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Gas

Your gas heritage Local study

Resources for teachers



Historic England

Your Gas Heritage

Gas has been used to light our streets, heat and light our homes, schools and workplaces, and cook our food for over 200 years. What evidence of this can you find in your local area? Try these activities to uncover the gas heritage in your local area and the impact on its people.

Gas lights

In the 1800s and early 1900s, the majority of street lamps were lit by gas. These were eventually replaced by electric lamps (although some gas lamps still remain – there are still nearly 1500 working gas lamps in central London). You can watch films about this here:

◆ [Lighting London – British Gas](#)

◆ [How gas was made](#)

Many of the lamp shades and posts were retained, but adapted for electric power.

Some gas lamps are such an important part of our national heritage that they have been 'listed'. That means they've been given special protection so that they can't be moved or damaged. You can see if there are any listed lamps near your school by searching [here](#) and using the 'Filters' tab to select your 'County, Unitary Authority or District'.

◆ Take a walk around your local area. Can students find evidence of old gas lamps? Clues:

- Parks, bridges, railway stations and old buildings are all good places to look
- Gas lamp posts were usually made of cast iron, often decorated and rarely included an access door (like the more modern electric lamp posts)
- The lamps may have been converted to electricity but still retain the original posts
- They might look something like these:



Historic England Archive ref:dp073454



Photo: Anna Husband



Photo: Anna Husband

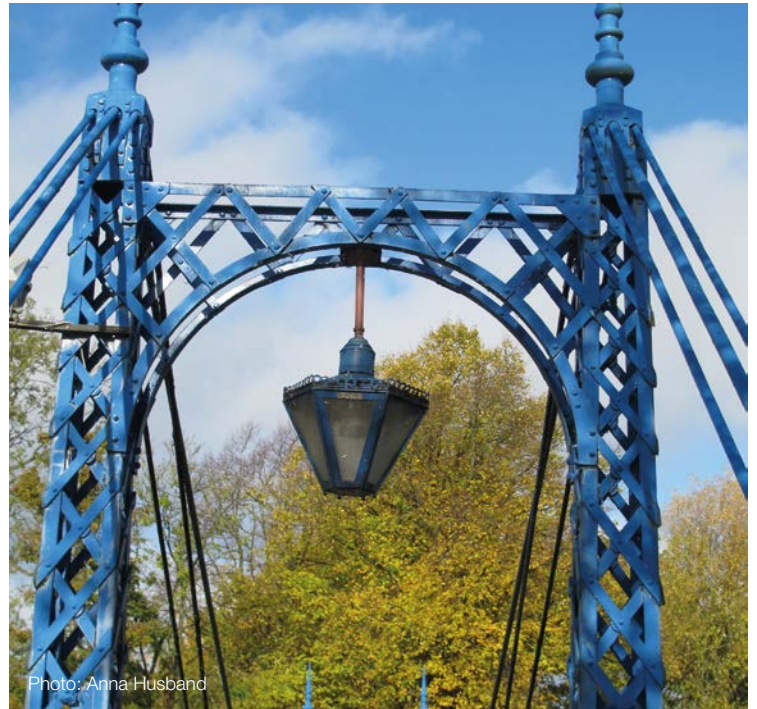


Photo: Anna Husband



Photo: Anna Husband

◆ Look closely:

- Is there a bar at the top for the lamp attendant to rest their ladder?
- How are the lamps powered now?
- Are there any markings or dates near the bottom of the lamp post? Gas lamp posts were often decorated. Sometimes a date or the current monarch was stamped onto them.
- Students can make sketches or take photographs of their observations and label or annotate them back in the classroom.
- Try using a crayon to making a rubbing of any dates or markings.
- How are these different to the more modern, electric street lights?



Photo: Anna Husband



Photo: Anna Husband

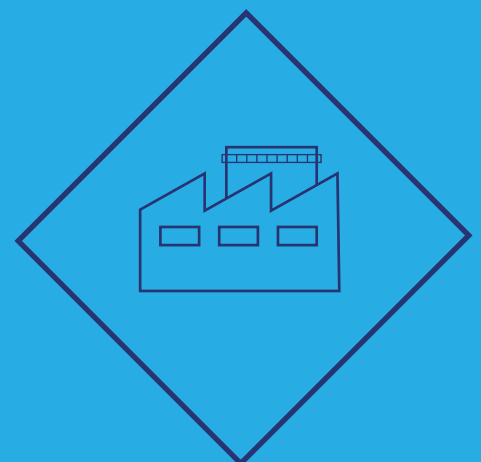


Gasworks

Before the 1970s, every major town and city in the UK included a [gasworks](#). Gasworks could be quite small, or in large cities were huge sites which included large buildings for heating coal, structures for cooling and cleaning, chimneys and, of course, the iconic [gas holder](#) – a large, circular container for storing the gas produced. Some gasworks even had cottages built very near to them for the manager and other workers to live in.

