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House of Commons

Session 2003 - 04

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*Delegated Legislation Committee Debates*

## Draft Charities (Alexandra Park and Palace) Order 2003

First Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation

Wednesday 14 January 2004

[Mr. Frank Cook in the Chair]

Draft Charities (Alexandra Park and Palace) Order 2003

2.30 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Charities (Alexandra Park and Palace) Order 2003.

I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Cook, for this important debate on the future of Alexandra palace. It may help members of the Committee if I set out, in the context of the history of Alexandra palace, why I object to the order.

The Committee will be aware that Alexandra palace was designed by the architects Alfred Meeson and John Johnson and was opened by Queen Victoria on 24 May 1873. It is significant that it was opened as the people's palace and was intended to provide, for Victorians from London and further afield, a wonderful environment and recreational centre. Tragically, it was ruined 16 days later by a great fire, but it was rebuilt and reopened two years later.

The rebuilt Alexandra palace covered, as it does now, some 8 acres. It included a great hall, a roller-skating rink, a theatre, a palm court, an open courtyard, a further exhibition hall and numerous other large rooms, some of which are still in use. The ambitiousness of that project, which again is so relevant to our debate, was immense. The great hall alone could seat 12,000 people, with nearly 2,000 in the orchestra stalls. It was equipped then with the country's largest organ, developed by Henry Willis, who also built the organs for Gloucester cathedral, the Royal Albert hall and Blenheim palace.

The Alexandra Park and Palace Act 1900 put the palace into the ownership of a charity. It is important to understand that a charitable trust was established. At that time the trustees were Middlesex council, the three local authorities that subsequently became the London borough of Haringey, and three other local authorities at that time, Islington, Finchley and Friern and Barnet. In 1936 the BBC began the world's first public television broadcasts from studios created in the south-east wing, a use that continued until 1980. The mast, which is still there, was designed and built by the Marconi brothers.

In 1966 ownership passed to the Greater London Council and, on its abolition in 1980, ownership passed to Haringey council through a trust established for that purpose. Tragically for Haringey and all those concerned about Alexandra palace, a second fire damaged about half the buildings just six months after Haringey's trust took over responsibility. Nevertheless, the TV studios and much of the Victorian theatre survived undamaged. Today, although the TV studios remain unused, the theatre has been restored, the iconic mast is still there and the

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shell remains as it was—a world-class heritage for us all. The great hall and the smaller hall have been rebuilt and are currently used for exhibitions and pop concerts, the palm court has been magnificently restored and an ice-skating rink has been built in the east hall. There is a pub, a large corporate function restaurant, a grand room used for large receptions and some other rooms.

I do not want to discuss the way in which Haringey council has looked after Alexandra palace. I acknowledge that it has had extreme difficulties with, for example, the cost of rebuilding after the fire. Some would argue that there has been mismanagement by the council and that unfair costings have been charged against the palace. I understand, although I cannot confirm, that in 1996 the council charged the trust £40,000 for clerking committees, which works out at about £10,000 for a two-hour sitting. Given the intention that Alexandra palace should be a people's palace, it seems inappropriate that responsibility for it should in the first instance

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