

HISTORY OF GAS IN SUTTON COLDFIELD DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY ALAN HOWELLS

Gas in Sutton Coldfield

The first confirmed reference to coal gas supplies in Sutton Coldfield is the opening of the Sutton Coldfield Gas Light and Coke Company's works in the mid 1800's. This was a private speculative venture following the similar introduction of coal gas supplies into so many other towns and cities in Britain in the first half of the 19th Century. Its primary use initially was for lighting, it was to replace the old oil lighting that was then in universal use.

Origins of Gas Lighting

William Murdoch 1754 - 1839, is considered to be the pioneer of coal gas lighting. He was born in Scotland and came in search of work to Birmingham in 1777. He was taken on by Matthew Boulton at the thriving Soho Manufactory, Handsworth Heath, Birmingham because of his ideas, enterprise and initiative. His introduction of some gas jet lighting into the manufactory in 1798 enabled hours of work to be extended and production increased. He illuminated the front of the manufactory in 1802 and the entire works in 1803. Gas lighting equipment then started to be made at Soho and was installed in factories throughout the country. He retired from the Soho Works in 1830 at the age of 76. He died at his house at Sycamore Hill, Handsworth, in 1839 aged 85 and is buried in Handsworth Church. ¹



William Murdoch

Arrival of Gas in Sutton Coldfield

Gas arrived in Sutton Coldfield in 1854, this was somewhat later than in a number of adjacent boroughs. In order to understand how the supplies in the surrounding boroughs had influenced the eventual arrival of gas supplies in Sutton, we will look firstly at the arrival of gas in the largest local area Birmingham.

During the 19th Century it must be remembered that quite a number of Sutton Coldfield residents either had businesses or worked for businesses in Birmingham and travelled between the two towns daily. (By means of horse drawn transport until the arrival of the railway in the 1860's.) So they were aware of the developments in gas lighting in Birmingham.

Birmingham Gas

The first Gas works in Birmingham is considered to be the private works of Mr John Gostling which he started in 1817 in Gas Street, off Broad Street, near the City centre. It was adjacent to the Gas Street canal basin and would have received it's coal initially via the canal, brought in by horse drawn canal narrow boat, from collieries in the midlands. This works became the Birmingham Gas Light and Coke Company in 1819 ² and continued to supply Birmingham. Later, in 1825, the Birmingham & Staffordshire Gas Light Company also commenced to supply Birmingham with gas from its West Bromwich works. The Act under which it was set up, allowed the company to supply Birmingham, Bilston, Wednesbury, Tipton, West Bromwich, Darlaston, Walsall, Handsworth, Edgbaston and Aston. The supply was to be better and cheaper than oil lamps. In 1845 a further Act allowed the company to extend its control to a very large area around Birmingham, adding the Boroughs of Oldbury, Harborne, Smethwick, Rowley Regis, Kings Norton and Sutton Coldfield. It became the most extensive district granted to any gas company, it was some 20 miles north to south and 16 miles east to west. The Boroughs of Aston Manor (and Erdington) including Sutton Coldfield, being in the County of Warwickshire not Staffordshire at this time? Further Acts of 1855 and 1864 allowed the company to extend it's areas to cover even more boroughs around Birmingham.

Both the Birmingham private companies were taken over by Birmingham Corporation in 1875. including all their assets, rights and privileges. ³ The works were in good condition with no liabilities of an embarrassing nature. Birmingham then commenced to supply the area with gas in what became a very profitable business for the Corporation. Its monopoly position enabled it to produce gas in large quantities very economically. To prevent extortion of outlying districts the gas was to be supplied at the same rate as that within Birmingham. In fact a number of reductions in the price of gas followed

Birmingham Corporation's take over. Clauses were inserted in the Act to allow any local authority to purchase the supply within their district. Neither Sutton Coldfield or Aston appear to have taken up this option. ³

Birmingham Corporation certainly supplied the Aston and Erdington areas after it took over the Company but despite the powers it inherited for Sutton Coldfield ⁴ it is not thought to have supplied gas.

Gas Lighting Acts

Following the introduction of coal gas lighting at the beginning of the 19th Century, Acts of Parliament were brought in to allow gas lights to be used for street lighting. These Acts were known as "Acts for the Lighting and Watching of Parishes." ⁵

The first such Act was enacted in the eleventh year of the reign of King George the Fourth. (1830).

The second Act was enacted in the fourth year of the reign of King William the Fourth (1833) and it repealed the first Act.

The Act required that a meeting be called by the Church Wardens, in order for the inhabitants of the Parish to determine if the provisions of the Act should be adopted. (Sutton did not have a Corporation at this time.) Inspectors (a committee), from 3 up to 12 persons, were to be elected to decide the local requirements and set the payments to be made by the ratepayers.

