

Notes on the Site of the Canon's Marsh Gasworks, Bristol

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When the Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society was formed, traditional town gas was still being produced at Canon's Marsh. This was not to continue for much longer as the South Western Gas Board rationalised the number of its manufacturing stations. Following the introduction of oil gas from petroleum distillate made at Avonmouth, and eventually natural gas from the North Sea, gas production based on coal was to be reduced and finally eliminated.

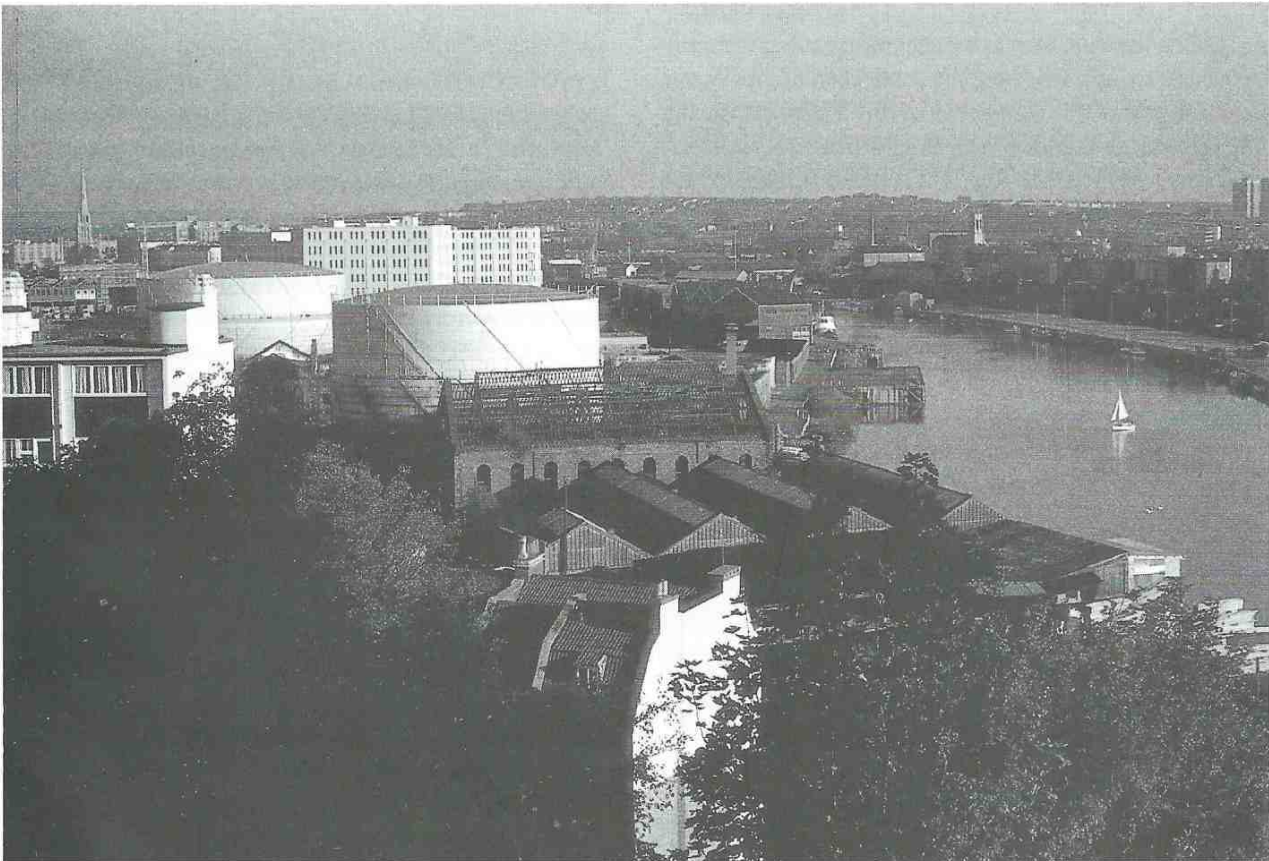
By 1983, replies to the questionnaire 'BIAS fifteen years on' referred to three boiler houses, an old weighbridge house, a stores building, governor house and several derelict buildings on the site. In their book *The Floating Harbour: a Landscape History of Bristol Docks* which appeared about the same time, John Lord and Jem Southam thought there was a case for preservation:

'Facing the harbour, the early office building, a classical design with a small portico, rustication on the ground floor and first floor Venetian windows, has been brutally hacked about; shorn of most architectural features, windows and doors blocked. Within the walled compound, and in the extension site next to Brandon Wharf are several retort and engine houses in an imposing and unaffected style. There are echoes of the non-conformist chapel in these simple buildings in grey, coursed rubble, with large round-headed windows and bull's eye openings in the gable ends.'

Development of the site has been complicated by its being in a conservation area. Moreover, two three-lift spirally guided gas holders there remain operational. The older, with 668,000 cubic feet capacity, had its tank installed in 1863 whilst the metal-work dates from 1933. The other, having a capacity of 1,240,000 cubic feet, dates from 1871 although the holder itself is much more recent, being the work of R. & J. Dempster Ltd completed in 1946.

The works was built by the Clifton and Bristol Oil Gas Company which obtained an Act of Parliament in 1823 to produce gas from oil. Its location was given as limekiln Lane, adjoining the glasshouse. Due to the high price of oil gas, the company changed to coal gas in 1836. In 1853 it amalgamated with the older Bristol Gaslight Company to form the Bristol United Gaslight Company and in 1857 the headquarters of the new concern were moved to Canon's Marsh. Not until 1903 was a site acquired in Colston Street for new offices and the proper display of appliances and fittings.

Extra land had been acquired over the years and in 1902 an initial agreement was reached with the Great Western Railway for it to be served by a siding; this was laid in 1910. During the second world war, on 24 November 1940, high explosive bombs did extensive damage to the original board room whilst on 11 April - Good Friday - of the following year, a holder was lost. The future of the site remains uncertain as various schemes to develop the neighbourhood are considered.



Canon's Marsh Gas Works in 1974 (Owen Ward)