

# Electricity Comes to Sutton Coldfield, 1901

By Alan Howells

## The First Public Supplies of Electricity

It was in the late 1870s that electricity started to be used commercially, mainly for electric lighting, and that interest was first shown in public electricity supplies.

Local Authorities, private companies and individuals applied to Parliament for Acts to allow them to lay cables and provided public supplies, resulting in the Electric Lighting Act of 1882, which favoured public ownership through local authorities because territorial monopolies were necessary. The Minister responsible for this Act was Birmingham's Joseph Chamberlain, then President of the Board of Trade. The Act was updated in 1888.

By the 1890s many municipal authorities, mainly in the larger towns, and a few private power companies were providing public supplies of electricity. Birmingham had its first supplies in 1891 from a private company with its generating station in Dale End. However, in 1898 the company was taken over by Birmingham Corporation who from then on provided all further supplies<sup>1</sup>

Sutton Coldfield Corporation started planning the town's first electricity supplies in 1898 and they were switched on in 1901. Boroughs adjacent to Sutton proceeded with providing electricity generating and distribution systems for their areas. Aston Manor had established an electricity undertaking in 1898, and Erdington Urban District Council provided their supplies in 1907 — both Aston and Erdington were absorbed into Birmingham in 1911. The first City power station built and opened by Birmingham Corporation itself was not until 1906, so in terms of corporation commissioned power stations, Sutton was ahead of Birmingham.

## The Gas Works/Power Station Site

Sutton had been supplied with gas for street lighting and domestic use from 1853 by a private gas works situated on the corner of Slash Lane (now Riland Road) and Coleshill Road. The works became run down and uneconomic and was closed down in 1892<sup>2</sup>. Sutton Coldfield Corporation considered taking over the gas works to continue to supply the town with gas, but by this time electric lighting was being introduced in adjacent boroughs.

Instead, the corporation bought the old gas works site for £650, an area of nearly one acre, and decided to replace the old gas works with a new electric power station. They also decided that, since the area was large enough, they would build a new corporation depôt alongside the power station in Riland Road. The depôt site is still there in Riland Road, along with the old Public Weighbridge and remains of old buildings abandoned since Sutton became part of Birmingham in 1974.

# SUTTON COLDFIELD



Sutton Coldfield  
Electricity Station  
1938

## The First Electricity Supplies in Sutton Coldfield

The Corporation obtained its own Electric Lighting Bill<sup>3</sup> in 1899 and proceeded to organise electricity supplies for the town. An Electric Lighting Sub-Committee was formed by the town council with Alderman Seal, who had been Mayor of Sutton from 1894 to 1896, as Chairman. The committee visited similar-sized towns to Sutton to observe their electricity undertakings, and decided to adopt the same system as the town of Barking. Mr W.C.C. Hawtayne was the consulting electrical engineer who had advised Barking, and in 1899 he was asked to design a system for Sutton<sup>4</sup>.

## Proposals for Sutton's first Electric Street Lights

The engineer's report of 12 January 1900 advised that the first streets to have electricity supplies should be as follows:

- Coleshill Road and Coleshill Street (from the gas works to High Street)
- Birmingham and Lichfield road (from Holland Road to Four Oaks Station)
- Park Road
- Clifton Road
- Manor Road.

The lighting to be extended in due course to:

- Anchorage Road
- Tudor Hill
- Victoria Road
- Station Street
- Bishops Road
- Rectory Road
- Clifton Road (from Manor Road to Cup Lane)
- Cup Lane (from Clifton Road to Driffold Lane)
- Driffold Lane (from Cup Lane to Bishops Road).

Most of these roads already had gas lamps.

Having identified the roads that were to have the first electric street lamps, the committee had to decide what types of lamps were to be used. Initially, there were to be three designs of street lights. Each of the major public thoroughfares and road junctions of the town, such as the High Street/Mill Street junction, and adjacent to the Town Hall in Mill Street, were to be lit by a bright arc lamp during the early evening, changing over to incandescent bulbs later at night. The major roads were to have twin incandescent bulb lamps at intervals along the road. The remaining roads were to have incandescent bulbs attached to the old gas lamp standards.