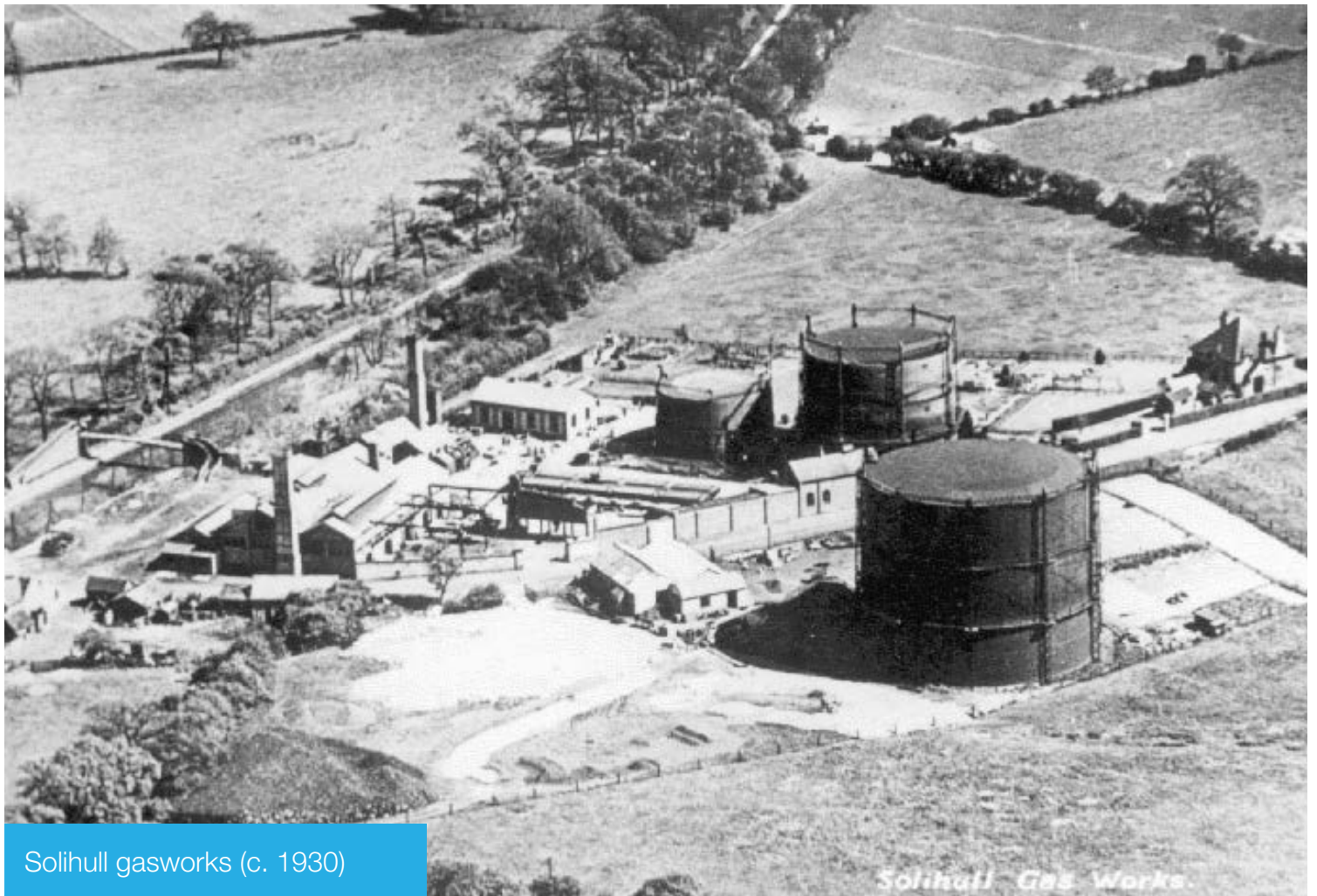
The whole site could be as large as 500 acres – like the Beckton Gas Works in East London – which was the size of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London.