They were to appoint the Watchmen (Constables) whose duties were to include, Preventing mischief of fire, Robberies, Burglaries, etc. A fire engine and clothing were also to be provided.

The Inspectors were also at their discretion allowed to put up any Lamp Irons (lampposts) on any Roads, Streets or Public places. But not on private property or roads without consent. They could enter into contracts with companies to light the streets with gas or oil or other materials. Lights to be lighted for determined periods within the 24 hours. No contract was to exceed £20. The lamps remained the property of the inspectors. They could oversee that gas pipes were laid in a specific manner, gas escapes were to be stopped in 24 hours! With the help of the Commissioners of Sewers the Gas Works was to be inspected to ensure no effluent leakages into water courses, sewers or drains.

The rates required to be raised in order to pay for the Lighting and Watching of the parish were determined by the Inspectors. They were to be collected by the Overseer of the Poor and passed to the treasurer of the. Inspectors.

The first reference to a meeting to discuss the requirements of the Act in Sutton Coldfield is a notice of a meeting dated 1860.

Sutton Coldfield Gas Works

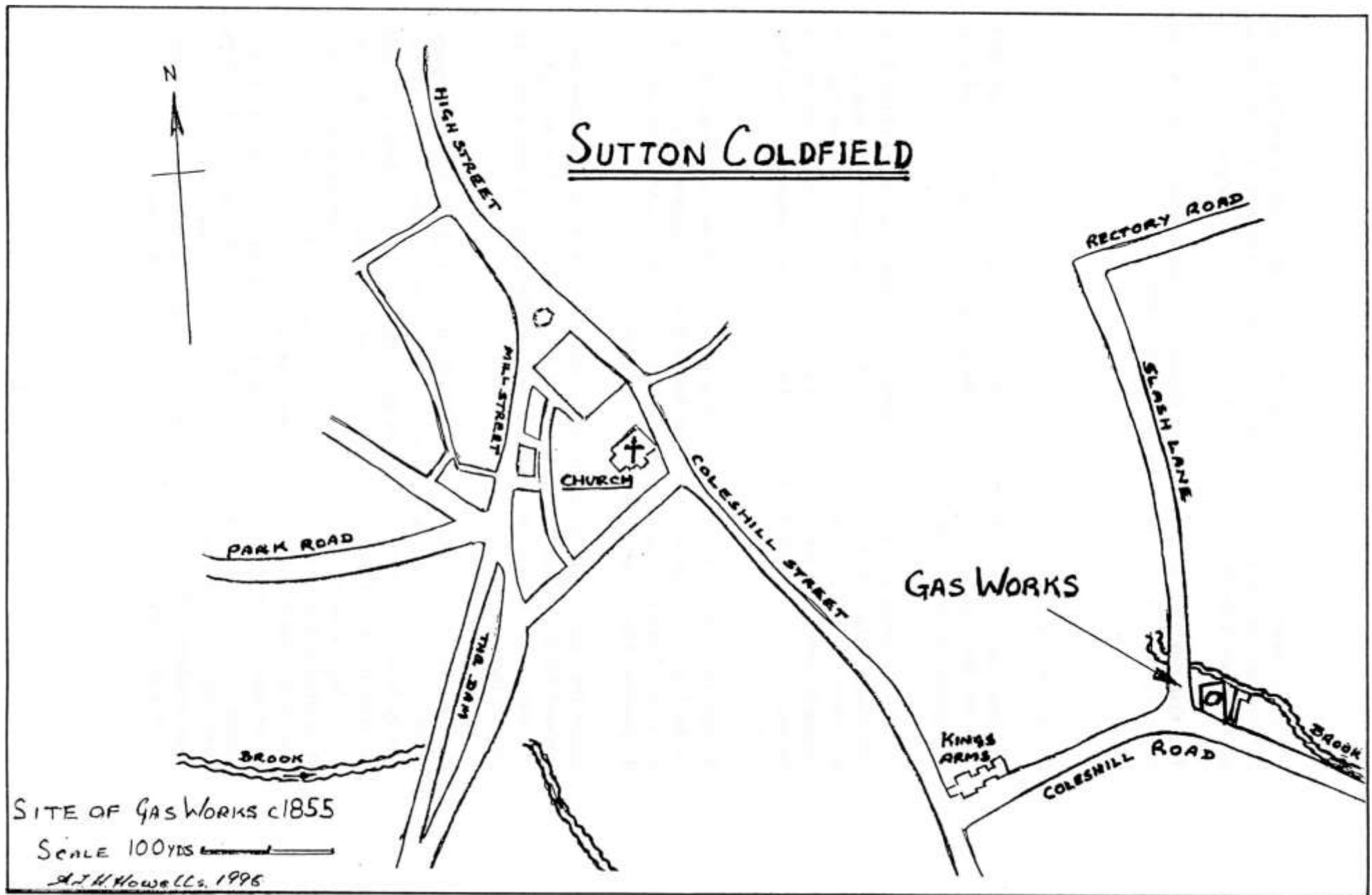
The first reference to a Gas Works within Sutton Coldfield is in February 1853 when the Borough Gas Committee is charged with the feasibility of aiding in the establishing of the Gas Works. ⁶

