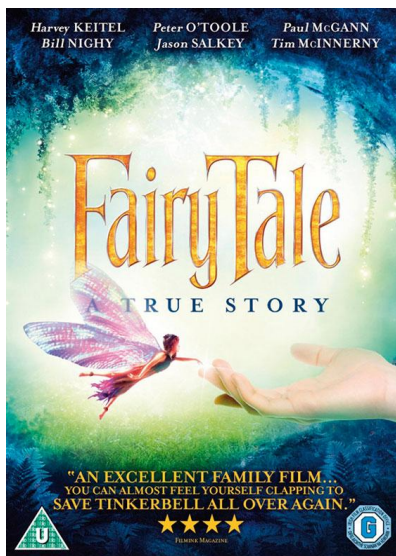


The Royal Zoological Surrey Gardens & Simon Drake's House of Magic

Researched and written by Simon Drake

In 1995 Simon Drake obtained the freehold of a rundown 4000 sq ft property in Chapter Road. Situated just over a mile as the crow flies, south of the river from the Houses of Parliament, the building was a former public house and had stood derelict for 7 years and had received little or no renovations for decades before that.

A year later Simon was hired as magical consultant to Director Charles Sturridge in pre-production on a movie called 'FairyTale: A True Story' which was about a long running news story in 1917 about five photographs taken by two young girls of fairies which were interpreted as evidence of psychic phenomena. Simon's other duties were to coach actor Harvey Keitel in the art of sleight of hand. Keitel was playing the part of Houdini, in between takes and on breaks Simon spent hours chatting about sleight of hand and acting technique with actor Peter O'Toole.



Slightly off topic but one of the conversations included this quote by O'Toole. 'Young man do you know what accomplished sleight of hand exponent has in common with a principle actor of The Royal Shakespeare Company? Simon guessed many things but was wrong. The great actor boomed the answer, "DRUDGERY MY BOY SHEER BLOODY HARD SLOG AND DRUGERY!" Anyway I digress.



One evening Simon returned home from a filming location and was presented with a small statuette which the gardeners found while digging the garden pond. Coincidentally the statuette bore a haunting similarity to the Victorian photos of which the whole move was about!

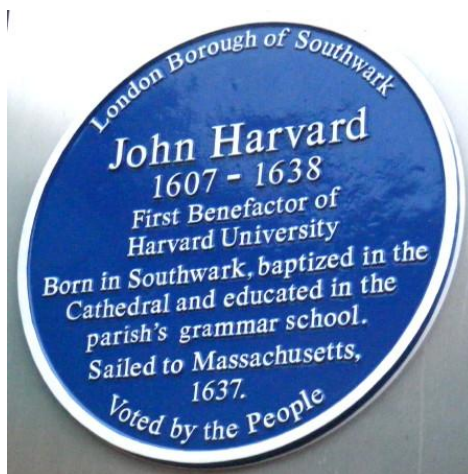


This is the statuette placed over the prints from the book.

They were, of course not real fairies, as it transpired the girls had cut them out from the Princess Mary Gift Book and posed with them for the famous shots.

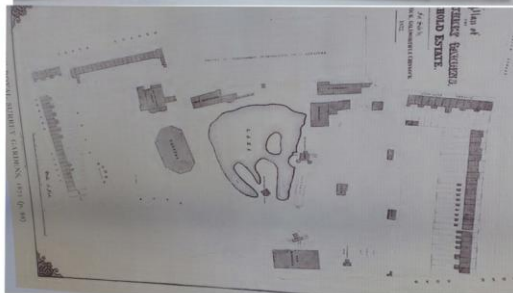
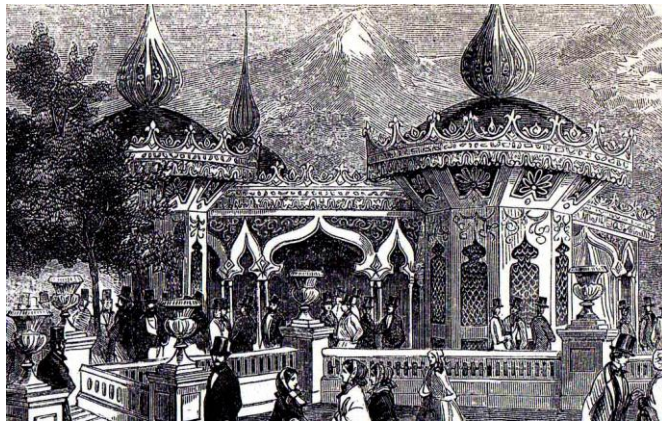


The statuette sparked off Simon's curiosity to delve into the history of his newly acquired building and on visits to the John Harvard records library in Borough he discovered a flood of quite extraordinary, largely forgotten London history.