After the discovery of reserves of natural gas in the North Sea, in 1965, the need for gas produced from coal rapidly diminished. Gasworks were decommissioned and, in some cases, dismantled and demolished. Today, gas is stored in pipes and caverns underground and some gasworks structures have been repurposed as homes or businesses, such as King's Cross Gasholder Park where apartments and a park have been built inside the old gasholder frames and Google's new UK Headquarters will be located. Derby County FC's Pride Park and Southampton FC's St Mary's Stadium were both built on former gasworks sites.





Ambergate gas reforming plant
in Derbyshire (c.1970)



Solihull gasworks (c. 1930)

Solihull Gas Works.

Some of these buildings and structures have been listed, which means they are protected, like the gas holder at the [Oval cricket](#) ground in London. Remaining, complete gasworks are very few and far between, they include Biggar in Ayrshire, Scotland; Carrick Fergus in Northern Ireland; and Fakenham in Norfolk, England, which was built in 1846 and now forms part of the museum there.

Was there a gasworks in your local area?

- ◆ Students could look at old maps or aerial views of the area – you could find these by:
 - Using the [Britain from above](#) online resource
 - Using the [National Library of Scotland](#) online resource – which includes comparison aerial views past and present
 - Ordering a ‘Map pack for schools’ of your local area from [Historic England](#)
 - Searching for local maps online or in your local library or archive service
- ◆ Students could also try looking for street names – gasworks were often built on streets that were given gas-related names like Gas Lane, Gasholder Park, Gasworks Bank.

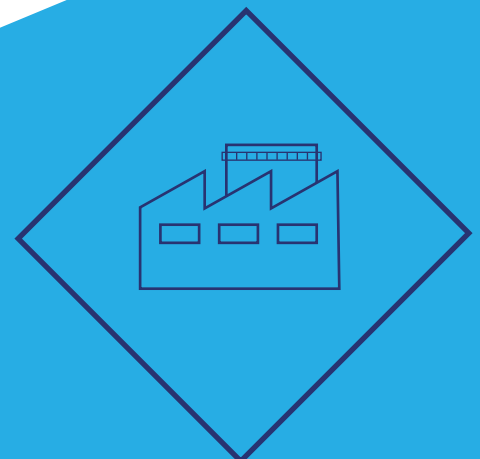
What has changed? Students could:

- ◆ Use Google maps or the resources above to compare the site now, with an old map or aerial view from when it was a gasworks
- ◆ Go on a class walk to the site to:
 - Walk the perimeter of the old gasworks site to see what is currently there
 - Look carefully at the buildings to see whether they look brand new or look like they have been repurposed
 - Look for clues which might tell you that a gasworks was once here – is it near a railway line or canal? Are there gas-related street names?

**** Students must always be supervised and be very careful to ensure they don't trespass or do anything which could cause injury, especially if the site is vacant ****

Historic England has some great tips for [exploring local heritage](#) and [investigating industrial sites](#).

Older students could discuss the balance between preserving heritage and development. Do they think historic buildings and structures should always be preserved? Should they be re-purposed? Or should sites sometimes be completely redeveloped - to create new homes, for example?





Repurposed gas holders at King's Cross ©Chris Wood CC.

Gas people

The coal gas industry employed many thousands of people (the gas industry still does). Some of the jobs included working:

- ◆ in the gas works – as a [stoker](#) loading coal into the giant furnaces, or as a chemist testing the quality of the gas produced
- ◆ as an [engineer](#) travelling around (often by bike) installing, mending or servicing street lights and appliances in people's homes
- ◆ in the [home service](#), doing cooking demonstrations or visiting householders to help them use different appliances.

Did anyone in your family or local community work in the gas industry? If there was a gasworks in your local town, it's possible that there are people who still live there who used to work in the industry or remember the gasworks.

Students could also try making links with local organisations and services for elderly people, which may include those who worked in the industry or have memories of when the gasworks was still functioning. They could interview them about their experiences, recording their answers as 'oral histories'.

The Oral History Society has this great [guide](#) for teachers and students.

Part of our set of [gas heritage](#) resources for schools

[Gas lighting](#)

[Heating & cooking with gas](#)

[Gas Gadgets](#)

[Gas – how was it made?](#)

[The changing role of women](#)

[Vehicles & transport](#)

[Classroom activities](#)

[Your gas heritage – local study](#)

