The Great Exhibition of 1851: teaching a significant event at Key Stage 1

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Why teach about the Great Exhibition?
The Great Exhibition allows pupils to consider the impact of a particular event. The exhibition provides a means to look at Britain’s wider role in the world and social and technical developments such as the impact of the railways. Pupils can explore a variety of sources, consider the substantive concepts such as daily life and technology as well as looking at social changes locally and globally at Key Stage 1.

The Great Exhibition can enable pupils to consider Victorian Britain, exploring ideas of trade and empire. Pupils can be introduced to ideas of diversity and representations of countries within the empire. By studying the exhibition, pupils can explore the Victorians at leisure and the importance of changes in technology and science, including the railways.

Concepts such as causation and change can be explored through enquiry questions such as: What does the Great Exhibition tell us about life in Britain and the British Empire at the time?

The Great Exhibition can be taught in Year 2 introducing pupils to the Victorian period. The topic should be taught in a way that enables pupils to visualise change in London and revisit the concept of significance. A well sequenced curriculum can expose pupils at regular intervals to concepts and knowledge that support progression in their historical thinking.

As Christine Counsell has commented, ‘curriculum is content structured as a narrative over time’ (Counsell, 2018). The teaching of the Great Exhibition should allow pupils to revisit concepts explored in earlier topics. Percival (2020) notes that ‘Repeated exposure to a concept using different contexts provides pupils with a nuanced and multifaceted view of the subject’.
Key questions that can be explored using the topic of the Great Exhibition

- What was the Great Exhibition and why was it organised?
- What can you learn about the Great Exhibition from looking at primary evidence (investigating sources as evidence)?
- Why did people visit the exhibition?
- Where did the exhibits come from?
- How are the exhibits different and/or similar to artefacts today?
- Why was the Great Exhibition a significant event?
- What can we learn about Victorian England from studying the Great Exhibition?

What was the Great Exhibition and why was it organised?

The picture above is a postcard of Queen Victoria arriving to open the Great Exhibition on 1 May 1851, crowds of people are watching. It is a very special day. Prince Albert the Queen's Husband is also in the carriage. The exhibition was his idea. Prince Albert wanted the exhibition to be a trade show displaying the latest inventions around the world, from massive steam engines to the latest bicycles, to show off the achievements of the British Empire.

The Great Exhibition was held in London and built in Hyde Park; it became quickly described as the Crystal Palace, because it was constructed of cast iron and 300,000 panes of glass that twinkled in the sun. Designed by architect Joseph Paxton, the building itself was a marvel of the Industrial age. The Crystal Palace was 1,848 feet long and many of the trees in Hyde Park were included inside the structure because it was so tall. The Crystal Palace covered an area of 12 football pitches and in the centre was a fountain made of 4 tonnes of pink glass. People had never seen such a magnificent building.

What can you learn about the Great Exhibition from looking at primary evidence (investigating sources as evidence)?

Using a Big Picture Source. After a short overview of the history of the Great Exhibition it is worth considering some enquiry questions raising from a primary source.

Pupils could first look at a picture of the Crystal Palace and use a wave diagram to consider some big questions. These start from simple engagement with what the pupils can see in the picture to thinking about what they might infer from the source.

Substantive concepts to introduce the children to as part of this topic

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Pupils can consider what information we can obtain from a source and what they can infer about whether the exhibition was a significant event or not. Substantive concepts linked to the exhibition can be explored in content. Other sources can be introduced to help the pupils answer questions about whether the exhibition was a significant event. At this point it can be useful to use a map of London to point out the location of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, while reinforcing their geographical knowledge of England and London which would support their understanding of Key Stage 1 geography.

How can we tell if the exhibition was a significant event?

Understanding significance at Key Stage 1 will enable pupils to make the transition to Key Stage 2 where ideas of significance are regularly considered. We can use Christine Counsell's 5 Rs to help pupils gauge whether an event is significant. It is useful to use the 5 Rs when forming questions to enable pupils to think more deeply about the event's significance.

- **Remarkable** – was the event remarked upon by people at the time as a significant event? Did it achieve ground-breaking innovations?
- **Remembered** – is the event significant in history within the collective memory of a group or groups? It helped to fund the Victoria and Albert Museum and encouraged a huge wave of other national Exhibitions.
• **Resulted in change** – exhibitions continued to be popular often as a way of marking a significant event. The centenary of the Great Exhibition was marked by the opening of the Festival of Britain in 1951. The exhibition led to the renaming of an area of London still known as Crystal Palace.

• **Resonant** – it had meaning for people for many years. People like to refer to the exhibition as a way of remarking upon the greatness of the British Empire. It has become the name of an area of London.

• **Revealing** – it encapsulated how Britain saw itself as a progressive, innovative world power.

