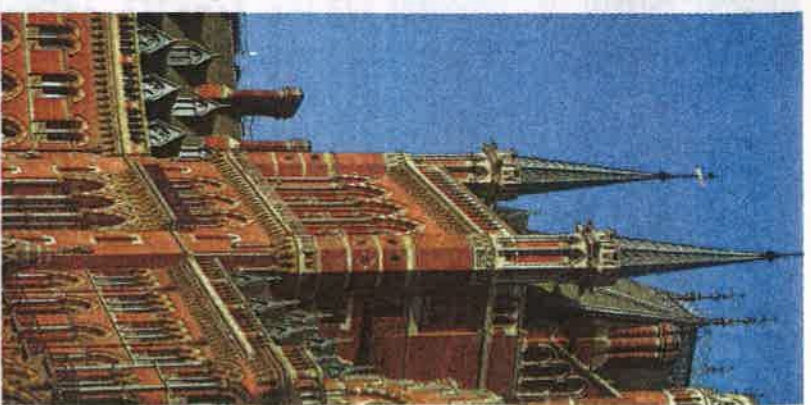




The decoration, as in medieval buildings, is as dazzling as can be: the St Pancras Renaissance hotel has been refurbished at a cost of £200m, including £47,000 spent re-creating the original wallpaper in one room.



The rebirth of a gothic masterpiece

George Gilbert Scott's landmark hotel above St Pancras station has been sumptuously restored after generations of neglect and ruin. Next month this magnificent – and demented – building reopens for business

Rowan Moore



St Pancras Renaissance hotel

London NW1

It is nearly a century since the Midland Grand hotel, the Victorian palace attached to St Pancras station, last flourished, and 76 years since it was a hotel at all. It is almost a half-century since the struggle began to rescue it from oblivion, 26 years since it had any full-time use and five since construction started to return it to its original purpose as a luxury hotel, now with some apartments attached. On 14 March the first guests will enter the St Pancras Renaissance hotel, as it is now called, where the rooms will cost from £250 a night in a modern extension, up to the many-roomed Royal Suite for £10,000. It will have cost £200m of construction to get this far.

Meanwhile, it has stood, like the weird house of a crazy old lady in some village, unmissable, spooky and inaccessible. The life of the city swirls around it and under it, in and out of some of the busiest train and underground stations in Europe. It has been possible to see inside on the occasional tour, and its interiors have been shown worldwide to unknowing millions, as locations for *Harry Potter*, *102 Dalmatians*, *Batman*, *Richard III* and other films requiring lavish gothic creepiness. Now, its restoration nearly complete, it feels like both a lost world

and something familiar, that has always been part of the furniture of London.

Inside, it is a thing of movement, a web of stairs and endless corridors. Even the coffee room, one of its most splendid interiors, is built on a radially curved, like a railway viaduct, as if you had not quite left a train carriage. Then, as if unsettled by instability, it is fixed with history. Medieval architecture is imported by the hundreds of tons, to ballast the risky Victorian world of capital and industry, of bank crashes and train crashes.

Palaces and churches are evoked with pointed arches and ogees, bunches of colonettes, carvings of flowers and fruit, trefois and quatrefoils. The materials include granite, alternating pink and white stone and wrought iron. The decoration, as it would have been in medieval buildings, is as dazzling as it can be: within a square foot or two, you can find royal blue, vermilion, gold, green, pink and a mustardy yellow. Great floral splodges march across the wallpaper like space invaders. Its looping, swooping, theatrical main staircase is decorated with 2,300 fleurs-de-lis. There are paintings of the Virtues and of a chaste love scene from the *Roman de la Rose*, perhaps antidotes to the potential lustfulness of a hotel.

It is both magnificent and a little demented. With its churchy aura, it feels uncomfortable with its own hedonism. Although its imagery is of nature and springtime, it feels a touch clammy and stifling. While admiring it, you can see why people in the early 20th century reacted against this kind of thing, in favour of simpler, fresher, less pretentious spaces.

