

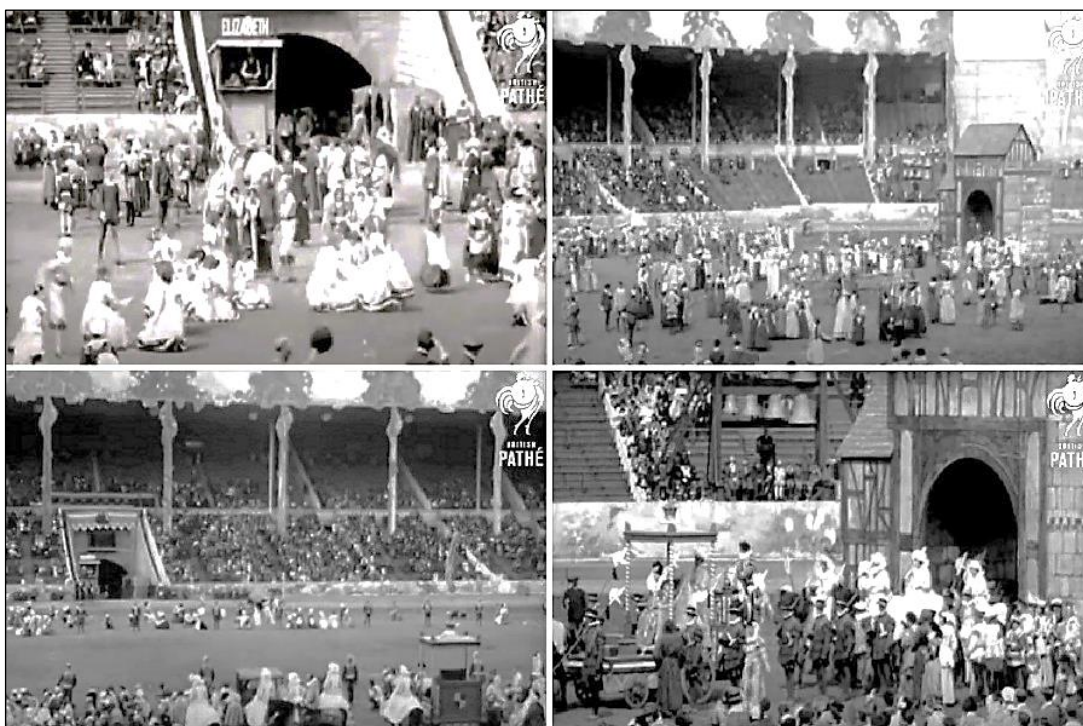
The Pageant of Empire, 1924 – Part 2: Eastward and Southward Ho!



Extract from the programme cover for Part 2 of the Pageant. (Source: Brent Archives)

Welcome back to my second article about this Pageant, which took place during the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley Park in 1924. If you have not read Part 1, you will find it [here](#).

The Pageant was performed in three parts, and I have already dealt with the opening section of Part 2, “The Days of Queen Elizabeth”, which was played by local people from Wembley. Here are a few more pictures of that, which are screenshots from a British Pathé newsreel film. I found that on YouTube, incorrectly described as [Wembley Exhibition Reel 3 \(1925\)](#). It is definitely from 1924, and was almost certainly filmed at the matinee performance of Part 2 of the Pageant of Empire, on Saturday 16 August 1924.



More scenes from Wembley's Elizabethan Episode. (Screenshots from a British Pathé newsreel film)

Part 2 continued with a scene from 1655, in which Admiral Blake and his naval squadron defeated Barbary pirates, making the Mediterranean safe for British ships and rescuing some sailors who had been captured and put to work as galley slaves. The commentary in the programme concludes: ‘The English flag has broken the power of the Corsairs’.

