

To create one of London's leading institutions you didn't need to be bewhiskered and beknighted, but it helped. During Queen Victoria's Age of Expansion, a transatlantic steamship journey decreased from 22 days to under five. This rendered the shrinking world ripe for exploration, population and, occasionally, appropriation. The mutton-chopped gentlemen, who retrieved rubber plants from the Amazon and dinosaur bones from Australia, preserved the fruits of an expanding empire for reasons noble, commercial and in some cases plain daft. Their legacy is a globalised playground of flora, fauna and Victorian structures that are works of art in themselves.

# INSTITUTIONS OF LONDON

Past these walls.

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# The British Library

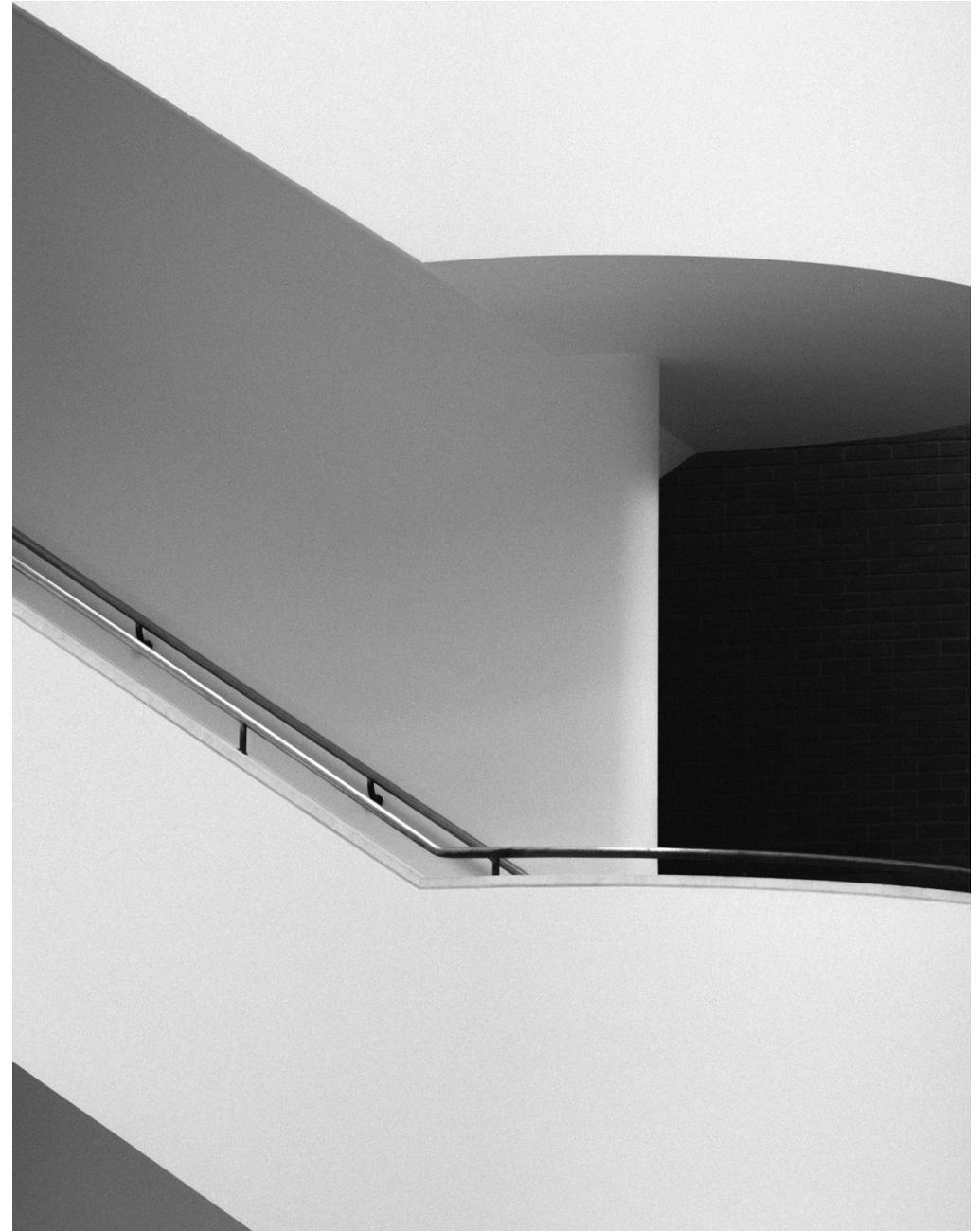
THE BRITISH LIBRARY, 96 EUSTON ROAD, LONDON, NW1 2DB

In the 15th century, Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable type printing press. This meant that his bibles could be cranked out, rather than laboriously copied by hand, as 'hot metal' letters inscribed a version of the truth in indelible ink. Theologian monk Martin Luther used Gutenberg's press to dispute the teachings of the Catholic church. In two weeks his Theses circulated through his native Germany. After two months the book had gone viral, challenging the dominant faith in all four corners of Europe. The printed word had changed the world.

