



Ten years ago, we were all agog with excitement at the dawn of a new millennium. Neil Richardson wrote a report on the Millennium Dome and we re-print it for this edition of Magna in a reflective mood.

I remember the original debates about the Dome project, started by Michael Heseltine during the days of Conservative Government of 1993-1997. At the time, it was felt that the significance of the occasion, the start of a new Millennium, required something really spectacular and of international significance. Greenwich was chosen because of its importance as the origin of the meridian line from which time is counted. The ambition was to produce something memorable, such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Festival of Britain in 1951.

As an ambition it had merit. What the ambition lacked was two-fold. The first was a failure to understand and acknowledge that the celebration was only really meaningful within a Christian framework. Once this issue had been fudged, there was never going to be a real heart to the project, a unity of purpose which would bring verve and spirit. The was stunningly evident on every visit to the Dome which I made. The second failure involved a lack of the political will to pay for the Dome out of the public purse. A decision was made by the then Conservative Government that no money raised by taxation should be spent on the Dome. This decision was confirmed by a Labour Government. Indeed, Chris Smith, MP, in his piece in the Dome Guide Book, even boasted of this fact. It was agreed that the costs could be borne by three effectively private resources: Millennium Lottery money, private sponsors and the predicted 12 million visitors from all over the world who would pay for entrance. With hindsight, it may appear obvious that this was the wrong decision. It was taken for political reasons by a Government which did not wish to be seen using too much public money but working to reduce taxation. On reflection, if the project was to be a national project, perhaps it would have been wiser to make the decision from day one to spend public money and make the whole show free to the public. After all, the national Lottery is a form of taxation, albeit voluntary taxation, and people were encouraged to buy lottery tickets, as a way of supporting good causes. This was intended to obviate the need for higher levels of taxation and boost the revenues of charities. This was a major miscalculation as people increasingly resented how the lottery money was disbursed and saw spending it on the Dome as not really the sort of project which is considered to be a good cause by any sensible person.



The two things that went badly wrong with the Dome were that the costs soared, (but who could not have predicted that?) and the visitors totalled only 6 million, not the 12 million budgeted for and anticipated. The visitor totals were affected by both the appalling press coverage of the Dome, painting it as a complete flop and the price structure which was too high (£20 per ticket). The Dome was, nevertheless, one of the most popular attractions in the country throughout the year. Those who did visit the Dome mostly liked what they saw and enjoyed themselves. As the year went by, the Company found ways of reducing the cost of tickets and of course, many thousands of children visited free of charge in school groups, from many parts of the country. The criticism that the Dome was built in London and not in another part of the country was understandable, but many people from far afield came to London and took advantage of its other facilities as they came to see the Dome. It was always going to be controversial, but Greenwich and the capital city seemed the obvious place, really

Our Town Story

I visited the Dome for the first time on 7th January, 2000 as part of the London Borough of Ealing's **Our Town Story**, sponsored by McDonald's Restaurants. One of the unquestionable successes of the whole Dome saga, the **Our Town** stage was to be the public expression of many local authorities and schools throughout the year. McDonald's Restaurants deserve a lot of credit for sponsoring this very attractive project. Ealing was second to go, preceded only by Camden, and the presentation was a triumph. It involved about 7 schools and a children's theatre group, co-ordinated by the Drama teacher at Cardinal Wiseman High School in Greenford. The presentation showed the various ways in which Ealing's life has changed over the years, using the famous people and the characteristics of the Borough with a witty attitude and energetic performance from the many children and young people involved. As the then Chair of the Ealing Borough Education Committee, I was delighted to be asked to appear on the stage during the performance, along with the Mayor, during the final music and dance sequence! For part of the performance, I sat next to a young man who turned out to be Charlie Round-Turner, the composer of the music in the show. Having heard his music, I took the plunge and decided there and then to ask him to compose an anthem for the Holy Cross Choir. He readily agreed and this strange accident of fate ended up in a commission which was first performed on Trinity Sunday, 2000, in the presence of the composer.

In all, I saw five **Our Town Stories** in the Dome, among them Rotherham, Sefton and Harrow. The Rotherham story had me in tears as they reminisced about the Miners' Strike and the manner in which it divided families in their community. Harrow's offering was very poor indeed. Apparently, the only people to live in Harrow since early pre-Christian days are small Asian girls! They performed very well, but what an unrepresentative selection that was, and no mention at all of Harrow School! How strange.

My introduction to the Dome was, therefore, a pleasant and enjoyable experience and Marion and I remember dragging ourselves out of bed and along the Greenford Road to join the others and catch the coach at 6am. As we arrived in Greenwich, the light was only just dawning and the Dome looked superb with the purple and red lighting picking out the features of what is, above all, a very fine structure. I visited the Dome as an adult helper with two schools and it was clear that children were interested by many of the Zones and impressed by the structure itself, set on the Greenwich Meridian and lying alongside the busy River Thames. My reflection is that the Dome was, on balance, a very good place to visit, but oh, what a series of missed opportunities to have done something so much better.

