

George Livesey

by Mary Mills

George Livesey became Chairman of the South Metropolitan Gas Light and Coke Company in 1881 having worked for the Company since 1848 and was a prominent figure in the industry of South East London. His work as an innovative gas engineer has in recent years been overshadowed by his reputation promoted, by labour historians, as a strike breaker. What has not been emphasised is the change he wrought in the gas industry using not only administrative skills but technological ones. Biography should attempt to describe the whole person and the following brief account of Livesey's life is an attempt to describe his achievements without isolating them from each other.

George Livesey's family background was that of a small business man. His grandfather was a greengrocer in Bethnal Green in the 1820s. George's great uncle, Thomas Livesey, a City hosier, had become a Director of the first London gas company, the Chartered Gas Light & Coke Company [1]. As Deputy Governor of that company he had largely masterminded the setting up of administration. Thomas's two nephews, the greengrocer's sons, were given jobs at the Chartered's Brick Lane works [2]. One of these, William, went on to become a specialist in gas legislation and a Parliamentary consultant, the other, another Thomas, was

George Livesey's father [3] and in 1839 he became Chief Clerk at the Old Kent Road Gas Works [4] of the South Metropolitan Company situated beside the Surrey Canal [5].

By 1839 the South Metropolitan had had a fairly turbulent history. Its origins in 1832 were in the days when many gas companies were started by charlatans and speculators. There had been financial and technical problems. The Company had employed as an engineer George Holworthy Palmer [6] and following a series of disputes between Palmer and the board over patent rights an explosion in an unventilated purifying house had wrecked much of the works. When Thomas Livesey moved into a house in Canal Grove [7] with his wife and two small children the company was hardly a going concern. When he died 32 years later it was outstandingly efficient in terms of production and price.

It is not easy to write anything serious about George Livesey and the South Metropolitan without understanding the politics of the gas industry in the last century and that is not easy to summarise. The main preoccupation of both industry and government was in making a privately owned, albeit statutory, industry accountable to the local authorities to whom it



Plate 1. One of a series of photographs of Old Kent Road Works taken in 1871. It shows the officers of the works, with George Livesey third from the left on the back row, and Thomas Livesey fifth from the left.

sold its product in the form of gas for street lighting. Under Thomas Livesey, the South Metropolitan's response was to restrict dividends and to invest profit in improvements in the works thus keeping prices as low as possible.

George Thomas Livesey was born on 8 April 1834 and was brought up in Canal Grove, adjacent to the works which were his playground. There is no record of his education although it has been suggested that he was educated privately. At 15 he started work as his father's assistant. As a teenager he "signed the pledge" and thus started a life-long commitment to the temperance movement in which he was active both locally and nationally, together with a strong commitment to the Anglican Church [9]. He married Harriet Howard, the daughter of a Rochester tallow chandler in 1859 [10]. His career at Old Kent Road moved steadily forward (Plate 1).

During the 1860s George worked on a number of projects. For example, he designed a chimney from the retorts at Old Kent Road, he had superintended the laying of mains, and the building of a gas holder (Plates 2,3). Some of this work had been done directly to his designs and supervision without contractors. He held patents for a number of devices. For a while he worked on a purifying process for ammoniacal liquor [11]. This should be seen against the background of patents being obtained by the Deptford chemist F.C.Hills. Earlier Hill patents had been the subject of much controversy and litigation in the gas industry [12]. Livesey's work in this field was not cost effective but the episode illustrates his approach to problem solving.

In 1871 George became a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers. He was by that time Engineer at the South Metropolitan. As a consultant he had designed Tynemouth Gas Works and was engaged in the construction of works at Aldershot and Coventry. He became a Member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in 1901.

Thomas Livesey died in his doctor's surgery in 1871 and George was made Company Secretary and Engineer, although apparently not without some hesitation on the part of the Board. They were no doubt apprehensive about working with a man, who while very competent, would not be easy to deal with. He soon explained that he preferred the work of an Engineer, but that by becoming company secretary and being elected by the shareholders he could not so easily be dismissed. Company meetings were sometimes charged with disagreements between Livesey, the Company Secretary and the octogenarian Chairman. In 1872 he gave controversial evidence to a Parliamentary Select Committee, later claiming as defence against the criticism he provoked to have been called under "Speakers Orders" i.e. that he had been

instructed to give evidence. He proposed a scheme whereby price and profit could be linked into an automatic sliding scale, thereby giving an incentive to economy in an industry in which normal competition was not practical. He was to describe this as a "partnership" between customers and company. This theme of partnership continued throughout his life.

The sliding scale of price and profit was gradually taken up by gas companies throughout the country, usually by government persuasion. It became the ruling *modus operandi* in the industry until the first world war and was in many ways massively successful. But it was not popular in many quarters of the industry and earned Livesey much hostility, as it was an effective method of price control.