When it was completed, the Midland Grand was the last and grandest of the railway hotels built to serve passengers at major termini and to act as an advertisement for them. It

was designed for the Midland Railway by the prolific George Gilbert Scott, architect of dozens of churches, Glasgow University, the Albert Memorial and the Foreign Office, and for whom the project was the fulfilment of his greatest dream, to design a great gothic public building in London. For him, the making of this monument went beyond mere uses; it was almost “too good for its purpose,” he said. Its innovations included lifts, fireproof construction and a generous supply of flushing lavatories, but



One of the hotel's suites. 'Sometimes, Scott's individualism collides with ubiquitous International hoteliana.'

While admiring it, you can see why people reacted against this kind of thing in favour of simpler spaces

these were not enough to defend it from the competition when newer hotels introduced things the Midland Grand did not have, such as ensuite bathrooms. In the 20th century, it declined, until it closed in 1935. After the war, it housed various offices of British Rail, which carved up its interiors with partitions and suspended ceilings. Seen as obsolete, inefficient and tasteless, it was threatened with demolition. It took campaigners by John Bejerman and others to save both the hotel and the great shed of St Pancras station – now the Eurostar terminus – behind.

Its eventual rescue is the work of Harry Handelman and his property company, Manhattan Loft Corporation, London and Continental Railways and Marriott Hotels, working with the architects RHWL and Richard Griffiths, and the close attention of English Heritage. The prodigiously successful hedge-fund manager (Lord) Stanley Fink put many of his millions behind it. Of all these, the driving force is Handelman, for whom it has become an obsession. He increased his stake when other partners fell away, nervous of a complicated, risky project in an unapproved location. Now he describes himself as the “custodian” of the building.

He freely admits that the budget “spiralled” and wears the cost as a badge of honour. When a fragment of rare wallpaper was found in one room, it was reinstated at a cost of £47,000 for the single room. He says that he “wanted to go the extra mile, even though it cost tens of millions”. He is confident that he will “recoup his investment, because it will be the most beautiful hotel in London”. His cheerful air suggests he is not being driven to bankruptcy by an architectural folly. The genius of the project lies in its

deal-making and risk-taking, the stacking up of partnerships, funding and uses such that it can, for the first time since the early 1920s, be a going concern. It has cost no public money since English Heritage supported the restoration of the exterior in the early 1990s.

With this history go some compromises. The restoration lacks an overall concept of how the old relates to the new, such as was possible, for example, in the state-funded, not-for-profit Neues Museum in Berlin. It feels more like a series of individual decisions than something with a guiding intelligence. A new wing to the rear, housing 189 bedrooms, is clad in a modern version of Scott's red-brick gothic by restoration specialists Richard Griffiths Architects. This is among the best of its kind, confident and not completely imitative, but it sits oddly with the modern, standardised block it covers.

The relationship with Marriott, which vetted every detail from its headquarters in Washington DC, causes awkwardness, as the corporate world seems to have lost its taste for fantasy since the days of the Midland Railway. Sometimes, Scott's individualism collides with ubiquitous international hoteliana. Worst is the fitted carpet in the corridors, whose architecture demands something with a less domestic quality: it is like socks worn with a ballgown and its space-killing quishiness makes my flesh creep.

But these are details compared to the far more significant fact that one of the country's architectural marvels is returning to life. That it is doing so, after so many decades and obstacles, shows the power of fantasy in cities. Usually, everyone beams building projects that take a long time and run over budget, but here nobody, not even those writing the cheques, seems to mind.



THE SUNDAYTIMES



The gothic-revivalist glory of the Midland Grand Hotel has been hidden from the world for 76

years. Now the painstaking £200m redevelopment in St Pancras is coming to fruition with its first paying guests. Hugh Pearman is impressed

Some buildings are more than mere buildings. They are symbols of something else. Consider the Sydney Opera House. Not great for opera, I'm told, but who cares? It is a confident statement of cultural intent. This is how I see the Victorian gothic fantasy of the Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras, in central London, which has just been restored at a cost approaching £200m and is about to reopen, 76 years since it last took in a paying guest. Nice to see it back in use as intended, but its real reason for existence is not to house well-heeled visitors to London. That's just an excuse. It is there to exude magnificence.

