

Decolonising the British Empire Exhibition of 1938



Empire Exhibition 1938

Discussion prompts

This booklet can be used to explore the Empire Exhibition of 1938, held in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, and its legacies. Materials have been organised into themes with prompts for discussion.

It was written by Daisy Abbott as part of "Decolonising the British Empire Exhibition of 1938 through Augmented Reality Narratives", a research project at The Glasgow School of Art, 2024-2025. More information about this project can be found at <https://sit.gsa.ac.uk/project/decolonising-augmented-reality> where you can also download related resources such as lesson plans, digital applications, and workshop templates.

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Scottish Identity

'An Clachan' was a reconstruction of a Highland village within Bellahouston Park during the 1938 Empire Exhibition.

Look at the following materials

A fake Highland castle, loch and painted backdrops.



A (fake) ruin, Celtic cross, and painted backdrop.



Mrs Mary Morrison, demonstrating wool spinning in front of a crowd of spectators including the Queen.



"The clachan, a little Highland croft.
That was very picturesque."

(Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.)

"At the north-east corner it was decided to add a Clachan as the one at the 1911 Scottish National Exhibition had been a popular attraction. [...] In the Clachan which evoked a traditional highland village, the presence of a derelict and abandoned cottage spoke poignantly of the origin of the huge Scottish diaspora."

Bruce Peter (2025) "Art Deco Scotland: Design and Architecture in the Jazz Age"

Your response to the materials

After you have looked at the photos and quotes above, consider:

- What idea of Scottish identity was the exhibition presenting with the reconstruction of a Highland village?
- Do you think there was a tension between the traditional identity presented in An Clachan and the modernist identity of the rest of the exhibition, or did they complement one another?
- News footage described the Clachan as "a perfect representation of the rural life of the Highlands." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blwvYYNDUc>) Do you think that is true?
- What was Scotland's relationship to the rest of Britain at this time and has it changed since?
- What was Scotland's identity within the British Empire?

Sources

- These images are all taken from a research project run by The Glasgow School of Art. You can see them (and more) at <http://empireexhibition.com/> and <https://sit.gsa.ac.uk/project/british-empire-exhibition-glasgow-1938>
- Bruce Peter (2025) "Art Deco Scotland: Design and Architecture in the Jazz Age"

Should we rebuild the Tower of Empire?

Some people are calling for the Tower of Empire to be rebuilt. Other people find this very problematic. What do you think? Should we rebuild this tower (also called Tait's Tower after Thomas Tait, the architect) and if so, what are some of the issues we should think about?

Look at the following material

Watch a 1 minute video about the tower, "Scotland's first skyscraper" here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3j2WGVs5vtkhX2XD2LLNtBY/why-scotland-s-first-skyscraper-built-for-the-1938-empire-exhibition-was-unexpectedly-demolished-just-one-year-later>

Look at this photo of graffiti from 2022, next to the foundation stone of the Empire Exhibition. The text reads "The colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force and at no time does it ever endeavour to cover up this nature of things." (The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon, 1961.)



SCAN for link



Read these quotes/newspaper articles from people with different connections to the Exhibition.

"Tait's Tower is a deserved winner of the Art Deco Society UK's poll of the most favoured lost structure from the 'Art Deco Era'. I would love to see it reconstructed in time for the centenary of the 1938 Empire Exhibition. It would be a spectacular addition to Glasgow's tourist trail."

(Paul Sweeney, Glasgow MSP, 2023, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/23472416.glasgow-history-calls-taits-tower-rebuilt/>)

"We'd go up the hill there and look across to the Tower all lit up, really great."

(Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.)

"If the exhibition was done now there would be more of a public backlash."

(Research participant. 2025.)

"I'm really offended by the idea of someone wanting to rebuild this tower - I mean the artist in me thinks it's great but from a racial sensitivity perspective it's very annoying."

(Research participant. 2025.)

"Decolonisation is not about telling an alternate narrative but about creating a space for multiple narratives."

(Research participant. 2025.)

"The best thing that ever happened to Glasgow in my opinion... The tower was great, it's a pity they didn't leave that."

(Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.)

So the great exhibition receives its Royal sendoff, the show that glorifies the British character, the British spirit and determination, the British will to win. It is not enough that we should possess all these; we must tell the world about them and that's Scotland's job at Bellahouston Park!"