The Gas Company first proposed to lease some waste land on the Horse Fair, now Lower Parade, to build the works. The site would have been near to the then centre of the town and be close to the water from the stream that had originally flowed into the old Town Mill Pool and now flowed past the site of the old town mill towards the Ebrook. The town's Gas Committee refused this request.

By May 1853 another site had been chosen near the Blabbs on Coleshill Road, the land, part of a garden, was to be leased from the tenants at £12 an Acre per Year. Again this site was near a stream where water could be obtained for the process. This site also proved to be unsuitable.

Finally the Gas Committee discussed, in December 1854, the Gas Company's proposal for the exchange of nearby land for a Works site. This was agreed and was to be carried out at the Gas Company's expense and under the General Inclosure Act. ⁷

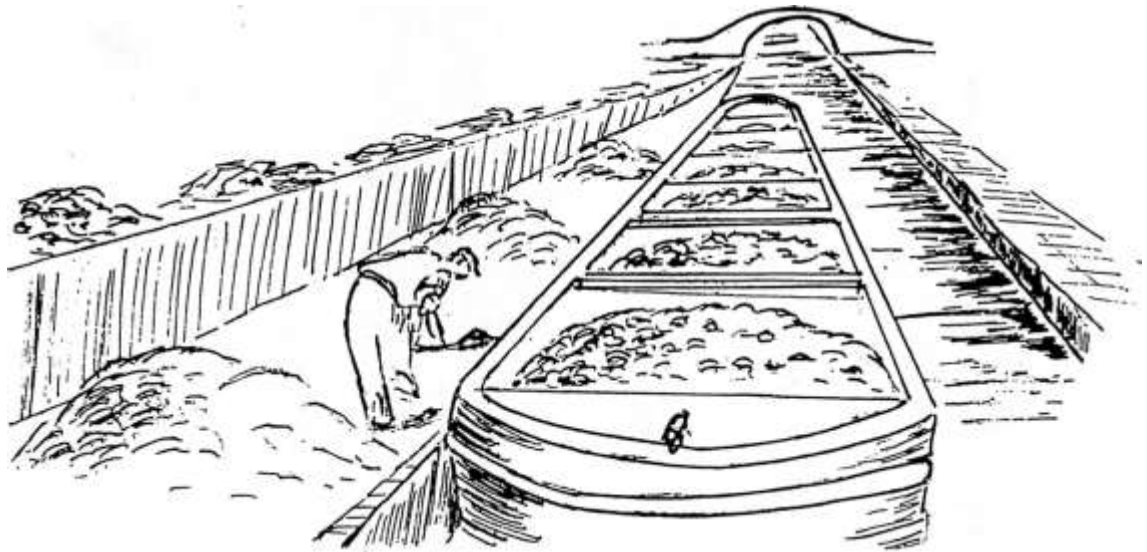
The first Gas Works of the Sutton Coldfield Gas Light & Coke Company seems to have been only a small works, the number of consumers would also initially have been small. It was on the corner of the then Slash Lane and Coleshill Road. ⁸This area at the time was countryside, mainly fields, the nearest large building being the Kings Arms Inn on Coleshill Road. A gas works sited well away from residential areas would also have been desirable in view of the smell that would have been produced. There was a convenient stream running through the site providing a suitable water supply for the gas making process. The site was probably convenient for the delivery of coal by horse and cart to the works and for the sale of the coke by product to the towns residents. The gas pipes to supply the town ran from the works along Coleshill Road and Coleshill Street into the centre of the town.



Site of Sutton Coldfield's first Gas Works. (c 1855).

