



# MEET ME AT THE AGGIE

Presented by  
Islington Local History Centre



ISLINGTON

## MEET ME AT THE AGGIE

This presentation showcases Islington Local History Centre's collection of Royal Agricultural Hall posters, promoting the amusement fairs held in the 1870s and 1880s. These fairs were aimed at a growing middle class who enjoyed increased amounts of leisure time and disposable income. From the 1860s, the pictorial poster became an artistic form in its own right as the development of affordable colour lithography became increasingly widespread.

While posters for legitimate theatre remained text based, circus, burlesque and pantomime featured all manner of flamboyant imagery in order to convey excitement and novelty. As we can see, this selection of posters set high expectations in their promotion of events, providing a raucous yet respectable experience filled with multi-sensory thrills for the entire family.

Researched and written by Julia Rank (2020)

Above: The 'Aggie', c.1862  
Below: World's Fair, 1885



## Introducing the Aggie

The Agricultural Hall is one of Islington's most striking and historically significant buildings. It opened on three acres of land in 1862, when the Royal Smithfield Club outgrew its premises in Baker Street. Designed by Frederick Peck of Maidstone, the state-of-the-art building featured 1,000 tons of iron, nine miles of ironwork, two acres of glass and one acre of slating. It was described as "a gigantic building of the railway station order."

The Agricultural Hall, known affectionately as 'the Aggie', boasted a larger main hall in a more central location than the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, originally built for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and Alexandra Palace in Muswell Hill (1873). It soon became well-known for cattle and horse shows, industrial fairs, dog shows (including the first Crufts in 1891), Christmas fairs and religious and political rallies, attracting visitors from the local area and beyond.

The Agricultural Hall complex was expanded in 1868 with the construction of St Mary's Hall, a performance space accommodating up to 3,000 audience members. The royal family were frequent visitors, particularly the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII). The Agricultural Hall was granted its 'Royal' title in 1885.

# AGRICULTURAL HALL

## WORLD'S FAIR

LESSEES - H. & T. READ & F. BAILEY.



1. World's Fair,  
opened 23 December 1882

OPEN DEC<sup>R</sup>. 23<sup>RD</sup> AND 5 FOLLOWING WEEKS  
ACCOMMODATION FOR 100,000 People. WET or DRY **ADMISSION SIXPENCE** NO EXTRA CHARGE FOR THE MENAGERIE.

## What a circus!

### 1. *World's Fair*, opened 23 December 1882

The first Grand Tournament, Hippodrome and Cirque at the Agricultural Hall opened on Boxing Day 1863. It was described by the *Shoreditch Gazette* as being “on a scale of magnificence hitherto unattempted in this country.” It featured 350 performers, 100 horses, 50 suits of armour and 60 musicians. Entertainments included steeplechases, chariot races, bareback riding, acrobatics, fire eating and lion taming demonstrations; the admission fee was 6d for a whole day’s entertainment!

The *Islington Gazette* observed in 1864: “There is no building equally well adapted for the purposes of a hippodrome and circus... the building is well lighted and free from those unpleasant smells that are offensively present in other buildings dedicated to equestrian amusement.”

The Aggie quickly became established as a venue for exciting entertainments in comfortable surroundings. The array of attractions became more extensive each year. The noise of thousands of visitors combined with music and animals unsurprisingly made for “a considerable hurly-burly” (*Islington Gazette*, 1880). The circus managed by ‘Lord’ George Sanger, known as the ‘British Barnum’, took up a long-term residency at the Aggie from 1870 to 1905.



2. World's Fair,  
opened 24 December 1885

OPEN THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24th, 1885, FOR SIX WEEKS.

## A purified Bartholomew / Bartlemy Fair

### 2. *World's Fair, opened 24 December 1885*

The World's Fairs held at the Agricultural Hall were unrelated to the World's Fairs and Universal Expositions, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851. Instead, the Aggie's annual World's Fairs, first presented over the festive period in 1879 by H & T Read and F Bailey, were a modern, enclosed version of ancient travelling fairs.

The Southwark, Greenwich, Barnet, Bartholomew Fairs and others originated in medieval times and were closed down by the authorities throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. They were described by some critics as “relics of a barbarous age.”

The *London Daily News* (1879) commented that when Charles Dickens wrote about these fairs, “he probably would have ridiculed the idea that such a jolly, out-of-door gathering could be held inside a building.” However, the article concluded that the indoor setting in fact “frees the fair from many disreputable features and keeps it from extinction.” The theatrical newspaper *The Era* (1883) agreed that “few will note the absence of the ancient crudeness... The glories of Bartlemy Fair have not only been revived but purified.”

**Half Man & Half Skeleton  
THE WORLD'S WONDER! A DOUBLE MAN ALIVE!**

AGRICULTURAL HALL FAIR, ISLINGTON, BOSTON-STR., DEC. 26, 1874.