Government came to believe that efficiency in the industry could be best served by fewer large companies rather than a number of small ones and began to press for amalgamations [13]. In North London the Chartered was soon to control all areas except a small enclave of East London under the Commercial Company. The South Metropolitan was the smallest of the three big South London companies, but, due to Livesey's negotiating skills by 1880 they had taken over Phoenix and Surrey Consumers and were beginning to mount a take-over bid for the Chartered north of the river. Only the direct intervention of the Board of Trade stopped this. For the rest of the century gas prices in London were directly controlled by the South Metropolitan; the Chartered and Commercial companies having to set theirs legally in line with those charged by the South Metropolitan through their statutes.

George Livesey officially retired in 1881 but was elected to the Board, and within a further six months he was Chair, a position he held until his death in 1908. He was also Chair of the adjacent South Suburban Company [14] and Deputy Chair of the Commercial [15]. With the Chartered he remained on very bad terms, turning up at their Company meeting to make dramatic speeches pointing out the faults of their management. In 1889 a dispute between the two companies over gas supply to Nine Elms Goods Yard led to an appeal to the House of Lords. His criticism was to lead to the setting up in 1899 of a Royal Commission to look into metropolitan gas companies.

He had been involved in the Institution of Gas Engineers (then the British Association of Gas Managers) since its start in 1863 being president in 1873 and winning their Birmingham medal in 1882. In 1883 he was responsible for setting up much of the International Electric and Gas Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham [16]. Allocation of display space led to a concerted attack on him and his associates by George Bray, a fittings manufacturer. The row led, via the High