Coal Supplies

A steady supply of coal suitable for producing gas was required at the works. This would have been delivered by horse and cart either direct from a colliery mining gas coal in the midlands, probably a considerable distance, as there were no railways to Sutton Coldfield at this time. Or it is more likely that the coal was collected from a wharf on the nearby Birmingham & Fazeley Canal where it had been brought by canal narrowboat in twenty ton loads from the collieries in south Staffordshire and Warwickshire. The canal had been built (opened 1789) primarily to enable coal from the south Staffordshire collieries at Wednesbury, Bilston, Sedgley, Tipton and West Bromwich to be transported to the Coventry area and beyond.⁹ There were wharfs along the canal at Minworth, Tyburn-Chester Road and other local places to enable coal to be supplied to all the local communities. The unloading of the coal from the boats onto the carts would have been heavy manual work with shovels.¹⁰

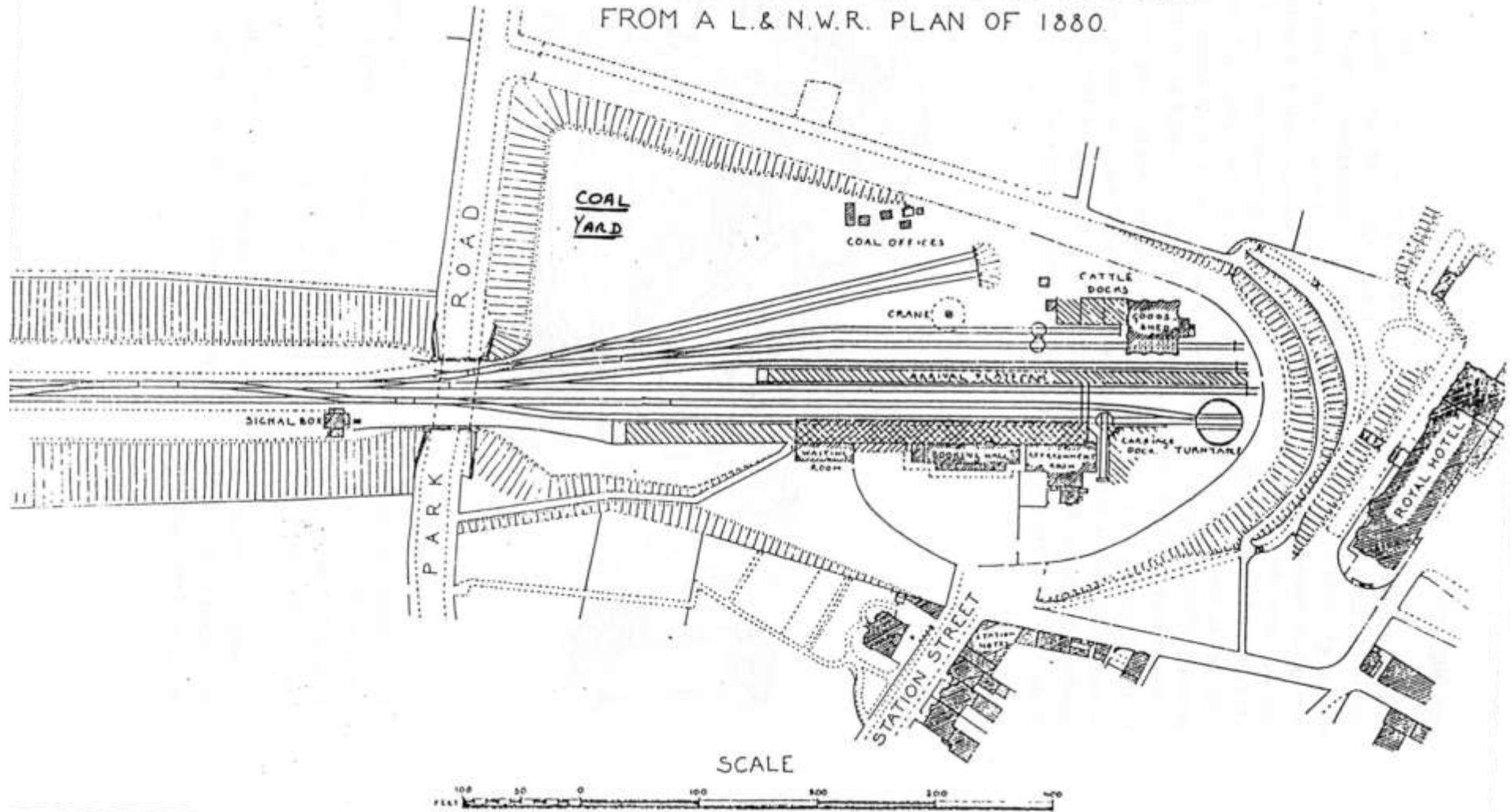


The situation became easier with the arrival of the L.N.W. Railway into the centre of Sutton Coldfield in 1862, enabling coal to be brought to the goods yard at the terminal sidings.¹¹ Where it could be collected locally by horse and cart and taken to the Gas Works.