**SEDGWICK'S**  
V. R.  
**EXHIBITION**  
OF  
**LIVING WONDERS**  
DURING THE  
**AGRICULTURAL HALL FAIR**  
The Greatest Living Wonder Ever Seen

**THE**  
**DOUBLE MAN**

**Half Man & Half Skeleton  
THE WORLD'S WONDER! A DOUBLE MAN ALIVE!**

**HE CHALLENGES  
THE WORLD FOR  
£20,000**

TO FIND HIS EQUAL. N.B.—All Medical Men are particularly invited to examine him. All persons not finding this Exhibition correct, as represented on the pointing, will have their money returned.

**COPY OF TESTIMONIALS**

London, April 10th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 11th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 12th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 13th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 14th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 15th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 16th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 17th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 18th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 19th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 20th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 21st, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 22nd, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 23rd, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 24th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 25th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 26th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 27th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 28th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 29th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

London, April 30th, 1874.  
I have the pleasure to inform you that I have examined the wonder-  
ful exhibition of the 'Half Man & Half Skeleton' and find it to be a  
most extraordinary and valuable specimen of the human frame.  
I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,  
JAMES SEDGWICK

3. Sedgwick's Exhibition of Living Wonders during the Agricultural Hall Fair, 26 December 1874



## Double men and giant sisters

### 3. *Sedgwick's Exhibition of Living Wonders during the Agricultural Hall Fair, 26 December 1874*

The commercial, institutionalised circus and the freak show both grew out of the travelling fair. They were considered respectable entertainments by the mid-19th Century and several acts were granted royal patronage by Queen Victoria. They were extremely popular across all levels of society. Although exploitation and degradation were widespread, some performers negotiated a certain amount of professional agency in the way they presented themselves and managed their business affairs.

Performers to appear the Agricultural Hall included the 8-foot 'Norfolk Giant' and the American 'Giant Sisters', Miss Minnie and Miss Eliza. James Taylor, 'The Double Man', was presented as half man and half skeleton and described as "The Greatest Living Wonder Ever Seen!" To substantiate this claim, he was presented with testimonials from members of the church and medical profession giving authenticity to his unique physique. Men of science were also offered an opportunity to win a £20,000 prize by finding another human being with the same unusual condition.

# WORLD'S FAIR

## AGRICULTURAL HALL.

Lessees and Managers

H. & T. READ & F. BAILEY

-: GRAND CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S CARNIVAL :-



MONSTRE GROUP OF FULL-CROWN FOREST-BRED LIONS AND LIONESSES.

MENAGERIE, & LARGEST EXHIBITIONS  
IN EUROPE

OPEN SATURDAY, Dec. 20th, 1884,  
FOR SIX WEEKS.

NINE HOURS' CONTINUOUS AMUSEMENT

**6d. Admission 6d.**

4. World's Fair,  
opened 20 December 1884

## Lions, crocodiles and fleas

### 4. *World's Fair, open 20 December 1884*

Though sensibilities and laws surrounding performing animals have changed, animal entertainments were for decades at the heart of the Aggie's amusement fairs. They ranged from flea circuses, to equestrian displays and menageries of exotic creatures. The famous Bostock and Wombwell's Menagerie made frequent visits. These displays of wild animals were fraught with danger.

There was a marked lack of health and safety at the time. In 1864, newly appointed lion keeper John Reeves had a hand amputated when he was dragged into the cages at feeding time. In their attempt to free him, his colleagues tried to temporarily blind the lions with blows to their eyes. The lions gave a performance later that day!

In 1866, a ten-foot crocodile, the largest ever shown in Europe, escaped when the water in his tank was being changed and he "fell upon the floor of the building and got away, lashing his tail, snapping violently at everything in his way" (*Islington Gazette*). Fortunately, the keeper and assistants were able to clamp the crocodile's jaws shut and return him to the tank without anyone being injured. The possibility of danger may have made these entertainments all the more exciting.



ADMISSION  
**6<sup>D</sup>**

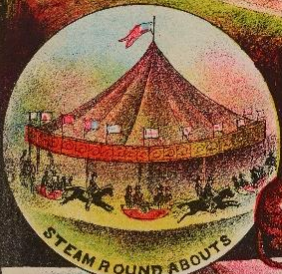
# WORLD'S FAIR

ADMISSION  
**6<sup>D</sup>**

LESSEES & MANAGERS, H. & T. READ & F. BAILEY.

