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Open Forum 07 (1973)

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Now, back to Alexandra Palace and the much larger scale event which I referred to at the start of the programme. This is The Open University's Congregation, taking place here in the Great Hall on June the 23rd. I'll be talking to the co-ordinator of the ceremony Peter Thornton-Pett presently, but first, let's look briefly at the history of Alexandra Palace because there are interesting parallels between the ideals which inspired its construction and those which led to the creation of The Open University. The 1859 prospectus for project announced, "A distinctive feature of the 'Palace of the People' will be to render the resources of the institution subservient to the cause of popular education: English, history, geography, astronomy, geology, mineralogy and mining, will all be illustrated in a systematic manner." High sounding aims, but the trouble was that not enough attention was paid to that last point about being systematic.

The first Alexandra Palace was opened on May 24 1873 in honour of Queen Victoria's birthday. It took thirteen years to build and cost half a million pounds. Over 124 thousand people visited it in the first two weeks. The central feature of the Palace was the Great Dome, two hundred feet in diameter, the interior of which was ornately decorated with papier-mâché on a light timber frame. On June 9, while carrying out a small repair at the top of the dome, a workman dropped a red hot piece of charcoal behind the inner skin and the whole lot went up in flames. Within two hours there was nothing left but the gable walls. There was no insurance cover, yet within two years funds had been raised and the replacement palace completed. The second palace incorporated the central gable wall of the first but was larger and altogether different in appearance and layout. It covered seven and a half acres of the Muswell Hill plateau and had its own railway terminus. There were two picture galleries, two conservatories, a concert hall, this large theatre and a smaller theatre. At the centre was the vast Great Hall. The Palace was filled to overflowing with objects described as of universal interest, but somehow its high educational purpose was lost sight of. The building and its mind-improving contents became increasingly shabby. In fact the Palace closed down seven times between 1875 and 1900, as one optimistic lessee after another failed to make it pay. The sheer size of the building is a basic problem, and the maintenance of the fabric alone is a colossal task. Imagine trying to keep all this roofing watertight. In 1900 an Act of Parliament put the Palace and park in the hands of public trustees. The famous roller skating rink was opened in 1901.

However the biggest change in its fortunes occurred in 1936 when television arrived. After some experimental transmissions, the southeast tower was completely re-gutted with a steel frame to carry the permanent television mast. From this the BBC radiated the world's first high definition television service. Smaller office floors were fitted into the tower and two studios were built in behind the colonnade. Naturally the BBC's lease of nearly half the Palace was a godsend to the trustees in augmenting their slender revenues. BBC occupation would in fact have ended in 1969 but for The Open University because a self-contained production centre was needed to make our programmes and so began a new chapter in the development of television here.