A further alternative local source of coal supply came in the late 1870's with the arrival of the Midland Railway's line and its coal yard at the goods siding at Sutton Park station.¹²

SUTTON COLDFIELD STATION

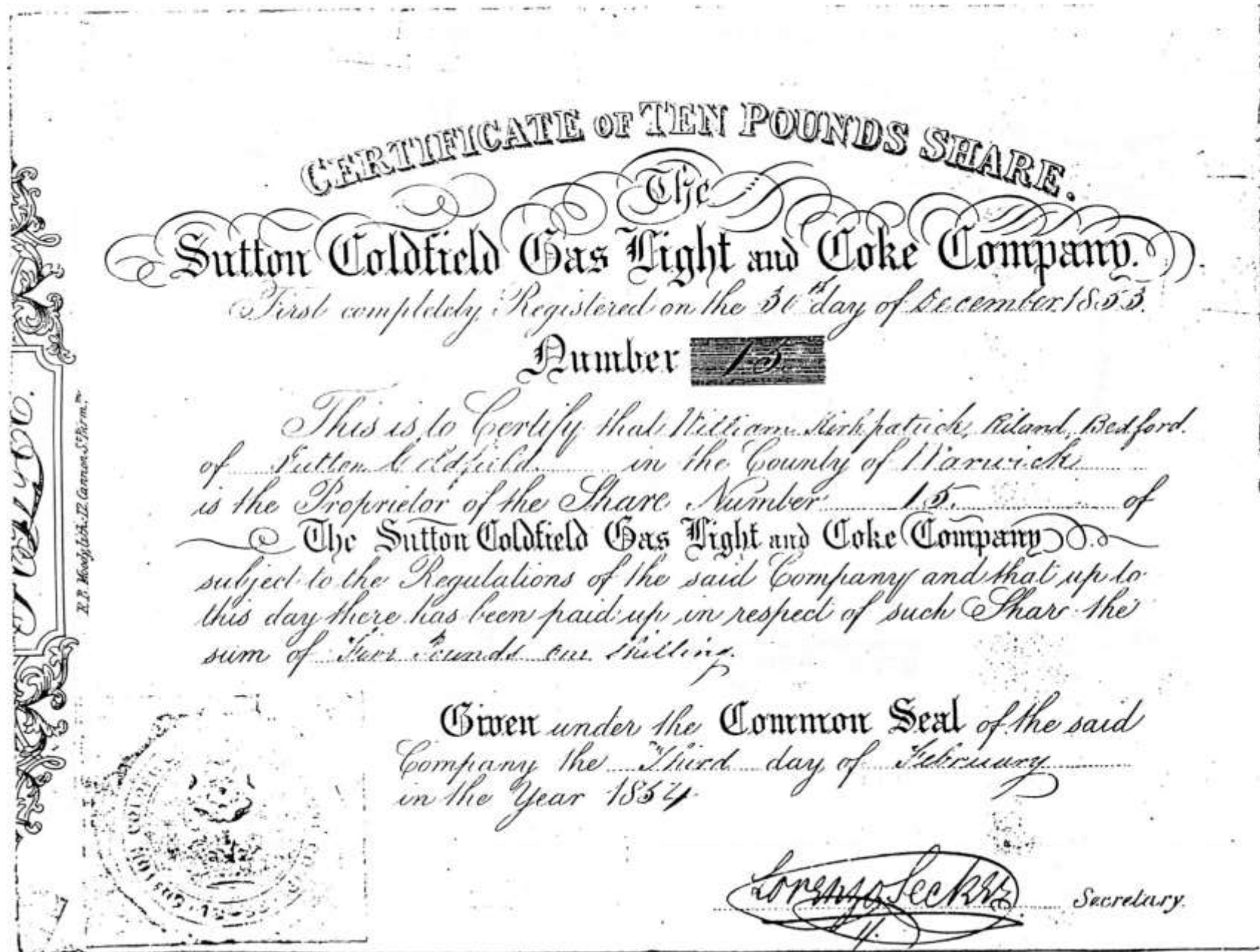
FROM A L. & N.W.R. PLAN OF 1880.