A first edition of the Gutenberg Bible sits in the British Library, a modern building that abuts Sir George Gilbert Scott's Gothic fortress of St Pancras Station. It's cautiously displayed in a gallery as cool, dark, quiet and carpeted as an Abu Dhabi Marriot during Ramadan. Curators advise visitors to wear an extra layer while browsing. Visitors may also peruse Shakespeare's first folio and Audubon's magical Birds of America. Plus John Lennon's hand-written lyrics for She Said She Said. The song sheet contains the word 'crap', which had to be omitted prior to recording at the Abbey Road Studios across Regent's Park, lest the song be banned as obscene.

Indeed two thousand years of societal change can be studied and shared as the building forms a receptacle for every publication produced in the United Kingdom. There's audio interviews, film scripts, pop videos and 60 million newspapers issues from around the globe. Not to mention every website with the suffix .uk, preserving a digital memory of how websites dedicated to cake baking and bottom spanking have evolved and, in some cases, merged. (Yes, it's true!) Cartographers can browse, for example, maps of Jonathan Swift's Lilliput, J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth and Winnie the Pooh's 100 Acre Wood. Such examples become overwhelming when one discovers the library is sent 8,000 new items every day. Or around three million per year.

To examine most of these, one's desires are ordered via the library website, then delivered to one of 11 Reading Rooms. Want to peruse the diaries of Colonel Charles Sibthorpe, who attended a "whimsical feast" inside a dinosaur skeleton, which is just the kind of wacky thing Victorian gentlemen did? These can be delivered to the Manuscripts Reading Room. On your way out look for the bust of Sir Joseph Banks, an old Etonian explorer whose books, maps, journals and portraits are also held in the world's largest archive.





# Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW, RICHMOND, TW9 3AE

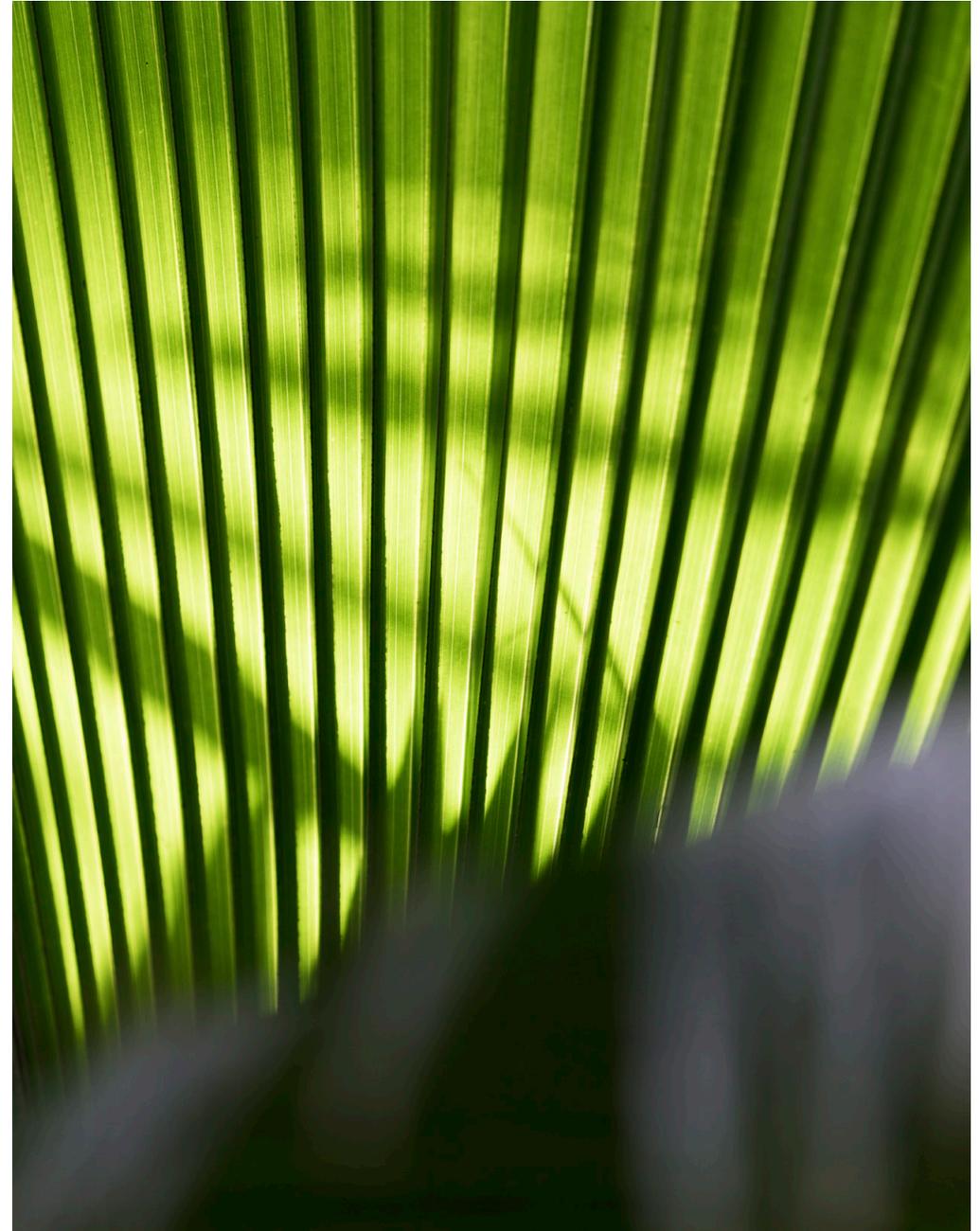
Sir Joseph Banks was the luxuriantly coiffured botanist who accompanied Captain James Cook on his first circumnavigation. Their mission was to find evidence of Terra Australis Incognita or 'unknown southern land'. In 1770 the crew discovered so many species that they nicknamed their Australian landfall Botany Bay. Before sailing home a conquering hero, Banks had cultivated eucalyptus, had a New Zealand island named after him and become the first European to spot a kangaroo.

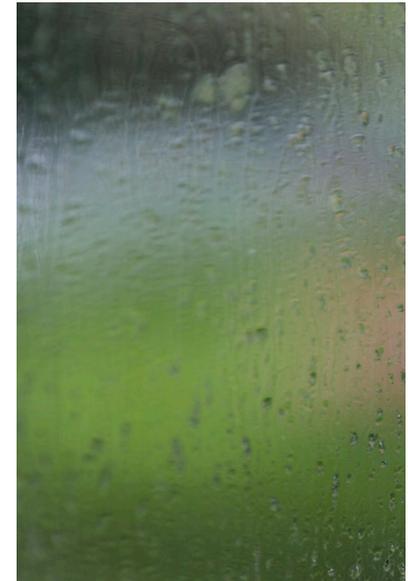
Under Banks' direction, the Royal Botanic Gardens dispatched gentlemen collectors to the farthest reaches of the map. These include William Bligh of the HMS Bounty, who was commissioned to transplant breadfruit from the Pacific to sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Spoiler alert: his mission didn't end well. Banks' greatest contributor was monomaniac plant hunter Francis Masson. The Scotsman endured pirate capture, political imprisonment and imminent execution to return 1,700 new species to Kew. The most famous is a Jurassic cycad, *Encephalartos altensteinii*, plucked from a voyage with Captain Cook in 1775. It's now the oldest pot plant in the world.