The Main Show

Nowhere was this missed opportunity better exemplified than in the Main Show. On the positive side, it was performed by a huge number of committed and skilful young men and women who were obviously enjoying themselves and putting all they had into the performance. The technical side of the Show was also a strength, with spectacular effects involving movement high up in the Dome and with performers dropping down on bungee ropes. The problems concerned what on earth it was all meant to mean. It purported to be some kind of mythological story of love triumphing over problems, or something, but why on earth invent such a myth when the Bible has in it a wide range of myths all asking for professional treatment? And in such a large

theatre, the story-telling aspect of the Show was difficult to deliver coherently. I came away impressed by the performance but bewildered as to what I was supposed to understand from it. The technical achievements of the Main Show were truly impressive, but applied in an enterprise and a manner which failed to do themselves justice.

The Zones

The Dome contained 14 Zones of differing quality. As one entered the Dome, the first thing to observe was the **Body Zone**, sponsored by Boots the Chemist, L'Oreal and Roche, which was probably the most well-known Zone and the one with the longest queues. The large model of a body was attractive to look at but the contents were an insult to the poor souls who queued for 90 minutes to see them. What a shocking waste of space the Body Zone was! The **Play Zone** was enjoyable, although not on crowded days, with an interesting selection of ideas and games to try out. **Shared Ground**, sponsored by Camelot, was a study of what it is like to live in a community, and quite interesting, inviting visitors to speak their comments into a permanent record of life today in Britain. The **Journey Zone**, sponsored by Ford, was also quite interesting and the collection of travel artefacts was impressive, in a museum-like way. **Living Island** was largely a pointless reminder that we pollute our environment too much. **Home Planet**, sponsored by British Airways and BAA, was a fun experience for small children with a decent amount of educational interest. **Self-Portrait**, sponsored by Marks and Spencer, was almost there, in the interesting department. The Gerald Scarfe models of the Queen and Tony Blair were quite amusing. On the ramp up to the centre of the zone were fixed hundreds of small cards containing a picture and a quotation from individuals who proposed something or someone as representative of the best of British qualities. Included were some of the usual suspects like Margaret Thatcher or Tony Benn, but they included the idiosyncratic choices of Fish and Chips, squirrels and the Scouts! The **Faith Zone**, sponsored by the now famous Hinduja Foundation, was an interesting exhibition, but worthy rather than sparkling, and tiring to stand around reading lots of text or watching videos. The **Talk Zone**, sponsored by BT was flashy, but although I visited it several times, I found nothing much to take away with me to remember. The **Mind Zone**, sponsored by BAE Systems and Marconi contained things which were, to me, more weird than interesting, such as a computer through which you could change your sex and skin colour, or see yourself as an older person. Not sure why, really. Perhaps it was too clever for me? The **Rest Zone** was a quaint idea, a bit like returning to the womb, perhaps? A sense of fragility was present here, as though we were present at the scraping of some barrel or other! The **Money Zone** was a waste of space as was the **Jewel exhibition**, later to star in a James Bond-like robbery attempt. The **Work Zone** and **Learning Zone**, sponsored by Manpower and Tesco respectively, were on the whole good to visit. One of the special gems, out of a lot of ordinary exhibitions, was the film *The Magic Seed* by David Puttnam. This film, lasting about 10 minutes, was beautiful and inspirational, as well as witty and innovative in its presentation. The film opens with a row of teachers sitting on a stage in a school hall, waiting for a girl to arrive. She is late, and as the lights go down, an actress rushes in through the theatre and then appears to climb onto the stage to take part in assembly. Very effective. And at the end, as the screen rolls up, there she is again, beckoning the audience into the infinite garden of learning beyond the screen. What a lovely 10 minutes.

Food and drink

I had lunch at the **Sea Bar** on every occasion I attended, and loved the oysters and cold dry white wine! On one occasion, I took my daughter Hannah to the Dome and having been recommended the **Red Boot** Pub, just outside the Dome, we went in for a drink at the end of the day. To her shock, however, they had run out of her favourite Jack Daniels, so it wasn't such a great pub after all!

On the whole, I am glad that both the Governments concerned persevered with the Dome. I was sorry that it didn't have more of a Christian heart or a Christian emphasis, but I felt strangely at home there, under the enormous canopy. The Dome felt good to be in and I would have liked it to survive as a visitor attraction in the future. I certainly hope that it will remain a permanent feature of the London skyline and the riverscape. So, you see, I started off as a sceptic, but I ended up as a convert!

Illustrations by David Clarke