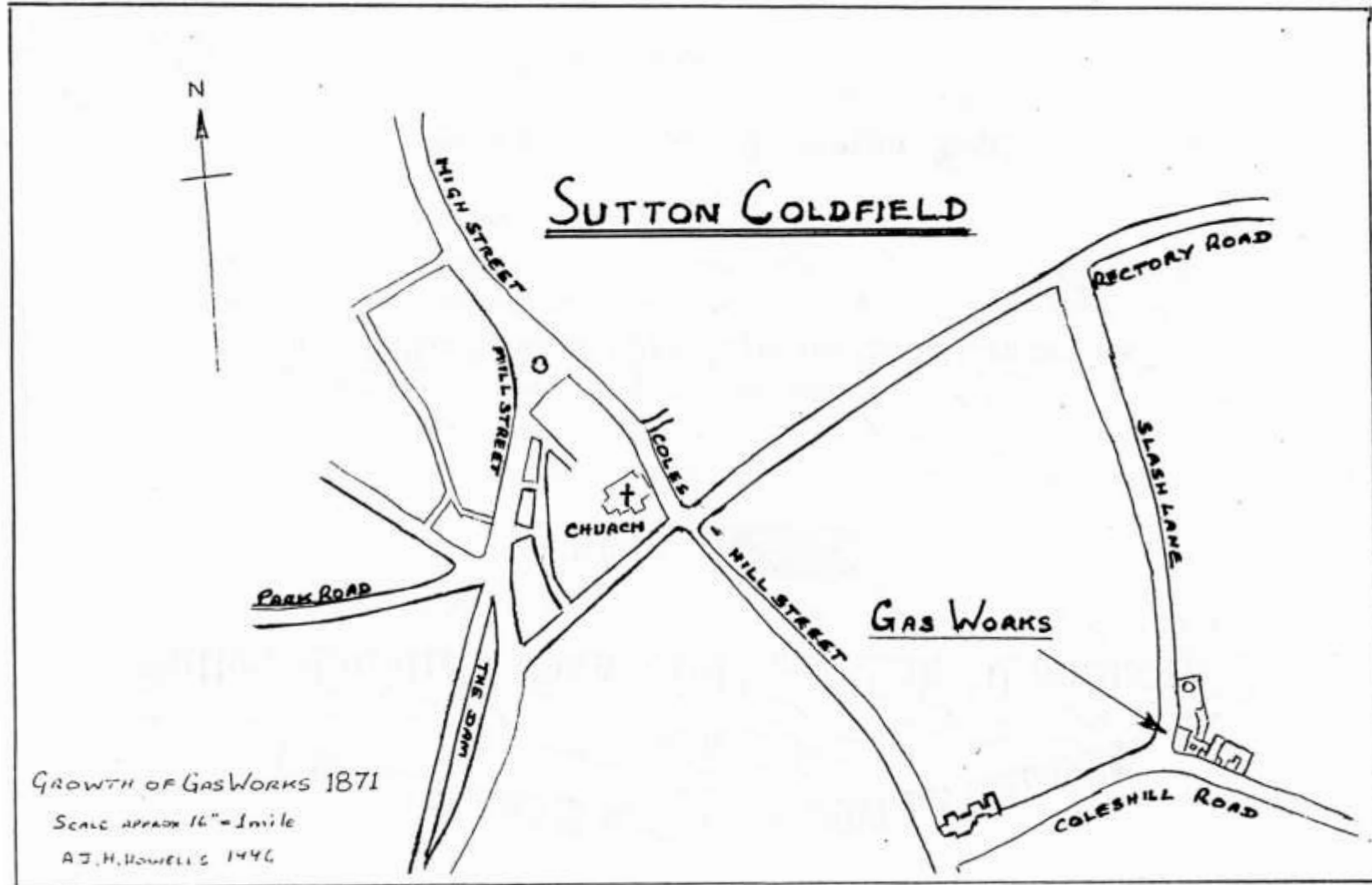
Site of the Coal collection yard Sutton Coldfield Railway station.

Gas Demand Grows

In 1853 the Sutton Coldfield Gas Light & Coke Company had become a Registered Company and issued shares in order to raise capital to build the works and the gas supply network. ¹³



The works was extended along Slash Lane as demand grew with further gas holders installed. ¹⁴



Expansion of Sutton Coldfield's Gas Works by 1871.

Public Lighting

Some of the earliest street gas lighting had started in Manchester in about 1817.