Although Part 2 was entitled “Eastward Ho!”, its next section was about, and staged by, the Dominion of South Africa. Its prelude depicted Phoenician sailors landing at the Cape, on a voyage around the coast of Africa on behalf of the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho, around 606BC, ‘two thousand years before the first white man set foot in Africa.’ Scene 1 depicts the first Europeans to land on this coast, Portuguese sailors, including Vasco de Gama in 1496.

Scenes 2 and 3 show the first Dutch settlers arriving at Table Bay in 1652, and being joined by French Huguenot refugees, at the invitation of the Dutch East India Company, from 1688. It is not until scene 4 that South Africa’s first British settlers arrive, in 1820, under a Government financed scheme to claim “Cape Colony” for Britain.



Two images from scene 4, showing British settlers arriving in South Africa.
(Screenshots from a British Pathé newsreel film)

It is this scene which helps to show the scale of the scenery used in the Pageant. It was all designed by the artist [Frank Brangwyn](#) R.A., and used 25,000 square feet (over 2,300m²) of Baltic timber. The full-size replica sailing ship did move across the scene, and the artificial sea at one end of the stadium, on which real boats were rowed, held 220,000 gallons of water.



Zulu warriors preparing to attack the Boers at Blood River. (Screenshot from a British Pathé newsreel film)

Scene 5 shows the British meeting the Zulu King Tshaka in 1824, and getting permission to start a small coastal colony in Natal. Moving on to 1886, scene 6 shows a breakdown in

relations between the Dutch Boer community, who wish to move further inland, and a later Zulu leader, resulting in a staging of the Battle of Blood River (on Wembley's "hallowed turf"!). The Boers defenders overwhelm the native warriors' spears with gunfire, and 'demoralise the Zulus and completely rout them. Thus the Boers are left to settle where they please.'

The British were also trying to settle where they pleased, and push north into what is now Zimbabwe. Scene 8 is described in this extract from the Part 2 programme, and it is this patriotic version of how our country treated the lands of other peoples that I find so distasteful.

SCENE VIII.
WILSON'S LAST STAND, DECEMBER 4, 1893.

After the first British advance into the country which is afterwards to bear the name of Rhodesia, the Matabele Army of King Lobengula raids the region of Mashonaland. A column under Forbes is in pursuit and Wilson attacks Lobengula's camp.

With his small force they have retreated throughout the night. Dawn approaches, and this small body of heroes, tired out with their exertions, short of food, and with ammunition fast failing, make their last stand.

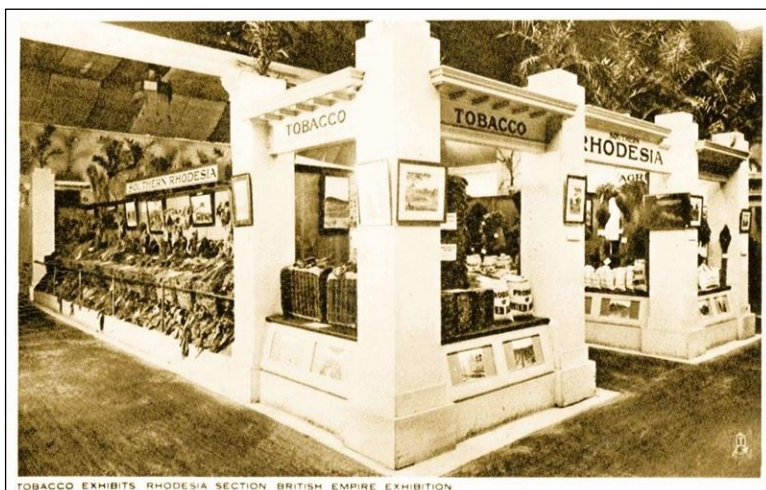
Gradually the Matabele close in, and man by man of the British is killed.

Their ammunition is finished, and Wilson and the small body left alive with him sing in their dying moments a verse of the National Anthem. Then they fall one by one as the verse proceeds, and the music only ceases as the last man dies.

With a wild shout the Matabele charge and surround the prostrate forms with a wild dance.

