

GAS COMES TO SALISBURY

Salisbury saw its first gas supply in 1833. Coal was brought from Devizes (presumably from the Somerset coalfield) by cart and a gas works was set up in Fisherton near to the Devizes road. Pipes were laid and Fisherton Street became the first in Salisbury to be lit by a dozen gas-lamps. A small number of shops in the street were also gas-lit.

By the 1850s, the gas network was spreading, as the Company minute book for 1857 noted that the “inhabitants of Rolestone street, the New church at Bemerton and the new school of St Edmunds, in School Lane, all request gas connection”. As street after street became connected, the splutter and hiss of gas-lamps became commonplace for Salisbury folk.

The growth of gas lighting in Salisbury was undoubtedly helped by the arrival of the London and Southwestern railway in 1847. With the new station close by, coal for the gasworks could be quickly and cheaply delivered and in larger amounts. The growing national rail network meant that coal from Yorkshire and Derbyshire could be used alongside coal from Somerset. All these changes meant that the company could reduce its prices for gas and coke, further stimulating demand.

1860 ORDNANCE MAP OF SALISBURY

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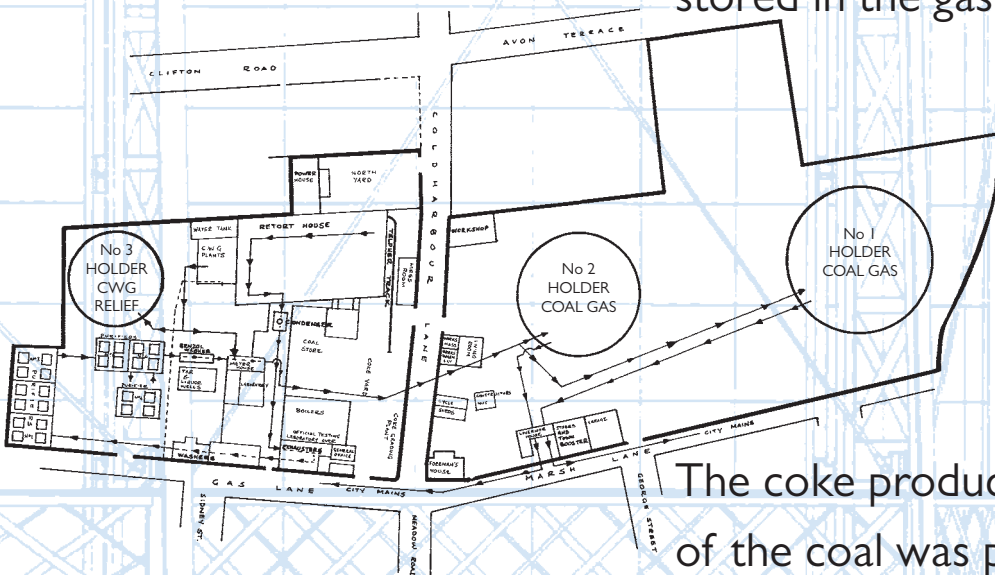
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HOW WAS THE GAS MADE?

Coal gas is made when bituminous coal is heated in the absence of oxygen. In the Salisbury gas-works, this was done in the retort house – the largest building on the site – where the coal was heated in long horizontal ovens or retorts. The resultant gas was piped off, purified, and stored in the gasholders.



1951 SOUTHERN GAS BOARD PLAN
Redrawn by Hugh Abel

The coke produced by the heating of the coal was partly used to heat the works and retorts but much was also sold and found a ready market. Other by-products included tar, benzoyl, ammonia and naphthalene. All of these could be sold, as indeed were the clinkers from the furnaces that were sold to sewage works!

The Victorian gas-works were very heat – efficient and re-used most of the waste heat from the retorts to run other processes.

Salisbury gas-works also produced water gas by passing steam and then air through red-hot coke. This had a similar heat value to coal gas but contained too much carbon monoxide to be used on its own. Mixed with oil as carburetted water gas it could be used to supplement gas supplies in periods of peak demand.



RETORT PRIOR TO DEMOLITION

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LIVING AND WORKING

in and around
the gas-works.

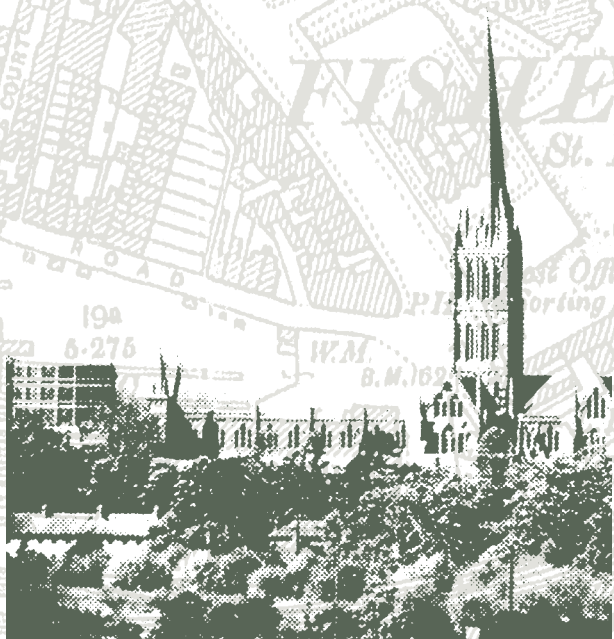
The area around the gas-works site looks quite unlike any other part of Salisbury. It is more reminiscent of the rows of terraced housing still so prevalent in many of our midland and northern industrial towns. This part of Fisherton is perhaps 'industrial Salisbury' and it is possible that its development and growth has been largely stimulated by the presence of the gas-works. As early as the 1860s maps show small numbers of houses close to the gasworks on either side of Devizes road. By the 1880s, streets such as Clifton Terrace or York Road had appeared. This process continued as the gas-works itself grew. It was likely that some of the people in these houses worked for the railway but with a workforce of some 60 men, the gas-works accounted for much of the building.



