

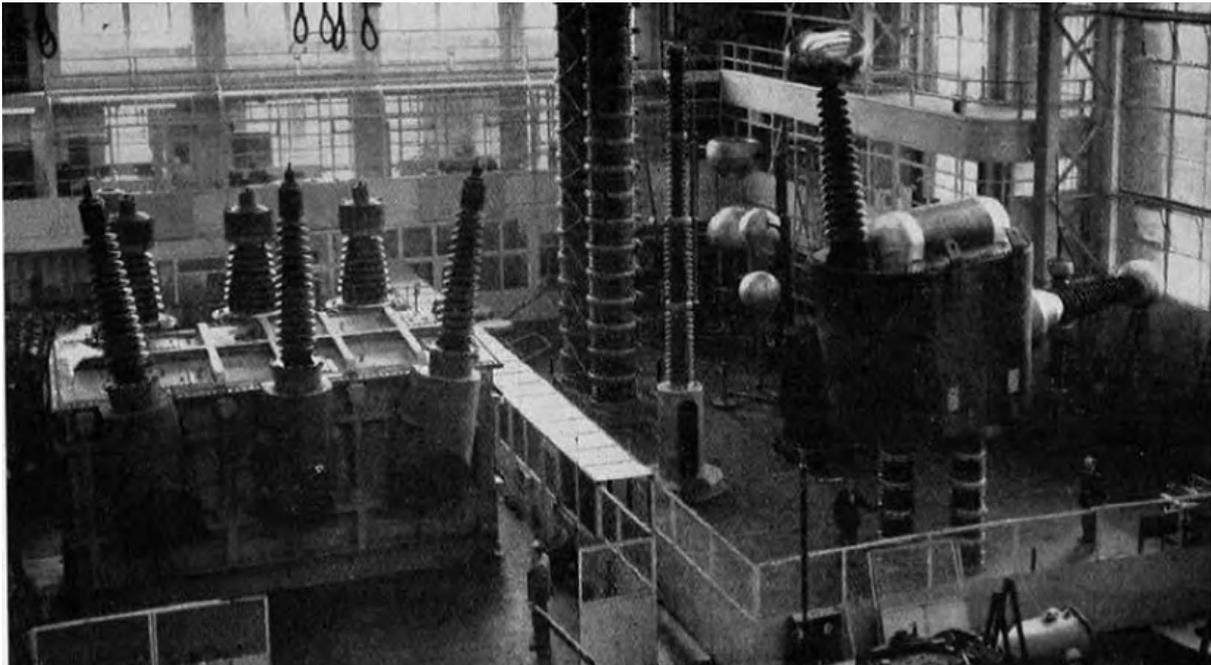
Bygone Days

Letchworth Power Station to Thames North Grid Control

by Alex Ford

Alex writes: "I am not sure that my 68 year old recollections of being a Control Engineer at Letchworth Power Station are worthy of being published, but I don't suppose there is likely to be anyone to question them!

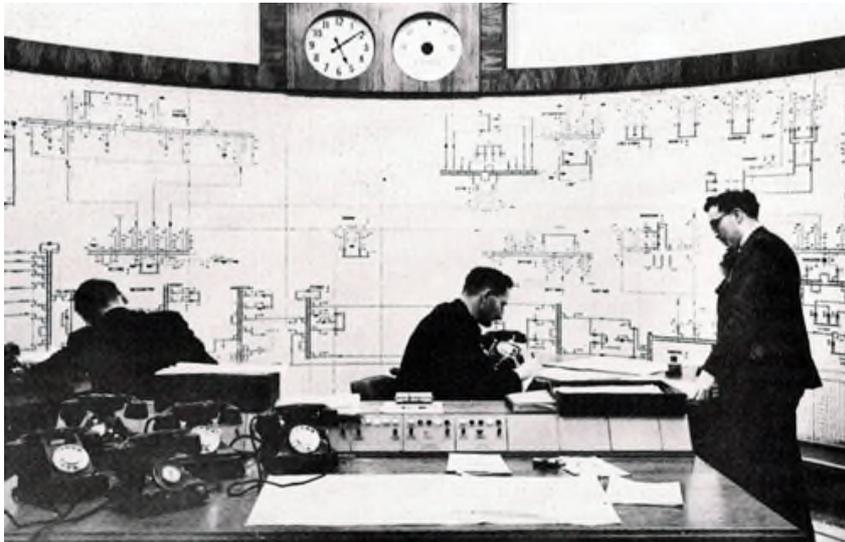
I didn't do National Service as I was eligible to have a junior officer position (IEE Membership qualification) but failed the Officer Selection week long course! Instead I went as 'Directed Labour' to Ferranti Transformers at Hollinwood, Manchester, which was fine for my future with the British Electricity Board.



