

## The British Empire Exhibition, 1924/25

The event which probably had the most important effect on Wembley's history was the British Empire Exhibition of 1924/25. The idea for a great exhibition, to show off the industry and natural resources of the British Empire, was first suggested before the First World War. In 1919 the Prince of Wales agreed to be President of the organising committee for an exhibition whose aim was '... to enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground and learn to know each other.' By 1921 the former pleasure grounds at Wembley Park had been chosen as the place to hold it, within easy reach of Central London and with a good railway service.

A colour illustration of the India Pavilion, from the lakeside gardens, in 1925 >



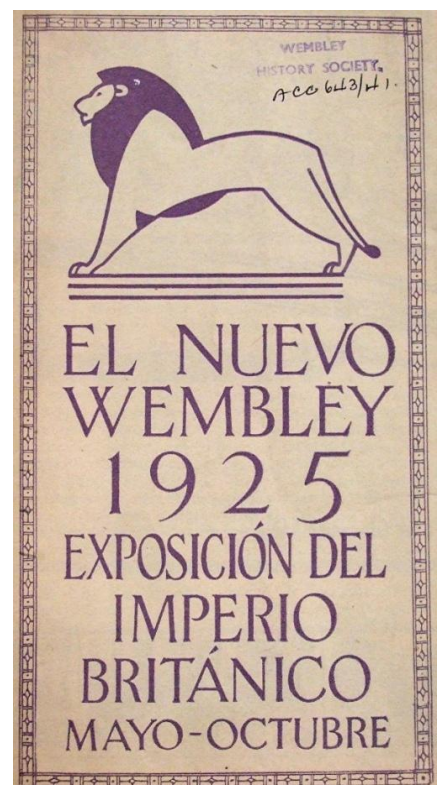
The Prince was keen that the scheme should include 'a great national sports ground', so work began on the Empire Stadium in January 1922. Local roads were made wider, and extra platforms were added at Wembley Park station. The concrete stadium was finished in time for the F.A. Cup Final in April 1923, but building the rest of the site took longer. It was not until 23 April 1924 that King George V came to Wembley to announce: 'I declare this Exhibition open', in the first ever radio broadcast by a British monarch, and visitors began to flock to the exhibition from all over the country, and around the world.



< A 1924 leaflet advertising the Exhibition,

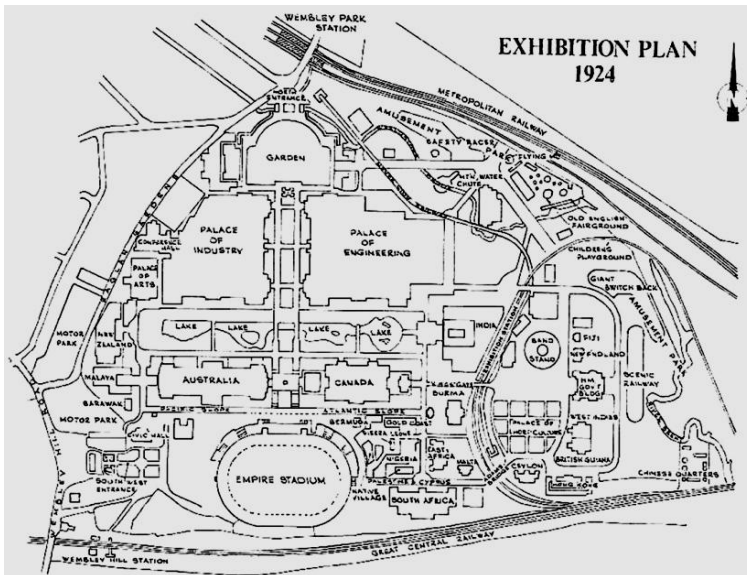
and the 1925 edition (Spanish version) >

[Source for all images:  
Brent Archives –  
Wembley History Society Collection]



The Exhibition included huge “Palaces” of Industry, Engineering, Horticulture and Arts, and

“Pavilions” housing displays for His Majesty’s Government as well as from almost every country in the British Empire. There were also gardens and a lake, a bandstand, places to eat, shops and a large amusement park. Two innovative transport systems, “Railodok” cars (a sort of land train) and the Never Stop Railway (propelled by a continuous spiral screw) were designed to help carry visitors around the 216 acre site.



< Plan showing the Exhibition site in 1924

An aerial view across the Exhibition, looking from the north-east, with the amusement park in the foreground and stadium in the distance >



Spectacular shows were put on in the stadium throughout the exhibition, including a Pageant of Empire and a very popular Wild West Rodeo Championships. There were also a number of concerts with choirs and massed bands, together with other displays by the military and youth organisations.



< Looking up Kingsway (re-named Olympic Way in 1948) towards the stadium, in 1924 with the Palace of Industry on the right.

(See the reverse view, as it is in 2012, on page 5.)