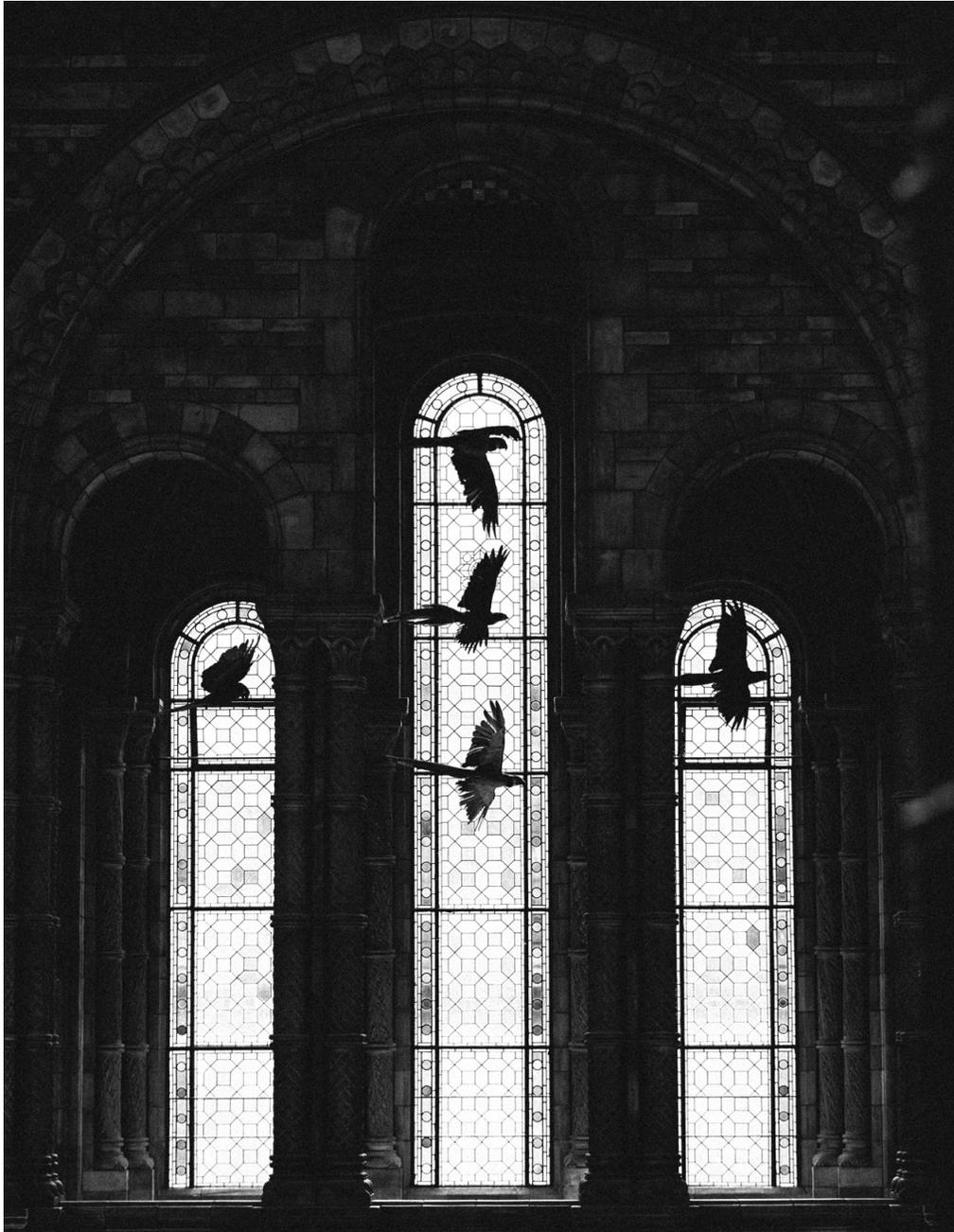
Masson's cycad lords it over Kew's Palm House. The world's largest glass structure at the time, now a wondrous fug of emerald forest, was built in 1844 expressly to house

tropical species purloined by top-hatted Victorians. That same year Galapagos returnee Charles Darwin wrote a letter to Sir Joseph Hooker, a future director of Kew. The note stated "that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable" but evolved through natural selection. Whoa, Charlie! Kew repaid Darwin's confidence with botanical proof of his ungodly theory, as well as bananas grown in the Palm House to nourish the evolutionist in his dotage. On his deathbed, Darwin gifted his dried plant specimens to Kew's Herbarium, where seven million plants provide a global seed bank and DNA database for the majority of living fauna.

But what schoolboy cares about evolutionary theory when you have the *Amorphophallus titanum*? Deep in the Princess of Wales Conservatory, planet earth's largest inflorescence stands erect and empurpled. Once per decade it ejaculates its wicked hum of rotting carcass, a tragic aroma that attracts flesh flies in its native sweatbox of Sumatra. In Indonesian, the plant is named bunga bangkai: the carrion flower. In Latin, its terms phallus (for 'penis') and titan (for 'giant') were deemed too much for British viewers. This caused naturalist Sir David Attenborough to rename the species *Titan arum* in his BBC series *The Private Life of Plants*.