For the first streets, this would require twelve arc lamps and 108 incandescent bulbs, but in addition to these street lamps the power station had to be capable of supplying 10,000 private lamps. It was calculated that the output capacity of the power station



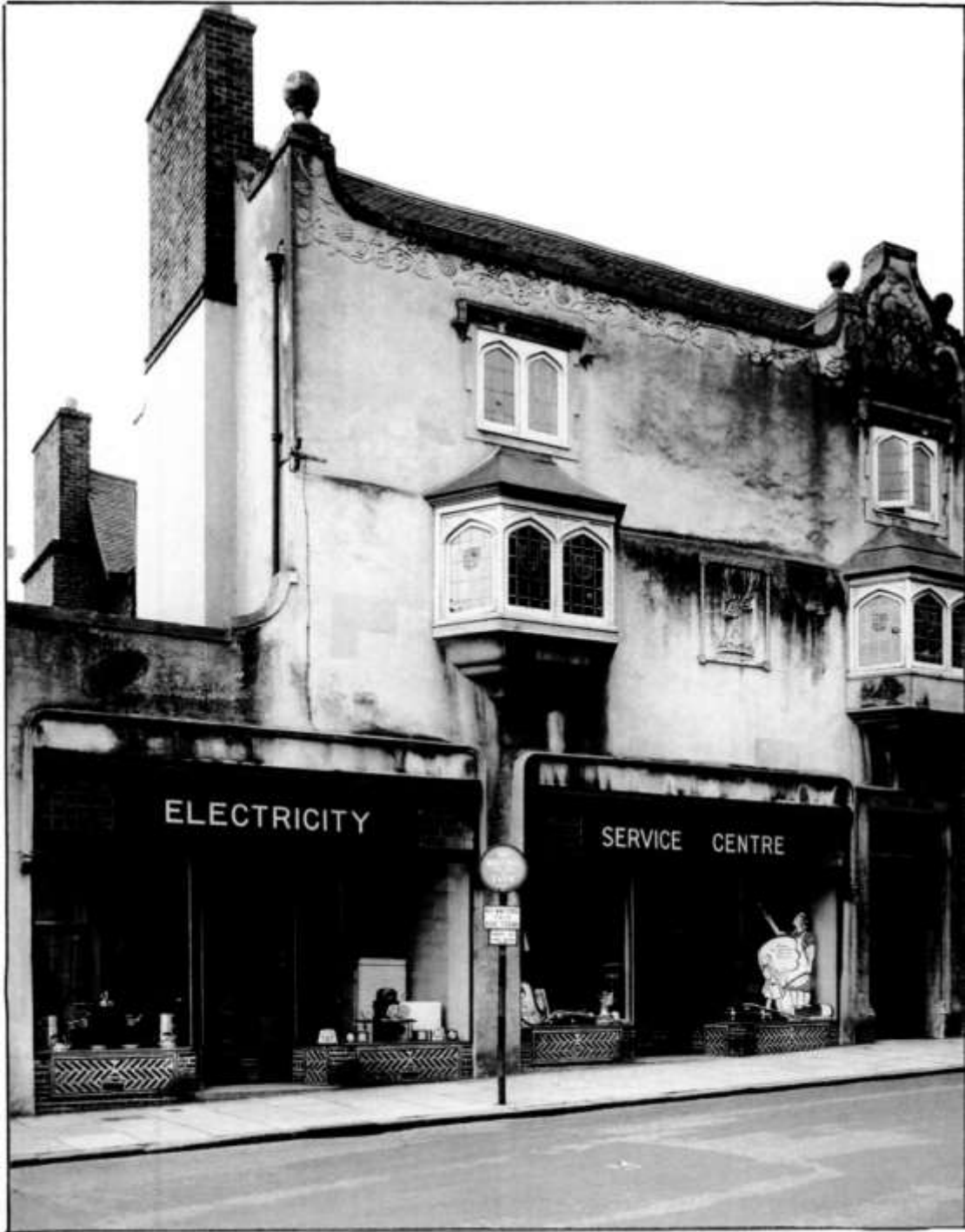
King Edwards Square, showing the lamp installed in 1901. At the top is the arc lamp in its globe, giving a very bright light, while the three incandescent lamps are on arms branching out from the lamppost lower down.

Opposite: A similar lamp at the junction of High Street and Coleshill Street





Arc lamp at the foot of Mill Street



The old Electricity Showrooms

would need to be 350kw direct current (approximately the equivalent of 350 single-bar electric fires today). This would allow for a further 2,000 domestic lamps.