This was the culmination of the construction of the last great intercity railway line of the 19th century. To compete with established rival lines to nearby King's Cross and Euston, it had to outdo them. King's Cross was plainly functional. Euston, in those days, was monumentally neoclassical. So, for St Pancras, the Midland Railway directors chose spiky multicoloured gothic. The engineering of the broad single-span train shed behind, by William Barlow and Rowland Mason Ordish, was a separate matter. Influenced by the Crystal Palace, it was a high-tech wonder in its time, and is still impressive now it is London's European rail terminus. For the architecture of the hotel and other station buildings, however, they turned to George Gilbert Scott, a fervent gothicist best known for his big churches and the rampantly over-the-top Albert Memorial. He did not let them down.

The extraordinary confection of the Midland Grand Hotel, opened in 1873, is the result. Scott's romantic, steep-roofed, turreted and gabled design, with a clock tower to rival Big Ben and a masterly sweep of a broad, curving approach ramp, was naturally the most expensive on offer. The railway directors spent the next few years trying to rein

him in, with little success. He had already been thwarted in his ambition to build his Foreign Office on Whitehall as a gothic fantasy: the prime minister, Palmerston, had insisted he produce an Italianate style instead. At St Pancras, he had a free hand. It is vampire-movie fodder, the peak of continental-influenced gothic excess, the endgame of this kind of gung-ho high-Victorian commercial architecture. Even when newly built, its rich and colourful decoration, inside and out, was starting to seem old-fashioned.

While Scott was good at modern medievalism and at resolving the awkward fact that the railway tracks arrived high above the street level outside, he was less good at modern comforts. He provided only two bathrooms per gaslit floor. Everyone else was expected to call for hip baths and hot water and chamber pots to be brought to them. And, although the rooms had wonderfully high ceilings, they weren't so broad as to allow bathrooms to be easily added. Some upgrading took place in the early 20th century, but the hotel closed in 1935, becoming railway offices. Even that use had stopped by the 1980s, since when it has served intermittently as a film set: Harry Potter, inevitably.

In the 1960s, British Rail had planned to demolish the hotel, along with the rest of the station — a fate that had notoriously befallen the old Euston. Conservationists and Victorian enthusiasts, including the poet John Betjeman, rallied round. Although the building was given Grade I-listed status in 1967, it was still in danger for a decade after that. Plan after plan to restore the hotel came and went: they were all uneconomic. Its exterior was restored in the mid-1990s, however, and a start was made on some of the interiors.

This time round, a different commercial formula was applied. A developer of upscale apartments, Harry

Handelsman, of Manhattan Loft Corporation, took the place on when few others would have dared. By converting a lot of it for sale and building a new hotel wing at the back, enough rooms could be created to work as a business. This means there are relatively few in the restored original part — just 38 — but the grand public restaurants and smoking rooms and staircases are all there, painstakingly restored. Scott's fine ticket office, with its ecclesiastical "linenfold" wood panelling, is reborn as a bar, while the glazed covered way of the hansom-cab approach is now the reception.

I have walked round this building many times over the years since it was abandoned. Now it is buzzing with life again, although it's clear that a modern hotel — even a "five-star-plus" type, as this Renaissance-branded part of the Marriott empire is pitched — is not the easiest fit with Scott's gothic mindset, in turn derived from the strictures of the earlier gothic evangelist AWN Pugin. The name of the new hotel, St Pancras Renaissance, denies its architecture. Pugin believed the Renaissance, which brought neoclassicism, had been a bad idea, starting architecture on a decadent, pagan downhill slide. Hence the need for a purifying gothic revival. Scott lapped all this up and applied it to as much of his work as his clients would allow. Strange that all this striving for the ultimate Christian architecture should have reached a frenzied climax not in some great cathedral, but in a railway-station hotel.

Modern hotels are squishy, soft places with neutral tones and a casual, sybaritic air. Scott's building was all hard materials, strong colours and a sense of moral purpose. The collision of these two worlds — good God! The pale carpets, with their giant swirly patterns! — is therefore sometimes uneasy. Scott often left his rough iron girders exposed, even as he laddled on the ornament elsewhere. The main dining room (to be run by the chef Marcus Wareing) is a 100ft-long curve. The vaulted ceiling to the incredible main double staircase is painted with stars. The corridors are broad and tall. The colours are rich. The whole building, like the whole station, is an embodiment of the Victorian way of simultaneously embracing and subverting the technology of the time. As in a church, its visual lavishness was leavened with austerity. It took the management until 1898 to concede that women should be allowed a place to smoke.

