

# INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

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## COVER PICTURE

*Blaenavon Ironworks by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, from Cox's Tour in Monmouthshire, 1799 (see Cordell Obituary, page 12)*

## The King's Cross gasholders

Chris Miele

*King's Cross and St. Pancras Stations together with the former goods yards to the north constitute one of the most important sites for industrial archaeology in London. This paper outlines the history and significance of the renowned gasholders on the site.*

More than a decade ago an inventory of historic structures was compiled, resulting in over a dozen listings. There followed masterplans and protracted discussions involving the owners, local residents, the London Borough of Camden, English Heritage, and others. Then, upsetting it all, came the decision to bring the Channel Rail Link into St. Pancras, and the subsequent Channel Tunnel Rail Bill (given Royal Assent earlier this year), which empowered London and Continental Railways to construct new track to the north of the St. Pancras shed, necessitating the demolition of several nineteenth-century gasholders, three of them, nos.10, 11 and 12, listed grade II. English Heritage petitioned against certain clauses in the Bill. In the meantime Philip Davies, Head of the North and East London Team at English Heritage, negotiated an alternative to their demolition. London and Continental Railways agreed to pay for the dismantling of the gasholders and their storage, pending re-erection and re-use nearby.

In order to inform these negotiations English Heritage staff carried out original research into the trio of listed gasholders abutting the former Midland Railway viaduct. Their so-called linked triplet configuration - 'linked' because they share structural members and are tied together by short spur girders - is unique in this country, the result, it turns out, of the peculiar history of the site and the particular needs

of the company which first put holders here, the Imperial Gas Light and Coke Co. The roughly triangular piece of land was leased by the freeholder, the Ecclesiastical Commission, in the 1830s, when short runs of terraced housing and semi-detached villas were constructed. A few years earlier, in 1825, the newly founded Imperial had opened a grand, state-of-the-art gasworks immediately to the south and east of the Commissioners' land. The architect Francis Edwards fitted the offices and retort house into a grand neo-classical shell for the industrial complex, with massive chimneys treated as columns (thus anticipating those at Giles Gilbert Scott's Battersea Power Station). The western half of the site was planned to receive 12 identical gasholders, each roughly 40 feet in diameter.

The 1840s was a time of cut-throat competition in the gas industry and at the end the Imperial was one of the most powerful in London, having a virtual monopoly over the northern suburbs from Shoreditch to Paddington. But there was one problem. The suburban street lighting schemes which had made the Imperial a fortune were now hemming in each of the company's three generating sites, at St. Pancras, Shoreditch and Fulham, all planned in the early 1820s when land was relatively cheap. The company's records (held at the London Metropolitan Archives, formerly the Greater London Record Office) show just how much pressure it was under. Gradual improvements were constantly being made: larger, more efficient retorts, better purification processes and mains, and more intensive gas storage machinery (gasholders were listed in company accounts as 'machinery').

The prospects for the Imperial's Shoreditch and Fulham stations were not dire but no amount of



*The famous linked triplet of gasholders, nos. 10, 11 and 12, as rebuilt by John Clark, 1879-80. All listed grade II, they are to be re-erected to make way for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link*

Photo: English Heritage