STREETS AROUND THE GAS-WORKS

Working in the gas-works was hot, heavy, dangerous work, the air quality was poor, and it was not particularly well paid. Accidents were likely and at least two fatalities were recorded in the 20th century.

For those living in the surrounding streets, dust, smoke, smells and soiled washing on the lines must have been a way of life. Housewives were forced to clean their homes several times a week and respiratory diseases were probably more prevalent in those areas close to the works.



A VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

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AIR-RAID

During the Second World War, on the 11th August 1942, the gas-works became a target in a hit-and-run raid by two German Focke-Wulf fighters.

On that fine summer's day, the enemy planes arrived without warning having flown low to avoid radar cover. Whilst one plane targeted the railway station, the other aimed a bomb at the gasholders along Marsh Lane. The bomb missed but damaged buildings in Middleton Road. Turning around the fighter returned and fired its cannon and machine-guns at the gasholders, setting both on fire.

As the planes made off, the fire brigade arrived to spray the blazing gasholders. Gas-works staff plugged the holes with emergency plating, clay and wooden plugs. In little more than an hour, the fires were out. Although gas was lost, city supplies were maintained using water gas.

It must have been a terrifying experience for the people of Middleton Road. Their windows and doors had been blown in, roof tiles stripped from the roof, ceilings cracked or down and furniture studded with shards of glass. Luckily, there were no serious injuries.

Less than a week later, another raider – a bomber – fired at the gas-works as it flew across Castle Road. In spite of “bullets spluttering around” there was little damage and no injuries.

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DECLINE AND FALL

After the Second World War, the gas-works passed into public ownership when gas companies were nationalised in 1949.

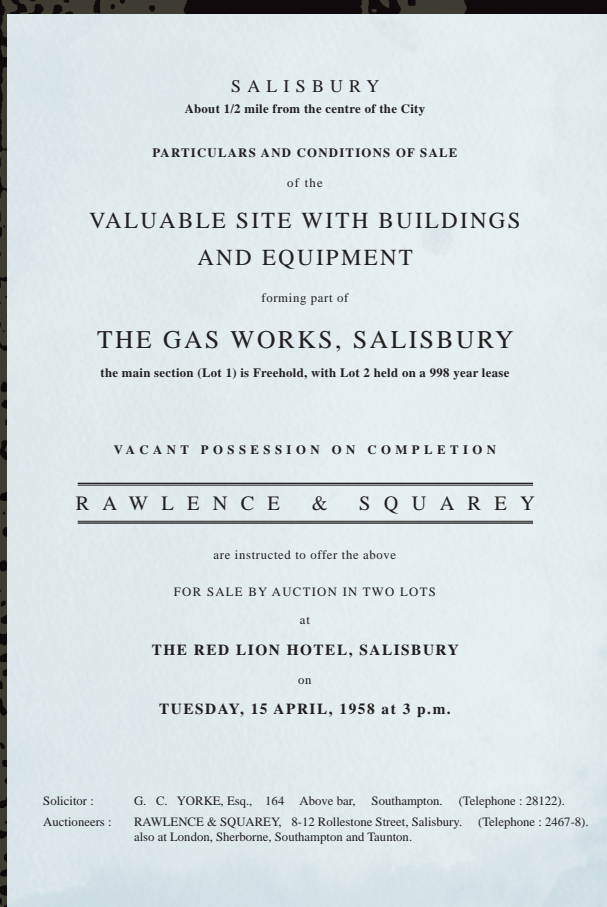
In the 1950s, the gas-works began to face competition from gas supplies from other sources. By the mid-1950s, Salisbury was receiving gas piped from Southampton making the works in Gas Lane redundant.

These must have been anxious times for the gas-works employees facing redundancy. Fortunately, unemployment was low in the UK at this time so most would eventually find alternative jobs.

The gas-works site on the west side of Coldharbour Lane was sold in 1958, by auction, at the Red Lion Hotel on April 15th of that year. It was described as “an enclosed freehold site of 1.561 acres” and was sold with all buildings and plant.

Some years later, the site was cleared and developed for housing. The former gas-works land to the east of Coldharbour Lane, where the last gasholder stood, remains the property of gas network company SGN.

The removal of the last gasholder in 2018 marked the end of an important part of Salisbury’s industrial heritage and over a century of gas making in Salisbury.



1951 AUCTION DETAILS

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