The Angel of Plenty

Just who is the mysterious lady on the very top of Ally Pally that seems to be Hornsey's Guardian Angel? **Jeff Probst** *tells her story.*

She stands on top of Alexandra Palace, looking south over N8 and beyond. Clouds and planes, and sometimes the morning moon, pass behind her. Traffic passes below, and people walk by, sometimes looking up.

For years as I climbed the park I wondered who she was. As I got closer I could see that she was winged and appeared to be signalling victory with two fingers of her left hand. It looked like she had a wreath in her right hand and a sheaf of wheat next to her.

I know now that, harder to see at her feet, is a cornucopia – a goat's horn overflowing with flowers, fruit and corn. She is a combination of ancient goddesses symbolising both winged victory and nature's abundance. She is the Angel of Plenty. And few people know her history.

As has been documented, in January 1980 Haringey Council took over the trusteeship of the Palace from the GLC. Six months later a fire, the second to befall the Palace, destroyed half the building. Some of the damage was repaired immediately, and as the refurbishment was being finished off a redevelopment team was brought in.

John Hutchinson was the zone architect on the team. "For those who were nostalgic," he told me, "it was important to extend the frontispiece, to put it back as close as possible to what it was before the decay began in the 1930s."

John was also commissioned to replace an earlier angel, which had been taken down in the late 1970s. He says she was perhaps 100 years old, was also wingèd and also had a cornucopia next to her.

Speaking from his Forest Gate home in south London, John explained that "the earlier statue was completely different – severe and glowery with beetle brows and a beady stare." The Bruce Castle archives support this. Among thousands of Palace photographs, a shot of the former angel shows her brows looking slightly knit.

The issue of replacing the earlier statue came to a head in the summer of 1985 and John organised the design with the family firm of Fredrica Banks, specialist restorers of high-profile exterior-decoration projects. Fredrica Banks were given free artistic rein, and they made the decision that the new statue would be an amalgamation of goddesses similar to the original.

A director of the company at the time was John Warne, who now runs the firm from Kent. They recently restored Great Yarmouth's monument to Admiral Nelson. John recalls that when they received the commission for the Angel, they engaged a modeller who was on their books at the time, a Mr Gonzalez who, having never seen the previous statue, set about creating "some type of angel", using photographs and historical models. Nobody seems to know who named her.

"Our main concern," said John Warne, "was to make sure that she was the right size, that the scale was correct." One of his team stood "up there", on the pyramid-shaped roof. "He was about six foot two and they could see he would be too small. She needed to be about one and a half times life-size."

The Angel was then modelled in Somerset out of clay, rubber and glass fibre. The architect, John Hutchinson, inspected and approved the proposed statue, and she was created – in pink, off-white and granite-coloured Portland stone, "a bit like reinforced concrete", as John Warne puts it. She stood at around 3.5 metres, weighed 100 kilos, and was installed where she stands today.

John Hutchinson comes up to the Palace every once in a while to have a look at the statue from ground level. He compares her to her previous incarnation. "The Angel of Plenty – or the Angel," he says, "is rather softer, with voluptuous curves."

There is an access ladder to the Angel, on her plinth above the arches and columns and the Great Hall's circular stained-glass window. John Hutchinson doesn't think she's ever been maintained, but he's not worried about her. "She's got quite a few more years yet to look over us."