The historic-buildings specialist Richard Griffiths, in conjunction with RHWL architects, has done well to make it work overall. Griffiths has even come up with his own version of Puginian gothic to clad the new rear extension, going back to the sources Scott used. It's refreshing, for once, not to have yet another example of the glass-box-contrast approach. Inside, though, this new part is just another modern hotel wing. Compare that to the best room in the old part, which is decorated almost entirely as it would have been in Scott's day, thanks to a patch of original wallpaper found behind a mirror.

Back in 1952, the great, puritanical architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner tried to salvage the then rock-bottom reputation of Scott's Midland Grand Hotel by arguing that it was arranged in a modern, informal manner. No need to justify it in those terms today. We can glory in its titanic eccentricity, its Victorian bombast, for its own sake. Does it finally work properly as a hotel? I hope so, but that's not my interest. For me, the hotel and the apartments are just dandy, and deserve to succeed purely as a means to an end. The end being to safeguard permanently one of the best buildings in Britain. □



London

A first glimpse of the glorious St Pancras

It cost £150 million to restore over six years. Is it worth it? **Tom Chesshyre** is the first to review the newly restored station hotel

Down below, somewhere way down below, I could hear the rumble and roll of a train. My first-floor room vibrated slightly. And then the sound passed. I waited a couple of minutes; it started again.

I tried to work out where the noise was coming from. Through my window I could see the huge arch of the train shed — designed by the Victorian engineer William Barlow — with a handful of long slug-like trains waiting to depart to the Continent. Passengers were passing the statue of John Bejerman, who famously (and thank-fully) campaigned to save the station from demolition in the 1960s.

Along a corridor with a high ceiling, ornate lamps and Gothic arches, I asked a member of staff what was going on. "That's just one of the characters of the hotel," said a fellow in a charcoal suit — as another train rumbled by. "One of the little quirks: unique. We're not sure what Tube line it is... we're still trying to work that out."

I suppose if you stay at a station hotel you should expect the sounds of a station. But what an hotel. The St Pancras Renaissance Hotel first opened in May 1873 as the Midland Grand Hotel, designed by the great and prolific George Gilbert Scott. It closed in 1935, owing to a fall-off in guests caused by competition from more modern hotels: at the time there were only five bath-rooms to cover the 300 rooms.

But this week it reopened after a £150-million refurbishment, with 245 rooms, in all its Gothic glory: the finishing touch for the still relatively new St Pancras station. I was staying in one in the "Chambers" section of the hotel, with a view of the platforms and of the seating area of the Bejerman Arms pub below. The 56 rooms of this part of the hotel have been carefully restored with the original wallpaper and carpets throughout: the developers, who have also opened apartments in the building, have conducted the restoration in conjunction with English Heritage.

They have done a superb job. I was visiting on the second day of the hotel's reopening (I was its twelfth guest), and I couldn't



RICHARD POHLE FOR THE TIMES

help but marvel at the impressive building. Down the long hall from my room — the hotel stretches 1km, so I was told, from the front to the new wing at the back of the station — I came to the beautiful curve of the grand staircase, which curls round with burgundy, blue and gold carpets reaching up three floors to a vaulted ceiling (with views at the top of people on laptops amid the shelves of the British Library).

Along the way I found the old "Ladies Smoking Room" with its granite columns, original Victorian peacock-pattern wallpaper and deck overlooking Euston Road. From here I passed a room with crystal chandeliers, where Queen Victoria dined after she opened the hotel, and went down to the basement spa. This is the hotel's old kitchen and the original tiles have been recreated around steam chambers, treatment rooms and a little pool with chroma-therapy lights.

After checking out the smart modern wing (which has all the hallmarks of Marriott, the slick chain that manages the hotel), I took in the grey steel arches of the reception, which used to be where hansom cabs were pulled in. Along a corridor from here a restaurant run by the renowned chef Marcus Wareing is due to open in May. Then I went to the bar/restaurant, where the old wooden kiosks of the booking hall are lined behind the bar.