Thus perish thirty-two heroes, and so closes a scene of matchless courage, loyalty and devotion to duty which is characteristic of the noble builders of our Empire.

Scene 9 shows Cecil Rhodes, a leading figure in the expansion of the British Empire in Southern Africa, travelling without an army to negotiate with the Matabele kingdom in 1896. He is successful in getting agreement for British settlers to come and start farming in their lands. The fruits of his success were seen at the Exhibition less than 30 years later, when the South African Pavilion included a section for Southern Rhodesia (a country named after him), showing the produce of its British-owned tobacco plantations.



Postcard showing Southern Rhodesia tobacco at the BEE in 1924. (Brent Archives online image 9961)

The final scene 10 of this section of the Pageant is entitled "An Allegory of the Union of South Africa". It portrays the benefits of a federal state, in which both British and Boers can govern their own provinces, within the British Empire, and the scene ends with the choir and orchestra performing "Land of Hope and Glory". The Pageant's history of South Africa does not include the significant (but uncomfortable to the storyline!) episode of [the Boer War, 1899-1902](#).

Part 2 of the Pageant, "Eastward Ho!", ends with India. It has only one scene, "The Early Days of India", but that puts on a spectacular show. It depicts the Mogul Emperor Jehangir receiving Sir Thomas Roe, an envoy from the British East India Company, in 1626, seeking to set up trading ties. The scene begins in a busy eastern bazaar, then a parade featuring seven

elephants shipped in from the subcontinent, and camels from Egypt. We also see Sir Thomas having his audience with the Emperor.



Some scenes from the Indian section of the Pageant. (Screenshots from a British Pathé newsreel film)

Most readers will know that there was more to the history of Britain's relations with India than trading between equal nations! Yet this is how the Pageant's programme notes move on from this scene to sum up that history in two short paragraphs:

The Emperor receives the envoy with dignified ceremonial, and then comes the great procession of elephants and camels, carts and oxen, foot soldiers and bands, which pass before the Emperor and his guests.

The Mogul power in the eighteenth century crumbles into decay, and the anarchy which followed ended in the creation of British dominion.

We recall at once how Queen Victoria, at a gorgeous Durbar held at Delhi in 1887, was proclaimed the Empress of India, and how our own day has seen the King and Queen of England crowned as Emperor and Empress of India in the same historic city.

Extract from the Part 2 Pageant programme. (Source: Brent Archives)

You may recall that in [an article at the start of this BEE centenary year](#) I wrote: 'It was an Act of Parliament in 1876, not any rulers of its many states, which awarded an additional title to Queen Victoria: Empress of India!'

Moving on, **Part 3 of the Pageant** was "Southward Ho!", performed on Wednesday and some Saturday evenings between 27 July and 30 August. Its prologue shows King George III at Windsor Castle, sending Captain Cook on an expedition to "the Southern Seas", where he has heard *'there are great new lands there which may be added to our Realm'*. Sure enough, the first scene of New Zealand's section shows Captain Cook "discovering" the North Island of that country in 1769. After an initially hostile meeting with a Maori tribe there, his crew are allowed ashore to fill their water barrels. Cook takes the opportunity to stick a pole in the ground, hoist 'the British Flag', and take possession of the land *'in the name of His Most Gracious Majesty'*.

New Zealand's scene 2 shows the first British settlers arriving in 1840, after 'an attempt by French adventurers to establish a claim on the islands finally drove the British Government into a formal annexation.' A New Zealand Land Company had been set up, which 'bought a vast tract of land from 58 Maori chiefs.' The programme notes record that this was soon followed with 'the Treaty of Waitangi, by which the chiefs ceded the sovereignty of New Zealand to Queen Victoria, receiving in return a guarantee of the rights and privileges of British subjects.'

This section of the Pageant is quite frank in revealing that the Maori people of New Zealand did not understand the “bargain” they had made with the British. I will include the programme text for scene 3 in full, because it does show the reality of how the Empire treated the indigenous people of the lands they annexed, if they resisted.