(British Pathé news footage, 1938, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blwvYYNDUc>)

"I never ever thought until now about the colonial nature of it all. So I thought 'oh we should rebuild it' but now I've found out more I feel kind of ashamed about it."

(Research participant. 2025.)

Newspaper articles from 1938 and 1939

Empire Tower Is Doomed

Glasgow Corporation Parks Committee yesterday discussed the future of the Empire Exhibition and agreed that none of the buildings should be retained, except the Corporation Pavilion and the Palace of Arts. If the Committee's decision is accepted by the Corporation, the Tower of Empire will be demolished, and Bellahouston will again become a public park. The show ends on October 29.

TOWER BEING DEMOLISHED.

Within three weeks the Tower of Empire in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, will be stripped of its plating and reduced once again to its bare girder structure before being finally demolished.

Already dismantlers have stripped a large area of plating stretching from the top balcony to the bottom of the tower. Every plate and bolt is being stored, as the Empire Exhibition authorities are still hopeful that they may be able to sell the tower for re-erection.

The job of dismantling the tower, which cost £60,000 to build and drew £30,000 from Exhibition crowds, is being undertaken by George Cohen and Sons, machinery merchants.

TOWER OF EMPIRE

Sale to English Firm

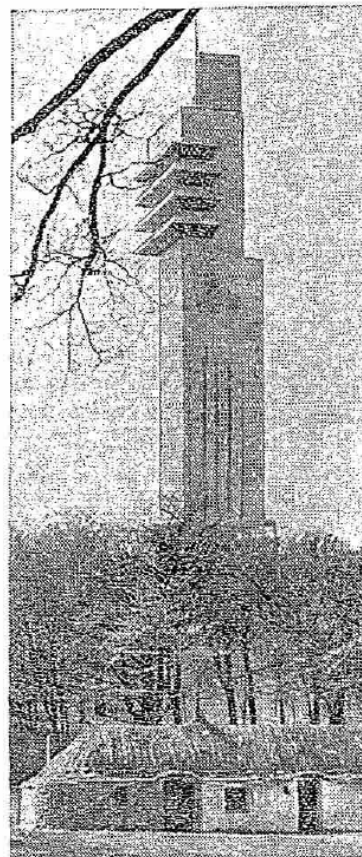
RE-ERECTION ARRANGEMENT

THE Empire Exhibition Authorities announced yesterday that the Tower of Empire, which was a feature of the Exhibition in Glasgow, has been sold to George Cohen, Son, & Co., Ltd., London and Branches, and the lifts to the Express Lift Co. Demolition will commence immediately.

During the past few weeks the restaurant section of the Tower has been dismantled, and the stripping of the main structure may be expected to commence any day.

Within recent weeks there have been quite a number of inquiries for the Tower from Local Authorities and other interested parties, who have been considering erecting it in certain well-known watering places.

As these inquiries have not reached finality, the Exhibition authorities, being anxious to have the Tower demolished by October, found

