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 1850s, 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 trainshed structure, the Midland selected the designs of George Gilbert Scott, the prominent ecclesiastical architect who had recently picked up the commission to create the memorial in Hyde Park to Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s Husband.

Barlow’s plans allowed room for 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 a lifetime of designing a wide range of buildings, Scott submitted designs whose grandeur – and cost – went far beyond the Midland’s expectations.

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 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.
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 the next eight years builders, stonemasons, artists, craftsmen and tradesmen laboured to bring Scott’s vision to life. They created an 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, 21ft-high decorated ceilings, neo-classical murals, vast south-facing windows to maximise natural daylighting into the deep floorplans, ornate Gothic fanlights over every door, Axminster rugs, 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.

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 guilded capitals carved with conkers, pea pods and bursting pomegranates. The Ladies’ Reading Room – eventually 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 Euston Road. When it was finished at the end of 1876, 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 Eight Figures of 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.

The corridors and Grand Staircase were designed noticeably wide to allow two ladies in Victorian dress to pass each other comfortably.

DID YOU KNOW?
The building features polished columns of 14 different British granites and limestones.

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.
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 one of the first hotels in Britain to offer an alternative to stairs: ‘Two ‘hydraulic ascending chambers’ magically transported guests between all floors. Luggage was taken up by rope-driven lifts.

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, wrought iron and corrugated iron.

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 £600 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 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”

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 40 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.

The hotel was totally dilapidated and in need of investment that wasn’t available, caused by the grouping of the railways in 1922. 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.

In 1901 en-suite rooms were created on the first and second floor, by running the pipework down the front of the building.

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.

DID YOU KNOW?
The Booking Office was bombed twice, in each of the World Wars – first in 1918 and again in 1941.
“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 and British Transport Catering, later known as ‘Travellers Fare.’ 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, modernising 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.

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”, they (the Victorian Society) succeeded in securing for it a Grade 1 listing in 1967, thereby ensuring its preservation. Its rehabilitation, though, was still a distant prospect.

The restored hotel “retains a gentle echo of a time when train travel was a genuine luxury”

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.

DID YOU KNOW?

Conde Nast Traveller, March 2011

The restored hotel “retains a gentle echo of a time when train travel was a genuine luxury”
The station continued to operate, but at a fraction of its former intensity. The hotel building was eventually abandoned by B.R. in 1985, after which B.R. spent £9m restoring the exterior, 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 102 Dalmations 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 building was eventually abandoned by BR for almost 20 years, although its glamour fraction of its former intensity. The hotel 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 1997, 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 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 Eight Virtues awoken from their slumber by the truth, chastity, patience, temperance, humility, liberality, industry and charity of a truly remarkable renaissance.

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.

"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.

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- Scott was a member of the Royal Academy
- was president of the RIBA for 2 years.
- His Grandson, Giles Gilbert Scott,
- Designed Liverpool Anglian Cathedral,
The Red Telephone Box, Battersea Power Station, Banksie Power Station and
- Waterloo Bridge

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);
  - Batman Begins (2005)
  - From Hell (2001);
  - The Secret Garden (1993);
  - Trauma (2004);
  - Operation Crossbow (1965);
  - Shackleton (2002);
  - The way we live now (2001);
  - Spider (2002);
  - Cambridge Spies (2003);
  - Breaking and Entering (2006);
  - Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2 (2011);
  - Nicholas Nickleby (2002);