

# Emsworth Gasholder

## by Howard Jacobs



*The gasholder  
photographed in 1985 by  
K E Jones*

Three years ago an iconic local landmark disappeared for ever. Never a thing of beauty but impossible to miss, love it or hate it...it was the Emsworth Gasholder.

In April 2016 Dorothy Bone from Emsworth Museum asked me to design an exhibition detailing the history of Emsworth Gasworks. During my researches for the exhibition I uncovered a wealth of fascinating background material.

The history of gas in Emsworth begins in the 1850s. The bringing of gas to the village had huge and positive implications for everyday life. At the time, Emsworth's population was just over 1,500. There were few surfaced roads and no motor vehicles; transport of goods and people was by horse and cart. There was no street lighting. Houses were lit either by candles or kerosene lamps while cooking was done on a wood or coal-fired range. The lack of modern sanitation and sewage treatment is well documented. There were limited job opportunities. The main sources of employment for men were boatbuilding, fishing or agriculture. The arrival of gas was to change this semi rural existence for ever.

In 1853 The Emsworth Gas and Coke Company was formed. The Company purchased part of an orchard from Brook Farm, with no road frontage and access via a narrow path from North Street. This access is no longer in use but if you look to the right of number 57 North Street you can trace it by a brick wall. The Company solicited applications from householders for connection to the gas network; it paid for mains piping, but customers needed to either rent or buy gas meters for their homes.

1853 saw construction of the first gasholder. Town gas, as it was then called, was produced by heating coal and capturing and storing the 'fumes' i.e. the gas. The coal was delivered by ship from North East England coalfields. In the early days it was offloaded at Dolphin Quay or onto the hard at the bottom of South Street. Hence, the nearby Coal Exchange public house. Its final journey to the gasworks was by horse and cart.

The popularity of gas led to the mains being extended to Westbourne and Warblington. By 1922 it was necessary to expand gas production and further land was purchased

from Brook Farm. This extension allowed direct access from Palmers Road.

In 1927 Emsworth gasworks was acquired by Portsmouth Gas Company who closed the site and linked Emsworth gas mains to the Portsmouth network. Six years later they began to update our facilities. A new gasholder, which until 2016 dominated the local skyline, was ordered from Robert Dempster at Rose Mount works in Elland, Yorkshire. The new gasholder was test assembled at their works and then transported to Emsworth by rail. All 1,000 tons were then carried to the new gas works by horse and cart supplied by Lashleys of Westbourne. Skilled labour carried out the assembly. The new works were opened in July 1934.

In the 1960s natural gas from the North Sea demanded an upgraded distribution system. If, like me, you have an insatiable interest in holes in the road you may have seen bright yellow pipes being buried. These pipes store gas at pressure, something the original 1850s

cast iron pipes and gasholder could not do; so our local landmark became redundant.

The network provider SGN regarded the dismantling of our gasholder as a serious learning curve, as it was the first of that type to be dismantled. It contained 16,000 tons of water and 1,000 tons of steel. The water was cleaned and filtered before being put into the drains and the steel structure was cut up, removed and recycled. The demolition began in February 2016 and took three highly skilled, experienced engineers 11 weeks to complete. Visit Emsworth Museum to watch the fascinating time lapse video of the whole process. The site has been cleared and all that remains is a 150 foot diameter concrete pad and a small building housing pressure reducing equipment. What next? Who knows!

*I am indebted to Clive Pugh, Tony & Jane Yoward, John Horne & Emsworth Museum for background material, also Sue Seddon for her editing skills.*

©Howard Jacobs