history.

The ladies' waiting rooms both had fireplaces, that in the 1st-class waiting room being curiously situated within a thick external wall directly beneath a window, resulting in an angled flue taking smoke up a chimney between two windows.

During the survey we noted in this room a possible former external wall of the earlier 1854 station, reused as an internal wall (Fig. 13). Its greater thickness, and window reveals on the north face, plus the fact that it is in line with the south wall of the train shed, certainly suggest it was once an external wall. It was built of brick, however, rather than the timber suggested by the brief description in *The Builder* in 1877.

In 1905 the roof of the train shed was replaced, and the island platform and spine wall were removed. The roof over the other platforms was removed and replaced by a separate canopy over each platform. A general decline in numbers of visitors to the Palace and its sale later in 1911 coincided with these changes and the reduction in the number of platforms at the station reflects this downturn. By the 1930s the Palace had become considerably rundown, with peeling paint, rusty metalwork, eroded stone and idle fountains.[1] It was destroyed in a spectacular fire on the night of 30 November 1936.

Decline and regeneration

Over the next few decades the station too became increasingly run down. Despite bomb damage during World

Fig. 11: the second refreshment room in the general waiting room, looking south-west

War II,[8] the station continued to operate. The remains of the railway colonnade, perhaps the last traces of the Crystal Palace itself, were demolished in the 1960s, as was the wide *porte-cochère*. In 1973 the building was listed Grade II, and the following year the large mansard roof over the north pavilion was removed as it had become severely dilapidated. In 1986 the entrance building was closed to the public after a new glazed ticket hall, evoking the end profile of the nave and transepts Crystal Palace, along with a small brick ticket office, were built abutting the 1877 building to the south.

In 2002 the mansard roof was reinstated and a smaller front canopy added, much smaller than the original; the latter is in modern materials and helps to improve the façade, but seems a pale imitation of the original. Since the entrance building closed in 1986 it has remained unused except for storage. The proposed redevelopment will see the demolition of the 1980s glazed ticket hall and refurbishment of the interior of the 1877 entrance hall, which will re-establish the station as a working railway building, without a doubt the best way of ensuring its continued upkeep and survival.

Fig. 12: the ticket booth and hall with ornate arched roof beams, looking north

Fig. 13: the south wall of the 1st-class ladies waiting room, showing the thicker wall with revealed windows, possibly a former external wall to the original 1854 station

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