The garden was the last part of the many months of renovations carried out under Simon's direction. The first of many discoveries was the similarity of the design of the new Red Room and the Victorian Pavilions of The Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens which had been literally over the garden wall some 150 years ago.





Entirely *by coincidence* and with absolutely *no prior knowledge*, Simon's House of Magic turned out to be very much in the tradition of the now forgotten, but once highly fashionable and glamorous Surrey Gardens.



House of Magic Garden in 1998

A chronological history of Surrey Gardens:



1834

Mr Edward Cross obtained permission from the Lord Holland of Walworth Manor to use the grounds as a menagerie, which he moved from his original base in the Strand. He named it The Surrey Zoological Gardens. It was set in 15 acres with a 3 acre lake. The whole gardens were utilised to the fullest extent and were built into the most splendid and lavish gardens. The entrances were in Manor Place and Penton Place. A huge glass conservatory was built, which was about 100 meters across, using 6000 ft of glass; it was at that time the largest building of its kind in England and built years before Crystal Palace was even thought of. It exhibited cages of lions, tigers, pygmy elephants, a female gorilla, baboons, bears, a huge variety of birds, reindeer, llamas, a pair of dromedaries presented by the King of Egypt and other wild animals including a one-horned Indian rhino, for which Cross paid £800. The zoo also housed a giant tortoise which the children could ride. Many animals were gradually added until there were over 170 different species in the collection.

The principle walks and avenues were planted with every description of native and exotic forest trees that would endure the climate. The lake was spotted with islands, shrubberies and plantations of great richness. Numerous rustic-looking buildings with thatched roofs, each of them added to the picturesque nature of the grounds. The conservatory exhibited examples of tropical quadrupeds and birds amidst the exotic plants. The lions, tigers and leopards were housed in separate cages toward the centre of the building around them was a colonnade, which supported the glazed roof and aviaries. Beyond this was a paved area for spectators and around this area was a stream full of gold, silver and other tropical fish. The grounds were laid out by Henry Phillips, the author of *Sylva Florifera* and were extremely beautiful and varied. Besides the conservatory there were many other movable cages and aviaries which were placed around the grounds. One of the prettiest spots was the Beaver Dam, a small pond partly enclosed by rockwork.

1836

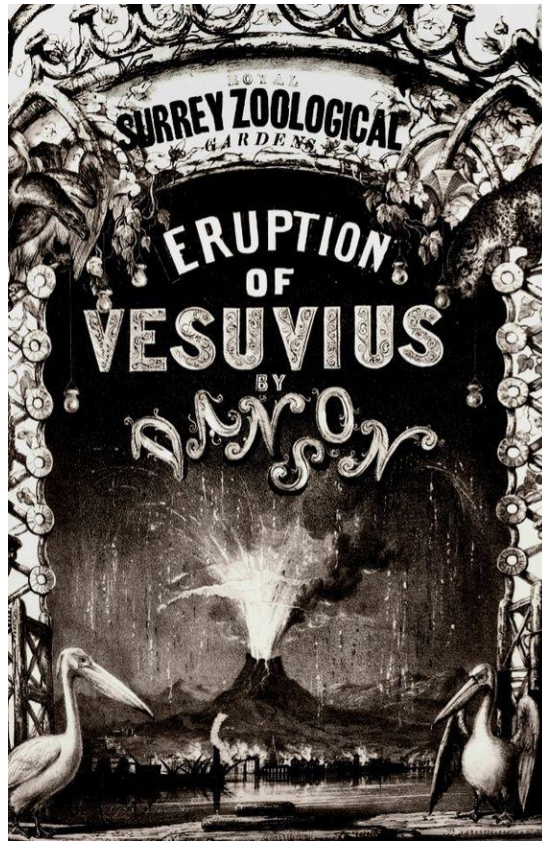
Giraffes were added to the zoo, which were brought over from Africa and looked after by an Arab boy named Fadallah. They were the first ever seen in England. Cross walked with them as quietly as possible from the Thames at Rotherhithe at four in the morning to avoid panic and the furore that may have occurred by residents seeing these strange creatures. Two died within a few years and were the subject of research by Richard Owen, who invented the word 'dinosaur'.