The old gas works was demolished in 1900, and the new power station, with its 150 feet high chimney, was completed in 1901. Although this was an industrial building, the Corporation made an effort to make the external appearance as pleasing as possible, and the walls that fronted on to Slash Lane (Riland Road) and Coleshill Road were built of brick and stone. The official description<sup>5</sup> of the external appearance of the building at the time (1901) was as follows:

*The elevation of both roads are of ordinary red brick with dark pressed string courses, terracotta and other aprons under the windows, and Bath stone heads and sills, two Tudor roses being carved on each of the stone windows and door heads, while the Borough Arms are carved upon a block of Bath stone built over the entrance.*

This ornamentation, although now weather-worn, can still be seen on the outer walls of the building today, over 100 years later. The power station comprised a boiler house and a number of dynamos driven by steam engine to produce the DC electricity, and large banks of batteries to supply the current for the town's electric lights. This building, and the old dynamo generator room, still stands, now used as a car repair shop; even the 100-year-old crane used when carrying out repairs to the dynamos is still present. Long may it remain as a monument to a major event in the history of Sutton Coldfield.

## Electric Lighting Department

The Corporation appointed a Resident Electrical Engineer to manage the new department, at £200 per annum. Mr Trevor Deusbury from Gloucester, a Power Station Driver for the steam-driven dynamos and a stoker for the boilers; some of the former lamplighters who had been employed to light the street gas lamps were transferred to the new department. Its offices were located at the Riland Road Power Station, to which residents would go to pay their electricity bills.

## Electricity is Switched on for the First Time



The Corporation was justly proud of the achievement of installing the town's first electricity supplies. During the summer and autumn of 1901 cables were being laid along the town centre streets and new lampposts and lights were being erected. Residents were being encouraged to have electric lights in their houses; some were eager, some were wary of the cost, and others were reluctant to give up their existing gas or oil lamps.

Arrangements were made for a magnificent opening ceremony, with the Mayor and all the town's civic dignitaries present at the official switching on of the new electric lights. The date chosen was Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> December 1901. The Mayor invited Mrs Seal, the wife of the chairman of the Electric Lighting Committee, to open the Riland Road Power Station, and a large party of guests was then shown round the works. The Mayor then invited Alderman Seal to start up the dynamos, and the electricity flowed along the cables to the Town Hall in Mill Street (now the Masonic Buildings).

The official party and guests moved to the Town Hall where the Mayor opened an exhibition of electricity at 4.00 p.m., designed to encourage residents to take up the



# CORPORATION OF SUTTON COLDFIELD. ELECTRICITY DEPARTMENT

1910  — 25 YEARS PROGRESS —  1935



RILAND ROAD GENERATING STATION 1910.

1910	CONSUMERS	1935
550		7,600
UNITS SOLD		
368,000		6,547,581
DEMAND		
262 K.W.		3,330 K.W.
PUBLIC LAMPS		
223		1,214



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MAIN SWITCHBOARD, RILAND ROAD 1935.

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COOKING BY ELECTRICITY  
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Tariff ... 3/4d. per Unit!



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various uses of electricity. Then at 4.30 the highlight of the day, when the Mayoress switched on the first electric street lights in Sutton Coldfield. The whole area round the Town Hall was bathed in light from the very bright arc lamps — a brilliant contrast to the poor light of the old gas and oil lamps.

The use of electric light then spread to other areas of the town. Cables were run to substations, filled with batteries, which were built at Wylde Green (Lime Grove) and at Mere Green (Belwell Drive) to supply these areas. The building at Wylde Green survives, though now disused, but the Mere Green substation was recently demolished (2002).

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Briggs, *A History of Birmingham volume 2*. p.97

<sup>2</sup> Howells, Alan *History of Gas in Sutton Coldfield during the nineteenth century*. In Proceedings vol. IV 1997.

<sup>3</sup> *Sutton Coldfield Electric Lighting Order*. 1899

<sup>4</sup> Mr.Hawtayne's report is in the minutes of the Electric Lighting Committee for 1899. These minutes form the basis for this part of the article.

<sup>5</sup> Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield. *Electricity Supply Inaugural Ceremony*. 14<sup>th</sup> December 1901. This is the source for the rest of this article.