## Natural History Museum

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, CROMWELL RD, KENSINGTON, LONDON, SW7 5BD

Little wonder that Oscar-winning actor Sir Peter Ustinov put his name to 'One of Our Dinosaurs Is Missing'. The paleo-heist caper is a Disney classic. In a way that was deemed socially acceptable back in 1975, an aristocratic posse of British nannies outwitted a karate-chopping cadre of Chinese, the leader of whom is played by a sinocised Ustinov himself. Hmmm. The escapade co-starred the Natural History Museum's diplodocus and blue whale skeletons. It also inspired an entire generation of junior botanists to visit dioramas of taxidermied zebra being attacked by moulting lions.

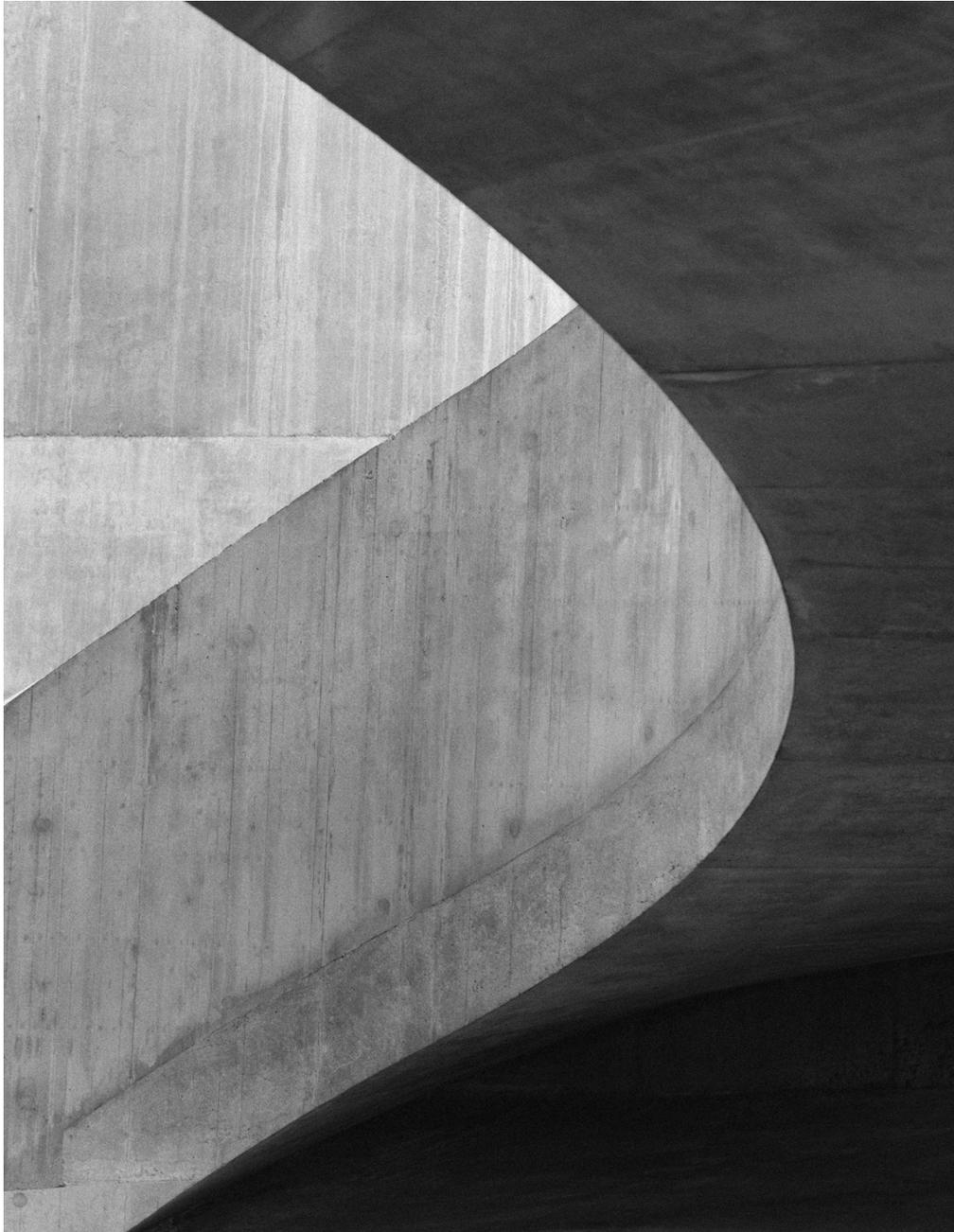
The museum has a similarly suspect backstory. From 1881, the Romanesque edifice acted like a railway terminus for colonial finds. These exotic species, some of them collected by Darwin, were installed in the face of newly industrialised London. At the same time, the city's underclass was enjoying rapid urbanisation's pros (the world's first underground railway) and cons (a deadly sulfur dioxide fog that claimed over 11,000 lives in three days the year before the museum opened).

