IN PARTNERSHIP WITH RAIL

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of St Pancras International, HS1 Ltd has partnered with University College London to learn more about the station’s rich and varied history. JOSIE MURRAY, Senior Heritage Advisor at HS1 Ltd, shows RAIL some of what they discovered and explains how the findings will be shared more widely.

Who was St Pancras?

According to the Roman Catholic church, St Pancras was born in Phrygia (in modern-day Turkey) in around 304AD. The 14-year-old orphan was brought to Rome, where he converted to Christianity. He was beheaded for refusing to renounce his faith in 304AD by the Emperor Diocletian. It is thought that Pope Vitalian sent his relics to England to spread Christianity, including to St Pancras Old Church in Camden, from which the railway station takes its name.

When St Pancras International opened in October 1868, its arched trainshed designed by William Henry Barlow became famous for being the largest single-span roof in the world. Built as a statement of intent by the Midland Railway Company (MRC) as it sought to showcase the best products that the East Midlands towns and cities served by the MRC were of the highest quality and designed as is the choice of building materials which could offer. For railway and architectural historians, much has already been documented about the physical construction and fabric of the cathedral station. The original drawings for the Barlow trainshed and the George Gilbert Scott-designed Midland Grand Hotel and station frontage are a matter of public record, as is the choice of building materials which were of the highest quality and designed to showcase the best products that the East Midlands towns and cities served by the MRC could offer.

But in order to dig deeper into the twists and turns of the St Pancras story and to uncover previously unreleased historical material, station owner and operator HS1 Ltd joined forces with students and academics from University College London (UCL) in March 2017. At UCL the project was led by Professor Margot Finn, chair of Modern British History, who coordinated a team of more than 30 student volunteer researchers. Meanwhile, advising from HS1 Ltd was its Senior Heritage Advisor Josie Murray. She explains: “St Pancras International is one of the lesser known facts about St Pancras International is that the MRC’s former goods depot at Somers Town became known as RAF St Pancras for two weeks when the first ever landing in the centre of London by a fixed wing aircraft was made on May 3 1909. An RAF Harrier “jump jet” made a vertical landing at the disused coal yard, in preparation for the Daily Mail Transatlantic Air Race between London and Manhattan a few days later. ALAMY.

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Sir George Gilbert Scott
Born in 1811, George Gilbert Scott was a Gothic revivalist architect chiefly associated with cathedrals, churches and workhouses. He is credited with the design or adaptation of more than 800 buildings.

Despite already designing a number of iconic buildings, including the Albert Memorial and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London, he beat ten other architects to win the commission to build the station and hotel buildings at St Pancras in January 1866. At £335,000, Scott’s designs were the most expensive, but achieved the company’s objective to outdo all other London termini.

Financial savings later dictated the removal of one of the floors from the frontage designs before the Midland Grand Hotel opened in May 1876. He was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1872 and died on March 27 1876.

It’s about inspiring the next generation of people who are going to look after buildings like St Pancras
Josie Murray, Senior Heritage Adviser, HS1 Ltd

Town were considered a malodorious slum which was due to poor quality housing, lack of infrastructure and overcrowding.

The location of the Fleet sewer, and gas holders built by the Imperial Gas & Coke Company, steered the MRC towards choosing those estates bordering on to Euston Road as the site of their station where 3,000 homes would need to be demolished.

Murray says that the MRC was a poor landlord to the residents of these houses before they were demolished, and that their occupants were evicted without compensation.

The MRC also dismantled St Luke’s Church on Euston Road and built a replacement in Kentish Town in 1866/69. The dismantled church was rebuilt in Wansetstead. The approach lines to the station cut through the old St Pancras graveyard and were built with scant regard for the human remains interred there.

They also had to bring the line through a burial ground which had closed in 1854, but had been very intensively used as the cemetery of the parish church. More than 7,000 bodies were exhumed but it wasn’t handled with much sensitivity. There was a huge outcry before they were reinterred in a new St Pancras cemetery at Crouch End in North London.

One of our first themes will be Transformation, which is about trying to get people to step for a moment and take a good look at the station because, when you consider the technological innovations embedded in the fabric of the station, they’re not just from the 19th century but the 20th and 21st too.

“We will follow that up with other themes, such as Women in the Railway and the unsung heroines who kept it open during both world wars. There will also be a Goods and Trade theme, because when it opened in 1888 the station wasn’t really about passengers but goods and freight. There were at least three beer trains a day from Burton, and we know that in 1887 MRC was bringing in 38% of London’s coal (£80,000 tonnes per year).”

For fans of the station, Murray says that the anniversary year will not mark the end of the research project and that there is still a lot of material to investigate. As the project continues to uncover more mysteries, it will provide a valuable snapshot in time of one of the UK’s most historically significant stations, and is not to be missed over the next 12 months.

Nevilles work on the site of the station undercroft which will be used to store barrels of beer from breweries in Burton-on-Trent. The spacing of the 688 cast iron columns that support the train deck above was dictated by the size of a standard beer barrel.