

London and some Londoners

‘Have you been to the Great Exhibition?’ Londoners asked each other, when they met on the street.

‘Have you been to the Great Exhibition?’ they asked their friends, as they walked through the lovely parks of England’s capital city.

‘Were you at the Great Exhibition on Saturday?’ people asked on Monday mornings, when they met those who worked with them.

Strangers on horse-drawn buses asked the same question. The drivers of horse-drawn cabs wanted to know if their passengers had been.

It was 1851 and London was all abuzz with the Great Exhibition. And no wonder.

‘Tell me about it,’ a man asked his cab driver.

‘You must be kidding!’ teased the driver, as he told his horse to move forward.

The man smiled. ‘I’ve just come off a boat at Tilbury Docks,’ he explained. ‘I’ve been overseas for five years and I’m really out of touch.’

Rolling his eyes at such ignorance, the cab driver began his description.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s like this. Prince Albert, that’s Queen Victoria’s husband, had a great idea. His idea was to have an exhibition that would show all the wonders

of the British Empire in one place. And, as the British Empire is full of wonders, he had to build a huge palace to hold them all.'

'A palace?' the man looked puzzled. 'Do you mean a palace like Buckingham Palace, where Queen Victoria lives?'

The driver roared with laughter.

'No,' he told his fare. 'Buckingham Palace is built of stone but the Crystal Palace is built of cast iron and plate glass. That's why it's called the Crystal Palace. And if you want to see it for yourself, you'll have to go to Hyde Park.'

'Isn't all that glass dangerous?' worried the man.

'You would think so,' the cab driver agreed. 'But I suppose Prince Albert had the best brains in the Empire working for him. I've no doubt that it's safe.'

As they clip-clopped along the streets, the cab driver rattled off facts and figures that he'd stored in his mind for just such a customer as the one he was carrying to Bishopsgate.

'The Crystal Palace is 564 metres (1,851 feet) long and 39 metres (128 feet) high. It's made of 294,000 huge panes of glass attached to a cast iron skeleton. Some people thought that it would never stand up. But even when the great choir sang the Hallelujah Chorus at the opening of the Exhibition it stood as firm as if it was made of bricks and mortar. Mind you,' said the driver, 'I let it settle before I went to see it. I didn't want it to crash down on my head.'

The man in the cab was fascinated and wanted to know more. 'What's being exhibited in the Crystal Palace?' he asked.

‘What’s not!’ laughed the cab driver. ‘There are treasures from every corner of the Empire,’ he said. ‘They’ve even got the Koh-i-Noor, the world’s biggest diamond!’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘No, I’m not,’ the driver insisted. ‘There are weaving looms and kitchen equipment, huge displays showing how steel is made and jewels by the dozen. Stuff that’s been dug up from history is on show, and inventions that belong far in the future too. There are over 100,000 things to see, I’m told. And I believe it. If you go, you’ll see big things and little things, new things and ancient things. And wait till I tell you what’

There was a long silence as the driver held his fare in suspense.

‘There are public closets where you can ...’ the cabman coughed rather than finish the sentence.

What he was trying to say was that there were public toilets in the Great Exhibition in London in 1851!

For six months people flocked to the Crystal Palace. At first only rich people could afford to go because entry cost £3 for men and £2 for women. That was a great deal of money in the middle of the 19th Century. But after a while it was reduced to one shilling (5p) each and that brought people in their thousands and then their millions.

Altogether six million people visited, and that was more than the population of the U.K. at that time. Of course, many people went more than once. And here’s an interesting statistic – 827,280 people used the public toilets, and they had to pay a penny to do so! That’s where the expression ‘spend a penny’ comes from.

When the Great Exhibition closed, the Crystal Palace was taken to pieces and much of it was carted through London to Sydenham Hill. A splendid but smaller exhibition centre was built there that was meant to last for many years rather than just six months. Building work began in 1852 and Sydenham Hill fairly swarmed with workmen for the next two years.

London was THE place to be in the early 1850s. The Great Exhibition had brought it to the notice of the whole wide world. Queen Victoria was young and lovely. Prince Albert was full of ideas for the city and the country. People were optimistic about the future and felt that it was good to be alive, and to be in London.

On 14th July, 1853 one London family was much more interested in what was happening inside their home than out in the city. They were the Trotters of Devonshire Place House, not far from another of London's famous green spaces, Regent's Park. For that day, in that very beautiful house, a baby girl was born. She was named Isabella Lilius Trotter and right from the beginning she was known as Lilius, or Lily.

'She's tiny,' whispered Emily, who was Lilius's sister, and the next oldest to her in age.

'She's cute,' Jaqueline giggled. She was the next one up.

Then Lilius's brothers came to see the new baby.

'She a girl,' announced ten-year-old Edward and twelve-year-old Henry.

The two oldest boys in the family, William and Coutts, were teenagers and they just smiled at the

new addition to their family and went back to what they were doing.

