The construction of the London Eye was a truly international effort

As the wheel turns, the cultural landscape of London emerges

Getting the measure of London

A personal view from the Eye

Why is the London Eye succeeding where other attempts have failed, both as an attraction and as a symbol of London for residents and visitors alike? The answer is simple: because every visitor's journey around this great arc of experience creates a personal narrative. The circular journey is never the same for any two travellers, or for the same traveller twice. Every passenger tells their own story of the panorama coming into view below them, a story taking in their own personal experience and knowledge. Everyone has an equal, and equally different, story to tell. Here, Deborah Jenkins of the London Metropolitan Archive records her own experience – watching the cultural map of the capital unfold around her as she looked down from the London Eye.

As the pod rises above ground, it is modern London which asserts itself first: the cluster of tall blocks in the City, Tower 42, the BT tower, and, oddly magnified, Centre Point, from the top of which, twenty years ago, I looked down on the twinkle of night-time, winter London.

More than streets or rivers, buildings shape the base map of an urban area – but only the base map, though, as much of the defining culture of an area stems from the purpose to which the buildings are dedicated. The National Theatre, with its external concrete pattern of rough hewn wood (imprinted from the original building planks), may have been designed as a shocking architectural statement, but its internal space, in tune with the artistic use of the building, is peaceful. Charing Cross station's new verdigris cowl is equally striking, yet it shelters the domestic concerns of commuters and what, from up here, look like children's train sets.

One of the more intriguing 1960s development proposals for the heart of London entailed covering over the Thames extensively and building over the lid. The idea is arresting: achieving such a technical feat (like building the Thames Barrier, or even the Edmonton Incineration Plant, now coming into view from the pod) must be tempting; the disregard for centuries of organic growth is astounding.

Looking down on the river, its busyness fascinates: the landfill barges, the riverboats, the moored warships. You speculate on the industriousness of the Thames in centuries past, when it was wider. The monument on the Victoria Embankment which marks its previous width is not visible from up here; still, you take a guess and imagine it. Other small ornamental details along that reach of the Thames give gentle pleasure: the monument to the Camel Corps in the embankment gardens, the weather vane in

the shape of a caravel on the Astor Estate Office, the dolphin street lamps.

Formal London can appeal to emotions unexpectedly. It is not the rather dreary mass of the Old Bailey which matters, but the monumental inscription above the main gate: 'Defend the children of the poor & punish the wrongdoer'. A compassionate sentiment, which articulates the concerns of the early twentieth century with crisp clarity.

At the apogee of the ride, Nelson looms in the haze. Shorn of his column, the authority of his presence becomes more understandable.

This is Nelson on a human scale. The column, normally so dominant, but now hidden, is an accurate reflection of public enthusiasm for this very human, and very public figure. This single column is an early graph of public opinion: a stone statement of an extraordinary posthumous approval rating.

By the early seventeenth century, land surveyors had a number of sophisticated measuring tools at their disposal, such as theodolites and circumferentors, but it was not unusual for them to climb up to the highest point of the parish they were surveying to get a feel for the area they were recording. While their accounts of roods and perches are pedantically accurate, they still allowed themselves the right to illustrate their maps and drawings with sketches of monumental windmills and massive oak trees