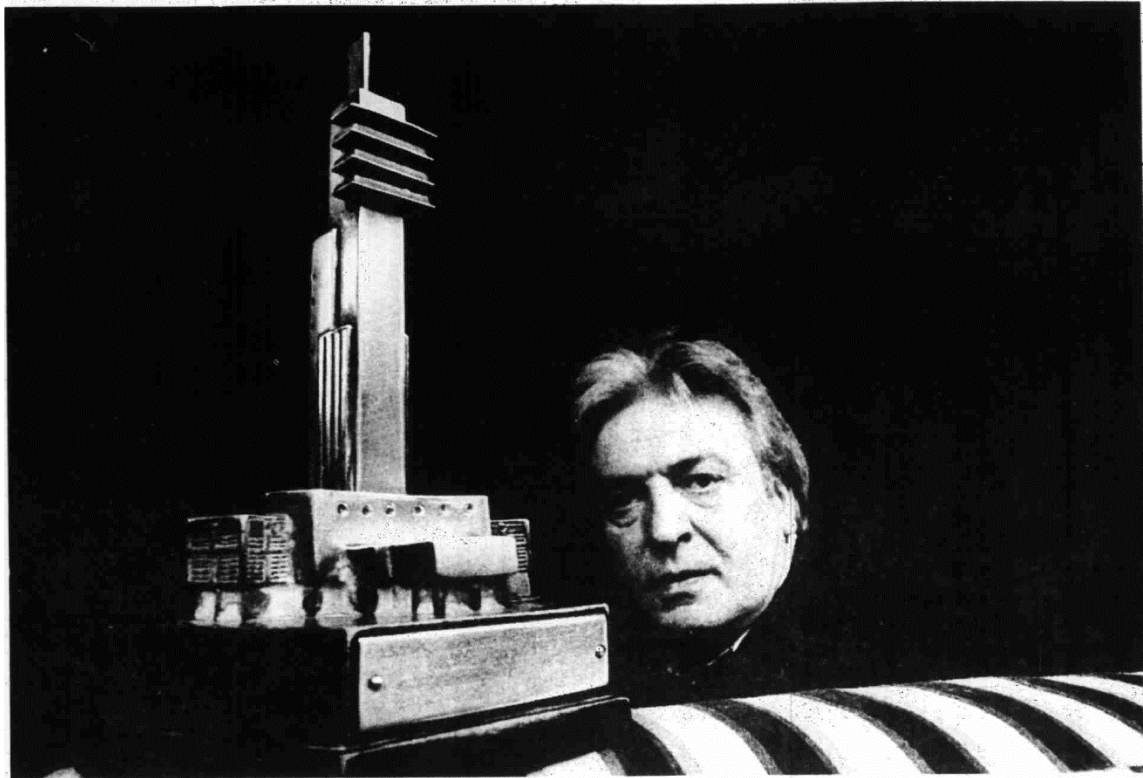


themselves obliged to accept the offers which Messrs Cohen and the Express Lift Co. had made them, but they were able to enter into an arrangement with these parties whereby it would still be possible to sell the Tower for erection elsewhere, provided the intending buyer can give a decision within the next few weeks. Under this arrangement the purchasers and the Exhibition authorities would be joint-sellers.

When it is realised that, during the six months period of the Exhibition, 1¼ million people ascended the Tower, and a sum of nearly £30,000 was taken at the turnstiles, it is considered that there are lucrative possibilities in the Tower for any enterprising Local Authority.

The Tower cost in the neighbourhood of £60,000, and, at the price at which it could be acquired, it is believed it should prove a profitable proposition for any popular holiday resort, even after the costs of dismantling and re-erecting have been taken into account.

This article is from 1995, showing that the debate on whether to rebuild it is not new.



Labour critic: Tom McCubbin with a model of Tait's Tower, the Tower of Empire from the 1938 Glasgow Empire Exhibition. Picture: Allan Milligan

Angry Tait-a-Tait over Tower of Empire

By Alan Forbes

AN ATTEMPT by Glasgow's Labour leader, Pat Lally, to have "Tait's Tower" from the city's 1938 Empire Exhibition rebuilt has stirred up anger.

Tom McCubbin, a surviving member of the family whose firm built the 300ft tower in Bellahouston Park, has accused Mr Lally of promoting the reconstruction for political gain. He said that Labour should take no credit for saving the tower because the old Labour-run corporation was responsible for its demolition after the exhibition.

It has been a frustrating few days for Mr McCubbin since Mr Lally announced on Wednesday

a £30,000 feasibility study into rebuilding Tait's Tower. Mr Lally said the tower would provide Glasgow with the internationally identifiable landmark it needed.

Mr McCubbin was irritated when the media did not give the tower its proper name, the Tower of Empire. He was annoyed when Mr Lally said he believed the tower had been demolished to avoid its becoming a landmark for German bombers.

'The tower would have been demolished about a year before the start of the Second World War. If the corporation knew that war was coming, why didn't they let everyone else know?'

"The tower would have been demolished about a year before the start of the Second World War. If the corporation knew so far in advance that war was coming, why didn't they let everyone else know?" said Mr McCubbin.

He explained that the family firm, the Glasgow Steel Roofing Company, had built the tower on a hill in the middle of the park. It boasted 600 tons of high-tensile

steel, 100,000 bolts and two of the fastest lifts in Britain.

The tower, one of the most popular buildings at the exhibition, could accommodate 600 people on its three viewing platforms. Ben More, 60 miles away, was one of the features that could be seen from it.

