



Candelabrum with lanterns originally design by Schinkel, this example in the Berlin Open-Air Museum of Gas Lamps in a corner of the Zoological Gardens

PHOTO: PETER BURMAN

Shedding LIGHT

Berlin's historic gas lighting system and its lamps and lanterns – a bright or a dim future? asks **Peter Burman**

Gas lamps

On a cold November evening in 2012, I was having dinner with Paul Harrison, a friend who lives in Berlin, in Dahlem Dorf, the charming village that during the time of divided Berlin became an important cultural and university centre in the western suburbs.

Towards the end of the meal he asked me if I would mind going for a walk as he planned to show me “something special”, and of course I agreed, little knowing that for the next three hours or more and late into the evening I was about to see one of the most “at risk” aspects of Berlin’s cultural and technical heritage – street after street of the most beautiful and atmospheric gas lighting, emanating from well-designed and even handsome lamps or lanterns, all of which were and still are under threat of removal.

It seemed incredible to me that this should be so and during 2013 I researched and wrote a 27-page report for the two organisations that are most involved in campaigning for their retention – Gaslicht-Kultur and Denk mal an Berlin.

Most but not all of the surviving gas lamps and lanterns of Berlin are in the former western rather than in the former eastern sector; it was a conscious decision of the government of West Berlin, after the Second World War, that they should continue to have both an electrical system of street lighting in some quarters and a gas-lit system in others. This dual system has obtained since 1882.

Below I give examples of all five principal types, though there are many variants: a suspended lamp with large gallows-type support; the top-piece lamp that is especially common in the quiet residential streets that are such a joy in the western suburbs (and such further-flung suburbs as Frohnau, Köpenick and Spandau); the in-line lamp developed in the 1950s in response to the growing volume of motorised traffic in a Berlin which was then recovering from the Second World War; the traditional lamp (also often used as a bracketed lantern), whose design is associated with Karl Friedrich Schinkel, famous Prussian architect of the 1820s and 1830s, who was deeply interested in the evolution of modern technology and will probably have seen working gas street lighting for the first time during his visit to London in 1826, together with his colleague, Peter Christian Beuth, the economic and technical expert; and finally the suspended lamp with Wilhelminian mast of the 1890s up to the time of the First World War. Many other German cities also had their variants and many examples can be seen in the Open-Air Gas Light Museum, tucked away in a corner of the Tiergarten in Berlin, and well worth a visit.

For anyone just starting to look out for and enjoy the gas lighting of Berlin a good starting point is to head for the long north-south street called Schloss-Strasse, which leads up to the noble baroque Charlottenburg Palace with its distinctive



Berlin gas lamps – the five main types. **From left:** Suspended lamp with large gallows; top-piece lamp; in-line lamp; traditional lamp and suspended lamp with Wilhelminian mast PHOTOS: BERTOLD KAJATH (WWW.GASLICHT-KULTUR.DE)



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Above left: Suspended lamp with gallows-type support in Schloss-Strasse; **Above right:** Top-piece lamp in Otto von Simson Strasse – one of many quiet streets made delightful by these timeless lamps often on older columns resembling Gothic colonettes

dome. Here you will see a long street lit by suspended lamps with gallows-type supports and at a certain point a roughly circular traffic island has on it a superb example of a candelabrum (central mast with three or four lanterns) of the traditional type associated with Schinkel, though his lanterns were not used in that way until the 1890s.

As can be imagined, only a small percentage of the 88,000 or so gas lights in Berlin that were in existence in 1939 survived the war but there was a great revival of them and the top-piece lamp is probably the most common, the one pictured here being in the Otto von Simson Strasse in Dahlem.

The other very common street light, especially in broad streets with a good deal of traffic, is the in-line lamp on a graceful curving stem, which can carry as many as nine gas mantles in its pod-like lamps which produce a tremendous amount of light.

It is a fallacy, though advocated by some, that the survival of gas lamps – currently there are

around 42,000 still in use, more than any other city in the world – is somehow old-fashioned and fuddy-duddy, producing a kind of Dickensian olde-worlde atmosphere, but this is very far from the truth. The truth is that, just as many of us enjoy candle-light on the table for meals, with its living light, so many of us can also appreciate that there is a gentle warmth about gas-light which has never been equalled by electricity. We can, however, as in Berlin – to a degree which obtains nowhere else – have the benefits of both. “Never put all your eggs into one basket”, as my grandmother used to say.

The history of the gas-lighting system of Berlin’s streets begins in 1826 with the lighting of the Unter den Linden, one of the world’s most famous streets. This was a few years later than the lighting of The Mall in London, another of the world’s most famous streets, but one that is still mostly lit by gas lamps. The Mall was already lit by experimental gas lighting in around 1807, by more permanent gas lighting by 1820, and the

Gas lamps

earlier lamps and masts may then have been replaced in the 1820s and 1830s. Many of the masts bear the royal cypher of William IV and some even still bear the cypher of George IV.