The Panoramas

1837

The lake was used as a foreground to huge panoramas. These were lavish and extraordinary themed outdoor spectacles. The first was a portrayal of Mount Vesuvius and featured magnificent fireworks as the eruption. The lake represented the Bay of Naples. This presentation ran for 2 years. This probably had its origins in the Ranelagh spectacles of around 1792 when an 80 ft high representation of Mount Etna erupted with flowing lava. It was the creation of George Danson, a theatrical scene painter who worked for Astley's. The well known pyrotechnician, Mr Borrett oversaw the incredible nightly fireworks. They had a massive team of builders and painters to create the huge backdrops and landscapes around the lake, using up to 250 thousand square feet of wood and canvas. These panoramas re-enacted volcanic eruptions, famous battles, dramatic events and ancient cityscapes. An average of 8000 visitors came per day, paying one shilling entrance fee. They were billed as 'rational entertainments' designed to educate as well as thrill.



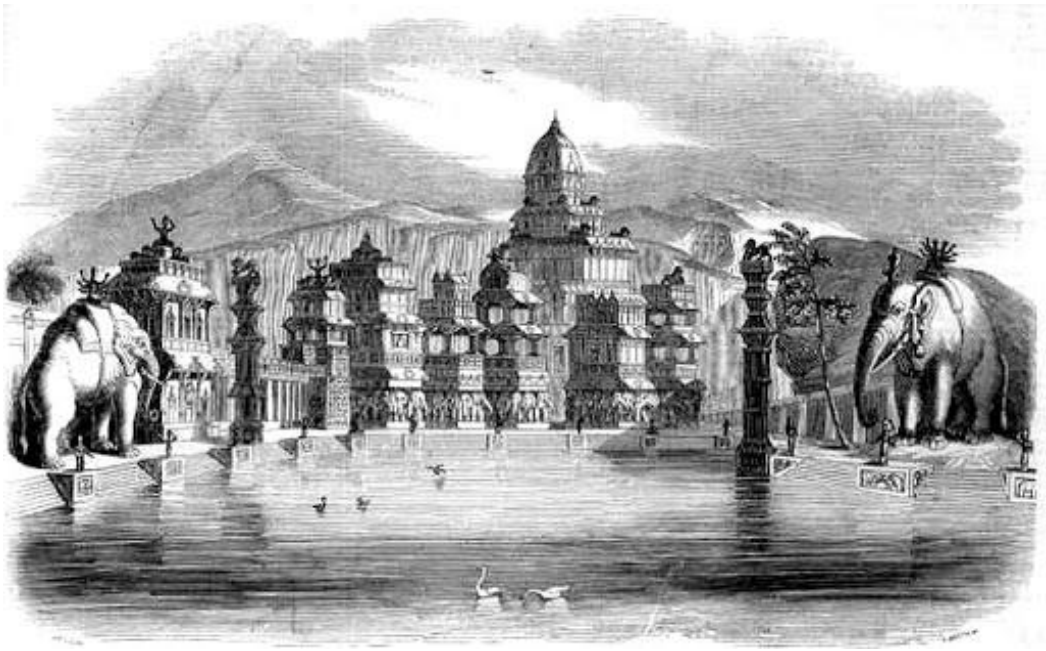
1839

A representation and re-enactment of the eruption of Mount Hecla, in Iceland, attracted over half a million people by its 100th performance. The same year they started the first concerts by the lake.



1841

A panorama of The City of Rome, which occupied 5 acres, the cross on St Peter's church in 'Rome' was 97 feet high. It was partly destroyed by fire and re-built.



1843

A panorama of The Temple of Ellora. A poem appeared in *The Comic Almanac*:

At the Surrey Menagerie everyone knows,
 Because 'tis a place to which everyone goes,
 There's a model of Rome, and as round it one struts,
 One sinks the remembrance of Newington Butts.
 And having a shilling laid down at the portal,
 One fancies one's self in the city immortal.

The panoramas were celebrated in newspapers and in verse but as time went on they appeared to become somewhat less 'rational'.