More than streets or rivers, buildings shape the base map of an urban area

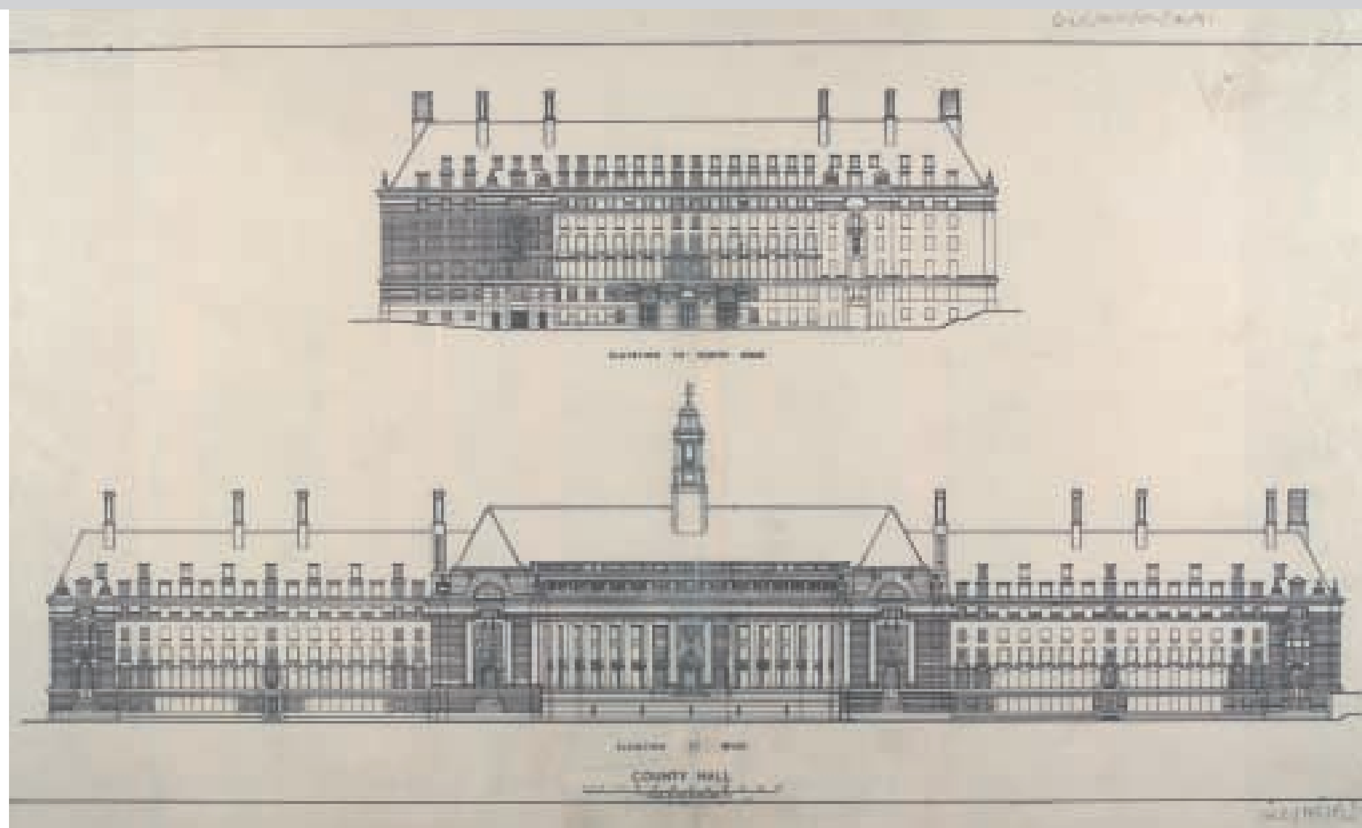
out of proportion with the rest of their work, a convention which is still observed today by the creators of illustrated maps. From the unique perspective of the wheel, I muse about distortion, the ability to prioritise features and magnify issues, the root of creative imagination, of history writing, of interpretation. The wheel turns and I pick out Battersea power station and, in the anarchic greyness of South London, Lambeth Palace and St Thomas's Hospital.

Each of the 32 capsules created carries up to 25 people

Finally and at long last, I take in, fully and deliberately, Big Ben and County Hall. In the current attempts at defining English culture, perhaps not enough is made of the peculiarly English management of power, political power especially. Nowhere is it so clearly physically represented as in that vista from the Eye. County Hall, that large assured building, shames the chintzy daintiness of the Houses of Parliament. Even now, fourteen years after the abolition of the municipality it housed, County Hall stands as a symbolic representation of local will. The tensions are not new, nor are they exclusive to this city, but London's landscape bears the scars.

Slowly, slowly, the wheel completes the circle; it feels like falling back to earth.

Text by Deborah Jenkins; **research** by Geoff Pick from materials held at London Metropolitan Archives. **The title is drawn from a pamphlet issued in 1985 by the Valuation and Estates Department of the Greater London Council.** References to surveying techniques are from Samuel Cunn's Compleat Surveyor, 1722.



The original plans for County Hall.
Picture courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives

FACT FILE

Ten facts about the London Eye

The London Eye stands **135 metres tall (450ft).** It is the biggest observation or Ferris wheel in the world. The previous biggest was the Technocosmos wheel at Expo '85 in Japan, which stood 85 metres high.

The London Eye is **London's fourth tallest structure**, behind Canada Tower at Canary Wharf (244 metres), the Telecom Tower (189 metres) and the NatWest Tower (183 metres).

The wheel's hub and **24 metre spindle** are supported by two columns, 60 metres high, which stand on bases in Jubilee Gardens.

Each of the wheel's 32 capsules can carry up to 25 passengers, giving the London Eye an **hourly capacity of 1,500.**

A **complete revolution** of the wheel **takes 30 minutes.**

The wheel is in continuous motion, collecting passengers as **it moves at 0.26 metres per second.**

Passengers can **see for 26 miles** from the top.

A total of **6km of cable** went into the wheel's construction.

Each of the wheel's cables weighs 1.5 tonnes. The combined weight of the wheel's hub and spindle is 330 tonnes. **The wheel as a whole weighs a massive 1,600 tonnes.**

The wheel was constructed at different locations away from its present site: the main structure was built in **Holland** using British steel; the hub and spindle were cast in the **Czech Republic;** the bearings, which enable the wheel to turn, were made in **Germany;** the cables were manufactured in **Italy;** the boarding and disembarking tests for the wheel were performed in **France.**