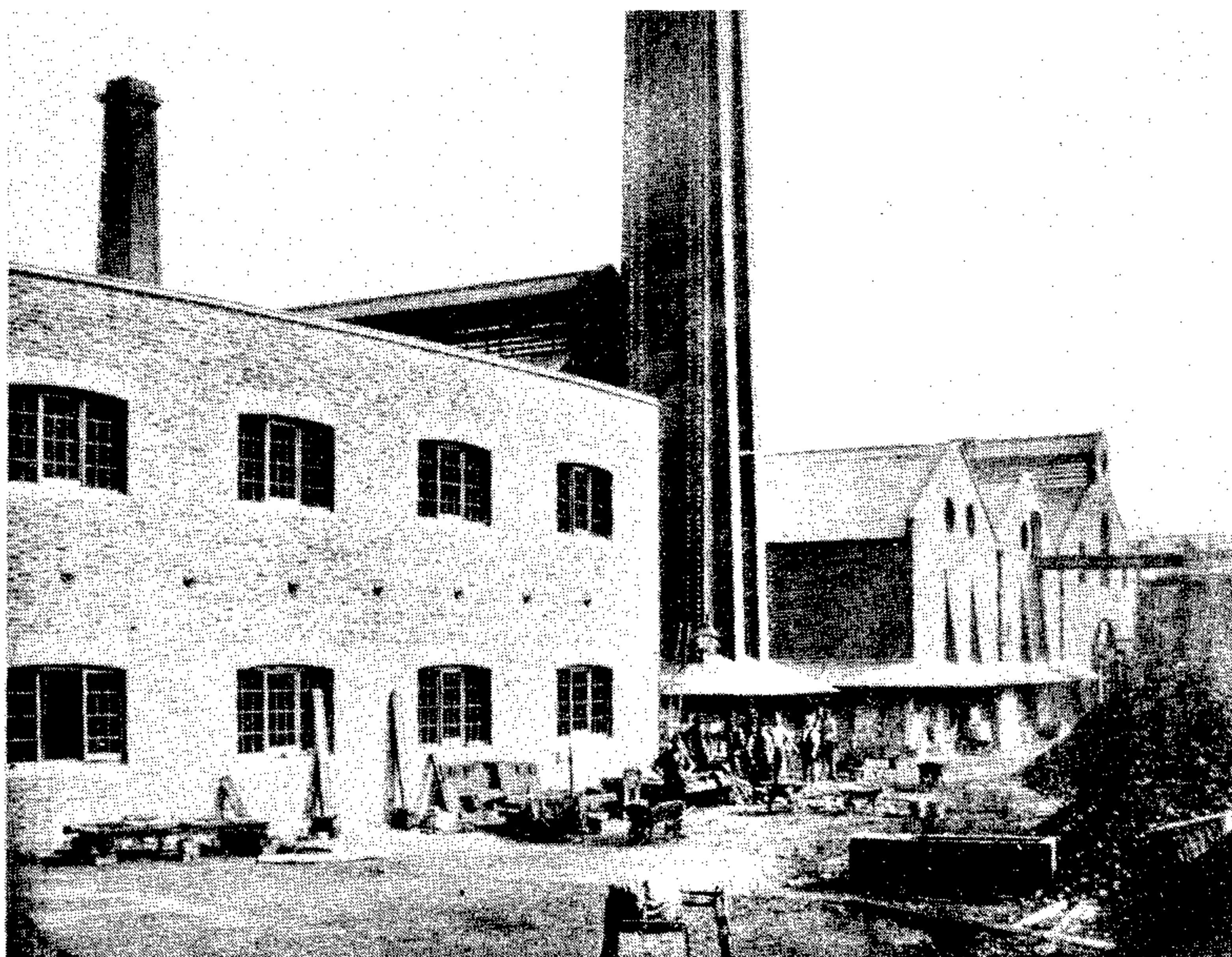


Plate 2. Works view, 1871, Possible that the chimney is that built by George Livesey, described in King's Treatise.