SCENE III.
WAR WITH THE MAORIS, 1864.

There was a land crisis with the natives in 1860 owing to the purchase of estates by the Government from a lesser chief, whose Head chief refused his consent.

In reality the discontent which the Maoris felt at the increase in the number of emigrants, who now outnumbered them and seemed to be occupying the whole land, was the cause of the trouble.

Open war broke out, and the greater part of the Northern tribes rose in rebellion. It was a strangely chivalrous war, for the Maoris made a clean fight, keeping generally to the defensive in their Pahs or stockades, which were constructed of bushes and contained rows of rifle pits, and were practically impregnable except against artillery.

Now we see the defence by the Maoris of the Pah of Orakau against a superior force under General Cameron.

The natives are singing hymns at the close of their customary morning service, while still working to complete the defences of their Pah.

The troops and militia close in upon the stronghold and guns are brought up, when the General sends forward an officer with a flag of truce to ask them to surrender.

The Chief Hauraki Tonganui answers “ *We will fight for ever and ever.*”

The General, expressing admiration for his courage, offers him safe escort to send away his women and children before the shelling recommences. A Maori woman cries out “ *If our men die, the women and children die also.*”

After a long and valiant defence the Maoris escape through the swamp and water at the back, and the troops set fire to the stronghold, carrying away the wounded and the dead.

Extract from the Part 3 Pageant programme. (Source: Brent Archives)

New Zealand’s final scene 4 is entitled “Peace and Prosperity”, and begins with these words: ‘The Maori rebellion died out after many years. Much of the land of the rebel tribes which had been confiscated was returned to them, and under tolerant and tactful administration their troubles were soon forgotten.’ That may be largely true, but when King George V visited the Maori house, beside the New Zealand Pavilion at the Exhibition in 1924, a Maori delegation complained to him that Britain had not honoured its side of the Treaty of Waitangi!



Postcard showing King George V, with Queen Mary and his officials, visiting the Maori house in 1924. (Brent Archives online image 969)

The Maori’s had rebelled in the 1860s because of the growing number of emigrants from Britain settling on their land. But at Wembley Park in 1924, the New Zealand Pavilion was still handing out [leaflets, like this one](#), encouraging more people to come!



Outside cover of a New Zealand promotional leaflet from 1924. (Source: Brent Archives)

The Australian section of the Pageant followed on from New Zealand, but I will not spend much time on it. It begins with the first settlement in the newly-created Colony of New South Wales in 1788, passes through an “era of development” in the 1800s, before ending with a great parade celebrating the produce and resources that Australia wants to trade with the rest of the British Empire, and the world.

Unlike its New Zealand neighbour, there is not a single word in Australia’s Pageant about the aboriginal people of this southern continent, and how appallingly they were treated (and in some ways, continue to be treated). For an insight into their story, we have had to wait for programmes like [The Australian Wars \(still available on BBC iPlayer\)](#).

Part 3 closes with a finale, featuring all the nations taking part in the British Empire Exhibition, and the people from them. This is how the programme describes it, although history shows it would be a few more decades before there was a true ‘Commonwealth of Free Nations’:

And now come groups from all the great Dominions, Colonies and Crown Colonies and from the Empire of India, to show the Motherland what they have done, of their sacrifice, their loyalty and love, and their hopes for the future. We see the British Empire as a Nation widely dispersed, full of Youth and Vigour. As the music crashes, the bells ring out, and the choirs sing, there streams in a glorious Procession like a Triumph or undreamed-of Thanksgiving, showing the Glories, the Wealth, the Opportunities and Resources of this Great Commonwealth of Free Nations.

Extract from the Part 3 Pageant programme. (Source: Brent Archives)



The Burmese contingent on their way to the Pageant finale. (Source: Brent Archives)

I am lucky that, in 1964, Wembley History Society received donations of several albums put together by people involved in the Exhibition forty years earlier. One featured Burma (above, now Myanmar), and another was from Mr Beck, who had been the Resident Superintendent of the Nigerian Village at Wembley. In his album were copies of photographs taken by a daily newspaper of the Nigerians rehearsing in the stadium for their part in the Pageant's finale.



