

Battersea Power Station

Fam Trip 2nd November 2008



London has more than its fair share of iconic buildings but surely Battersea Power Station must be up there on at least a podium position in a 'Most Iconic Buildings in Britain awards' programme.

After Michael Faraday proposed his theories of electromagnetic induction and the subsequent invention of the dynamo in 1831, the commercial production of electricity proceeded quickly and by 1900 an electricity supply became commonplace powered by a series of largely unregulated public and private suppliers. In 1925 an Act of Parliament created the London Power Company and a year later plans were confirmed to rationalise the national electricity supply. The power requirements for London now required new super-stations and permission was approved for the building of a new power station on a 15 acre site in Battersea. One of the main design considerations was for the 'washing' of sulphur from the waste gases as a result of burning coal for the boilers preventing corrosive and 'noxious gases' being vented into the surrounding area, hence the four 120m chimneys at the corners of the building. Ironically, one of the concerns with

the building now is corrosion of the steel reinforcement of the four chimneys, leaving one to believe that that 'washing' was not perhaps as successful as first claimed.

By 1931 work had started on Battersea A consisting of a boiler house and two chimneys flanked by a turbine hall and switch rooms. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (who also designed Bankside Power Station) was commissioned to design the structure and interiors. He proposed a steel frame with a brick skin and pre-cast concrete chimneys. This was also the centenary of Faraday's discovery of electromagnetic induction and a memorial stone was placed at the Battersea Power Station in commemoration. By the end of the war, Battersea B was in operation and in 1955 the current shape of the power station with four chimneys and two turbine halls was complete.

Power continued to be generated on-site right up until 1982 when Battersea B ceased operation. The removal of the roof and walls of the turbine halls has meant that the building has been exposed to the elements for the last 20 years and has resulted in considerable damage and decay to the structure. The current owners REO (Power station) Ltd and our hosts for the visit have spent a considerable amount of money stabilising the structure and creating safe areas which are now available for filming and similar events.

The site now consists of two huge parking and event areas where even the very largest feature film unit could be parked with ease. The exterior areas of the power station, including spoil heaps and roadways alongside railway embankments, areas of scrubland and the two coal wharf cranes on their own pontoon on the river side.

Because of the very real danger of falling masonry from the skin of the building, there is a 30m exclusion zone around the outside of the building and safe walkway entrances

into the turbine and boiler house halls. This zone is created from Blok-n-Mesh style fencing and is not removable under any circumstances. However on the East side of the site (Battersea B), stabilisation of the walls has meant that the exclusion zone can be decreased meaning that it is possible to work right up to part of the walls on this side. Being this close to the building means it is possible to use the location without revealing the four chimneys.

Access into the centre of the power station is via walkways protected by scaffolding 'crash-decks'. These are large enough to allow access for Genie Booms and similar equipment, which can then be used to assist with rigging or the moving of equipment into the two control rooms or the cable floors within the building.

The interior of the power station now consists of three huge, derelict spaces with the largest centre space open to the sky and with the framework of steel windows at either end. On the west side of the building is the older Battersea A control room with its parquet floor and extraordinary controls and switchgear. The very high quality of design is apparent in the detailing of the roof, interior tiles and unique ceiling and working lights. In contrast the east Auxiliary Control Room for Battersea B is more reminiscent of a 1950's science fiction film with the control surfaces made from stainless steel (a considerable extra expense in wartime Britain). Both areas have appeared in photo shoots but apparently never used in film or a television drama.

Elsewhere in the building are the huge cable halls that run the full length of the building. Period staircases of various designs including the fine stone stairs that were part of the Director's Entrance to the Control Room. These surround a fine period lift, alas no longer working and presently stuck unusable between floors

The site is a fantastic location for the staging of large-scale stunts (see the latest Batman film for evidence of what can be achieved with huge amounts of explosive gas and SFX). Not only is the interior of the power station now available again, but also its surrounding areas, hard standing for Unit Bases and even the riverside wharf and coal cranes.

Facility fees are not expensive for such a large, flexible and iconic site in the centre of London. There is some noise from the neighbouring waste transfer station on the east side of the site and occasionally from helicopters arriving and departing from the helipad further up the river.

The site has changed recently with far greater access to the building now possible. It's well worth bearing in mind for a location.

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Soaring towers of Battersea above the tiny location managers below