

“THE NORTH WEST GAS HISTORICAL WHAT ...?”

Terry Mitchell

It is something of a moot point, if when mentioning the North West Gas Historical Society (hereafter NWGHS), the listener is more amazed to find that there is a society dedicated to the history of the gas industry or that the gas industry has a history. Either way the confession of interest is enough to cause eyes to glaze over, watches to be consulted and appointments suddenly to be remembered. Which is a great pity, for the history of the gas industry did not begin with North Sea Gas, nor, for older readers, even with Mr Therm. Its seminal event, at least in this country, occurred in 1792, when a Scottish engineer, supplying and maintaining steam engines for a Birmingham company to the tin mines of Cornwall ignited the ‘smoke’ he had generated by roasting coal in a closed container. That was one small flame for a man, but one great light for mankind.

The engineer was William Murdoch, and the company he worked for was Boulton & Watt, then the most important steam engine manufacturers in the world. Murdoch continued his experiments on his return to Birmingham and eventually, as part of the celebrations of the Peace of Amiens, he illuminated part of the frontage of the Soho Foundry with gas lighting. Thus can be marked the commencement of the supply and utilisation of gas which has continued unceasing to the present day.

Gas and the Industrial Revolution

With the increasing use of coal as an industrial fuel, it is a matter of wonder that the practical value of the gaseous by-product was not recognised until almost the close of the eighteenth century. By then, however, its time had most definitely come. The ‘Industrial Revolution’ (if we can accept the term without debate, just to move the gas story on!) was giving rise to a requirement not only for power but for light. This is a concept that many in the twentieth century have difficulty in coming to terms with. Light is now ubiquitous, no matter what time of day or season of the year. It was not always so. Until the nineteenth century, for light, man was largely dependant upon the sun and moon. Artificial light sources, candles and oil lamps, were available only to the small wealthy elite of society, but do not be deceived by Hollywood, nor even by the BBC. The effect upon the pervading gloom we should regard as much less than satisfactory: for most of mankind – nightfall meant bedtime. The social and industrial developments of the eighteenth century gave rise to many attempts to ‘extend daylight’. Contractors grew rich installing oil lamps in the streets of London and other major cities. The insufficiency of what was being provided was, however, recognised even in the lighting contracts – they all stipulated lamps would not be lit for 2/3 days around the full-moon. They could not compete! Even the light provided on the blackest night was derided as serving only “to make the darkness visible”. Contractors, when taxed as to the absence of light from their lamps, would reply that they were contracted “to provide lights, not light”.

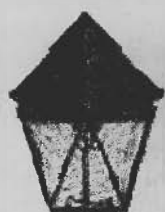
Into this society the ‘Industrial Revolution’ introduced the factory. It is not surprising that the first major application of the ‘flammable smoke’ was at the hub of the fledgling cotton textile industry, in the factory of Messrs. Phillips and Lee, off Chapel Street in Salford. William Murdoch, on behalf of Boulton and Watt fitted out the factory with its own gas plant and over 900 burners were installed. The citizens of Manchester flocked to gaze over the River Irwell at this great illumination.

Gas goes Public

Neither Murdoch nor Boulton and Watt reaped much advantage from this advance. They installed gas plants in a number of factories, but their vision was flawed. The future lay not in each factory being equipped with its own plant but in public gasworks supplying gas to a multitude of customers, through a network of pipes laid in the public streets. This was the vision of Frederic Albert Winsor, a native of Moravia.

Winsor conceived his plan in Paris at the displays of the French Pioneer of Gas, Philippe LeBon. Taking ship for England he arrived in London and demonstrated his gaslights in the theatres and, in 1807, on the walls of Carlton House, the Pall Mall home of the Prince of Wales. His claims for the benefits of gas, and the returns which would be available to investors in his Universal Gas Light Company, would nowadays, one hopes, see him exposed as a fraud and a cheat. In 1812, however, under Parliamentary authority, the Chartered Gas Company was established to make available a public supply of gas in the cities of London and Westminster and in the Borough of Southwark.