## AGRICULTURAL HALL

CHANNEL TUNNEL RAILWAY



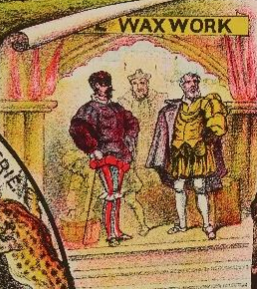
STEAM ROUNDABOUTS



MARIONETTES



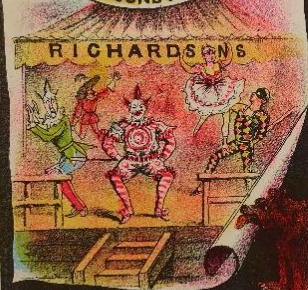
BOSTOCK & WOMBWELLS CELEBRATED MENAGERIE



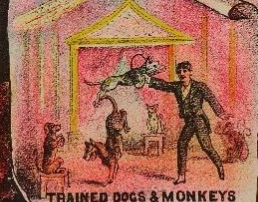
WAXWORK



SEA ON LAND



RICHARDSONS

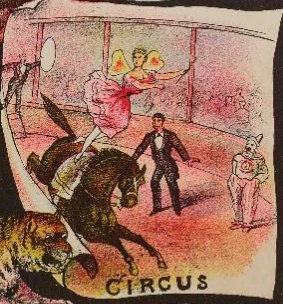


TRAINED DOGS & MONKEYS



RANDALL WILLIAMS

PHANTOSCOPE



CIRCUS



AMERICAN BOTTLE SHOOTING



REGISTERED



Captain Dudley Vane and his marvellous Group of Trained Lions, Tigers, &c.



SHOOTING SALOON



REGISTERED

OPEN SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20th, 1884, FOR SIX WEEKS.

5. World's Fair,  
opened 20 December 1884

## The first Channel Tunnel railway

### *5. World's Fair, opened 20 December 1884*

The possibility of excavating a Channel Tunnel linking Britain and France had been discussed since the early 19th Century. In 1880, a provisional tunnel was begun but was abandoned two years later. The scheme inspired a model railway at the Agricultural Hall, in which visitors had the opportunity to travel from Dover to Calais through a simulated Channel Tunnel.

It continued to be an attraction into the 1900s. The train was named Sir Edward Watkin, after the MP for Hythe in Kent and instigator of the scheme. Over a century later in 1994, the first Eurostar service was launched from Waterloo Station. In 2007 it relocated to St Pancras International Station (built 1868), a building sharing many architectural similarities with the Aggie.

ROYAL  
AGRICULTURAL HALL  
WORLDS FAIR.

(Manager, M<sup>r</sup>J.O Connor)



GEO WEBB. LITH. 55 WATERLOO RD LONDON.

OPEN DAILY FROM 10 TILL 10 COMMENCING BOXING DAY.  
ADMISSION SIXPENCE.

6. World's Fair,  
opened 26 December c.1885

## A family-friendly fairyland

### 6. *World's Fair, opened 26 December c.1885*

Unlike many off-shoots of the Great Exhibition, the World's Fairs at the Agricultural Hall did not feature an explicitly educational or moral agenda for adults and children. These fairs were instead designed to entertain and evoke an escapist fantasy wonderland, combined with demonstrations of the latest technology.

In 1881, the *Islington Gazette* commented that many of their attractions should “not be considered beneath the dignity of even the ‘learned, grave and reverend’ in as much as considerable ingenuity and skill are displayed in the construction and working of the miniature railway and yachting roundabout.”

In this image, a well-dressed family are shown admiring the wonders of the fair on a post-Christmas outing. In experiencing amusement for its own sake, they are absorbing what the *Islington Gazette* described as “that conglomerate mass of everything that is pleasing to minds juvenile and mature” for one special day.

## Further reading

*The building that lived twice* by Alec Forshaw (Business Design Centre, 2011)

*The building that would not go away* by Tadeusz Grajewski (Royal Agricultural Hall Ltd, 1989)

*Consuming Pleasures: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* by Judith Flanders (Harper Perennial, 2009)

*Fun Without Vulgarity: Victorian and Edwardian Popular Entertainment Posters* by Catherine Hail (The Stationery Office/Public Record Office, 1996)

*Palaces of Pleasure: From Music Halls to the Seaside, How the Victorians Invented Mass Entertainment* by Lee Jackson (Yale University Press, 2019)

*The Wonders: Lifting the Curtain on the Freak Show, Circus and Victorian Age* by John Woolf (Michael O'Mara Books, 2019)



## Archives and online sources

[British Newspaper Archive](#) (acc. Dec. 2020)

Business Design Centre (formerly the Royal Agricultural Hall) website: [A brief history](#) (acc. Dec. 2020)

[Royal Agricultural Hall Ltd Archive](#) at Islington Local History Centre (acc. Dec. 2020)

[Royal Agricultural Hall during the First World War](#): The British Postal Museum & Archive blog (acc. Dec. 2020)

# MEET ME AT THE AGGIE

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