The 17 million visitors, who came to the Exhibition in 1924 from all over Britain and beyond to learn about the world, saw some remarkable sights. Many of the national pavilions had been designed in the architectural styles of the countries they represented. Burma's building was entered over a wooden bridge, carved by craftsmen in that country, which copied the Arakan Pagoda in Mandalay, while Sarawak's pavilion was like a large hut made from native materials. Hong Kong built a complete Chinese street, with traders selling silk, toys, ivory carvings and other goods from their island. Inside the walls of the West Africa exhibit was a village of thatched huts, where people from Nigeria, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Sierra Leone showed how they produced woven, carved and leather crafts and grew cocoa, rubber

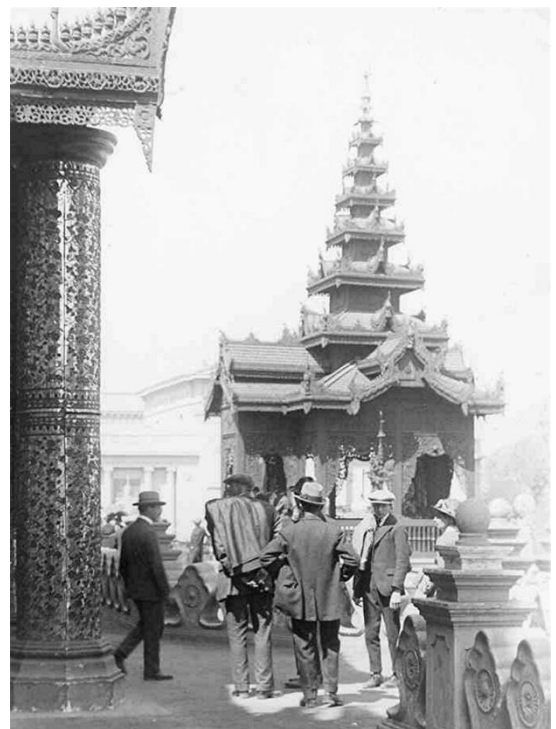
and nuts. Palestine, then a British protectorate following the First World War, used its pavilion to introduce Jaffa oranges to England for the first time, creating an export market for itself.

< The Palestine Pavilion in 1924, with the stadium and the walls of the West Africa exhibit behind it.



A Buddhist shrine at the Burma Pavilion. >

The Palaces of Engineering and Industry, designed to showcase British manufactured products, were much plainer buildings, but covered huge areas. The 13-acre Palace of Engineering had five full-sized railway lines within it to help bring in the larger exhibits from the shipbuilding and other heavy industries in which the country lead the world at that time. The section of this "Palace" devoted to road transport was the forerunner of later Motor Shows, with all of the latest models of cars, goods vehicles buses, motorbikes and bicycles on display.



< A view down one of the many aisles inside the Palace of Engineering in 1924, with the Vickers Armstrong armaments stand front right.





The British Empire Exhibition was so popular that it re-opened in 1925 with many new attractions, so that the organisers used the slogan “The Same Empire but a New Exhibition” in their advertising. The Amusement Park had some extra features to attract children, such as “Treasure Island”. In all, another 10 million visitors came to Wembley for the exhibition between May and October that year.

< The logo from an advert for “Treasure Island” in 1925.

Among the new shows at the Empire Stadium for 1925 were a circus and “London Defended”, a spectacular display which included aircraft flying round above the stadium, lit up by searchlights from below.

A view inside the Amusement Park at the Exhibition in 1924 >



One of the new developments showcased at the exhibition was refrigeration, which allowed ships to bring meat and dairy products to Britain from around the world. This brought out the rivalry between two of the largest Dominions in the Empire. In 1924 the Canadians used a large refrigerated case in their Pavilion to display a life-sized sculpture in butter of the Prince of Wales and his horse. For the 1925 exhibition, the Australians created a butter sculpture on an even larger scale, with a scene from their recent 4-1 win over England in the Ashes, showing top English batsman Jack Hobbs being stumped during the Sydney test match!



< The Australian Pavilion butter sculpture in 1925.



As well as its trade and educational value, the British Empire Exhibition was a great tourist attraction. Most visitors went away with lots of leaflets, and bought postcards to send or souvenirs of their visit.

< **Selling off Goss china souvenirs, at the end of the Exhibition in October 1925.**

Apart from the stadium, which was to remain, no plans had been made for what would happen to the buildings once the

exhibition finished. They were sold off very cheaply in 1926, with the concrete "Palaces" being left for use as factories and warehouses. The rest were demolished, or dismantled to be put up somewhere else - Sierra Leone's building reappeared as a restaurant in the Irish Republic, while the Palestine Pavilion was rebuilt in Glasgow as a laundry! The Amusement Park's attractions were also sold, either to be reused in Blackpool and Southend, or for scrap metal.

**A mosaic from the Palace of Arts, now in Brent Museum >**



Even the buildings which survived demolition in the 1920's have gradually disappeared. The old stadium was knocked down in 2002, to make way for the new Wembley Stadium. The final bit of the Palace of Arts was demolished in 2005 (with one of its remaining mosaics saved by Brent Museum), and the last surviving building from the 1924/25 exhibition, part of the Palace of Industry, is due to go soon in the next phase of the "Wembley City" redevelopment. **You can still see this building behind Brent's new Civic Centre, in Olympic Way and Fulton Road, but be quick or it might have gone!**

© Philip Grant, January 2012.



This article first appeared as part of the Wembley History Society 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition at Brent Town Hall Library in March 2012.

< **The final part of the Palace of Industry (now a warehouse) in Olympic Way.**

[Photograph by Philip Grant, January 2012]