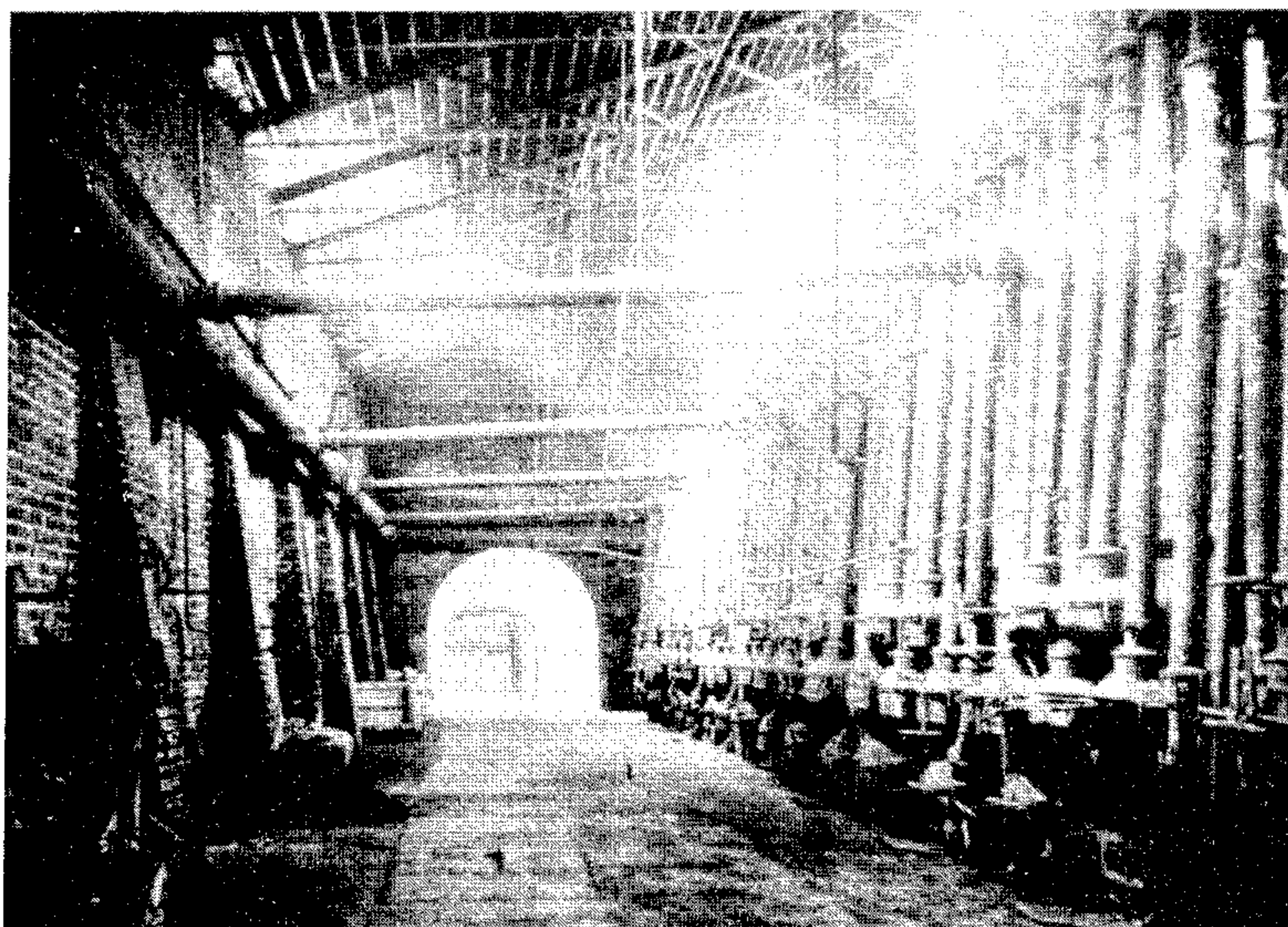


Plate 3. No 6 retort house, built on the site of the old Christ Church, 1865.