I drank "Victorian" rum punches in honour of the Victorian hotel in this huge, marvellous space, listening to gentle jazz, under a clock with the time stuck at 7.32pm (not, perhaps, so useful in a station hotel). I ate sea bass and mash in the relaxed atmosphere, sitting at a cream leather banquette with a view of the platforms, and bumped into an old friend who had brought his wife. "We love it here," he said. "But watch out for your bill." He showed me a receipt for



Need to know

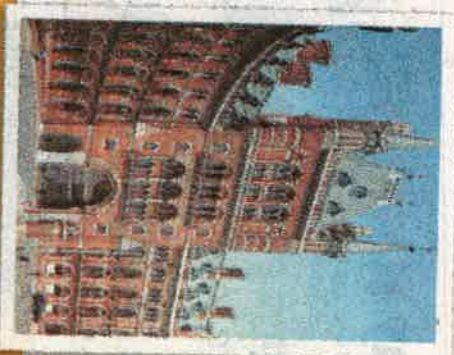
St Pancras Renaissance Hotel (020-7841 3540, stpancrasrenaisance.co.uk). Doubles from £250; Chambers rooms from £500 B&B plus free minibar and pressing service. Cocktails in the bar are about £7, and main courses about £15.

his meal that had a compulsory 12.5 per cent service charge included, plus a space for "gratuities at your discretion".

Then I returned to my room, passing along Gothic halls that featured in the film *Batman* (and were also the setting for the Spice Girls' first video, *Wannabe*, as a cheerful barman had told me earlier). The trains had stopped rumbling and I got a good night's sleep on a very comfortable bed in a room with a high ceiling, stacks of glossy magazines, a fancy iPod docking station and a marble bathroom with posh REN products: all framed by croquet hoop-shaped windows lined by shiny granite columns. I awoke to the muffled sound of a train announcement: the 706am to Paris. But I didn't mind. This is a great new London hotel — much more interesting than the newly restored Savoy — with charm, style and plenty of station character (and rumbles, too).

London Evening Standard

standard.co.uk



Grand design
Rowan Moore
on the most
romantic
building in
the capital
Pages 32 & 33

THE MOST ROMANTIC BUILDING IN LONDON

After 75 years of misuse and neglect, the Midland Grand in St Pancras is restored to its former glory with 67 apartments now completed and a new hotel due next year

Rowan Moore
Architecture critic



The Midland Grand Hotel, the salmon-coloured Gothic fantasia that introduces St Pancras station to London, should not by rights exist. It has spent more of its 127-year life as a problem, a failing building ill-suited to the purposes it was supposed to serve.

Now, 75 years since it closed as a hotel, the arduous, expensive struggle to find it a prosperous future is nearly over. The conversion of one half of it into 67 apartments is now complete. Next year the rest of it, together with a new rear extension, will open as a 245-bedroom Marriott Renaissance hotel, designed by the architects RHWL and Richard Griffiths. By any measure of value engineering, or cost-benefit analysis, it should not be there. The fact that it can be attributed to the power of fantasy – a power whose effects can be measured in hundreds of millions of pounds.

Even at conception, its existence was rickety and perilous. As the author Simon Bradley recounted in his book on St Pancras, it was the last and most extravagant of the great Victorian railway hotels, costing 14 times more than its nearby rival the Great Northern. It opened when the railway boom was turning to bust, the 19th century's equivalent of the bursting of the dot-com bubble.

A floor was shaved off the proposals in an effort to cut costs, and the lavish ornament cheapened. Oak was substituted with cheaper deal. For the completion of its interiors, its celebrated and workaholic architect Sir George Gilbert Scott was replaced with a more malleable practice.

The Midland Grand still managed to be one of the most spectacular gothic revival buildings anywhere and, for a decade or two, the epitome of luxury. It represented industrial wealth in medieval form. Sanctified with the style of cathedrals, it was an exotic bloom grown out of the muck and coal of the industrial Midlands.

But the hotel business moved on and it faded from fashion – not least because its handsome rooms came without bathrooms. It closed in 1935, after which it became offices for the railway company. After the coming of British Rail, it became the base of the company's catering division, from which crimes against gastronomy were plotted for buffers across the land.

