

# **The Crystal Palace Park: Beyond The Dinosaurs**

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and the Friends of Crystal Palace Dinosaurs



# PROJECT SUMMARY

[The Crystal Palace Park: Beyond the Dinosaurs Project](#) has been a collaboration between myself ([Dr. Chris Manias in the Department of History at King's College London](#)), and [the Friends of Crystal Palace Dinosaurs](#) (FCPD), a charity responsible for fundraising, conservation and promotion of the surviving structures of the Geological Courts of the Crystal Palace exhibition complex, built in south-east London in the mid-nineteenth century. These structures include famous reconstructions of dinosaurs as imagined by Victorian artists, engineers and scientists, and a range of other models, including: a smaller series of sculptures of extinct mammals; 'geological illustrations,' models of rock strata illustrating the geology of the UK, and how it connects to deep-time; and the 'palaeoplanting project,' a new initiative by the FCPD to document the plants at the site, and plant vegetation which matches the periods depicted in the sculptures.

Our impact project aimed to develop some new resources to provide interpretation for these lesser-known elements of the site, highlighting their existence, and using them to think about larger issues, around biodiversity, ecology, evolution, climate change, and deep time. We produced two major sets of resources: guide sheets, each giving a clear introduction and discussion of the significance of the mammal sculptures, illustrations and palaeoplanting project; and three narrative audio guides, giving accounts of the history and development of these aspects of the site, and linking current views with Victorian understandings. In doing so, we aimed to increase awareness of these aspects of the site among Crystal Palace Park users, connecting with adult audiences (FCPD's past outreach has often been focussed on children and young audiences), and encouraging reflection on the relations between history, deep-time and environmental change.



## HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

Since 2016, I have been running a cross-disciplinary research network entitled '[Popularizing Palaeontology: Current and Historical Perspectives](#),' involving humanities scholars, palaeontologists, artists and science communicators interested in the public role of the palaeontological sciences, and their implications for big issues of time, nature and biodiversity. Several of the trustees of the FCPD have been key members of this network, and we have been looking for ways to collaborate more formally for some time.

So, when the Major Projects call arose, we had a brainstorming meeting, and quickly settled on a theme for a project to examine and highlight the three non-dinosaur elements of the site. This connected very well and synergistically with some of our interests – the FCPD had been doing a lot of work around the Geological Illustrations and planting projects that they were very keen to write up and promote, and were also interested in linking up with new institutions like universities to develop their activities. Meanwhile, I had been working for a while on a book on the history of mammal palaeontology in the nineteenth century, which very directly connected to one of the themes being highlighted by the *Beyond the Dinosaurs* project. I also had general interests in the cultural value attached to lost ecosystems and environments and changing conceptions of geological time.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

Developing at the tail-end of the Covid-19 pandemic, the project was delivered in a hybrid fashion. We appointed Dr. Jennifer Crees as a researcher, who played a key role in organising and developing the project. We then had a series of online meetings to make initial plans and ran an online and in-person survey of people interested in Crystal Palace Park, as a way of generating ideas and making sure that the project would appeal to, and be useful for, our target audiences. This was very productive and meant that the design process integrated and clarified our audiences, in terms of their interests and what was meaningful for them. The survey had the added value of giving a current snapshot of how visitors and other interested parties understand and engage with the Crystal Palace Park site, and so will feed into the FCPD's future outreach projects.

Once we had developed proof-of-concept outlines for one of the sets of resources (the one on mammals) we held a workshop and some public events. At a research workshop at King's, we held talks on different aspects of the site and divided into groups to plan the resources in detail. We also held a public event on the first evening of the King's workshop, and on the second day had a site visit to Crystal Palace Park, which coincided with the book launch for [Mark Witton and Ellinor Michel's \*The Art and Science of the Crystal Palace Dinosaurs\* \(Crowood 2022\)](#). This gave us a full structure and plans for all the resources, which meant that we could continue working on them at our own pace.

In addition, members of the project participated in a [Heritage Open Day event](#) at the park in September, which involved having a catch-up meeting, and leading some walking tours around the site to test out the content of the guide sheets and audio guides. We then finalised the guide sheets and produced the audio guides. We have plans to develop similar resources for other aspects of the site – most notably the dinosaur and other reptile sculptures, and issues around conservation.



## WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

Both myself and the FCPD benefitted a great deal from the collaboration, especially around linking the history of science with current scientific thinking and public outreach.

More specifically from my side, I very much enjoyed the chance to put my research in the history of the deep-time sciences into a more collaborative and public-facing form and will be keen to do more of this in the future – both through future collaborations with the FCPD, and through wider impact and public engagement projects, most notably a grant application for a project on palaeontological artwork.

For the FCPD, the main benefit was gaining closer connection with the history of science, as well as developing material to reach new audiences and to feed into their fundraising, outreach, and education activities.

The project has also involved other stakeholders, mainly people already involved in the Popularizing Palaeontology network, including palaeobotanists, artists and designers. This has had the effect of linking the group more cohesively and developing ideas for future collaborations.

## WHAT DID I LEARN?

I learnt a great deal about geology and palaeobotany through the project, both as fields and how they can be communicated to a range of public audiences. Before this project, I knew from the literature on impact that these sorts of projects should be very clear and specific in terms of messaging and audience; developing a survey and interacting with Crystal Palace Park users made me much more aware of how this might be done.

On both a research and impact front, I learnt about the importance of being specific and going right for the most important and targeted information. For both the printed guide sheets and audio guides, there are quite strict limits on the number of words and images for accessibility, and so you need to be extremely clear, direct and prioritise the key issues of interest to your audience. This is quite a different genre to academic writing (and to the more popular writing and talks I have done), and so was very interesting to learn.

## MY 3 TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT:

1. Let things develop organically. An impact project needs to be mutually beneficial for all parties involved, while also progressing in a shared direction. As this is an exercise in relationship-building and collaboration, it cannot really be forced, but needs to grow in a natural manner.
2. These things take time and need to move at their own pace! Our project took longer than the initial seven months planned in the grant application. I wouldn't say this was a downside at all: taking longer and tying in with both my own and the FCPD's projects has meant that the resources themselves are much better developed and more clearly thought through. Also, given that the FCPD trustees are all volunteers and I needed to fit impact activities around my regular teaching and admin duties at King's, time was limited for all. We had different rhythms of when we had time available to work on the project.
3. An impact project should be part of a much longer-term set of developments. This project really worked because I already knew many of the FCPD trustees from previous networks I had been running, and the project fitted in with our respective long-term goals (for FCPD, raising the profile of the site and for myself, moving more into outreach activity based on my own work). Impact takes time and depends on making and developing connections. While discrete projects are important building blocks, they should all form part of something larger and more strategic.

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