

The *Millennium Dome*, often referred to simply as *The Dome*, is the original name of a large dome-shaped building, originally used to house the **Millennium Experience**, a major exhibition celebrating the beginning of the third millennium. Located on the Greenwich Peninsula in South East London, the exhibition was open to the public from the 1st of January to the end of December 2000. The project and exhibition was the subject of considerable political controversy as it failed to attract the number of visitors anticipated, with recurring financial problems. All of the original exhibition and associated complex has since been demolished. The dome still exists, and it is now a key exterior feature of The O<sub>2</sub>. The Prime Meridian passes the western edge of the Dome and the nearest London Underground station is North Greenwich on the Jubilee Line.

## Construction

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The dome is the largest of its type in the world. Externally, it appears as a large white marquee with twelve 100 m-high yellow support towers, one for each month of the year, or each hour of the clock face, representing the role played by Greenwich Mean Time. In plan view it is circular, 365 m in diameter — one metre for each day of the year — with scalloped edges. It has become one of the United Kingdom's most recognisable landmarks. It can easily be seen on aerial photographs of London. Its exterior is reminiscent of the Dome of Discovery built for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

The architect was Richard Rogers. He and the contractor was a joint venture company, McAlpine/Laing Joint Venture (MLJV) formed between Sir Robert McAlpine and Laing Management. The building structure was engineered by architect Happold, and the entire roof structure weighs less than the air contained within the building. Although referred to as a dome it is not strictly one as it is not self-supporting, but is a mast-supported, dome-shaped cable network. For this reason, it has been disparagingly referred to as the Millennium Tent.

The canopy is made of glass fibre fabric, a durable and weather-resistant plastic, and is 52 m high in the middle - one metre for each week of the year. Its symmetry is interrupted by a hole through which a ventilation shaft from the Blackwall Tunnel rises.

Apart from the dome itself, the project included the reclamation of the entire Greenwich Peninsula. The land was previously derelict and contaminated by toxic sludge from an earlier gasworks that operated from 1889 to 1985. The clean-up operation was seen by the then Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine as an investment that would add a large area of useful land to the crowded capital. This was billed as part of a larger plan to regenerate a large, sparsely populated area to the east of London and south of the River Thames, an area initially called the East Thames Corridor but latterly marketed as the "Thames Gateway".

## Background to the Dome project

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The Dome project was conceived, originally on a somewhat smaller scale, under John Major's Conservative government, as a Festival of Britain or World's Fair-type showcase to celebrate the third millennium. The incoming Labour government elected in 1997 under Tony Blair greatly expanded the size, scope and funding of the project. It also significantly increased expectations of what would be delivered. Just before its opening Blair claimed the Dome would be "a triumph of confidence over cynicism, boldness over blandness, excellence over mediocrity". In the words of BBC correspondent Robert Orchard, "the Dome was to be highlighted as a glittering New Labour achievement in the next election manifesto".

However, before its opening, The Dome was excoriated in Sinclair's diatribe, *Sorry Meniscus - Excursions to the Millennium Dome* (Profile Books: London 1999, ISBN 1861971796), which accurately forecast the hype, the political posturing and the eventual disillusion.

The post-exhibition plan had been to convert The Dome into a football stadium which would last for 25 years: Charlton Athletic at one point considered a possible move but instead chose to redevelop their own stadium. Fisher Athletic were a local team interested in moving to the Dome, however they were considered to have too small a fan base to make this feasible. The Dome was planned to take over the functions performed by the London Arena, after its closure, along with the Croydon Arena. This is the function which The O<sub>2</sub> arena has now undertaken.