

# RETURN JOURNEY

## THE REMARKABLE RISE, FALL AND REBIRTH OF ST PANCRAS RENAISSANCE HOTEL

You've checked in, dropped your luggage in your room and sat down... Even if you have only just arrived, you can probably tell that this is no ordinary hotel. The architecture, the decoration, the mixture of classical and contemporary – the chances are it is like no other hotel you have ever entered, or will ever enter.

The story of how it came into existence is just as extraordinary. It is the tale of a true renaissance; of a national treasure that was almost reduced to rubble but that is today, once again, the pride of London.

It begins in the 1860s, when the thriving Midland Railway, which connected the industrial heartlands of the East Midlands and Yorkshire with London, took the decision to construct its own line into the capital, rather than share tracks with other companies. It chose the unprepossessing district of St Pancras, on the northern side of New Road (later Euston Road) as the site for its new terminus.

For the station building, which would be erected around William Barlow's spectacular single-span trashed structure, the Midland selected the designs of George Gilbert Scott, the prominent ecclesiastical architect who had recently picked up the commission from Victoria to create the memorial in Hyde Park to her late husband, Prince Albert.



FLOOR TILE DETAIL



CEILING DETAIL

Barlow's plans included a large luxury hotel that would extend the St Pancras frontage westwards along Euston Road. Scott's designs made the most of this huge canvas. Drawing inspiration from Sir Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin's Gothic Revival Palace of Westminster (now better known as the Houses of Parliament), which was nearing completion at the time, Scott submitted designs whose grandeur – and cost – went far beyond the Midland's expectations.

He envisaged a building that was as imposing and ornate as the Palace, but strongly influenced by the softer, more colourful Venetian Gothic, championed by the noted critic, John Ruskin. Scott, in the face of criticism, held that he was creating a new style entirely rather than reviving one, maintaining that his designs 'performed loyally and willingly to the habits of the age'.

His audacity paid off. He promised his client a station that would eclipse every other terminus in the city. It would also stand as a monumental advertisement for the enterprise and industry of the Midlands region itself. Having witnessed the inventive use of brickwork on his European travels, Scott was eager to make red brick the signature material in his new creation – red brick whose manufacture in the Midlands was creating new wealth in the region.

It was too much for the Midland to resist. The railwaymen took a deep breath, dug deep into their pockets and gave Scott's vision the 'clear' signal.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Servants in different parts of the hotel communicated through speaking tubes

1873

# THE MIDLAND GRAND

1935

St Pancras Station, which came to be known as the ‘cathedral of railways’, started operating in 1868 although to little fanfare, since it was still unfinished and many of the platforms were temporary structures. By then, construction of the Midland Grand Hotel next door was under way.



For five years, builders, stonemasons, artists, craftsmen and tradesmen laboured to bring Scott’s vision to life. They created a interior world so lavish it must have seemed like a fantasy land to the first guests, in May 1873. The grandest rooms, on the lower floors, included spectacular, 18ft-high decorated ceilings, neo-classical murals, vast south-facing windows to maximise natural daylighting into the deep floorplans, ornate Gothic fanlights over every door, wall-to-wall Axminster carpets, massive fireplaces with carved marble surrounds and Walnut furniture with gold inlay. Ornate stencilling, gold leaf and flamboyant wallpapers met the eye at every turn, and the furnishings and fittings, supplied by Gillows, were of the very highest quality.



DETAIL OF STONE AND BRICK WORK



LADIES SMOKING ROOM

Nine stonemasons were employed to carve the legion of capitals, headstops and gargoyles that decorated the building inside and out. In the Dining and Coffee Room (now The Gilbert Scott Restaurant), pillars of polished limestone lined the walls, their gilded capitals carved with conkers, pea pods and bursting pomegranates. The Ladies’ Smoking Room – the first public room in Europe in which women were permitted to smoke – boasted a breathtaking painted ceiling as well as granite pillars, carved stonework and a magnificent terrace overlooking the hustle and bustle of New Road. As he surveyed his creation, Scott himself remarked that the hotel was “almost too good for its purpose”.

But perhaps the greatest showpiece was the Grand Staircase. A masterpiece of High Victorian, neo-Gothic decoration and extravagance, this broad, sweeping double stairway featured wrought iron balustrading and curled up three storeys before reaching an extraordinary vaulted ceiling, painted with a celestial scene of stars and the Seven Virtues against a viridian sky. Ascending the stairs to one’s room in the Midland Grand must have felt a little like arriving in some kind of paradise, even if it was just for a night or two.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

In 1899, the hotel entrance hall was fitted with the first revolving door in Britain, supplied by its inventor, Theophilus Van Kannel

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The building features polished columns of 14 different British granites and limestones

# AHEAD OF ITS TIME

It wasn't just the splendour and luxury that distinguished the Midland Grand. Guests were equally taken with the technological innovations that added to their comfort. It was the first hotel in the world to offer an alternative to stairs: a pair of 'hydraulic ascending chambers' magically transported guests (in one chamber) and their luggage (in the second) between the four main floors.