Partitions, suspended ceilings and fluorescent lights sliced mercilessly through the hotel's florid detail.

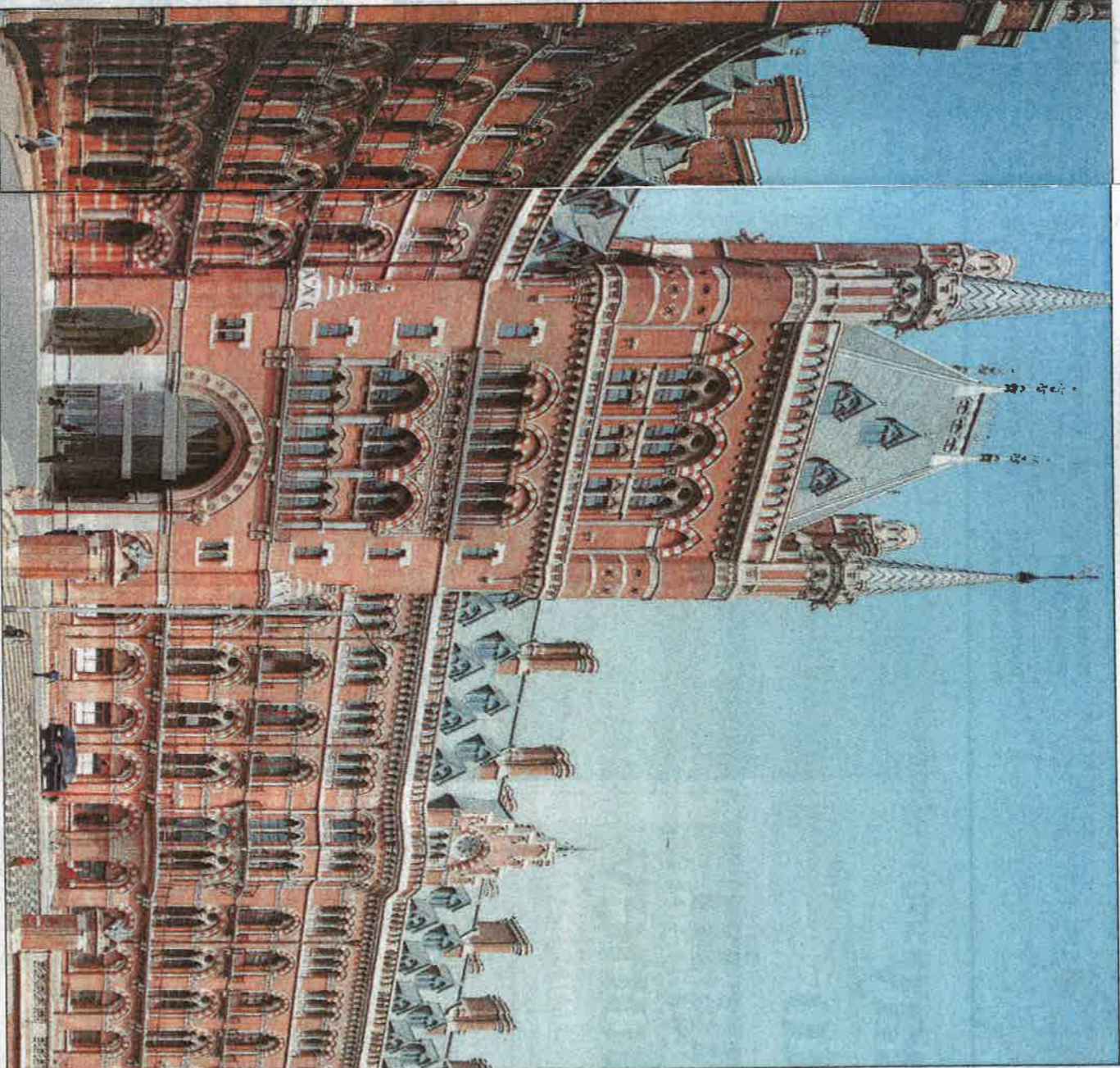
What at its opening was called "the most perfect in every possible respect in the world", would be called "completely obsolete and hopeless" by one chairman of the railway company. Not even architectural historians liked it – they mostly thought it too flashy and vulgar, and could not forgive the way it obscured the more innovative steel structure of the station roof behind. They preferred simpler, more chaste stations, like King's Cross.