In fact, Berlin and London were neck and neck in the development of a safe and effective system of street lighting – perhaps one of the greatest steps forward in the evolution of the world’s cities and of the safety of mankind. As we might expect, each of the two cities paid close attention to what was going on in the other, and many of Berlin’s streets were during the 19th century lit by a lamp known as the Camberwell lantern.

During the late 19th century and early 20th century Jugendstil, or Wilhelminian, period gas lamps and lanterns were designed by some of the leading architects of the day and often in such a way as to harmonise with or complement the buildings they designed. The example pictured shows a suspended lamp with a delicious example of curly ornamentation of 1890s blacksmithery.

An example of slightly later turn-of-the-century design is pictured too – in the delightful suburb of Frohnau to the north of central Berlin, where there is a group of lanterns designed by Franz Heinrich Schwechten (1842-1924), who was also the architect of many fine buildings in imperial Berlin including the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church that today, in its fragmentary state, is one of the grandest and most poignant memorial landmarks of Berlin.

So what, you may well be asking yourself, is the interest of all this for SPAB members? It is that the Berlin gas lighting system, unique in the world in the extent of its survival, is threatened with extirpation and a programme of removal and replacement with a graceless design of electrical lamp called Jessica is in some places under way and only held back by budget cuts at the present time.

It is difficult in photographs to show just how beautiful gas lighting is. Fortunately any member living in or visiting London can easily see some magnificent (and even agreeably street-ordinary) gas lights still at work, as there are around 1,400 in the City of Westminster. Illustrated opposite is a noble standard lamp of c1912, early in the reign of George V, at the Piccadilly end of Green Park and also a row of more modest gas lamps that still line the pedestrian walk along the east side of the park.

It is an extraordinary thing that so many citizens rarely seem to look up and really study what is happening with street lighting. (It is brilliant news, by the way, that some of the Richardson Candles – electric street lamps designed by Sir Albert Richardson – in Cambridge, have recently been listed).

Pictured opposite is one of the two gas lights, with exquisite Chinese-pagoda style lanterns on either side of the main entrance to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. But I would be surprised if many people notice that fact. It



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Above left: One of a pair of magnificent lanterns in Frohnau designed by Franz Heinrich Schwechten (1842-1924); **Above right:** Suspended lamp with Wilhelminian detail on the corner of Bismarck Allee and Herthastrasse

remains true, as Ruskin said, that ‘thousands can think for one who can see’.

The enchanting Cecil Court, a few minutes’ walk away, is lit solely by two gas lamps (see cover) and there are literally hundreds of them lighting many of the best streets and best buildings (eg, St Paul’s Church, Theatre Royal in Drury Lane) in Covent Garden. Many spectacular gas lanterns and street lights still function as they should around Buckingham Palace, and make a notable contribution to the visual delight of the adjoining streets.

There are also other German cities besides Berlin that still retain some of their gas lighting – Düsseldorf has the most after Berlin – and other British cities than Westminster including the delightful suburb of inner Nottingham, The Park, and in Malvern, Worcestershire, a well-informed citizens’ action has led to a complete refurbishment of the gas lighting system in ways that have made it more energy efficient and sustainable: there was apparently very little wrong with the system other than a lack of proper maintenance, and it is maintenance that is now sadly slipping in Berlin as politicians argue about whether to retain the gas lighting or not.

The argument appears strong that the Berlin gas lighting system is worth preserving as a working whole, and not just as some quaint relic of the past. Indeed, just as the Rideau Canal in Canada, the three Mountain Railways in India, and the Rhaetian Railway of Switzerland have been inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage list, while

continuing to be working systems whose parts occasionally need replacement when worn out or as the result of a regular cyclical maintenance, so the distinctive Berlin Gas Light – with its special aesthetic and technical qualities – and Gas Lamps & Lanterns is worthy of being considered for World Heritage status.

In fact the same two criteria would apply as with the canal and the railways: criterion (ii) requires demonstration that to be World Heritage cultural heritage should “exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design”, and criterion (iv) requires that such cultural heritage should be “an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates [a] significant stage[s] in human history”. It is small wonder that the World Monuments Watch has lately placed the Berlin Gas Lighting System on its 2014 list of the world’s 100 most endangered heritage sites. ○

● Peter Burman is an arts and heritage consultant, and an SPAB Guardian, living in Edinburgh. His report on the Berlin Gas Lighting System is available from him in English as an email attachment by writing to him direct at peterburman@btinternet.com. He would welcome any information on gas lighting in Britain or elsewhere in the world which other members may have.

London's gas lamps



Above: Surviving gas lamp in use in The Mall, London

Inset right: One of a number of gas lamps in this area of Westminster with the cypher of King William IV



PHOTOS: PETER BURMAN

Above: Green Park gas lamps lining one of the walks of Green Park, perfect in scale and design



One of a series of spectacular gas lanterns on the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, Covent Garden



Above: One of the Chinese-pagoda-like lamps on either side of the entrance to the National Gallery, London

Below: Magnificent standard lamp of c.1912 in Green Park photographed in ‘die blaue Stunde’, that magical ‘blue hour’ when it is between light and dark