A unique electric bell calling system allowed guests to summon service with the push of a button. There were toilets that flushed – unheard-of in hotels at the time, who relied on chamber pots. Guests could enjoy total peace of mind about the safety of the building, too. With the memory of the blaze that had destroyed the last Palace of Westminster in 1834 still fresh in many minds, the Midland Grand boasted a fireproof floor construction comprising 22-inch thick concrete slabs.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The hotel was the first privately-owned building to include 'hydraulic ascending chambers', or water-driven lifts. One of these was in place until 1958

#### THE GUARDIAN, JANUARY 2011

"The much trumpeted St Pancras Renaissance Hotel... will be THE big hotel opening of the year"



EXTERIOR STONEWORK DETAIL



DURING CONSTRUCTION

The Midland Grand quickly became the talk of the town. In its heyday, guests paid between three-and-a-half shillings and several pounds to spend a night there; only The Langham on Portland Place was more expensive. The final bill for the hotel's construction had come in at a staggering £438,000 – around £500 million today – but now the Midland Railway was reaping the benefits of a new, lucrative revenue stream as well as the considerable prestige the hotel attracted.

That prestige accumulated as word spread further afield. As well as homegrown celebrities such as the music hall favourite Marie Lloyd and the boss of Boot's The Chemist, Jesse Boot, the hotel could count among its guests eminent visitors from abroad such as railroad and shipping entrepreneur Cornelius 'Commodore' Vanderbilt – one of the world's richest Americans – and George Pullman, creator of the luxurious Pullman sleeping car.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The newly created hotel extension automatically became a Grade I listed structure upon construction due to its association with the main Chambers building

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The Ticket Booth, now part of the Booking Office Bar and Restaurant, is a listed structure in its own right

# AND BEHIND THE TIMES

For 30 years or more, the Midland Grand retained its glamour for visitors travelling to London. By the 1920s, though, it was losing its sparkle; the great and the good were staying elsewhere in town. It wasn't that the hotel's beauty had faded; its shortcomings were to do with more mundane and practical matters.

In the rival establishments around London that had opened around the turn of the century, en-suite bathrooms had become de rigueur. At the Midland Grand, guests had to share bathing and toilet facilities. For the 300 rooms there were just five bathrooms with nine baths between them. The sanitary amenities that had seemed so advanced when the hotel opened were now considered to be behind the times.

The decline was compounded by another of the Midland Grand's once-revolutionary design features. The monumental construction of the thick concrete floor rendered it impossible to install new plumbing systems that could have serviced en-suite bathrooms and brought the Midland Grand up to the standards of its competitors. The very innovation that was designed to save the hotel helped to finish it off.

Try as it might to bolster custom with novelties such as a Moroccan coffee house and an in-house orchestra, the Midland Railway couldn't arrest the decline. The costs of heating the hotel and maintaining it with an army of servants led to year-on-year losses, and in 1935 the London, Midland and Scottish Railway accepted the inevitable; the hotel closed.



THE HOTEL AFTER ITS CONSTRUCTION



THE HOTEL IN 1925

# “TOO BEAUTIFUL TO SURVIVE”

Against all the odds, the building remained standing despite determined attempts by the Luftwaffe and London’s modernising planners to knock it down. During raids in World War II, the hotel was bombed three times within a month, but its sturdy construction saw it through almost unscathed. After the war, St Pancras Chambers (as it was now known) was used as offices by British Rail and its hospitality business, British Transport Hotels. Clearly, the staff found working amidst such faded grandeur uncomfortable: much of the magnificent original stencilling and paintwork was simply whitewashed without a care, and the carved stone pillars were boarded up.

Worse was on the cards. In the 1960s, city planners sought to sweep away what it saw as dated, inefficient swathes of London’s architectural heritage and erect streamlined, system-built blocks, and the ageing Gothic pile on the busy Euston Road was in their sights. It was seen by some as the epitome of Victorian bombast and indulgence: over-decorated, impossible to maintain and an obstacle to the capital’s future development. Plus, it was attached to a rail terminus that had also had its day: St Pancras Station was wedged between the now much busier King’s Cross and Euston stations.

CONDE NAST TRAVELLER, MARCH 2011  
The restored hotel “retains a gentle echo of a time when train travel was a genuine luxury”



ORIGINAL FLOOR TILES



LADIES SMOKING ROOM CEILING

But one prominent, much-loved voice was raised in protest. Sir John Betjeman called the plan to demolish St Pancras “a criminal folly”. He adored the building’s extravagance and wrote: “What [the Londoner] sees in his mind’s eye is that cluster of towers and pinnacles seen from Pentonville Hill and outlined against a foggy sunset, and the great arc of Barlow’s train shed gaping to devour incoming engines, and the sudden burst of exuberant Gothic of the hotel seen from gloomy Judd Street.”