Above the Hintze Hall, 162 botanical illustrations showed the fruits of an empire that visitors worked night and day to fuel. The tobacco plant, rubber trees and the opium

poppy, all bathed in a golden light. Given the arrogance of the age, the museum's superintendent, Sir Richard Owen, was forward-thinking. He exhibited living animals in the west wing, and extinct species in the east wing, perhaps encouraging viewers to rethink their wildfire ride to modernity. He also coined the word dinosaur, which means 'Terrible Reptile'.

Then as now, seeing a massive dinosaur skeleton – rather than faunal erudition – was probably top of visitors' must-sees. In 1905 all 292 pieces of 'Dippy' the diplodocus were assembled to uniform delight. Following the Ustinov film, the celebrity skeleton moved under the gilded ceiling of Hintze Hall in 1979. Alas, last year Dippy departed on a nationwide tour to be replaced by the aged skeleton of a female blue whale. Named 'Hope', she recalls the fact 250,000 of the species thrived at the start of Queen Victoria's reign, dropping to a mere 400 in 1966. That year the London round of the International Whaling Commission banned blue whale hunting, with numbers recovering to 20,000 today. Hope also presides over a more inclusive chapter of the Natural History Museum, where apps, group yoga and even silent discos bring modern Londoners closer to species unwittingly preserved by those five generations past.





## Tate Modern

TATE MODERN, BANKSIDE, LONDON, SE1 9TG

To site a power station opposite St Paul's Cathedral, the blueprint needed to be as beautiful as it was functional. For the latter was London's tallest building, the nation's largest cathedral, the final-send-off point for Britain's saviour triumvirate: Nelson-Wellington-Churchill. In the 1890s Bankside Power Station rose astride the Thames in Victorian red brick. It exemplified changing moods in the world's first megacity. Here a population nudging five million souls demanded printed Christmas Cards, safety matches and gramophones, among other electrically produced mod-cons. Residents showed minimal concern for Bankside's racketing turbines that spun coal dust a mile high. In 1903 the power station was fined the piddling sum of £20 for 'creating smoke'.

The ever-expanding city pressed for more. Bankside B would deliver three times the capacity, and would rely on imported oil, not dwindling reserves of coal. Following his successful façade at Battersea Power Station, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (grandson of the St Pancras architect) was commissioned to add flamboyance to a financial necessity. A square chimney that recalls Giotto's campanile in Florence was, diplomatically, hobbled in size so it didn't outrank St Paul's across the river. While far below three underground tanks belched 67 tons of fuel into the fire each and every hour. Until international oil crises and three-day-weeks rendered the entire site as moribund as the British economy in the 1970s.

A shame, as the forlorn structure melded aestheticism with minimalism. It was London's largest blank canvas where individual beauty had paired with public duty, until it was crushed by globalism's changing tide. Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron flipped the equation on its head. The five-storey Turbine Hall became a cathedral to culture where annual installations called in international artists. A case in point is Carsten Höller's Test Site, where Italian grannies and Filipina nannies could scream down a space-filling serpentine of slides. Peregrine falcons, one of 400 bird species that live within a 20-mile radius of St Paul's, now hunt from the Bankside Power Station's chimney.

Better still, the project could be paid for in the free-wheeling way that London knows best. Sponsorship by Unilever, Hyundai and BP powered the Tate Modern – an institution originally financed by a sugar baron – into second place of Britain's most visited attractions, a whisker behind the British Museum. Meanwhile, the underground oil tanks reopened in 2016 to become the world's first museum galleries dedicated to live art, film and sound. Photovoltaic panels atop the Turbine Hall render the Tate Modern a low-carbon citadel of contemporary culture. Even the Victorians couldn't invent that.

