

What Can We Do with the Dome?

By Philip Morgan

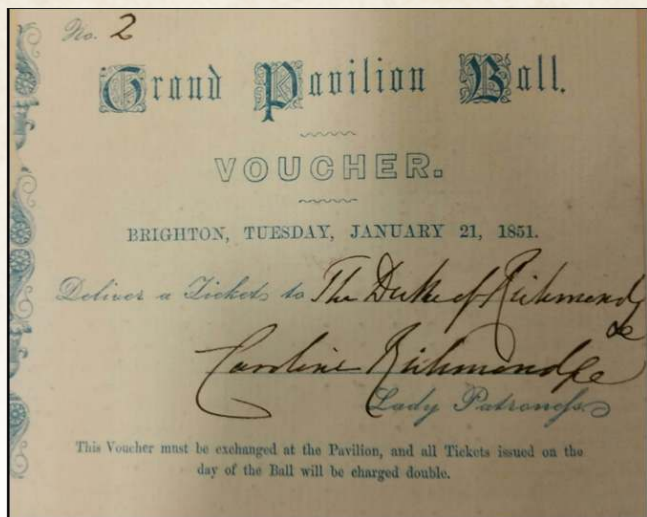


When in February 1845, Queen Victoria and Albert went out for what would become their last solo walk in Brighton, they were pursued by a 'set of unmannerly curs that poked their noses under the bonnet of a queen' and "hunted the royal couple to the very gates of their palace." This reinforced Victoria's opinion "that the people here are very indiscreet and troublesome," and that the Royal Pavilion was too public to use as her summer residence. She left and never returned. The Royal Pavilion Estate was sold to the town commissioners by the Crown in 1850 for a knockdown price of £53,000. Within a year, they restored the Royal Pavilion and opened it to the public at sixpence a go. Then used

it for receptions, conferences banquets and balls.

But what to do with the old stables known locally as the Dome? They rented them out from 1856 to 1864 as

cavalry barracks, but this was never going to be a long-term solution for a piece of prime property in the heart of what was, thanks to the arrival of the railways in 1841,



a boom town. The suggestions ranged from a law court to a swimming pool, but eventually, the town commissioners decided by a small majority that what the city needed was a concert hall and assembly room.

Philip Lockwood, the town surveyor whose previous projects in Brighton included sewers, police stations, an abattoir and the iconic seafront bandstand, was handed the responsibility of overseeing the conversion. He spent £10,000 (the equivalent of £750,000) and opened it in 1867 with a capacity of 3000 and a massive chandelier lit by 520 gas jets.

A reporter from the Brighton Gazette observed that “the decorations are purely Saracenic and correct throughout. Mr Tony Dury with his well known taste has carried to a splendid completeness the decorations. No words of ours can sufficiently express our gratification with the good taste he has evinced.” Comfort was not high on the agenda, as the audience had only wooden chairs or benches to sit on. It was also apparently extremely draughty, but the opening concert on June 5th 1867, was, according to the Brighton Gazette, a success and featured “the most attractive and successful combination of talent ever witnessed in Brighton.”

The Brighton Dome and Corn Exchange went on from this auspicious beginning to become a home for everything from exhibitions



to roller skating



to the musical superstars of the day.

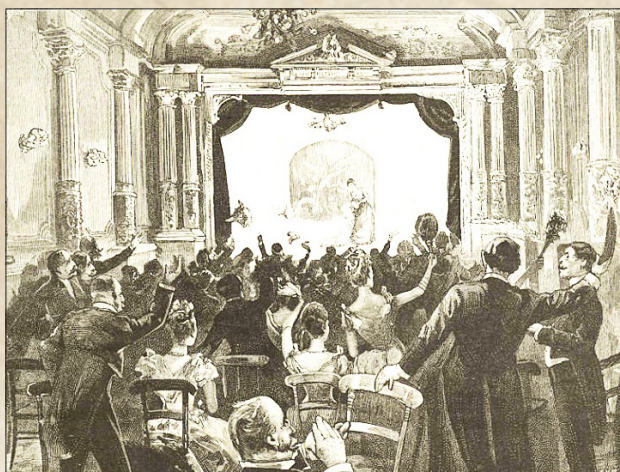
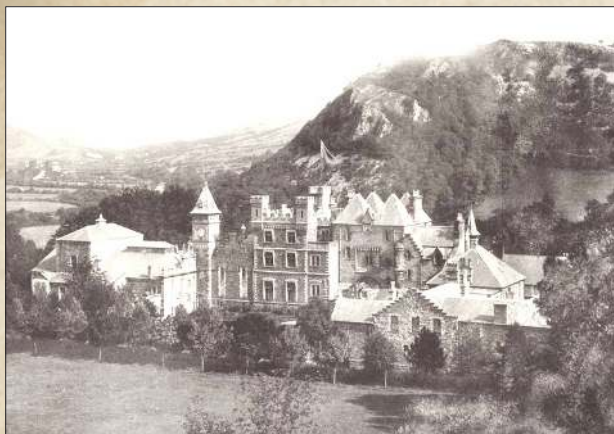


Adelina Patti (1843 -1919) who appeared many times at the Dome was the nineteenth-century equivalent of Taylor Swift. "Her delicate and pure warm high contralto voice of extensive range produced with an amazing accuracy and an impeccable trill brought audiences worldwide to their feet." In 1877, the great composer Giuseppe Verdi described her as "perhaps the greatest singer who had ever lived."



"She blazed when she walked," an admirer wrote. Her declared fans included Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens, Tolstoy, Rossini and George Bernard Shaw. She was close friends with royalty and had a legendary jewellery collection. She appeared in one performance wearing 3,700 diamonds, which today would be worth about £15,000,000. When she toured Mexico in 1887, the local gentry pawned their own jewellery to buy the incredibly high-priced tickets. The president of Mexico gave her a solid gold crown, a gold locket with his own portrait in it, and a bouquet of flowers containing a Chihuahua she instantly fell in love with, named Bonito and made into her inseparable companion. When she appeared in Brighton, special late trains had to be arranged to get her audience home. This wasn't necessary for her as she always travelled in her own private railway carriages, complete with embossed leather seats.





We can get a flavour of what it must have been like to see her and other superstars at the Dome from the music critic of the Brighton Gazette on October 7th 1870. "The Pavilion Dome on Thursday evening last was again the scene of one of those remarkable scenes which no other town or city in Europe can produce. The sentiment in the auditorium of the immense and brilliant throng who were literally alive with eager expectation was beyond description. She has appeared in London, Paris,

and St Petersburg. She has entranced thousands and seen splendid opera houses crowded ceiling to floor with enthusiastic admirers, but even Patti was struck with the unique spectacle before her and was clearly intensely gratified with the hearty welcome she received."

Although only five foot two, Patti had no problem standing up for herself. She insisted on being paid \$5000 (\$100,000 when adjusted for inflation) a night in gold before each performance. Her

name had to be on the top of the bill at least one third larger larger than anyone else's. She refused to attend rehearsals unless she felt like it sang only operas she chose and had trained her parrot to shout 'Cash, cash,' whenever her promoter came into the room. When she eventually retired at 62, she went to live in her castle in Wales.

Where she had built a scaled down replica of the auditorium in Bayreuth as her private concert hall.

The castle had a private railway connected directly to the mainline network so she could travel in her own train wherever and whenever she wanted. This was not unreasonable, given that she often travelled with 45 wardrobe trunks for herself and one for her Chihuahua who had a different suit for each day of the week and silk nightgowns. Adelina performed for a remarkable 63 years and gave her last public performance on October 24th 1914, at a charity concert.

