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FACILITY DRILL

Blog - 2018 - March

Albert Memorial

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PDF Date: 6 April 2019

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Recently we went to see the Albert Memorial which is on the south east corner of Kensington Gardens in Central London. I had seen pictures of it and realised that I had never seen it, despite several years of scouring London for places of interest to visit. We chose a dry sunny day and walked through St James's Park, past Buckingham Palace and through Green Park, arriving at the eastern end of Hyde Park. We then walked along the edge of the Serpentine. a long narrow lake on the south side of the park. There were birds everywhere, swans, geese, ducks, pigeons, crows and a few starlings, and crowds of people standing around feeding them, sitting on the benches watching them, and taking photos of their friends being besieged by expectant feathered friends, with everything from phones to business-like large cameras. It was like a scene on a Victorian postcard, minus the long dresses and top hats, with everyone walking up and down to enjoy the park, lake and sunshine. We had our sandwiches much further along, but we were still accompanied by a few seagulls, and one slightly lame pigeon who got a personal supply of crumbs without having to compete for them.

When we reached the memorial, I was surprised at its size, as I had imagined it to be about 10 metres high. It is actually 54 metres (176 feet) high. On the covered plinth sits the golden figure of Albert under an ornate canopy and above that a spire rises steeply, topped by figures of angels and a cross. The whole is densely covered in friezes, carvings, sculptures, mosaics, decorative artworks and inscriptions. At the corners are statues representing agriculture, commerce, engineering and manufacture. The monument is contained within a square of elaborate red and gold painted railings. There is a sculpture group at each corner representing the continents of the world, with figures and an animal: Europe with a bull, Africa with a camel, Asia with an elephant, and the Americas with a bison.

Prince Albert married Oueen Victoria in 1840 but died of typhoid in 1861 at the age of 42. He had requested that no statues of him should be made but despite this many memorials were raised throughout the country and throughout the British Empire. This one took two years to design and agree on, and was opened in 1872. The figure of Albert was put in place in 1875. Unfortunately the engineering and manufacture that the Victorians developed and pursued with such vigour contributed to the atmospheric pollution that gradually destroyed the gold leaf, and at the beginning of the twentieth century the statue was painted black. Restoration took place in 1990 and the whole monument was cleaned, restored, repainted and re-gilded.

There is much detail to see but it is all at a distance, and the only way to overcome the limitation of the enclosing railings is to use the zoom on the camera, so that it can be captured and viewed later, on the computer screen in the comfort of home. There are tours held each month so that visitors can see the monument close up. Opposite the monument is the Albert Hall, and in nearby Kensington to the south are the Science Museum, Natural History Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, and Imperial College London. These were created with the profits from the Great Exhibition of 1851, which Albert was the driving force behind and which was intended to improve business and trade. As Prince Consort, Albert took on the role of initiator of reforms in trade and the modernising of education, which benefited both industry and the working classes. The area of the museums was nicknamed "Albertopolis", which was not only a bit of fun but also a slight satire on the ambitious mission he had set himself. Judging by the crowds still thronging these institutions some 160 years later, his efforts to provide these centres of scientific education and research are his best memorial.

Albert Memorial

I have one puzzling question about this memorial, which is colourful and in pristine condition, and that is how the pigeons are kept off, seeing as there are so many cosy and sheltered corners and ledges where they could roost . The use of rows of spikes to discourage perching by pigeons is now widespread. In one covered market in London they broadcast a sound file of intermittent pigeon alarm squawks. Trafalgar Square is devoid of pigeons now that feeding is not allowed and I think this is probably the answer. They are all at the other end of the park by the café, where people sit and eat. Or maybe the pigeons are just staunch Victorians and, in deference to Prince Albert, respectfully sit instead in the surrounding trees, silently thanking him for his wonderful museums a short distance away that attract a steady and endless supply of snack eating and crumb dropping visitors. (821 words)