Court, to a break up of the professional institution and for some years two rival bodies claimed to represent gas engineers, the Gas Institute and the Institution of Gas Engineers. This dispute was not to be resolved until the establishment of the Incorporated Institution of Gas Engineers, and the reconciliation of Livesey and Bray. The South Metropolitan now ran five works in South London [17] together with a number of holder stations. In

While purification and gas holder construction were two major areas of technology in which Livesey was involved he held patents in several other areas, some devices being extremely successful. The gas press carried a stream of letters and articles from him on every conceivable aspect of gas manufacture and company administration.

Labour Relations was a subject on which

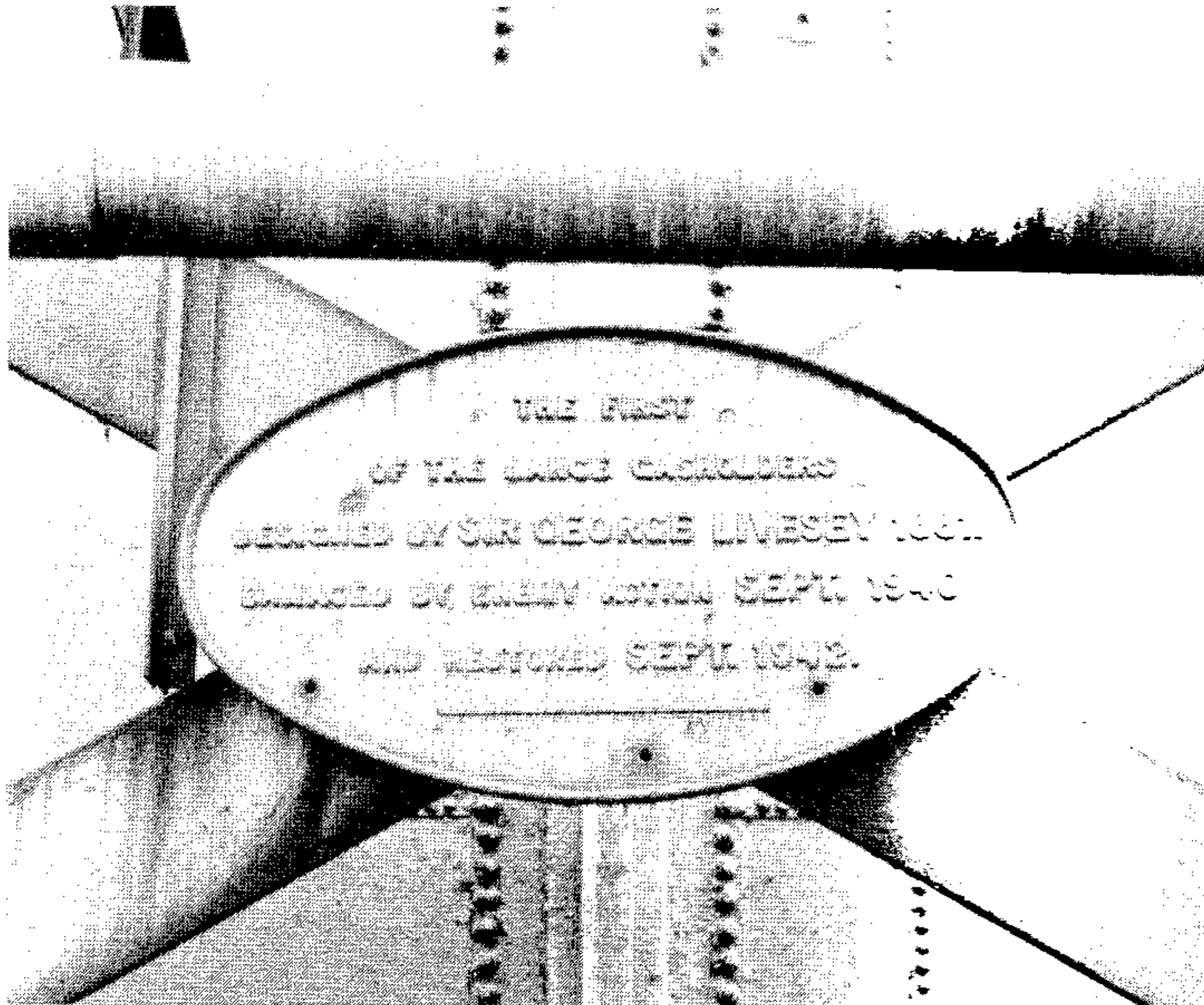


Plate 4. Plaque on no.13 gasholder, 1881, Old Kent Road, This was the precursor of those at East Greenwich. It dominates the site and is easily seen from the road

Woolwich they had bought two works which were almost immediately closed down [18]. This paved the way for the purchase of land at East Greenwich and the erection of a 'super' works to rival Beckton [19]. The land purchase included a number of concerns in the area which became subsumed into the works as a whole. Undoubtedly the site gave the South Metropolitan problems because of subsidence in the marsh subsoil [20].