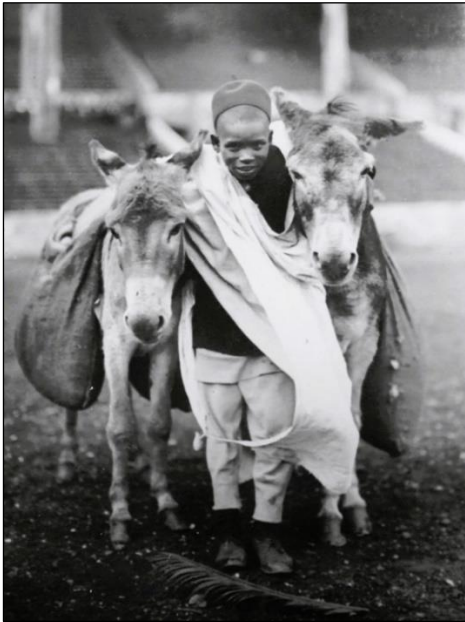
The Nigerian “horse race” at the stadium rehearsal, with Mr Beck arrowed. (Source: Brent Archives)

Mr Beck had annotated some of the photographs, and in the one above he had marked himself (disguised in Nigerian robes) with a “x”, which I have replaced with an arrow, for clarity. His caption shows that he was meant to be leading the group of horsemen (plus a horsewoman in disguise, Mrs Cumberbatch – any relation to Benedict?) at a trot. Instead, Bala, a silversmith from Kano, led a charge down the stadium, just for fun, during the rehearsal!



Some of the Nigerians with their banner during the rehearsal in the stadium. (Source: Brent Archives)

There were other photographs showing the Nigerians in high spirits, but the “News Chronicle” chose to print just the one below, showing Mamman, Bala’s young brother and apprentice, in a more docile pose from the Pageant rehearsal, with two donkeys.



Mamman and two donkeys, at the rehearsal in the stadium. (Source: Brent Archive – Mr Beck’s album)

In all, the Pageant made use of fifty donkeys, which when not taking part in performances were kept at the nearby Oakington Manor Farm (known locally by the farmer’s name, as Sherren’s Farm). Wembley’s police force became familiar with them, when every available policeman was called out to round them up, after they escaped from their field one night in August!

**DONKEYS ROAM WEMBLEY STREETS
AT NIGHT.**

There was a procession of donkeys into Wembley Police Station throughout Tuesday night, sixteen in all being brought in by Policemen at various hours. They were found in the High Road, Wembley Hill Road, and other places in the vicinity of the Exhibition. Eventually, it was found that they were appearing in the Pageant of Empire and had escaped from Sherren’s Farm.

Article from “The Wembley News”, 14 August 1924. (Brent Archives – local newspaper microfilms)

On that lighter note, I will end my description of Part 3, and of the Pageant of Empire at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924. But what are we to make of that event? The “Daily Express”, at the time, described it as ‘the climax of centuries of British heroism, pride, endeavour and struggle.’ My own view is less glowing, as you will have gathered from reading these articles.

Yes, the history is important, but we need to look at it honestly, the bad as well as the good. We need wider education about it, seeking and listening to the views of people from the countries which were part of Britain’s Empire, in order to get a wider perspective and understanding of the past. This centenary year of the Exhibition at Wembley Park provides a good opportunity to start doing that.

You will have the chance to share your views, and your family’s stories of Empire, through the “Becoming Brent” project. You can find details of its events on the [Brent Libraries, Arts and Heritage Eventbrite site](#), or read about it on the [Museum and Archives blog](#).

Philip Grant, September 2024.

This article was written for, and first published on, the “Wembley Matters” blog website, but anyone is free to share it on a “not for profit” basis. Our local history belongs to all of us!