THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM
LONDON

The South Kensington Museum, Lecture Theatre Building 1864, now part of the V&A
(“Imperial London,” M H Port, 1995)

South Kensington Museum (Competition), London, 1891
Architect Sir Aston Webb

Phipson wrote to Aston Webb in connection with the proposed heating, ventilation and lighting of a building
referred to only as the “SKM Competition.” [PC/44, 8 June 1891] His suggested scheme covered steam boilers,
heating and ventilation and electric lighting. His design included a 6 feet square underground tunnel running
the length of the building containing all service pipes, and equipped with “air propellers” to draw fresh air into the
tunnel from a central tower. This fresh air would then have been distributed through vertical shafts to be supplied
to “the Courts and Galleries.” The vertical shafts would have been fitted with local heaters, Phipson obviously
being determined not to repeat the mistakes made at Glasgow University (Section 3.2). He proposed that a
system of outlets, without the use of fans, would cater for exhaust air removal. Though not specifically detailed,
Phipson obviously intended to use steam-driven electricity generators and “utilise the exhaust steam from the
Electric Plant.”

After many years of indecision, the Government finally (1890) bowed to pressure from the Department of
Science and Art, and authorised the completion of the South Kensington Museum as it was then called (more
often irreverently referred to as the Brompton Boilers.) A limited competition of invited architects was decided
upon, four chosen by the First Commissioner and four by the RIBA. Alfred Waterhouse, at that time President of
the RIBA, was appointed to the judging panel as a “professional assessor.” The final entrants comprised: Aston
Webb, Deane, Collcut, Jackson, Emerson, Belcher and Young. [IL, 305, note 72] The winner was Aston Webb,
though the Architect [IL,186] wrote that “John Belcher’s design had ‘the most satisfying dignity.’” The actual
work was postponed for many years. Webb’s design, for what was to become the Victoria & Albert Museum,
was greatly modified before and during execution (1899–1909).

Text extract from “Wilson Weatherley Phipson:
Victorian Engineer Extraordinary, 1838-91,” Brian Roberts, 2006
Site Meeting at the Museum, c.1864
From the left: Henry Cole (Secretary Dept Science & Art), Captain Fowke RE (Architect), Godfrey Sykes (Architectural detail designer) and (?) John Liddell (Draughtsman) (From Port)
Purpose made column radiator c.1900
(“Then & Now,” The Building Services Engineer, April 1977)
Cast-iron column radiator, photograph from 1930’s (“Then & Now”)
One of two 14 ft paddle-blade ventilation fans, photograph from the 1930s (“Then & Now”)