**Let’s explore how a painting can help to understand ideas of significance**

Using the painting below, ask the children if there any clues to why it was significant at the time? Why does this day look so special? What clues are in the painting?

*So many remarkable firsts*

Pupils can deepen their understanding of significance through learning about the important developments achieved in the organisation and running of the Great Exhibition.

- It was one the most successful exhibitions in history. From May to October 1851 over six million people passed through its doors which was about a third of the population of the United Kingdom at that time.
- It had 10 miles of exhibition walks
- It was also the first to sell fizzy drinks and souvenirs such as postcards.
- It also was the first to have public toilets where visitors would spend a penny to have their own cubicle.
- It was the first exhibition where you could travel by train on a cheap ticket so that working people could visit. People of all social classes could visit the event.

Ask pupils to select what they consider was the most significant event and ask them to explain why. This helps them to consider why the event was important at the time.

**Why was it important that people saw objects from other places?**

More than 100,000 objects were displayed. Exhibits from Britain and the empire had over half the floor space. There were huge moving steam-powered machines and people could even watch cotton being spun. There were rows of bicycles and even a folding piano.

One important aspect of the Great Exhibition is for pupils to be introduced to the concept of the British Empire and what it was, this could also be linked to the Commonwealth. Pupils could look at a map of the empire see if they recognise any of the countries. It is worth noting that exhibits also came from other countries.

In the Indian rooms people were stunned to see a coat embroidered with emeralds, pearls and rubies, with an elephant dressed for carrying a prince. These rooms were for many visitors a window into other worlds. In the Chinese room they would have seen fine silks and china coupled with hanging lanterns.
Let’s go with Molly to the Great Exhibition

How would she remember her visit?

Molly woke up early and was excited as her family were going to get a train from their new railway station to London to visit the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. Molly had never been on a train before; she was told it was faster than a horse and carriage. Molly’s father had told her it was a big palace made of glass and that inside there were items from all over the world from places such as China, Africa, India, and Europe.

The steam train was larger than any horse she had seen. Her father told her all the details about the train. She wished she could drive it but girls were not allowed to drive trains. As she left the train a child carried her bags; another one swept the street for her.

Stories enable pupils to consolidate their prior learning and reinforce their understanding of chronology and enable pupils to remember a sequence of events. We can explore the exhibition through a fictional character, Molly. We tried this with pupils from a London primary school.

Through Molly’s journey pupils can revisit any prior knowledge but also engage in some new ideas such why was a child sweeping the streets in Victorian Britain. This was an opportunity to see the wider social context of Victorian London. Pupils could explore some further creative writing or draw a picture of Molly’s journey. Which we did in school. We then took it further and pupils had to consider what she thought once she entered. How would Molly have reacted to the inside of the Great Exhibition?

It is at this point we considered pupils making their own exhibition from objects around the world, providing an opportunity to link up with geography and thereby enabling more reinforcement.

How did Molly feel when she peered in and saw a fountain made of pink glass?
Molly was excited when she finally arrived at the Great Exhibition. The building was huge and there were thousands of people. It sparkled like a star. Her mother said it cost them 1 shilling each, or £5 in today’s money. Later, Molly would learn that 6 million people went to the exhibition. When Molly stood in front of the Crystal Palace she thought…..

Can you finish the story?
- How she got there.
- What the building looked like.
- What she might see inside.
- How excited she was.

What did Molly see at the exhibition?
How do sources enable pupils to see change over time?
The exhibits from the exhibition can provide an opportunity to look at change and continuity over time, for pupils to see the objects that Molly would have seen and compare them with those items today. Here is an example of a lesson that was put together for Year 2 pupils with some types of questions that could be asked. The lesson also scaffolded questions for the pupils to ask. It is this activity that allows pupils to explore another aspect of Counsell’s 5Rs to connect and experience situations over time and resonate with people in the past.

Can you match the objects?
Do you have any of these objects?
What are they made of?
How do the objects change?
Why might the objects have changed?
What do they say about people in the past?

Using primary sources to find out about the exhibition

Significance
To consider the long term importance of the Great Exhibition today

When the exhibition finished in October 1851 it had made enough money to build three great museums in Kensington: the Natural History Museum, the Victoria and Albert, and the Science Museum. Pupils can consider why they built two museums to sciences. Today these museums have over 14 million visitors a year. After the exhibition the Crystal Palace was moved to south London, where it has given its name to the area. Unfortunately, in 1936 it burnt to the ground after a fire started in the women’s cloakroom.

It is at this point pupils can reflect on how the exhibition is remembered not through a special day but through the legacy of exhibiting and how it created a new set of experiences that we share today. The Great Exhibition showed that events such as these can be powerful in helping to form identities about a nation and its people. At this point pupils could consider what would they put in an exhibition about their lives or their school, and what would they want to show. Finally, they must consider what the exhibition revealed about Victorian London and what impact did it have on the lives of those at the time.

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