Mr McCubbin said that when the exhibition ended, his father, John, who was managing director, and grandfather, Thomas,

who was chairman, offered the tower to the city.

The councillors refused, saying that the corporation was not able to afford the tower's upkeep.

"I would like to see the tower rebuilt, but I object to these myths about the tower. I understand one television programme suggested that an aeroplane seen on film flying past the tower might have been a German spotter plane.

"It was probably a pleasure flight, and it is quite likely that the pilot was George Pinkerton, who shot the first German plane over the Forth."

Mr Lally was not available for comment last night.



A big part of the original Empire Exhibition was about Britain's role as a coloniser. As well as the Tower of Empire, there were roads called "Colonial Avenue" and "Dominion Avenue." This photograph shows the central diorama in the Colonial Pavilion. Glass showcases contained examples of the products shipped to Britain from the Colonies. A frieze of silhouetted people, buildings and vegetation, above, showed aspects of everyday life in the Colonies. ©Stanley K Hunter, Scottish Exhibitions Study Group. Licensors www.scran.ac.uk



Your response to this material

- What do you think about the proposal to rebuild Tait's Tower?
- Why are some people offended by the idea of rebuilding the tower?
- Do you think your own identity affects your opinion? If so, how?
- If the tower was rebuilt, what should it be called? What would be its purpose?
- How might people who live in Bellahouston now react? What about people visiting the area?
- What do you think has changed about how British people think of their role as a colonising nation since 1938?

Sources

- Scotland's first skyscraper, BBC
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3j2WGVs5vtkhX2XD2LLNtBY/why-scotland-s-first-skyscraper-built-for-the-1938-empire-exhibition-was-unexpectedly-demolished-just-one-year-later>
- Graffiti photograph by Benjamin White.
- Paul Sweeney quote from
<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/23472416.glasgow-history-calls-taits-tower-rebuilt/>
- British Pathé news footage, 1938,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blwvYNDUc>
- Other quotes from research projects run by The Glasgow School of Art. Online at <http://empireexhibition.com/> and <https://sit.gsa.ac.uk/project/decolonising-augmented-reality>
- One image is licensed by scan.ac.uk

Hidden Histories: Creative Writing based on the Empire Exhibition

The way we record history sometimes tells one version of a story and leaves out other people's stories. It can be interesting to think about some of the stories that aren't already being told. Can you use your creativity to imagine the stories of lesser-known characters, using the information from the Empire Exhibition?

Look at the following images

The king and queen arriving and in their carriage. Who else is there? What are they doing? What are they thinking?



A kiosk selling orange juice. Would orange juice have been common in 1938? Who worked there? Do you think they came from the same country as the oranges?



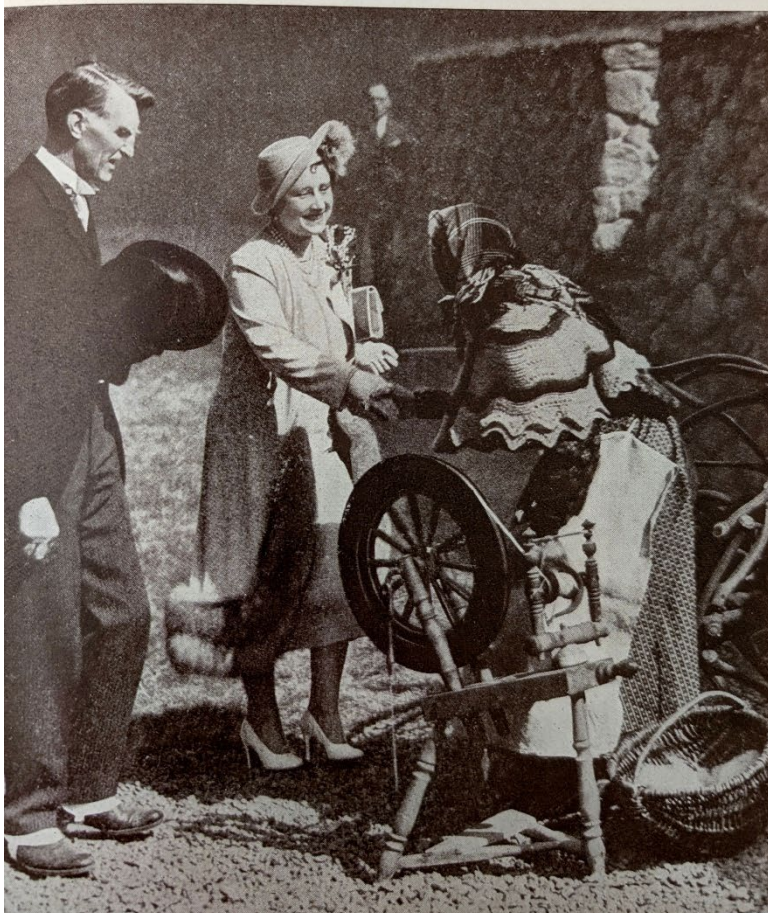
An amusement park exhibit themed around West Africa. Who was Chief Ober Mekewwhe? How do you think he felt about being described as 'savage'? What might the people who visited him think?