1844

In January P. T. Barnum and General Tom Thumb sailed for England to begin a European tour. The famous dwarf made a captive balloon ascent at the gardens in the 'Dolphin goldbeater's skin air bladder' A hot air balloon, or ballonnet rather, capable of lifting fifty or sixty pounds when filled with gas. The panorama that year was London during The Great Fire of 1666.



1847

A panorama of the sea battle of Gibraltar.

1848

A revival of a panorama of Rome. Victoria & Albert and the Royal children visit. They were especially interested by a friendship between a tiger and a dog, which lived in the same cage. The press had a field day and this story ran for a while.

1849

A panorama of the storming of Badajoz with 'new effects of real ordinance' including real battle scenes and firing cannons, which must have terrified the animals. In this same year Mr Jullien organised a series of summer promenade concerts in a large covered area by the lake, they played on four evenings a week.

1850

A panorama of Napoleon's passage over the Alps was mounted which included 'fifty thousand men in motion, who were made by an optical illusion to appear to dwindle gradually at different distances, to the various specks which the eye could track along the zigzag line of ascent towards the summit of the alpine pass. Where stood the Monastery of St Bernard, ready to receive the weary and half-frozen troops and their imperial master.'

1851

The year of the Great Exhibition.

1852

A panorama of Mount Etna.

1853

A panorama of Chusan & the Temple of Janus.

1855

A panorama of Sebastopol. Edward Cross died and his assistant & secretary, Mr Tyler, took over for a few years.

1856

A panorama of Constantinople & Scutari. The gardens were used for a public dinner for the Guards on their return from Crimea. The zoo was closed and the gardens were auctioned and the huge

Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall was erected on a part of its grounds. It held 12,000 people for Mr Jullien's high-class concerts and cost £18,000. Mr Jullien's orchestra was joined by eleven military bands, singers from the Royal Italian Opera and The Royal Surrey Choral Society making one thousand performers in all. The concerts were in aid of Mary Seacole, the heroic Jamaican woman, who went on her own initiative, like Florence Nightingale, to nurse the wounded in Crimea.



Mary Seacole

October 19, 1856 --- The Surrey Gardens Tragedy

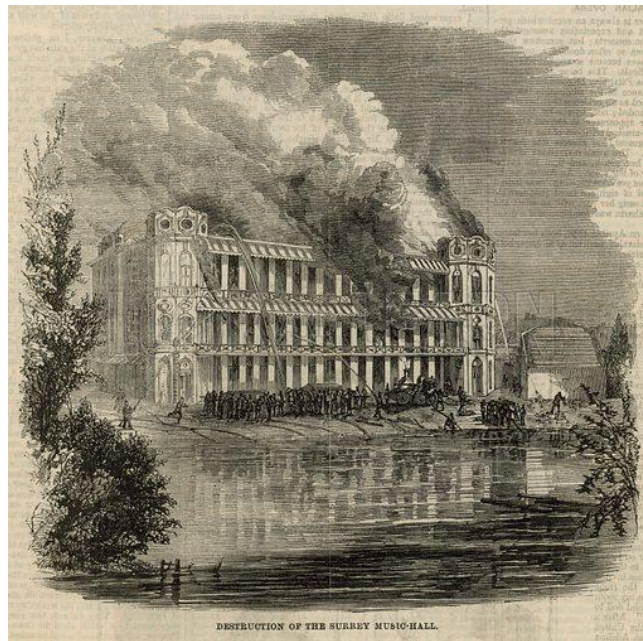


Rev. Charles Spurgeon

Eight people were crushed to death at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall when panic swept through a huge crowd gathered to hear 'the Cambridgeshire lad,' the Rev. Charles Spurgeon. At just 25 years old Spurgeon had established himself as the 'most wonderful preacher' in England. It was a Sunday evening fund-raiser to help the young Baptist build his dream tabernacle. The crowd is estimated at 14,000 in a hall designed for 10,000 with thousands more outside. The preaching has not even begun when people start surging toward the exits in terror. Some say they heard a cry of "Fire!" The jammed balconies began to sway. The stairways and limited exits are soon an horrific mass of tangled, desperate people.

1860

A panorama of The City of Venice.



1861

Music hall almost totally destroyed by fire in June this year. It was rebuilt.