There were open attempts to demolish it, until a Grade I listing in 1967 meant it had to stay. In 1988, the office workers moved out, after the building was declared unsafe. In 1993-5, £9 million of public money was spent on restoring the exterior but the building remained unused.

In all this time, it has played the part of a gigantic haunted house in the imagination of London. It is conspicuous, mysterious and a little sinister. It has been a popular location for films involving Harry Potter, Batman and Damsels, or directed by Mike Leigh, or starring Uma Thurman, or Alec Guinness. It has played the part of Richard III's demented palace. Directors unsympathetically respond to the fact that the building is, in effect, a stage set.

Tours into its dark interior, led by a self-taught Midland Grand expert called Royden Stock, have become popular. Were he not built like the security guard he once was, Stock could be called the phantom of the Hotel, so closely has he become identified with the place. He is still employed as head of security on the building site, where he has worked on and off since he fell in love with the place in 1996 but he is also employed for his expertise on the building's heritage, in what must be a unique combination of roles.

Stock is familiar with each pore and wrinkle of the hotel. He now knows more than trained historians and likes to point out their mistakes with force. He takes part in debates with English Heritage about the best way of restoring it. He is the sort of exceptional



Epitome of luxury: the Grand was built on the wealth of the industrial Midlands

Since 1935 it has played the part of a gothic haunted house in the imagination of London

character that exceptional buildings like this attract.

The hotel has also attracted Harry Handelman, the developer who popularised loft living in the early 1990s with his company Manhattan Lofts. Initially the junior partner of a consortium with Whitebread, within which his role was to develop rooftop flats, he has ended up being the main man behind the £200 million development. He is now in partnership with London and Continental Railways, the company charged with bringing Eurostar to St Pancras, and the hedge fund manager Stanley Fink, who has a penthouse flat in the development.

It is the biggest and most complicated project Handelman has done, and like the original construction of the hotel, it has flirted with disaster.

The cost, he said, "escalated dramatically". "It's a very intricate building," he says, "and you discover things that surprise you." It is, however, also "overwhelmingly", "fantastic" and "incredibly beautiful", which seems to have made the hazards of the project all worthwhile.

"That man must have balls of cast iron," is the way Royden Stock puts it.

Now that the flats are completed, a degree of normality has inevitably come to the building, such as it has rarely known in its life. Corridors are carpeted, to reduce noise, and painted grey and cream. Kitchen units and fireproof screens introduce the everyday, sometimes jarringly. A new reception desk, made to look like a giant piece of luggage, has been introduced, in a misguided attempt to glid the lily.

But the original building won't lie down quietly. The corridors are unusually tall, or long, or narrow, with bits of gothic arch intruding, and wandering curves. Heavy wooden beams and trusses, and the triangular geometry of the roof, make each flat different. It is like the inside of a vast mansion or boarding school or lunatic asylum, now populated by an intriguing mixture of actors, directors, media types, fashionistas and models, some of them attracted by the fact that Paris is more easily reached from here than some outer parts of London. They have paid anything from £450,000 to more than £10 million for their flats, which is high for this location, but justified by the extraordinary architecture.

The full richness of the interior will

become apparent when the hotel is completed next year, when the delightful staircases, curving dining rooms, and riotous stenciling and plasterwork will become visible. It is, however, already possible to see that, in the sheer fact of this building finally returning to active use, something extraordinary has happened.

In the years when the hotel was threatened, Sir John Bejerman said that the Midland Grand Hotel was "too beautiful and too romantic to survive". He was wrong: it has survived for precisely these reasons.

Beauty and romance will make people pay more for flats and hotel rooms, and have inspired huge efforts over decades on the building's behalf.

The building is also a rebuke to all those who wanted to demolish it in the name of efficiency and modernity. Fifty years ago they were many, but the idea now seems inconceivable. There are currently similar mutterings about a work of George Gilbert Scott's grandson Giles, Battersea Power Station. Anyone who doubts the wisdom of preserving the latter should go to St Pancras and see what an awkward pile of old bricks can do.