Schoolboys photographed at the Empire Exhibition in 1938, outside the "Empire Picture House" (cinema). What are their stories?



*The Queen has a charming smile
for Mary Morrison, who works at
the spinning-wheel in the Clachan.
With Her Majesty is Sir Alexander
MacEwan*



This picture shows the Queen (the current King's grandmother) meeting Mary Morrison who had come down from Shetland to demonstrate the use of the spinning wheel. What is her story?



Boys using a vending machine. They seem happy to be dressed up smartly! © Newsquest (Herald & Times). Licensor www.scran.ac.uk



GIRAFFE-NECKED WOMAN'S BABY

To be Called " Bella Houston "

A BABY girl has been born to one of the giraffe-necked women who are appearing in the Amusement Park at the Empire Exhibition. The birth took place in a private nursing home in Glasgow.

The mother, 22-years-old Mu Swai, and her baby are both doing well. The infant is a normal, healthy child of 6 lbs 15 ozs. Mu Swai's husband, Maung Suri, was beaming with delight when seen at the Exhibition yesterday morning. He had in his arms his first born, Peter Olympia, who was born at Olympia on their last visit to this country, the Christmas before last.

"A fine baby," said Maung Suri smilingly. He had just come from the nursing home. The baby is to be called Bella Houston.

He father and mother hail from a jungle village in the Shan States, which lie between Tibet and Siam. They left Rangoon for this country on March 2 of this year to appear at the Exhibition.

At the conclusion of the Exhibition they will return to their jungle home. Their only previous visit to this country was for the show at Olympia two years ago.



A photo of the inside of the Treetop Restaurant.

"for some time we puzzled to know how to plan [this restaurant] to avoid the trees... At one stage we decided to raise the restaurants on stilts which would carry them clear above the trees but later we realised that a much better effect could be obtained if we shortened the stilts and allowed the topmost branches to project upwards through the floor."

(Thomas Tait, the chief architect of the Exhibition.)

"Tait's Tower of course was a very memorable thing. I got to go up the Tower. There was a restaurant there also which unfortunately we couldn't afford to go into!"

(Glasgow resident who visited the exhibition as a child. 2007.)

Your response to the materials

- Who do you think gets the most attention in the histories already written? Who do you think the other people in the photographs are? What are their stories?
- Can you choose a character from above and imagine a story about them? You could write the story from their perspective, pretend that you are a time traveller interviewing them, or any other story you like.
- You can do some extra research to fill in the details of their lives.

Sources

- Images are from the Empire Exhibition Souvenir booklet, the Scottish Pavilions Official Guide and a research project run by The Glasgow School of Art. You can see them (and more) at <http://empireexhibition.com/> and <https://sit.gsa.ac.uk/project/british-empire-exhibition-glasgow-1938>
- Two images have been licensed for use in this booklet by [scan.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk)
- *Art Deco Scotland: Design and Architecture in the Jazz Age* by Bruce Peter

Industry and work

The Empire Exhibition of 1938 showcased the industries of Scotland, Great Britain, and the colonies.

Look at the following images

How many industries do you recognise? Have they changed a lot between 1938 and today?

This is the Palace of Industries (West) building. The mural on the front shows the "Angel of Energy". There was so much demand for exhibition space that there were two Palace of Industries built to accommodate everybody.





Pavilions for coal and oil companies



Beardmore was a shipbuilding company based in Glasgow.

