

Living in style can be a gas

A Victorian gasworks, dubbed the prettiest in Britain, makes an ideal home, says Christine Webb

A property that is possibly the prettiest gasworks in the country to have been converted to a home has just come on to the market. The Old Gas House in Bradfield, Berkshire, was designed by the Victorian architect George Gilbert Scott, who reputedly set out to make it look like an Italian Renaissance chapel.

Scott, probably the most famous and sought-after architect of his day, was initially brought to Bradfield by the Rev Thomas Stevens to "modernise" his lovely medieval church, St Andrew's. Despite this sacrifice, Scott's effort must have been a success, because in 1850 the wealthy Stevens founded St Andrew's (now Bradfield) College near by to provide a choir for his congregation.

Scott, whose work includes the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens, the Foreign Office in Whitehall and St Pancras Station, designed the school's dining hall, which was built in

1856 and boasts a William Morris stained-glass window. And on a site near the River Pang, his humble gas house with its attractive criss-cross brick and flint facade, was built to supply lighting to the school, the church and the rectory, where Stevens lived.

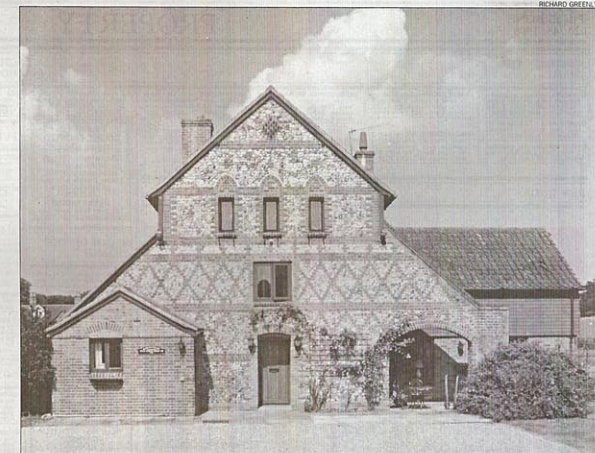
Sadly, the school's records of the gasworks were destroyed when the central heating system's pipes burst, flooding the archives. A plaque on The Old Gas House proclaims it was built in 1867, although it is thought that the school had gas in 1858.

Sylvia Payne, the house's owner, has a letter written in January 1854 by Stevens to the Vegetable Gas Light Company, then apparently based in Leadenhall Street, London, saying that 13 candles were burnt in the church at every evening, and asking: "Can you show me that gas can be used with advantage?" Eddie Richards, the former London Gas Museum's manager, told her that oil was vaporised to form a gas.

He wrote: "In country areas not served by towns' gas, large estates would install gas using vegetable and fish oils. A vegetable oil plant was installed to produce gas but several explosions occurred and serious fires resulted."

"On holiday last year in Devon I visited a large country house, and in its museum were two lamps fuelled by oil extracted from white cabbage."

It is more likely that Bradfield College was lit by coal gas, which



The Old Gas House in Bradfield, Berkshire, has been converted into a luxury five-bedroom home and is now on sale for £575,000

was produced by heating coal in retorts, a kind of kiln, to 1,000°C, a process that delivers 50 per cent hydrogen, 30 per cent methane and 8 per cent carbon monoxide. Although Stevens was ahead of his time in trying to bring gas to the country, it had already been used in cities. Pall Mall was lit by gas from 1807 just to show it could be done, and the Gaslight and Coke Company was the first to be chartered to light the City, Westminster and Southwark, in 1812. The Science Museum in London says that some large estates built their own gasworks, and the museum has in storage a diorama of how these worked.

The National Trust for Scotland has recently restored a gas

house at Culzean Castle, near Ayr, which was built in the early 1840s. This used the coke produced in the gas process to heat the retorts to convert the coal into gas, which produced more coke and completed the circle.

Stevens recklessly spent all his money on the college and as a result went bankrupt in 1881. By this time, the gas house retorts needed renewing.

The college was taken over by the Simonds family of Reading—Blackall Simonds had been the school's first pupil and his family's business, the Blackall-Simonds brewery, later became Courage. The family even installed a brewery at the school.

Bradfield College, which now

has about 570 pupils, celebrated its 150th anniversary last May by performing Euripides's *Hippolytus* in the original Greek at its own Greek amphitheatre.

Between 1919 and 1921, Bradfield's gas production stopped when electricity was introduced. Perhaps the end of its first working life was brought in as a matter of necessity, since the following poem, produced by a pupil who studied at the college from 1913, suggests a worrying trend.

College Gas by N.K. Worters, written on October 27, 1916, reads: "... far and wide throughout the land/ the smell of gas—a brew/ bad egg' smell goes forth/ towards the village/ and

as well right up the hill to college runs apace/ and everywhere it strikes you in the face..."

Despite its good looks, the old gasworks was left for 60 years to fall into dereliction until 1983, when it was bought from the farmer and converted to a luxury five-bedroom home, with large sitting and dining rooms. The only structural alteration allowed was the addition of one window.

The gasworks stands on the edge of the village of Bradfield, in gardens of 1.2 acres, and coal is still burnt in a fireplace in the sitting room.

The Old Gas House is being marketed by Strutt & Parker (01635 521700) at £575,000.

Seems like old times

Vintage interiors are all the rage. Ana Arena helps you to latch on

fireplaces and Royal Doulton urns. The company's most valuable item at the moment is a fireplace from a French town hall that is going for £11,000.

Owen Pacey, the owner of Renaissance, is now in Greece looking at an old monastery on a hill that needs to be restored, and is hoping to be granted permission to extract some of the white stone. "It is in good condition, I will bring it back to London," he says.

It is a long process, as Pacey will have to drive to the site, number all the bits of stone, load them into his van, bring them back to London and reassemble them. Though Renaissance has prestige clients such as Ralph Lauren, Alan Parker, Cher and the artist duo Gilbert and George, Pacey says: "We have all sorts of clients, ranging from nurses to bankers."

So how do you find his showroom to indulge in a spot of stone therapy?

"The shop is a purple-coloured old pub in the middle of City Road and it sticks out like a sore thumb. People come in out of curiosity and end up loving it," says Pacey.

Once you have surrounded yourself in stone, the next step is to buy some soft fabrics as a contrast. The Curtain Exchange carries a range of new patterns, a bespoke curtain service and a collection of antique curtains draped throughout the shop.

Liz Meston, the owner, says: "We are selling the antiques as fast as we can put them up. People love nostalgia and the feeling of patina, the passing of ages."

It is very much an impulse buy triggered by the memory sensors. "People remember a pair of curtains their mother used to

have in her dining room or get very nostalgic when they see curtains with the same finishing and patterns as the ones they used to have in their bedroom as children," says Meston.

The curtains cost from £60 to £1,000 and Meston allows her clients to take them home, fit them and try them out overnight. She says: "The light changes throughout the day. You have to be able to experience the curtain in your home to see if it works properly with the surroundings. If you don't like it, you bring it back and try another one till you find the right one."

Though the history of the curtains is often kept a secret, there is a chance that customers might take home curtains that once hung in the castle of some European monarch or minor royal. As Meston says: "If only these pieces could talk..."



The Renaissance look has spread from clothes to interiors

IN WITH the old and out with the new — the trend for vintage styles has spread from clothes to interior design. Images of Kate Moss shopping in Notting Hill's second-hand shops are being joined by photographs of Naomi Campbell buying 16th-century fireplaces and Chris Evans browsing for antique curtains.

If you want to give your new home that popular, lived-in look, start by putting in some ancient stone Renaissance London will fit your house with marble floors, French 18th to 19th-century stone