Thus, the gas industry was launched and the true age of gaslight had begun. For eighty years gaslight was the gas industry, until the threat of the electric light sparked a wave of new invention and development. Only then was gas to become a near universal feature of urban homes. It took the electricity industry until after the Great War to become the illuminant of choice in domestic premises: it was after the Second World War before it took control of the streets. The gas industry, however, had learnt to live with the competition and developed alternative markets. Nationalisation in 1949 saw the sweeping away of the thousand-odd private and municipal companies and their replacement by twelve regional boards. In every corner of the country the Gas Boards closed small and inefficient gasworks and rationalised the supply network. Under the threat of the monopoly coal pricing imposed by the NCB, they developed alternative fuel sources and in the early-sixties commenced the erection of large-scale oil based gasification plants to end the 150 years of dependence on coal. These plants were still uncompleted when large quantities of natural gas were found in the North Sea ...



GASLIGHT

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WHAT'S ON, NWGHS

19th May 1999 - Transco Offices, Spa Rd, Bolton.

A Gasman Goes To Buenos Ayres

Following a buffet tea served from 5.30pm, former **NWGHS** Chairman, **Keith Eastwood**, will give an illustrated presentation of his time working for **Metrogas**, the public gas supply company in **Buenos Ayres**. In what was very much an historic event, **British Gas** had become the largest shareholder in the privatised utility and was then contracted to provide management and technical expertise. When **Keith** left for the **Argentine**, in 1994, he had justifiable anxieties as to his reception. The Falkland's conflict was only one complication, another was the history of the Argentinian gas industry. It was largely the creation of British capital and gas industry expertise but had been nationalised by the Peron administration. Its development had then lagged far behind that of the British gas industry but now British capital and gas industry expertise were coming back. What would be their reception?

The meeting is held at **Spa Road** by kind invitation of **Mr Jo Yeowart**, **LDZ Manager**, **Transco, BG plc**.

FUTURE PROGRAMME.

A full programme has now been arranged for the 1999 session as follows:-

17th June - Visit to the "History of the Co-operative Movement" at the Toad Lane Museum, Rochdale.

14th October - Bill Aldridge - "Early Motor Transport of the Gas Industry" - Bramhall Methodist Church.

11th November - Terry Mitchell - "Gaslight Goes To War - The Final Years" - Stockport.

Times and Venues will be announced in *Gaslight*.

Gaslight Gleamings

An Ice-Breaker on a British Canal would seem as likely as an electric fire in a gas showroom but there is one at the **Ellesmere Port Boat Museum!** This was just one of the facts paraded by **Harry Hignett** to his **NWGHS** audience at Stockport. The former Master Mariner fully illustrated his talk with a wide selection of slides showing the development of the Museum from an unused terminus of the Shropshire Union to one of the countries foremost attractions for all interested in the canal system and its contribution to the growth of British industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The former extent of the canal infrastructure is now hard to comprehend. In its heyday not only were industrial centres connected but most major factories and mills had their own wharves, linking them to their customers and to the mining districts. With their dependence on bulk supplies of coal, it was no accident that so many early gasworks were built on canal banks.

NWGHS member, **Michael J Williams**, is appealing for help in tracing the location of the gasworks which served the Oakengates area of Shropshire. Was this the original works of the Wellington (Salop) Gas Company? This was formed in 1851 but eventually became a part of the Severn Valley Gas Corporation in the 1930's. If anyone can help Michael please contact him at **2 Oakfield Rd, Wollaton, Nottingham, NG2 2SQ.**

History of the Society

The rest is your history and that of the North West Gas Historical Society. The completion of the conversion programme, in the late 1970s, was a natural watershed in gas history. All that had gone before, to make gas, had indeed now gone. The gasworks which had dominated the towns and many villages for 150 years had been demolished. Almost nothing tangible remained: as the heady excitement of conversion subsided, the enormity of what had really happened began to dawn.

North West Gas recruited a newly retired gas engineer, J. Kenneth Lord, to investigate what, if anything, still remained. He soon realised that the resources available to him were, not to put too fine a point on it, less than adequate. What he needed was enthusiasm and manpower: the enthusiasm could be boundless, the manpower had to be cheap – well free actually. In 1983, Ken Lord placed an advert in "Link-Up", the North West Gas employees' magazine, appealing for those with an interest in the industry's history to meet with the object of establishing an historical society and assisting in the setting up of an archive.