1862

The giant panoramic idea was tried again with the city and Bay of Naples featuring the erupting Vesuvius and though a series of attractions were announced, the public didn't take to them and it was found that the place had lost its popularity. For a short time the Music Hall was used as a temporary base for St Thomas's hospital.

1872

A panorama of the Sultan's summer Palace on the Bosphorus.

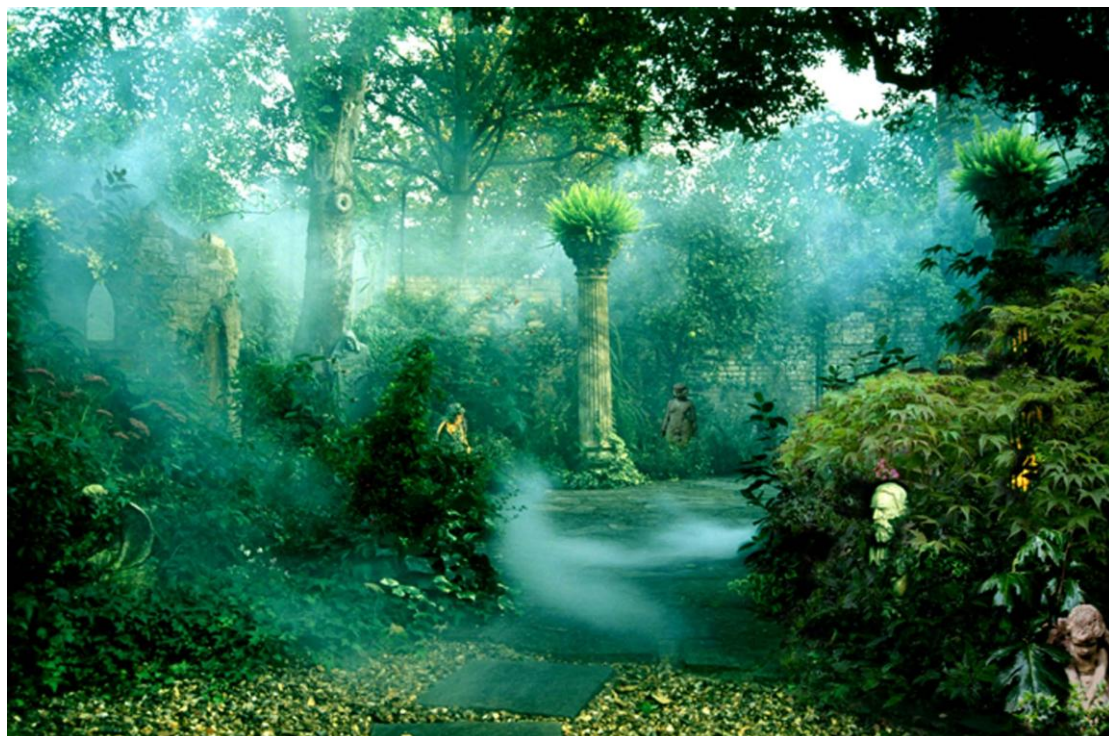
1877

The final event, a boxing match, took place. Surrey Gardens finally closes; the area was developed for housing and the marvellous gardens vanished beneath the closely packed streets: Sturgeon Road, Pasley Road, Manor Place, Borrett Road and Danson Road. Named after some of the people who were instrumental in the panoramas and Surrey Garden's history.