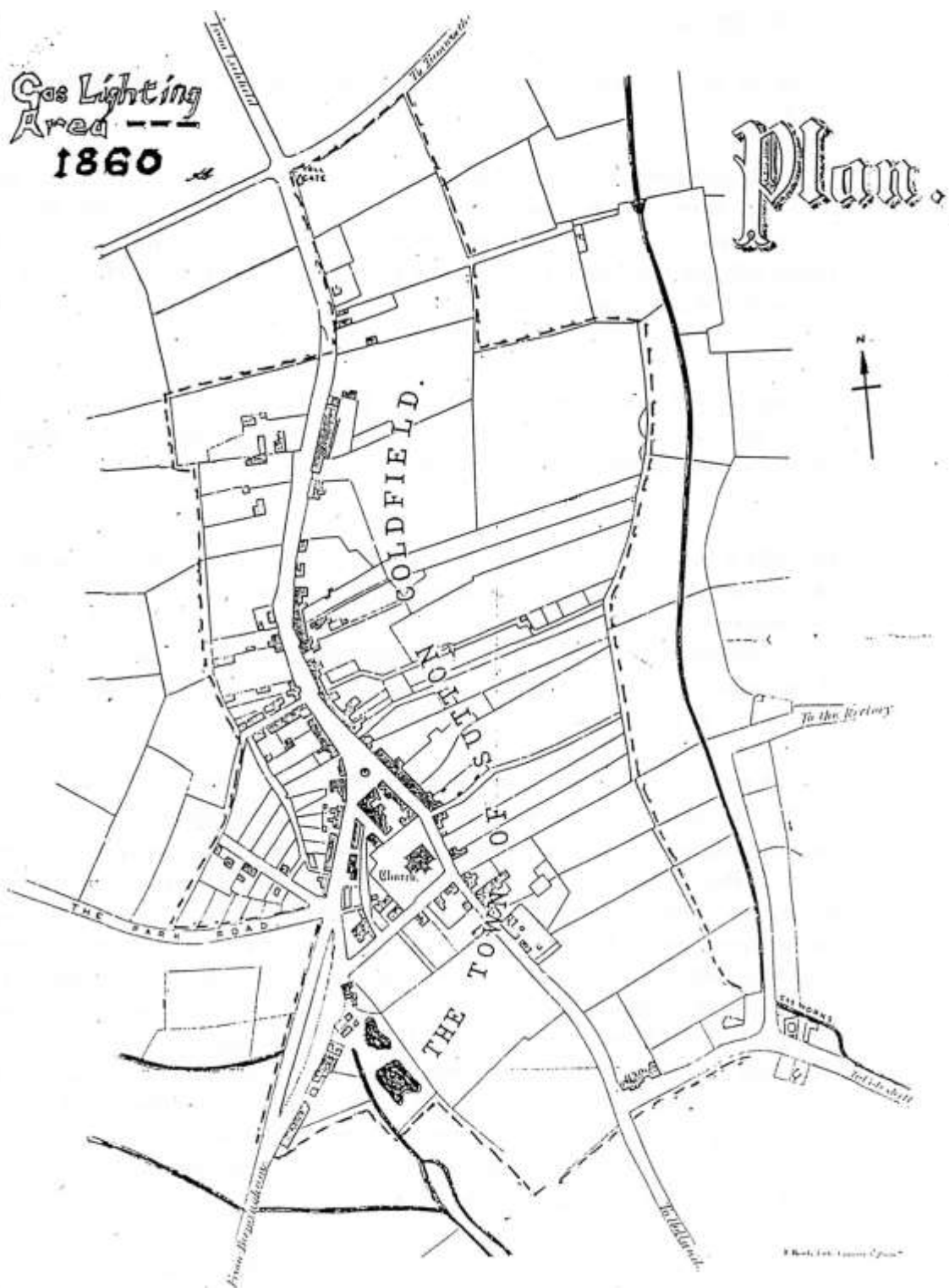
In 1853, following the establishing of the Sutton Coldfield Gas Light & Coke Co, the Borough discussed ways of laying gas pipes to the Moot Hall, Policeman's House and School Houses in the town centre. The three gas lamps lighting the Moot Hall and the one on the Policeman's House to be paid for by the Warden and Society. 15

During 1855 it was suggested that a gas lamp be erected on the site of the old Moot Hall at the top of Mill Street. This was confirmed by the Borough in 1856, and was installed in order to light up this major junction in the town.

In 1860 a meeting was called, by Samuel Kempson and Henry Edwin Farnell Shaw, Churchwardens of the Parish of Sutton Coldfield. This meeting of the ratepayers and inhabitants of the parish was to determine how the requirements of the Act for Lighting and Watching of Parishes in England and Wales was to be provided for in Sutton Coldfield. The meeting was held in November in the Moot Hall in the centre of the town.

A map of the area of the town in which lighting was to be provided was drawn up.¹⁶ The town was then very much different to today. The number of buildings were very few, the High Street being the major street in the town and today's 'Parade' with its shops and businesses did not exist, this was still the site of the Dam for the towns earlier water mill pool. The area surrounding these streets was mainly gardens and fields. Lighting of the main street was required initially from the crossroads of the Tamworth Road Lichfield Road along the High Street to the junction with Mill Street, down Mill Street and along to the Maney end of the 'Dam'. The lighting was then gradually extended to other streets and parts of the town including Coleshill Road and Street along which the gas mains ran. The major factor influencing the spread of street lights was the cost of paying for the lights, which had to be borne out of the rates. There is a record of the Borough agreeing to the erection of a Gas Lamp on Church Hill in 1861.¹⁷

Lamplighters were also required in order to turn on and light each lamp in the evening and to turn them off again, together with cleaning and servicing.



Plan of the central area of Sutton Coldfield where the first Gas supplies were to be installed for lighting the town. (1860).