About two dozen attended what was to be the inaugural meeting of the NWGHS. In a most businesslike manner the meeting nominated, and elected a President, Chairman, Secretary and Management Committee. They were instructed to define the society's terms of reference (but on no account to draw up anything too bureaucratic!), to publicise the NWGHS's existence, to liaise with Ken Lord and arrange assistance and, above all, to draw-up a programme of meetings for the first season which was to commence the next month! The meeting, its business satisfactorily completed, then closed.

The meetings were the biggest headache, but with the desperation of the condemned a programme was drawn up which set a pattern to the society's year which still runs today. We had to accept that, although dedicated to researching, preserving and publicising the history of the gas industry, it would not be possible for every meeting to have a purely gas theme, nor, on reflection, did we consider it desirable.

The principal fact, of which we were conscious, was that very little had been published about the history of gas and it was therefore a not unreasonable supposition that very little research had been carried out either. This was an obvious hindrance to finding speakers. In fact, we had to become our own speakers, but only after we had carried out the very necessary research. In addressing this obstacle, however, what initially had been a problem very quickly became an opportunity. The dearth of information about 'gas' made it more necessary to try to place it in an industrial, economic and social context. So, so long as our speakers mentioned 'gas' somewhere in their presentation, we should be the winners.

The Society Today

The annual programme therefore tries to contain at least one meeting with significant new gas research. There is also a 'mini-topic' evening with 2 or 3 half-hour presentations on a gas theme. The AGM, a video and film night and a

summer visit are the other fixed points of the programme. The other three meetings may have a gas or an industrial history base.

It must be said that, as a society, the NWGHS had advantages not normally available to many. Arising from our role in helping North West Gas build its archive, we were able to make use of many company facilities. Meeting rooms were never a problem, nor the provision of audio-visual equipment, and above all perhaps a buffet tea was normally available. Research papers could be printed and publicity generated through the employee magazine. The company was happy to provide all this because it recognised the value it derived from the society's activities. The fledgling archive outgrew four sites before finally settling at Partington. What had initially been a collection based on the North West was adopted by British Gas (now BG plc) as the National Gas Archive and the company's collection of historic records from all its regions were centralised there. This is now the country's largest centre of gas industry records.

The quality of original research carried out by NWGHS has been recognised by the Institution of Gas Engineers who, on six occasions since 1983, have presented their Sugg Heritage Award to members. It is also recognised in the links which have been forged with Manchester University, the Manchester Metropolitan University and Salford University. From these links have come two publications, *The Great Salford Gas Scandal* by John Garrard and *Lighting The Town* by John Wilson.

The radical restructuring of the gas industry has had obvious effects upon the NWGHS. Many of the facilities, once taken for granted, are now no longer available. Nevertheless, strong support is still given by both BG plc and Centrica in the provision of meeting rooms and assistance with printing. This latter facility has assumed a greater importance since the introduction of *Gaslight*, the newsletter of the NWGHS. At least eight editions are produced each year, each copy containing information of the society's programme and activities. In addition, at least four A4 pages are devoted to articles on gas history, some original, some extracted from the journals of the industry which date back to 1849. *Gaslight* has brought with it an enlarged constituency for the NWGHS: membership is no longer confined to the North West, it reaches out to all parts of the United Kingdom. Gas history is no longer the preserve of the eccentric; its study no longer considered esoteric. For 200 years, the evolution of the UK gas industry has impacted on local, national and international history. Most of that story has been forgotten or lost. Even so momentous a change as privatisation failed to stimulate a re-examination of the past: regulation, control, structure, pricing, all of these were the pre-occupations of parliament, municipalities, consumers and companies alike in the almost 150 years to nationalisation. Who would have known? Well you might if you had been a member of the NWGHS!

Are You Interested in Gas History? Are You Ready To Come Out? Membership is just £5.00 per annum, providing free copies of *Gaslight*, as well as free entrance to all meetings (including the buffet teas). For further details, please contact: Terry Mitchell, Editor, *Gaslight*, Old Barnshaw Cottage, Pepper Street, Mobberley, Cheshire WA16 6JH.