Colville & Sons was a Scottish iron and steel company.

This photo shows their shared tower, with the Tower of Empire (Tait's Tower) in the background.



These photographs show structures built for travel and transport, tartan, and the Palace of Engineering.

Other industries which were featured were: airships, railways, Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI, who later made explosives near Glasgow for use in WW2), rubber, wool, food and drink, timber, agriculture, distillers, gas, milk, newspapers, and the Scottish Co-Operative Society.



This extract from the Empire Exhibition Souvenir booklet shows that some workers were on strike during the construction of the exhibition. There are newspaper clippings which explain more about the strike, below.

On May 3 of this year Their Majesties returned to Bellahouston to perform the opening ceremony.

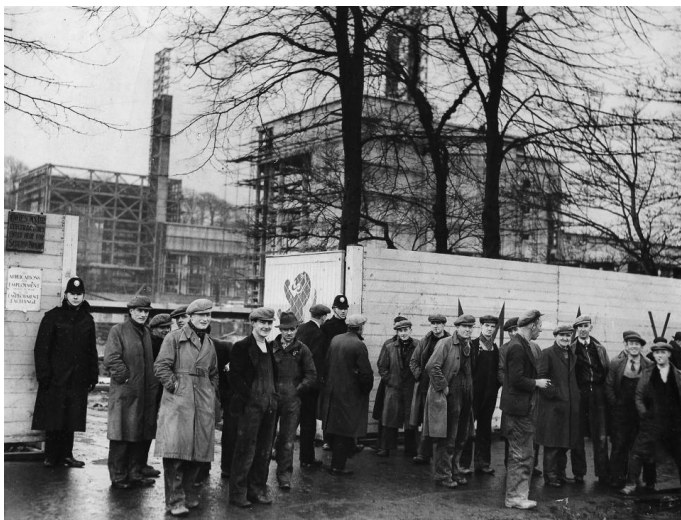
On the first occasion when they visited Bellahouston there were only twenty girders on the Palace of Engineering and six on the Palace of Industry ; on the second the Exhibition was completed, in spite of the fact that in the intervening period a serious strike had occurred.

I think Glasgow can in all modesty claim that this was a tremendous accomplishment—and also, in its way, a mute testimony to Clyde workmanship. Scottish people are extremely proud of their Exhibition—and they have good reason to be. Certainly this Exhibition beats anything in my experience.

GLASGOW EXHIBITION STRIKE.

One thousand workers at the Empire Exhibition were on strike yesterday. They are all members of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. About 200 joiners had previously gone on strike, and yesterday 800 workers, not of the same union, agreed to give them their support.

It is understood the union is giving its support to the joiners' demand for a penny an hour "dirty money," but a more important demand for 3d an hour extra is not likely to be recognised by the union.



Auto-Truck Workers' Strike At Exhibition

A strike of auto-truck drivers and conductors at the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow occurred to-day. All the trucks were taken off just at a time when the avenues were crowded with people shortly after one o'clock.

