

CP DINOS

The dinosaurs in crystal palace park are 'life size' concrete sculptures that were designed and built by sculptor benjamin waterhouse hawkins, guided by palaeontologist and zoologist richard owen, in 1854. They were based on contemporary dino research and are significantly different from modern perceptions of how these species should appear. Working from a limited amount of information, hawkins and owen interpreted fragments of evidence, often scaling-up living species such as iguanas and dolphins, to imagine the forms that became the crystal palace dinosaurs. They were the first major display of images of dinosaurs to the public: the first dinosaur spectacle.

The sculptures were constructed to coincide, and be seen alongside, the great exhibition that was permanently rehoused at crystal palace park. The great exhibition, organised by henry cole and prince albert, was intended to prove to the world britain's superiority and make clear its role as industrial leader; it was a display of colonial wealth and western intellect to national and international audiences. After the crystal palace burned down in 1936, the dinosaurs and other sculptural commissions throughout the park were surviving remnants.

The dinosaurs are concentrated on a collection of small islands, arranged to be viewable from a path around the lake and wetlands. The islands are a changing environment, the water levels rise and drop with seasons, revealing or hiding elements of the display. Over time, plants flourish and die, weeds grow and concrete corrodes. Conservationists and planting teams work to restore and repair damage from years of neglect, interpreting early documentation to inform their decisions. The islands are bent and distorted around the dinosaur's bodies, framing them to an audience. Their bodily arrangements are moulded diagrammatically to communicate information around their believed naturalistic behaviours. The constructed landscape functions similarly to zoo enclosures: spaces not just for animals to live in, but also for teaching humans about them, creating a feeling of closeness and experience despite separation and barriers. These environments are nearly always centring the human viewpoint and reinforcing ideas of superiority and dominance.

The dinosaurs are sci-fi and speculative, or they were. Now they are cumbersome, funny, nostalgic. Spanning time scales from once-living prehistoric animals to their Victorian re-imagining and now their current repairs and restorations, they appear quite awkward and personable, closer to familiar animals than the modern dinosaur spectacle of the jurassic park franchise and other high budget productions. Despite it now being widely believed that many species, including velociraptors and tyrannosaurus rex, had feathers, for their recent productions (2015, 2018) jurassic park has stuck with anatomies similar to those used in the original film released in

1993, without adapting to fit more closely with current theories; preferring impact and popularity than up-to-date accuracy. The 'jurassic park' image has become the lasting popularised collective idea of a dinosaur partly due to mass distribution, but also perhaps because of a shared human desire for dinosaurs to be fantastical, otherworldly and terrible; dragons, not snakes or birds.

The different species of dinosaurs on the island simulation have been gathered from different eons and geographical locations, displaced through space and time. The aquatic species, ichthyosaur, mosasaurus and plesiosaurus, are now believed to be fully aquatic, marine animals, but here they are miles from the coast, laying on land or half submerged in water, presented as amphibians. Their existence is non-linear and distorted through interpretation and ideology. These lasting sculptural images from another time show the disparity between our changing ideas and the animals that were once alive.

There is a cyclical thing here about extinction. Sixty-five million years ago, at the end of the cretaceous period, the dinosaurs went extinct as the world became uninhabitable for them. These sculptures were commissioned and built as part of a celebration of the mind-sets and systems; of colonialism-white supremacy-capitalism-industrialisation, that are now leading towards new, multiple extinctions. They were a demonstration of how much we knew about the past, presented as a means of looking forward, moving forward, but the move forward can be seen as a part of a move towards further extinctions, which is what we were looking back at in the first place.