As a founding member of the Victorian Society with architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, Betjeman was able to mobilise a popular campaign against the demolition plans. Despite his fear that St Pancras was “too beautiful and too romantic to survive”, he succeeded in securing for it a Grade 1 listing in 1967, thereby ensuring its preservation. Its rehabilitation, though, was still a distant prospect.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

In the Booking Office Bar and Restaurant, you will find 173 carved diamonds in the wood panelling. All 173 feature a flower of different design

#### DID YOU KNOW?

There were two billiard rooms in the original Midland Grand Hotel – one for private guests and one for the public. In the public billiard room, now one of the meeting rooms on the 1st floor, a man was paid ten shillings a week to mark up the score

# RENAISSANCE

The station continued to operate, but at a fraction of its former intensity. The hotel building was eventually abandoned by BR in 1985, and it stood empty and neglected for almost 20 years, although its glamour flickered again intermittently thanks to its use as a location for film and TV shoots; scenes from Batman, Shirley Valentine, Bridget Jones' Diary and Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets were all shot there. It was also the backdrop to the video for the Spice Girls' first hit, Wannabe.

A pouting Posh Spice was the closest to posh it was going to get for the hotel – or so many people thought. Hope finally arrived in the mid-1990s when the largely empty and under-used St Pancras Station was chosen as the new terminus for the cross-Channel Eurostar service. Once again, work started to turn it into the UK's most advanced and admired railway station.

For the owner of St Pancras, London and Continental Railways, there was also the matter of the hotel next door, the former Midland Grand. In 2002, a consortium led by property developer Manhattan Loft Corporation (MLC) won the project to breathe life back into the building with a proposal comprising a high quality hotel with luxury loft-style apartments on the upper floors.

When its partners withdrew from the project, MLC pressed on alone with what has been one of the UK's most ambitious and demanding property restoration projects ever, supported and advised by English Heritage, and partnered in the latter stages by Marriott International. Hundreds of specialist craftspeople and painters, and conservation experts from across the UK have, at one time or other, been part of making good the harm and



CORNICING DETAIL



THE GRAND STAIRCASE

neglect of the past 70 years, stripping away layers of emulsion and chipboard and recovering or replicating the original colour and pattern that lay beneath.

You can see their extraordinary care and craftsmanship everywhere you go in the Chambers building, the hotel's historic heart, from the fiery, rich reds and golds in The Gilbert Scott (taken from the 1892 interior scheme) to the lighter, calmer greens and golds of the Ladies' Smoking Room ceiling (a replica of the original 1870s design).

Every Chambers room has a story of painstaking renovation to tell, and at the centre of it all is the hotel's most famous feature: the Grand Staircase, where ballgowns, top hats and tails may have given way to less formal dress codes, but where the ceiling decoration is as it was in the hotel's heyday, with its fleur-de-lis patterning fully restored and the Seven Virtues awoken from their slumber by the wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, faith, hope and charity of a truly remarkable renaissance.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The Ladies' Smoking Room, now restored to its original 1873 design, is so called because it was the first room in Europe in which women could smoke publicly

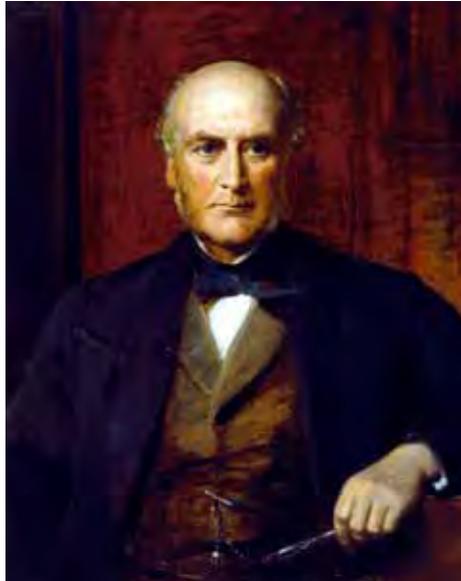
#### MODERN RAILWAYS, FEBRUARY 2011

"What a restoration this is!  
The finest materials and craftsmen have been employed; it is top of the range in every sense"

# SIR GEORGE GILBERT SCOTT

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Scott's original design for the hotel included an extra floor which had to be removed to reduce costs.
- Scott designed or altered some 800 buildings in his lifetime, including hundreds of churches, chapels, cathedrals and workhouses, but this was his first and only hotel.
- Scott was a member of the Royal Academy and was president of the RIBA for 2 years.
- His son, George Gilbert Scott Jr, also a prominent architect, went into hiding at the hotel after he was released from a mental institution to which he had been wrongly committed.
- Scott's equally famous London structure is the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park.



# ON FILM

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Scenes of many motion pictures have been filmed in the hotel, including:
- The Servant (1963);
  - Batman (1989);
  - Shirley Valentine (1989);
  - King Ralph (1991);
  - 102 Dalmatians (2000);
  - Bridget Jones' Diary (2001);
  - Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2002);
  - and Batman Begins (2005)
- In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry flies off the top of the Porte Cochere and across the front of the building in his flying car .
  - In 1996, the then-unknown Spice Girls filmed their first video, for Wannabe, in the corridors and rooms of the hotel's ground floor. Filmed in a single continuous shot, the video featured the band running riot through a bohemian party and a famous tabletop backflip by Mel C.

EST. 1873  
**ST PANCRAS**  
RENAISSANCE® HOTEL  
LONDON

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