Livesey had been building ever bigger gas holders at Old Kent Road [21] (Plate 4). There were a number of reasons for this large scale which he put forward at various times: bigger gas storage areas cut down on Sunday working, it was cheaper to store gas in a large area of airspace than otherwise. The subject of gas holder construction and Livesey's contribution to it has been covered adequately elsewhere [22]. East Greenwich was soon to see the construction of the largest holder in Europe [23].

Livesey had spoken many times before the mid 1880s. He had extended his ideas on partnership of company and consumers already part of the South Metropolitan ideology to cover workers and tried to establish profit sharing schemes. He was successful in this when the establishment of the Gas Workers Union led to a challenge to company power in the workplace in 1889. It was no accident that this challenge coincided with the election of the first LCC with a commitment to municipalise gas in London. Livesey set up a profit sharing scheme - which was to become "co-partnership" (Plate 5). This led to a major "strike" in 1889 over union recognition [24].

By spring 1890 the strike was over, the union defeated and profit sharing established as a way of life in the South Metropolitan. The scheme was linked to price and profit and was extended to include allocations of company shares to workers. This money was tied up in such a way as to encourage workers to purchase

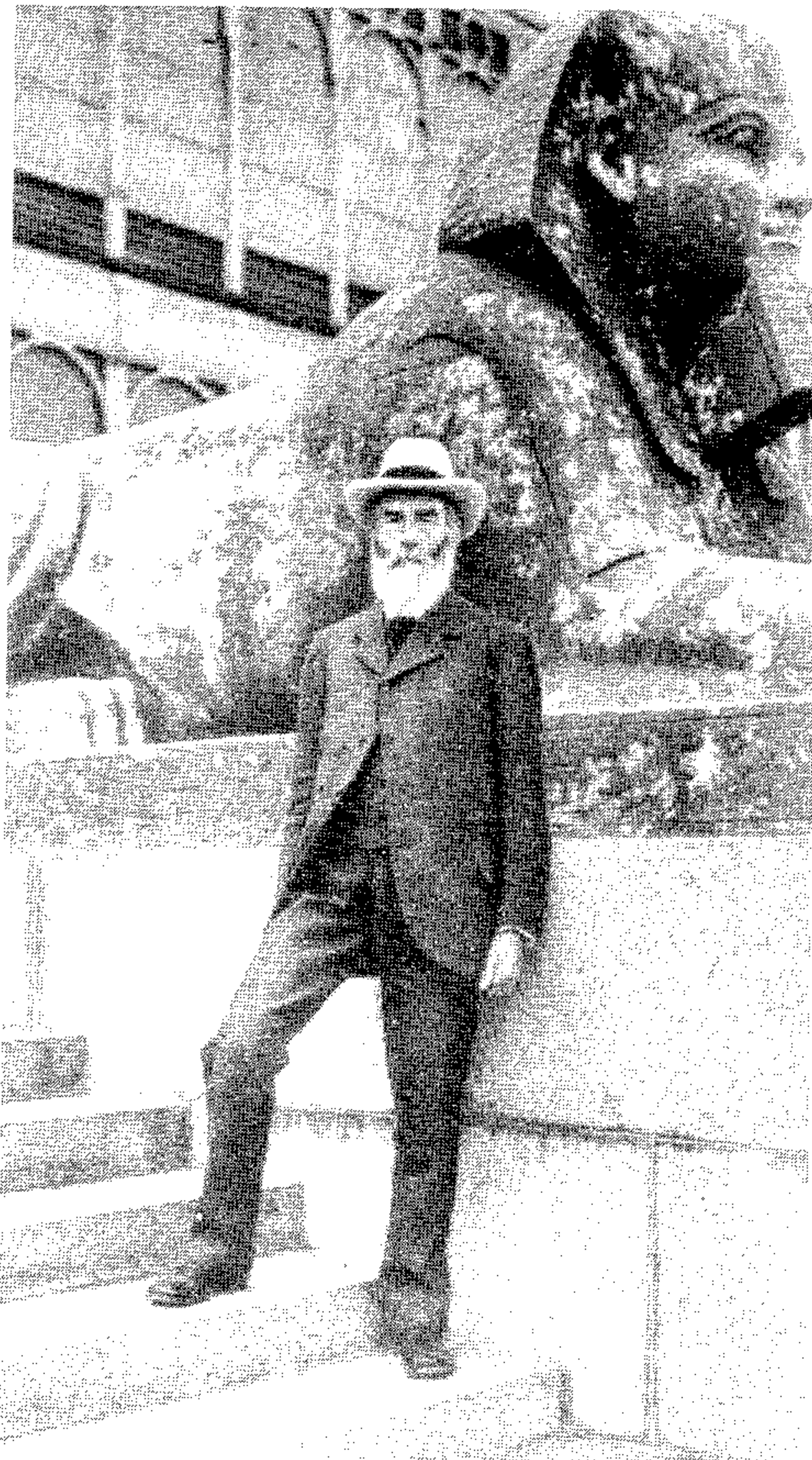


Plate 5. George Livesey at a Co-partnership Festival, Crystal Palace, 1908 shortly before his death.

their own homes [25]. A consultation process to replace union representation was set up through a series of departmental Co-partnership Committees. By 1896 a company statute had been, with difficulty, got through Parliament allowing three Board members to be elected by shareholding sections of the workforce. In face of objections from both the South Metropolitan Board and the LCC the statute was amended to get it through.

George Livesey was seen by some anti-trade unionists as the saviour of the industry from the Union [26]. Other gas companies at first derisive, gradually came to see the benefits of the profit sharing scheme and by the First World War other companies were running similar schemes but only South Suburban was to appoint worker directors.



Plate 6. George Livesey speaking at a 'Bonus Festival', Old Kent Road, 1892, Are they electric lights?

The South Metropolitan under the Liveseys had always been a company which fostered the welfare [27] of its workers, with a pension scheme set up in 1855, sick benefit in the 1850s, and holidays for 'deserving' workers (deserving in the eyes of the company) from 1872. From the 1890s workplace facilities multiplied. Each works had its Institute for recreation, sports grounds and social clubs of all kinds [28]. There was a building society, a convalescent home, a maternity benefit scheme, etc. Accidents in the works were investigated by a joint panel of workers and management and its recommendations acted on. Workers were given prizes for improvements in working practice (Plate 6). The idea was always to promote responsibility in the workforce and the feeling that they were working for a concern to which their contribution was important, and their views listened to. In return they would get security and a chance of a better life. It is easy to be cynical and to say that those workers who did well under this regime were the few prepared to sacrifice their independence to the whim of management. However, Livesey himself was always prepared to make responsibility mean real responsibility and to trust workers with the results of their actions, something not true of many other companies who copied the co-partnership scheme [29].

George Livesey and the South Metropolitan were responsible for many other innovations in the gas industry. The South Metropolitan was one of the first companies to use slot meters for payment, and one of the first to promote the use of gas for cooking and heating, to open

showrooms, and to manufacture their own brand of appliances. Livesey had been responsible for the Board of Trade Technical Committee which in 1895 made recommendations on standards on the testing of gas illuminating power. The South Metropolitan also moved very early to meet the challenge of electricity. In the early 1900s calorific standards were improved and the company produced an enormous selection of devices to make gas as convenient and as effective as electricity in every field - in the eyes of gasmen more effective.

There are many areas of George Livesey's activity and innovations which are not covered in this article. He was a man of ideas trying to change the world around him. Outside the gas industry in late middle age he served on several Government Committees, promoted co-partnership around the country and never ceased to work for the Anglican Church and the cause of Temperance. He was knighted in 1902. South London should remember his contribution both to one of its largest industries, and to society in general through his changes to the way energy was supplied to the community, and to his ideas about the ownership of that energy source. South London attended his funeral in October 1908 and 7000 gas workers walked behind his coffin to pay their respects [30].