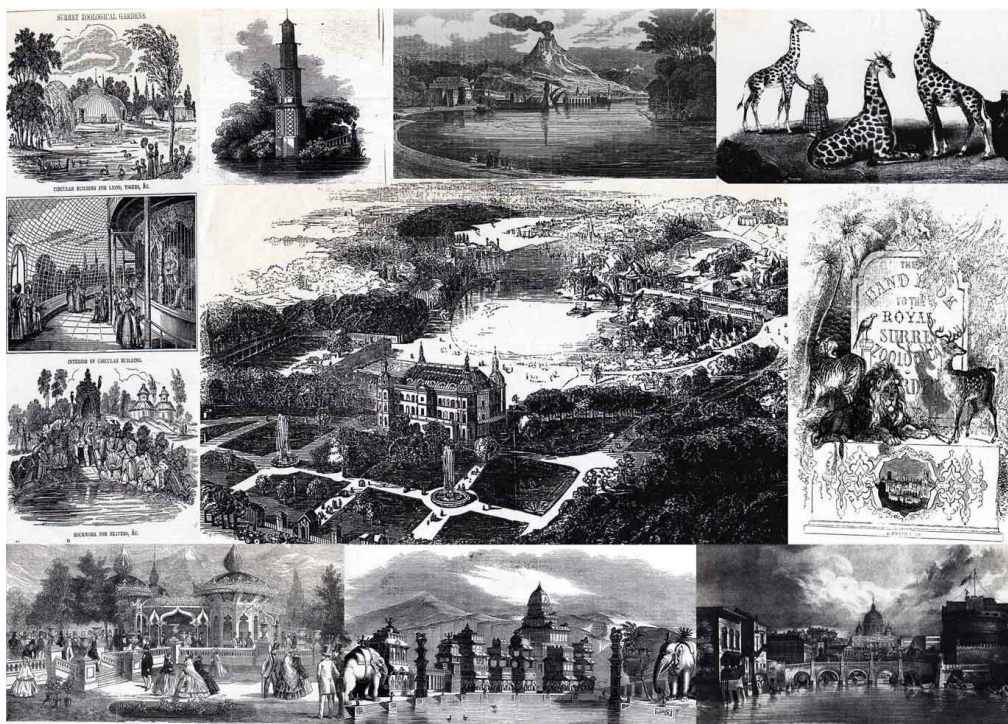


All that remained at the end of the century of the famous Surrey Gardens are a few artefacts in The Cuming Museum, including one of the tiger's skulls and a lovely sculpture of one of the giraffes,

The Surrey Gardens Memorial Hall, The Surrey Gardens Hotel, now converted into flats and two public houses: The Giraffe in Penton Place, which had an 18 foot painting of a giraffe on its exterior but was demolished in 2004 and The Surrey Garden Arms, Chapter Road which has now been restored to its early Victorian splendour as the House of Magic. In the Enchanted Garden, through which guests walk to enter the building, there is the old Surrey Garden Arms pub sign hidden behind the ivy on the back wall to the left of a small castle folly.



The Royal Zoological Surrey Gardens



The Surrey Garden Tavern

The building appears on maps from the late 1700's. It was most likely a small single story tavern to cater for the servants and land workers employed by the Lord of Walworth manor. They lived in small dwellings in Doddington Grove.

1859

First record in rate books as 30 Chapter Rd but marked as 'E' (empty) – probably due to re-construction. It is most likely this is when the second floor was added.

1861

Surrey Gardens Tavern (Alfred George Wyatt)

1865

Surrey Gardens Tavern (Thomas Catherwood)

1901

Surrey Gardens Tavern (William Adams)

1928

Surrey Gardens Tavern (Alfred Thomas Lingham)

1940

Due to bomb damage during the London Blitz and the loss of several houses, the street numbers were changed making the pub now number 9 Chapter Road

1958

The name was changed to Surrey Garden Arms (Jack & Ann Neal)



1988

The run-down pub closed down. Building remained empty and derelict for 7 years. Squatters move in, amongst them the actor Paul McGann, around the same time as starring in the film *Withnail and I*.



Coincidentally Paul McGann was also in the movie Fairy Tale



1995

Freehold obtained by Simon Drake. 5 months of extensive refurbishment and stripping back of the whole building back to early Victorian style and re-planting of the garden, including Tasmanian tree ferns, Doric columns and the building of a castle folly. Due to strange electrical anomalies (apparently due to an underground stream) and other phenomena, the dowser Gay Annand was brought in who, as well as suggesting effective remedies related the first of the many tales of the supernatural associated with the building.

1996

Re-named 'Simon Drake's House of Magic'. The first event was on 1st March for 120 people featuring tours of The Haunted Cellar, fortune telling on The Whispering Chair and Simon's 40 minute magical extravaganza with a musical opening act. Within a short time many present asked to have their own parties at the venue.

1997

The venue is engulfed with requests for corporate events and product launches, amongst them Microsoft's launch of Office 97 in the UK.

2000

Simon retires from 30 years of touring and doing shows outside his own venue, preferring the many in-house effects possible through built-in secret passages, lifts and bespoke lighting and special effects, all giving the appearance of being Victorian but state-of-the art high-tech under the vintage dressing.

2003

To compliment the many private and corporate events, monthly public events were started, with more at Halloween and many more during the Christmas season.