I joined the industry after Nationalisation in December 1948 at Letchworth Power Station. This was my first real job. When I started, Letchworth Power Station operated completely separately from the rest of the country supplying 'Letchworth Town', 'Local Villages' and 'Industry' at the standard 50Hz frequency at 11kV. It had a combined capacity of 28 MW consisting of both AC and DC Generators together with rotary and motor converters. Standard frequency was maintained by insuring that there was always enough plant synchronised to cover the loss of the largest unit.

Success was measured by comparing the local electric time with a standard (pendulum) clock and not being more than 10 second adrift. The standard clock was checked each morning by the Station Superintendent against the BBC 9:00 am time signal. If the electric time was more than a few seconds different, he would want to know why. The frequency, and hence the electric time, was controlled by increasing (to gain time) or reducing (to lose time) the total steam input to the synchronised AC generators.

In late 1949 a 11/33 kV transformer was installed to provide connection to the National Grid via the local Area Board 33kV network; and so was able to import or export a few Megawatts and removed the task of frequency control from the Power Station. This connection was viewed with suspicion by the old Charge Engineers and was initially switched out at night! This was because of a widespread National shut-down (before my time), when Letchworth was one of the few places in South East England where the lights stayed on. This practice was frowned upon and abandoned well before I left Letchworth in July 1950 to start at St Pauls Control ('down the hole') in London.



The entrance to 'the hole' was from King Edward Street via the old (now dismantled) St. Pauls tube station originally on top of the old lift shafts for the Post Office Underground Station. All levels were then accessed down a spiral staircase. There was also an emergency access door (watertight) to the station platform to be used by the shift staff if an air raid was taking place! The circular control rooms did not appear very cramped and I've no recollection of where the loos were. Meals were taken in the canteen at the top level and I was surprised to be told on my first day by the Control Manager that it was time to go to lunch at 12.35 when lunch hour was officially 1:00 pm until 2:00 pm. Lunch hour, I was informed, was for walking the City with the National Control Manager, and we had to eat before then!

When I joined St- Pauls Control I was on day duties and soon moved to Thames North in the Control Office doing Load Estimating. I eventually went on shift, and was on shift when Thames North moved to Cumberland House, Redbourn, Hertfordshire, in June 1957. I came

off shift (at my request) in the late 1950s after the move to Rebound, and rotated with the day planning staff between the Control, Generating Plant, and Development offices. Due to some Regional re-organisation I was moved to Bankside House from Redbourn in 1971 until 1983; then I moved back to Redbourn until my retirement on 1 July 1984.



My only knowledge of the London Power Company was that the majority of the staff in the new Thames South Control came from the LPC Control room at Ergon House, London.

Regarding Letchworth Power Station, I don't know who built it but it was probably owned by the local authority until it was Nationalised in 1948. After it was shut down, the site was certainly re-used as it had a couple of large gas turbines installed on it in later life.

London Underground Railways has a unique history and in the early days operated independent from the fledgling National Grid. Lotts Road Power Station opened in 1905 with an installed capacity of 50Mw. It was owned by one of the many private companies building the Underground network but eventually became the property of, and was run by, London Transport, to supply Direct Current electricity to the Underground railway network. In its life time it was converted from coal then oil and latterly gas but it was eventually closed on 21 October 2002.

Over the years the Underground railway has become more dependent on supply from National Grid. However Greenwich Power Station is still operational but in a back-up mode to operate in an emergency if supply from the Grid is interrupted. My understanding is they have re-equipped the Gas Turbine plant which provides a very quick start. Grove Road Power Station closed sometime in the late 1970s but I have no knowledge of it supplying power to the Underground network.

There is a story that Cumberland House, reputed to be the hunting Lodge of the Duke of Cumberland, left his mistress locked in the house whilst he joined his army to drive the

Scots back from England. He only expected the battle to last a week but it took much longer – more like a year.



Now there are stories that it is haunted, and there are tales of sightings of a lady in a white nightdress and bonnet walking across the lawns in the dead of night and disappearing. Do we have an eye witness? I never saw a ghost but the ghost story started when resident caretaker Alf Lambden's father-in-law spent a night sleeping in the attic room and was quoted to have said he would not spend another night there alone as he was convinced there had been someone or something else present with him that night! However this happened after I'd moved to Bankside and I heard of no other reported 'sightings'.

Written by Alex Ford. Edited by Tony Malins

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