ALEXANDRA PALACE, LONDON

The first Alexandra Palace opened May 1873 and was destroyed by fire June 1873
(Pictures from “A Palace of the People,” The Alexandra Palace & Park Trust, undated)

The New Alexandra Palace, Muswell Hill, London, 1873-75
Architect John Johnson

As the population of London increased rapidly during the mid-19th century, there arose a need to provide open spaces with appropriate buildings for the purposes of mass recreation and entertainment. In one such venture, a company was formed (1865) to acquire land at Muswell Hill, a site dominating North London and affording spectacular views. Just as the Hyde Park’s Crystal Palace (1851) had been re-erected at Sydenham, so it was decided to purchase portions of the South Kensington International Exhibition structure (1862) and include them in a new building at Muswell Hill (this included the world’s then largest dome), naming the building the Alexandra Palace, after the Princess of Wales, the Danish bride of the future King Edward VII.

This “Palace of the People,” designed by Alfred Meeson (architect of the 1862 Exhibition building) and described elsewhere [PP. 2-9] was opened by Queen Victoria on her birthday (24 May 1873), but only a few days later, “about midday on 9 June, as a result of a fire accidentally caused by a plumber repairing the dome, the building was burnt to the ground, leaving a gutted ruin and a tangled heap of misshapen lengths of ironwork.”

Despite financial difficulties, the Directors, encouraged by the large attendances in the few days the building had been open, decided immediately to rebuild. This time the architect chosen was John Johnson (who had been in partnership with Meeson) and he produced a significantly different design. A description in a contemporary account reads:

“The (New) Palace....comprises a rectangular building complex 898 feet long and 425 feet wide. It has a built up area of 7.4 acres. The high five-storey central hall rises in the middle and occupies the whole width of the building transversely from north to south. Two large open courtyards with fountains and decorative gardens adjoin the central hall on both sides, along the main axis. Elongated galleries for exhibition purposes adjoin these courtyards on the north side, and next to these are the concert hall on one side of the centre and the theatre on the other side...” [Handbuch der Architektur, Durm & Ende, 4, part IV, 1885, 143-5]

It took just under two years to design and build the New Alexandra Palace (opened 1st May 1875).

The opening of the first Alexandra Palace on 24 May 1873
The Alexandra Palace Fire, 9 June 1873
A review of the new building [TB.1874/688-9] credits Messrs Kelk & Lucas (contractor), Messrs Handyside & Co of Derby (cast iron), Staveley Works of Staffordshire (wrought iron) and Wilson W Phipson (heating by ‘hot water’). The details of Phipson’s system are unknown.

But the new venture had been over-ambitious and the company soon went bankrupt (1877). After more troubles, an Act of Parliament (1900) set up a Board of Trustees to preserve the Palace and the Park ‘‘for the free use and recreation of the public for ever.” [PP, 12-16] Later (2 November 1936), the BBC launched the first public television service from a transmitter mast on the south-east tower. After a long period of neglect, during and after the Second World War, ownership passed to the Borough of Haringey (January 1980), but again the Palace Great Hall suffered a catastrophic fire (9 July 1980). It has now been once again rebuilt and restored (second phase completed June 1990). As a pioneer in the field of heating and ventilating, Phipson would have been proud that the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers chose Alexandra Palace as the venue for their Centenary Gala & Banquet (6 October 1997).

The Second Alexandra Palace, 1875
The opening of the second Alexandra Palace, 1 May 1875

Picnic in the Park
Plan of Alexandra Palace from a German Handbook of 1885