Gas Lamp installed in 1856 on the site of old Moot Hall
Site occupied by town's Public Weighbridge, top of Mill street



Gas Lamp on Church Hill Sutton Coldfield Erected 1871

Lighting the Turnpike Road

The main road through Sutton Coldfield was at this time a Turnpike Road and the responsibility of a Turnpike Trust, with a Toll Gate at the Tamworth Road junction (at approx the site of the present Sutton Court Hotel.) for collecting the tolls of all travellers. The tolls were dependant on the mode of transport used, either vehicles, horsemen or cattle, and went towards the upkeep of the road. This Toll Gate came within the Sutton Coldfield Lighting Area as did much of the Turnpike Road and the Trust agreed to pay for the running of some street gas lamps, two at the toll gate and one at each end of the 'Dam' The lamps at the Toll Gate would have been very useful to the trust to see travellers and administer tolls during dark periods and would have replaced the poor illumination of the oil lamps. It was agreed that the Turnpike Trust would pay £3 per gas lamp per year. ¹⁸ The Turnpike Trusts themselves began to be abolished from 1862 and were all finally abolished by 1895 when their powers were taken over by the local authorities.



First Gas Lamp on "The Dam" Sutton Coldfield. 1861

Complaints

During the 1870's a number of Sutton's gas users were becoming dissatisfied with the gas they were receiving from the local company. The quality was poor and the costs higher when compared with the gas that was being supplied by Birmingham to its districts. In January 1877 a number of local residents approached the Sutton Gas Committee to be allowed to be supplied with gas from Birmingham and this was reluctantly accepted. Birmingham Gas Dept then agreed to extend its gas main from Erdington into Sutton Coldfield by way of Wylde Green.¹⁹

Demise of Local Gas Supplies

By 1892 the local gas works was in a poor state, the equipment was no longer modern and was deteriorating and the gas mains were so bad that 25% of all gas produced was lost through leakage. The price of the Birmingham produced gas became impossible to compete with and the company offered to sell it's undertaking to Birmingham. This offer was rejected by Birmingham.

The Corporation of Sutton became concerned that the whole Borough would become dependant on Birmingham for its gas supplies if the local private company failed. In order to retain its independence and hopefully make some money for the town, as Birmingham had done with its works, it was proposed that the Sutton Corporation take over the Sutton Gas Works and continue to supply the town. The decision is also likely to have been influenced by prominent people in the town, at the time, who held shares in the local company and did not want to see it fail.

A Bill was drawn up for an Act of Parliament to give the Corporation the powers it needed to purchase and take over the running of the works and to supply the town with gas.²⁰

Enquiries to Birmingham Corporation revealed that they were quite willing to forego their interest in gas supplies to Sutton Coldfield since they had enough demand within Birmingham. They even offered to convey to Sutton Corporation all the powers they already had in Sutton (under the Acts of 1845 & 1875) and required only valuation price for the mains already laid.

Meetings were organised throughout the borough to determine the views of ratepayers and residents. These meetings started a very fierce debate in the town between those that were interested in retaining the Gas Works, such as the Rector Rev Riland Bedford, Joseph Ansell (Ansell's Brewery) of Wylde Green House and the other prominent residents. Against them were other residents who considered that it would be impossible economically to compete with the lower cost of the Birmingham supplied gas.²¹

The residents wanted a quality gas supply at the lowest cost and not a works that needed investment due to it's poor state. For, although the purchase price was to

be low, a considerable sum would have to be financed from the rates to put the works and distribution system into good order. This contrasts with the Birmingham & Staffs gas works that was taken over by Birmingham Corporation in good condition and 'with no liabilities of an embarrassing character'!

In the final event the sanction of the majority of the ratepayers could not be obtained and the scheme and Parliamentary bill were abandoned.

The Sutton Coldfield Gas Light & Coke Company went into liquidation in 1892 and the Gas Works was abandoned.

Gas Supplies Continue.

Thus from 1892 all Sutton Coldfield's gas supplies were to come from the Birmingham system. Birmingham purchased the Sutton Company's goodwill and distribution apparatus only, the works remained abandoned.

Gas was piped from Erdington along the Birmingham Road into Sutton. With governing stations near the Chester Road Tram Terminus, at Beeches Walk and at Mere Green. This plentiful gas supply was soon to reach most homes, businesses and streets in Sutton Coldfield where it remained for street lighting in some instances until towards the middle of the 20th century.

The Old Gas Works Site

The old gas works site was to return to life some years later as the Sutton Corporation's new Electric Light power station. So from the turn of the century (1901) the old gas lamps themselves started to be replaced with the new electric lights.²²

The old Power Station building still stands on the site of the old Gas Works today, now in use as industrial units on the industrial estate on the corner of Coleshill Road and Riland Road. The adjacent former Sutton Corporation Council Yard in Riland Road is standing on the remaining part of the old Gas Works site. This yard, also built in 1901, is currently being **demolished** (1996).

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