



## Royal Exhibition Building

### Video Transcript

#### CHRIS TAYLOR:

In this age of social networking sites, viral marketing and video uploading, you can instantly sell yourself to the world.

Status updates. Chris is available to host game shows and achieve world domination.

But in the 19th century if you wanted to flog your wares, you had to build an architectural masterpiece. That National Treasure is in the Carlton Gardens in Melbourne.

This is the Royal Exhibition Building. In its day it was to Melbourne what the Eiffel Tower was to Paris and Crystal Palace was to London. This was the Great Hall of the Palace of Industry and it's the only one left in the world which is why it's on the World Heritage List. It's a product of the 19th century's Golden Age of International Exhibitions, when nations sold themselves to the world in buildings designed to make a splash. Back then Melbourne was swimming in gold – 200 million pounds of it thanks to the world's biggest gold rush. The city was the economic power house of Australia and this building proved it to the rest of the nation, and to the world.

More than one and a half million people attended the 1880 Exhibition. Eight years later the Centenary Exhibition hosted two million visitors, nearly twice the state's population.

We displayed our own treasures, but the overseas exhibits were the real stars. We oohed at pedal sewing machines and aahed at push lawnmowers. We oohed and aahed at permanent electric lighting which meant people can visit at night, and oohed and aahed again at the generator outside which powered it. Edison phonographs, ice-making machines, heavy armaments, even barbed wire gave Australia its first tantalizing glimpses of a brave new world.

As big as this place looks, it was only a small part of the exhibition site. In 1888 this building and all the temporary annexes covered 14 hectares. No wonder some visitors became dazed and disoriented. They were wandering through the world's largest building.

Two years later Victoria's economic boom went pop, and extravagant exhibitions were a casualty. But history wasn't done with this grand old lady.

In May 1901, five months after Federation, our first Prime Minister Edmund Barton and a host of dignitaries attended the opening of the inaugural Australian Parliament right here in the Royal Exhibition Building.

12,000 people crammed in to watch the Duke of Cornwall and York do the honours. The gala event was captured by artist Charles Nuttall and the painting is still on display in the building's mezzanine.

Now I don't know if there are actually 12,000 people in this picture, but apparently some of the guests who do appear, members of the city's elite weren't actually there on the day. They paid Nuttall to paint them in later.

Can you imagine being that desperate.

Throughout the twentieth century the Royal Exhibition Building was used as a hospital, an army training base and even the wrestling venue at the 1956 Olympics. And each year school and uni students wrestle with their own problems at exam time.

What's amazing is that most exhibition buildings in the 19th century were designed to be temporary but not this one. More often than not they were allowed to fall apart, or they burnt down, which incidentally is exactly what happened

to Sydney's Exhibition Hall, the Garden Palace in 1882. All that remains of that is a small lump of molten glass in the New South Wales State Library. Not quite the same really.

Melbourne's Royal Exhibition Building is a lasting reminder of a time when Australia began to take its place and that makes it a National Treasure.