

Rebirth of a Legend – St. Pancras Chambers

Report by Chan To Sum

Mr. Royden Stock, Facilities Manager, together with Mr. Hadyn Davies, a former HKMTR manager, gave an interesting presentation on the renovation of St. Pancras Chambers to members of HKIE UK Chapter, ICE London and North Thames Branch of IStructE. Mr. Stock also led a group on a site visit.

It has sat next to the St. Pancras International railway station for nearly a century and a half. It was commissioned by the Midland Railway Company, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott with his famous neo-gothic style and was first presented as the Midland Grand Hotel. Its extravagant Victorian décor attracted socialites worldwide

It was also an engineering showcase. It was one of the first hotels to be installed with electric lighting, and the first building with 'Ascending Rooms' (lifts). The main lift employed a ropes-on-pulley system. The second lift used a piston to push it up. Water was from a deep well. Though it was also connected to the public water system, the well was so reliable that they only paid for the water meter hire, not water consumption. This fascinating and innovative piece of engineering was the work of Sir William Armstrong, a pioneer of harnessing hydraulic energy in the Victorian era.

The hotel lost its competitiveness when en-suite facilities were offered by other newly built hotels in the early 20th century. Conversion was not easy because of the thick concrete floors. It was closed as a hotel at 1935.

After railways were nationalised, it was converted to British Railways' offices and staff accommodation. For the following 40 years, it was neglected and abused. Its glory faded. Its furniture, though supposedly protected under national heritage, was auctioned away. Its limestone and granite columns and wall artwork were painted over. Its service facilities were not maintained. Ceilings were hidden or painted over. Rooms were partitioned without consideration of preserving existing artwork. Three metres of spiral staircase in the centre of the building was demolished from the bottom. In the 1960s, the building was threatened by demolition but the Victorian Society successfully appealed and the building was listed Grade 1 by English

Heritage. It was only at the mid-90s that the roof was re-slatted and the building made weather-tight to prevent the building being terminally damaged.

Now, it is being converted into a hotel/residential complex. There are 66 luxury apartments which are already completed and a 246-room 5-star hotel is due to open next year. The £200 million challenging works include the construction of modern lift-shafts within the existing narrow structure using hand-operated lifting equipment and meticulous restoration of the Victorian style décor in the main public rooms.

During the guided tour, we saw that the hotel renovation is almost complete, and the residential apartments fully occupied. The neo-Gothic styled architecture will be appreciated once again by the public in spring 2011. Meanwhile, the Chambers' opulence could be glimpsed in the BBC Climb Great Buildings, Spice Girl's MTV - Wannabe; or the Arkham Asylum in 'Batman Begins' which uses the grand staircase as part of the film-set. You might not encounter Batman when you visit the Chambers. But with the residential flat as dear as £2 million, you might come across the likes of Bruce Wayne.



ST. PANCRAS CHAMBERS



ROYDEN STOCK (THIRD FROM LEFT) & VISITING GROUP



RESTORED WALL ARTWORK



GRAND STAIRCASE