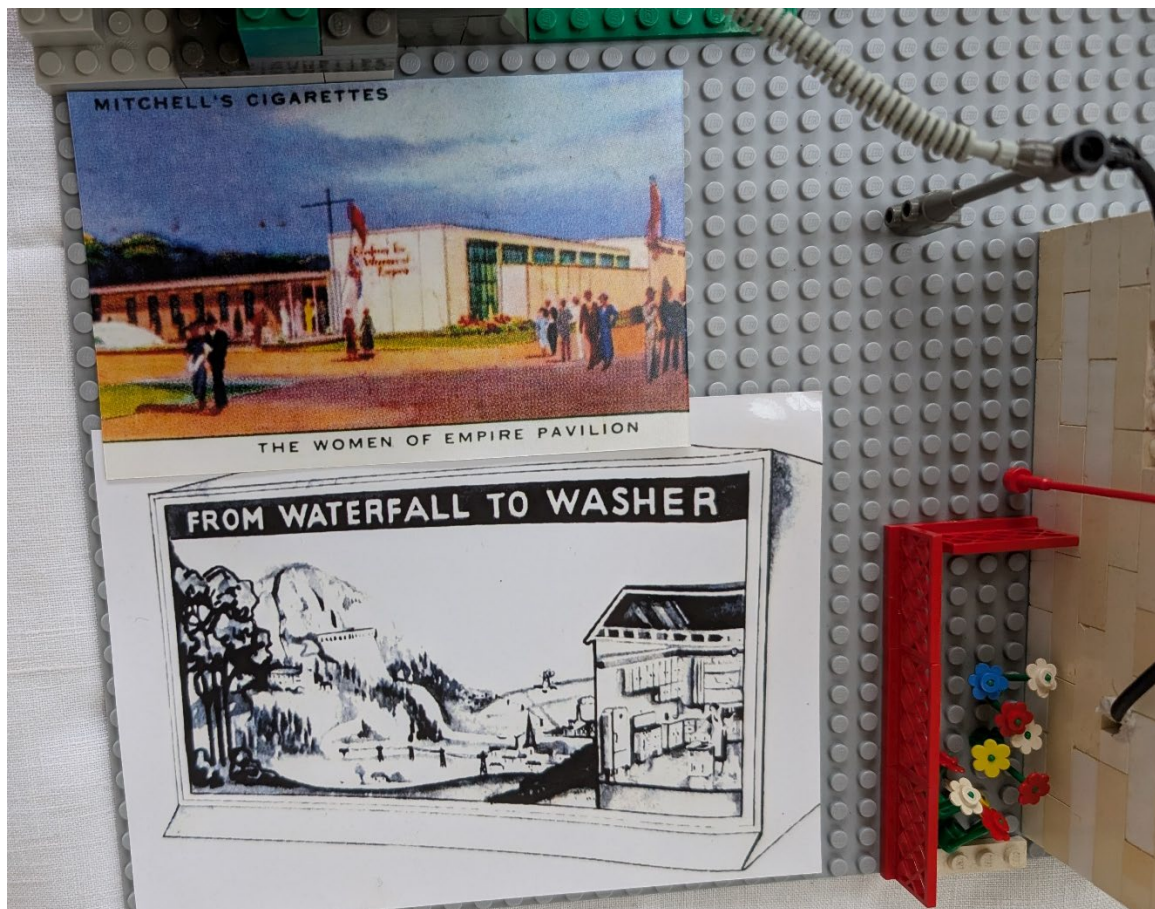
The men, who number about 110, took strike action because a demand for time and half for working on the Glasgow holiday to-day had not been met. One of the men explained that this demand was made on the occasion of the Glasgow Fair Saturday, and negotiations with the employers had been going on ever since. "There seems to have been a misunderstanding," said one of the men, "because our employers thought we wanted time and half only for extra two hours' work, whereas we want it for the whole day."

Some of the men started work as usual at 9.45 and at 11.0. This afternoon men who were due to start on another shift at one o'clock declined to do so, and the stoppage became general. There are 52 trucks serving the public on the grounds. The drivers are paid £3 5s and the conductors £3 a week. Recently the men received an increase of 5s a week in their wages.

The officials of the Transport Union and the Allied Trades Association were to-day negotiating with the employers.



Photograph of a work outing outside the Palace of Art (which still exists in Bellahouston Park.) The costumed figure, dressed as a pig, suggests that the firm may have been involved in the production of sausages or meat pies. © Stanley K Hunter, Scottish Exhibitions Study Group. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk



This photo shows a Lego reconstruction of a diorama about hydroelectric power that was displayed in the Women's Pavilion. The diorama was called "From Waterfall to Washer". It was separate from the other hydro-electricity displays in the Palace of Engineering.

Your response to the materials

- Why do you think there were so many industries on show at the Empire Exhibition?
- What impression do the industries on display give of the British Empire, and Scotland more specifically?
- Which industries have changed since 1938? Do you know anyone who works in any of these industries?
- Who are the workers who these industries rely on? What are some of the resources that are used in these industries and where do they come from?

Sources

- *Art Deco Scotland: Design and Architecture in the Jazz Age* by Bruce Peter
- These images are all taken from a research project run by The Glasgow School of Art. You can see them (and more) at <http://empireexhibition.com/> and <https://sit.gsa.ac.uk/project/british-empire-exhibition-glasgow-1938>
- Empire Exhibition Souvenir booklet
- British Newspaper Archive.
- One image is licensed by scan.ac.uk

For more information about this project, visit
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