Gazetteer and Notes

1. **Thomas Livesey.** The elder Thomas Livesey was an interesting man whose contribution was in the efficient exploitation and administration of a new technology. More should be known about him. A few details can be found in Stirling Everard *History of the Gas Light and Coke Company*, London 1949. The site of one of his homes survives at 3 Clapton Place, Lower Clapton Road, London, E5.
2. **Brick Lane Works.** Confusingly it is not the Brick Lane in E1 but a road now called Central Street, London, EC1. One of the earliest London works, it dated from 1814. Details can be found in Everard (op cit) and in E.G.Stewart *Historical Index of Gasworks* London 1957. The works closed in 1871 but the site is still partly occupied by British Gas. An office frontage remains in Goswell Road in other use.
3. **George Thomas Livesey** born in Canonbury Terrace, now part of Alwyne Villas, N1. He was christened in St.Lukes, Old Street, EC1; roofless and derelict since the Second World War, it is adjacent to the site of Brick Lane Gasworks. He died on 4 October 1908.
4. **Old Kent Road Gasworks.** The site has changed considerably since the 1840s when it occupied a narrow strip stretching alongside the Surrey Canal from the Canal Bridge. As the Company was able to purchase freehold land further down the Old Kent Road, leasehold land near Canal Bridge was released, leaving only the northern part of the present site as part of the original. Walter T.Layton *The Early Years of the South Metropolitan Gas Company*, London 1920 gives a few details. No early building remain but there is in office block of the 1890s, some holders (see below) and a statue of George Livesey erected on 8th December 1910.
5. **Surrey Canal.** The frontage on the Old Kent Road works is built over and inaccessible. Further south the Peckham and Camberwell branches have been landscaped as part of Burgess Park and include many interesting relics of canal side industry, including a preserved lime kiln and the 'Camberwell Beauty' mosaic. To the north the route of the canal is easily followed to the river Thames and includes a stretch of the Surrey Canal Road, SE15. This too contains many interesting sites and needs proper documentation.
6. **George Holworthy Palmer.** This interesting man deserves a biography. Old Kent Road was not the only gas works designed by him which was destroyed by explosion. The retort house built by him at Kensal Green in the 1840s had to be demolished, and the company was nearly bankrupted; other disasters occurred at Sheffield, the Royal Mint, and elsewhere. While we document the Great Engineers perhaps we should also record the failures!
7. **Canal Grove, SE15.** This charming row of cottages just off the Old Kent Road on the west of the Surrey Canal has recently been refurbished by a housing association. The Liveseys lived in the first house from the Old Kent Road; others were occupied by foremen.
8. **South London Gasworks.** There were two other main South London companies:
 - (a) **Surrey Consumers:** works at Rotherhithe Street, SE16. The site can be identified from the modern gas holder extant. Some company housing in the area i.e. Moodkee Street, SE16
 - (b) **Phoenix.** Bankside - now part of the site of Bankside Power Station; Greenwich Thames Street, SE10 - the site occupied the tip of the Creek on the east bank and a tank of 1852 holder remains on site as storage pit; Vauxhall Works. Gasholder Place, SE11 - some buildings remain, including the famous holder seen from the Oval Cricket ground.
 - (c) In addition there were a number of smaller properties used as holder stations or subsidiary works often the works of smaller companies already subsumed. For example: **Roan Street**, SE10 flats were built on the site approximately 20 years ago but holders were still marked on the 1983 Geographia Greater London Street Atlas! **Creekside**, SE8 immediately south of the railway was the site of the Deptford Gas Company, derelict and abandoned it is still in SEGAS ownership. **Evelyn Street**, SE8 just before the canal bridge a metal plaque on the north side of the road advises you to ring the

South Eastern Gas Board on NEW CROSS 2000!

9. From his youth Livesey was a Sunday School teacher at old Christ Church, Old Kent Road. The present church, opposite the works was a replacement for one demolished by the company for the site of the retort house. The pinnacles of its tower for many years surmounted the works offices. In later years he was connected with St.Judes' Church, Dulwich Road, SE24. Now "London's No.1 for Office Furniture" the church still has an incumbent who holds services in a local school.

10. George and Harriet Livesey were married at St.Mary's in Peckham, St.Mary's Road, SE15, bombed and rebuilt. During their married life they moved several times starting off at 3 Rye Hill Park, now demolished, as is 147 Lower Tulse Hill. Another of their residences was in Herne Hill, at that period an area lived in by many industrialists including, Bessemer. On retirement Livesey had a house built, Shagbrook, Buckland Road, Reigate, which is now divided into flats.

11. For a description of the chimney at Old Kent Road see *Kings Treatise on the Science and Practice of the Manufacture and Distribution of Coal Gas* (3vols 1878-82). The holder, built before 1870 and supervised by George Livesey (see his application for membership of I.C.E.) was No 10 built in 1867. This holder has a plaque on it "T.Pigott & Sons 1867 erected". This holder is among the oldest left in London (Plate 7).

12. Frank Clarke Hills had a number of chemical works throughout the area, including Battersea and Stratford. His main works during this period were in Creekside, SE8 (south of the gas works site mentioned above). This is now occupied by a by a number of small businesses. He later acquired the East Greenwich Chemical Works at Riverway, SE10.

13. The numerous gas works scattered around North London must be confusing to the general reader. Stewart (op cit) lists most of the works which were eventually to become part of North Thames Gas. A movement can be seen with early works in the centre, followed by works built around the canal system followed by a move eastwards. A description of these sites is beyond the remit of this work but are interesting and deserve investigation. For instance a city site has been recently excavated by the Museum of London and a public park in Haggerston is laid out in the pattern of long gone holders. Following the amalgamations of the 1870s North London was largely supplied from Beckton (recently turned into Vietnam for the sake of the film industry) and a number of other works including Bromley by Bow works at Twelvetreves Crescent.

