

THE THAMES STATUE AT LECHLADE

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Nearly 160 years ago on 10th of June 1854, Queen Victoria opened the new Crystal Palace at Sydenham. This followed the success of its smaller predecessor built in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition. Today one relic from Sydenham is here in Gloucestershire; two more are just over the border in Oxfordshire; all three are sculptures. What is known about them?

The contents of the Fine Arts Courts at the new Crystal Palace were intended to refine the taste of the people and to increase their knowledge of ornament and colouring. How patronising that sounds today. New works were commissioned and over 1000 copies collected of the best of the world's statuary.

The Italian sculptor Raffaele Monti (1818 – 1881), who settled in London in 1848, created many of the sculptures displayed both within the Crystal Palace and in its park. In 1853 he sculpted eight allegorical figures to adorn the two large fountain basins on the Italian Terrace in the Palace grounds. Four statues, representing the Arctic, Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans were placed around one basin and four representing the Rivers Amazon, Ganges, Nile and Thames around the other. The last named is now at Saint John's Lock, Lechlade. Few notice the shield of the City of London resting behind the figure.

A series of 26 statues along the Upper Garden Terrace represented countries and cities. One, Egypt, was sculpted by Carlo Marochetti, perhaps better known for his statue of Richard the Lionheart at Westminster. Another, by the French sculptor, Antoine Etex, represented Marseilles. Both are now in the grounds of Faringdon House. Why are they there?

The second Crystal Palace was a great success initially, significantly influencing artistic life in the second half of the 19th century. With its botanical displays, elaborate formal gardens, grand musical events and astonishing waterworks, it was England's first entertainment mall and theme park, visited by millions. Thereafter, increasingly difficult times followed, culminating in a disastrous fire of 1936.

Remaining statues and vases from the terraces and grounds were sold by public auction in 1957. Mr. Robert Heber- Percy, eccentric owner of Faringdon House, bought his two figures for £1.10s.0d. each (one can be seen clearly from the Radcot Road mounted on a former pillbox). Mr. H Scott Freeman, Senior Conservator of the River Thames purchased the Thames sculpture. No record of what he paid has yet been found. With the cooperation of Mister H. Phillips, the owner of Trewsbury Mead, he installed it there in 1958. Increasing vandalism of the Thames statue led to it being removed for repair, then relocated at Lechlade in 1974. On its way it inadvertently acquired a small measure of sexual equality. The Gloucestershire Mason, Ronald Packer modelled its new foot on that of his wife!

Today the statue is in the care of the Environment Agency, who cleaned it ten years ago. Sadly some of its earlier injuries are beginning to show. For example, one of its toes is becoming detached. Coincidentally, another of Monti's statues is only five miles away. In 1848 he carved the marble effigy of Barbara, Lady de Mauley who died in 1844. She lies in the church of Saint Nicholas, Hatherop.

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