The Trotters were a very happy family, but it had not always been like that. Lilias's father had been married before and all the older children were born to his first wife. When she died the family went through a time of great sadness.

Two years later, Mr Trotter told William and Coutts, Edward and Henry that he was going to marry again and the boys wondered what kind of stepmother they would have. Their two little sisters were really too young to be worried. They needn't have been concerned for their father's new wife was a good and kind, loving and caring young woman – even if she didn't seem young to them! Lilias was her first baby and it was as though tiny Isabella Lilias Trotter cemented the family together.

'May we walk with the baby?' Jaqueline and Emily asked their nursemaid, when it came time for their afternoon outing, a month or two after Lilias was born.

'We'll have to ask Nanny,' they were told.

Nanny appeared in her uniform, the baby in her arms.

'The girls would like us to join your walk,' the nursemaid told her. 'May we do that?'

Nanny, who looked very serious but was good fun too, said that would be alright and they'd better go and get ready.

Getting ready to go out took a long time in the 1850s. The best dressed girls, and Jaqueline and Emily were among them, wouldn't go out the door without their hair brushed and their hats on, their

dresses straightened and their boot buckles polished. And the baby? Liliias was tightly swaddled in a shawl and wrapped in a blanket even though it was warm outside. Her pram was high and more like the body of a small convertible car than a modern-day pram! Had a sailor seen them coming along the road, he might have thought that Nanny, Nursemaid, Jaqueline and Emily along with Liliias in her wonderful pram looked like stately galleons going out to sea!

The Trotters lived in a beautiful, and very expensive, area of London. Their part of the city was called Marylebone, which started life as a little village hundreds of years before. By the time Liliias was born the streets were lined with stylish Georgian houses, each with its own garden.

The houses were often built around squares with lovely gardens in the middle. It was a good place for children to live as Jaqueline and Emily discovered when they moved out of the care of nursemaids and into the kind and firm hands of their first governess.

Of course, having a governess meant spending most mornings in the schoolroom (yes, they had their own schoolroom!), but it also meant going to play in Regent's Park in the afternoons. The girls met their friends there and were able to run about freely – or as freely as their long frilly bloomers would allow!

As soon as Liliias was old enough, she and her sisters loved watching their father going off to work each day. And no wonder they liked watching for he went to work in a stagecoach. So there were horses to see and a friendly coachmen who always looked up and waved to them.

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‘Why can’t we go to school like our brothers?’ Lilias asked her governess, in the middle of a reading lesson one day. She was six years old.

William and Coutts, Edward and Henry all went to Harrow, one of the most famous schools in England.

‘Young ladies don’t go to school,’ the governess said firmly.

‘But I’d like to learn the kind of things that William and Coutts learn,’ Lilias announced. ‘I’d like to learn about science and mathematics and things like that.’

Her governess smiled. ‘And I wonder what good learning science would do you. Young ladies have their own skills to learn, things that will help them to fit into society when they grow up.’

Lilias was suddenly interested, expecting these skills to be exciting.

‘Well,’ her governess said. ‘As you’ll meet many grand people from overseas when you’re older, you have to learn some foreign languages. You need to be able to entertain guests, some of them very well-known and clever, and for that you need to learn about art and literature, about the theatre and music.’

‘I like art,’ Lilias agreed. But she wasn’t convinced that learning to entertain even well-known and clever guests was ever going to be as exciting as science.

Lilias did like art and she was very good at both drawing and painting.

‘Is that a starling?’ asked Mrs Trotter one day, when she went into the schoolroom. She picked up Lilias’s drawing pad and took it to the window to see it more clearly.

It was a sketch of a starling sitting just outside the window, and it looked so real that it might have flown away.

‘That’s beautiful,’ Mrs Trotter said. ‘His feathers are so well drawn.’

‘Would you like to see some paintings, Mama?’

‘I certainly would!’

Mrs Trotter sat down beside her daughter. The other children had gone out to play for a while but Liliias chose to stay in to finish her drawing.

‘These are flowers from the garden,’ the girl explained. ‘I drew them one day and then painted them afterwards. I tried painting them in the schoolroom but it was better when I took my paints outside to the garden.’

‘You could have picked the flowers and brought them in to paint,’ her mother suggested.

Liliias thought for a minute.

‘I didn’t want to do that, Mama, for the poor flowers would just wilt and die.’

Mrs Trotter took the sheets of paper. She looked at the top one and then, very slowly, she looked at the rest.

‘These are lovely,’ she said quietly. ‘I can almost smell the scent of the roses.’

Very slowly she and Liliias looked through the paintings. They were amazing considering they’d been done by such a young child.

That evening, after the children were sound asleep, their parents sat and talked.

‘Liliias has a real gift for drawing and painting,’ Mrs Trotter told her husband, who was himself a keen artist.

Together they looked through Liliias’s paintings and finished with the drawing of the starling. Both agreed that their young daughter was a born artist.