14. Bell Green Gasworks, SE26. Works still in use with considerable remains on site.

15. The Commercial Company was very much smaller than the other North London Company. Their works were, in this period, Stepney and Poplar (holders still on site in Harford St E1 and Leven St E14) and Wapping.

16. The site of Crystal Palace is well known but this is Sydenham and not Hyde Park.

17. Rotherhithe and West Greenwich works are detailed above.

18. Woolwich Works. There were two works (a third site in the Arsenal does not concern this study). Both sites are now subsumed into the rebuilding of the Woolwich riverside.

(a) Woolwich, Plumstead & Charlton Consumers Gas Company on the riverside at the end of the then Short's Alley.

(b) Woolwich Equitable Gas Company at the end of Harding Lane. This site has been excavated recently by the Kent Rescue Archaeology Unit.

19. East Greenwich. This site occupied much of Greenwich Marsh from the early 1880s. Most remains either derelict or in use by various haulage and other businesses. Adjacent to Riverway the film industry is making good use of the post war sulphate house. One holder remains, No.1. built in 1886. A giant in its own right it was until 1986 eclipsed by No.2 the largest holder in Europe, now demolished. All else that remains on site is the remains of the jetty and some office buildings.

20. These include the sites of two chemical works: (a) Hills, see above. (b) Ordnance Wharf run by South Metropolitan as a tar works and (c) a dry dock on Blackwall Point, acquired by South Metropolitan by the compulsion of the House of Lords in return for the statute for land purchase. It was disposed of by them and following a series of failures by successive owners was re-acquired and turned into a storage reservoir. A capstan, allegedly from this dock, has recently been acquired by the Museum of London.

21. During Livesey's management at Old Kent Road three more holders were built. Of these No. 11 has recently been demolished. No.13 for some years the largest in the world, is the most easily seen from the road. Details of the earlier two holders can be found in *Kings Treatise* (op. cit.). No 13 is described in a series of articles in J. Gas Lighting 11 & 13 1880. describes damage in the Second World War.

22 Brian Sturt, *Low pressure gas storage* London's Industrial Archaeology no.2. 1980 pp13-23.

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South Eastern Gas Board on NEW CROSS 2000!

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Plate 7. Plaque on the base of no.10 gasholder, Old Kent Road, showing the date and contractor's name.

25. It was said in the house magazine that the Corbett Estates in Lewisham were reserved for purchase by gas workers.

26. The park which Livesey bought with the testimonial money plus donations from Greenwich Borough Council and the Haberdashers Company was Telegraph Hill at Hatcham. In the corner of the park formed by Pepys Road and Kitto Road is the base of a removed commemorative fountain.

27. In addition to welfare the Board was strongly in favour of promoting religious observance. At the back of the Old Kent Road works in Lynton Road, SE15 stands St. Augustines church. A plaque on the Vicarage wall records its opening by the daughter of the South Metropolitan's major shareholder, Richard Foster.

28. Although not a South Metropolitan institute the Livesey Institute in Sydenham was built for South Suburban workers at Bell Green as a memorial to Livesey. This charming building is still very much in use. The Old Kent Road Institute was the ex-company offices and until a few years ago stood at Canal Bridge.

29. This gazetteer would not be complete without a mention of the Livesey Museum in the Old Kent Road given to the people of Camberwell in 1888 by George Livesey as a free library - with a stock of books of gas

interest.

30. George Livesey is buried in Nunhead Cemetary, Linden Grove, SE15. The grave is on the left of the main concourse facing the chapel. Harriett is buried with him. His parents are also buried at Nunhead but seekers after their grave will need to consult plans held in Camberwell New Cemetary Office and set off for a long tangle with the undergrowth.

Bibliographic Note

Material for this article is taken from such a wide variety of sources that it would not be reasonable to list them all. A prime source was the Minute Books of the South Metropolitan held at the Greater London Record Office.

Technical information is from many published works, principally contemporary journals, that also includes some bibliographic information. A set of J. Gas Lighting is held at the British Gas Research Library, Fulham and a later less technical source is the Co-partnership Journal, a partial set of which is held at the Institution of Gas Engineers. A general study is *Early Years of the South Metropolitan Gas* by Walter Layton and the South Metropolitan's own publication *A Century of Gas in South London*. More recent is Derek Matthews *The London Gasworks: A technical, commercial and Labour History to 1914* Ph.D. Thesis (U. of Hull 1983) and in it will be found a very different view of Livesey.