2005

The House of Magic voted 6th in the top 350 venues in the UK and the only one in the top 20 to be solely owned by an individual.

2006

The venue celebrated its 10th anniversary and Simon's 50th Birthday on 1st March.

2009

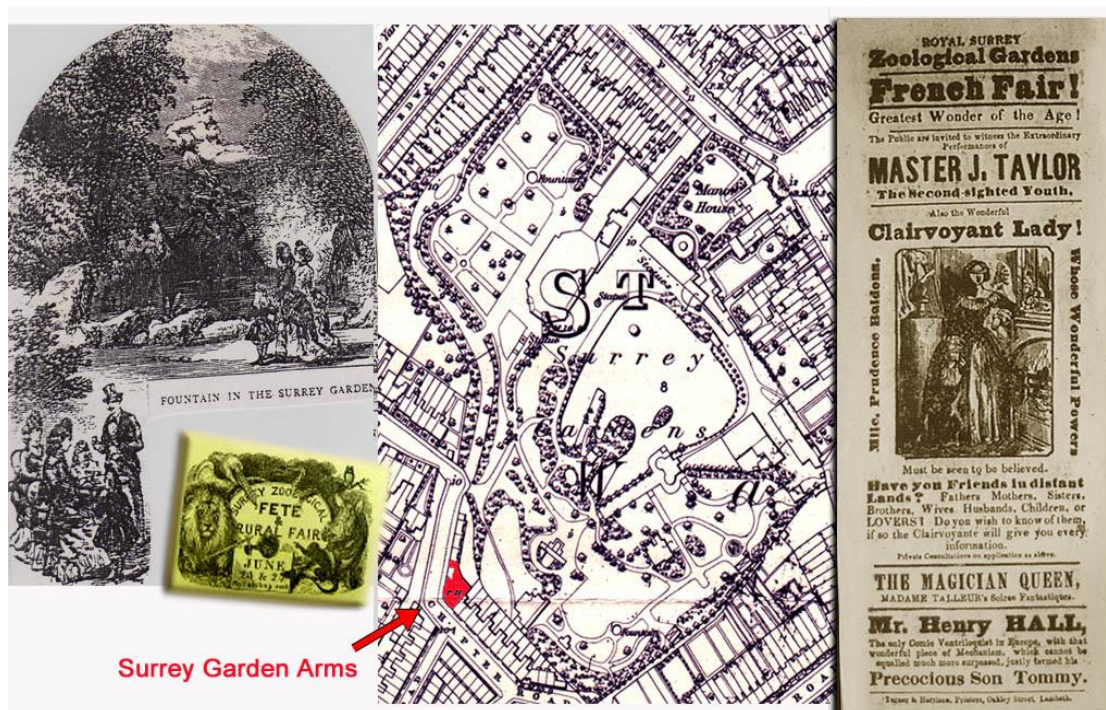
Following Simon's presentation to Simon Hughes MP, Annie Shepherd, Chief Executive of South Council and Caroline Pidgeon Lib Dem Councillor, Southwark Council held a Victorian themed celebratory event on the 25th July in what remains of the gardens entitled 'The Lost Zoo of Walworth'. Various animals were brought from Surrey Docks Farm, there were performances, magicians, clowns, Punch and Judy shows, guided tours of the area including a short visit to the House of Magic. Information about Surrey Gardens was provided with workshops and activities for children of all ages. Following this event council funds were allocated for more extensive planting in the small park that remains and permanent info boards.

2010

Simon married Abigail, taking on Theo as a step-son and their daughter Alice was born. By now many hundreds of events, parties, photo shoots, filming, launches, even Bah mitzvahs have been hosted in the venue.

2011

In September, Alice celebrated her first birthday with a small party. The theme was Alice in Wonderland.



Sadly there is now no trace of what was once a sensation of this city, The Royal Zoological Surrey Gardens apart from one single item left in the entire area and that is a cast iron Corinthian column.



It's almost certain that this column was 'borrowed' in the wee hours from a huge pile of them when the music hall was demolished and used in what was then a public house. This fantastic grade one listed column was most definitely not part of the original pub. It sits there today in front of the stage of The House of Magic.



Simon is still performing at his House of Magic at private parties, wedding events and monthly shows which are open to the public.

www.houseofmagic.co.uk



© S. Drake London 7-Sept-2011 with additions in 2022 and 2023