

The battle for Bankside: electricity, politics and the plans for post-war London

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ABSTRACT: In the mid-1940s a conflict arose – the battle for Bankside – between two plans for a contested space on London’s South Bank. The electricity industry planned to rebuild Bankside power station to alleviate a critical shortage of electricity, whereas the *County of London Plan* envisaged redevelopment of the area as public gardens, flats and offices. This article examines these plans and their entanglement in the planning system as then constituted; it argues that the significance of the planning principles escalated the arguments from a local issue to the highest level of government. The roles of key actors who manoeuvred to influence the decision-making process are explored. The article demonstrates that the power station approval was crisis driven and imposed ill-considered conditions with long-term implications. Elements of the *County of London Plan* were realized through deindustrialization and the transformation of the long-derelict power station into Tate Modern in 2000.

Introduction

The failure, and the achievements, of the plans for the reconstruction of post-war Britain have a well-established historiography.¹ Yet, there are few accounts of how the grand designs were deployed within the planning system for specific developments. The 1943 *County of London Plan* envisaged redevelopment of war-damaged London on a modern, rational and visionary basis. It has been described as a plan of ‘pervasive national importance’; as part of the golden age of urban planning; or more prosaically as ‘honest, pragmatic and logical’.² The *Plan* proposed

¹ Recent examples include M. Clapson and P.J. Larkham (eds.), *The Blitz and its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-war Reconstruction* (Farnham, 2013); J. Pendlebury, E. Ertem and P.J. Larkham (eds.), *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating the Modern Townscape* (Abingdon, 2015); M. Amati and R. Freestone, ‘All of London’s a stage: the 1943 County of London Plan Exhibition’, *Urban History*, 43 (2016), 539–56; M.P. Collins, ‘The London County Council’s approach to town planning: 1909–1945’, *London Journal*, 42 (2017), 172–91.

² J.H. Forshaw and P. Abercrombie, *County of London Plan* (London, 1943). The ‘pervasive’ comment was by Herbert Morrison quoted in K. Young and P.L. Garside, *Metropolitan London: Politics and Urban Change 1837–1981* (London, 1982), 241; J.R. Gold, ‘In spite of

the deindustrialization of the South Bank of the Thames.³ Meanwhile, in response to the pressing need for electricity, plans were made to extend and rebuild Bankside power station opposite the City of London. The tension and conflict between these plans – the battle for Bankside – entailed a web of interactions, first in private then in the public realm over the period 1945–47, supporting the contention that the infrastructure state ‘inevitably pits interests against one another’.⁴

This article has four aims. First, to examine the two plans and argue that the issues raised – rational, long-term urban planning, and the more immediate needs of post-war reconstruction – were of such importance that the decision on how to implement them escalated to a debate of national significance with the decision taken at the highest level of government. Second, to explore the workings of local and central government in the planning process, including the influence of ministers and statutory bodies, and the political manoeuvrings to develop and shift the arguments and influence the decision-making process. The article argues that the planning decision was resolved in favour of the electricity industry through the contingency of the ‘bleak midwinter’ of 1947 which turned an energy shortage into a crisis. Third, the article sets the decision-making process and its outcomes in a wider context: the battle for Bankside is contrasted with the controversy around plans for Battersea power station in the late 1920s, and with the simplified planning system following legislative changes in 1947 including later consents for nuclear power stations. Finally, the article addresses the legacies of the battle: the fate of the South Bank now transformed into a popular cultural quarter and Bankside power station reborn as Tate Modern.

Planning the built environment: the *County of London Plan*

In the 1940s, the replanning of British cities had long been an unachieved aspiration. The Barlow Commission’s report of 1940 identified that haphazard urban development had led people to suffer from *inter alia* poor housing, difficulties of transport, congestion, smoke, dirt, fog and noise.⁵ The report recommended ‘continued and further redevelopment of congested urban areas, where necessary [and] decentralisation or dispersal, both of industries and industrial populations, from such areas’.⁶ Lord Reith, the wartime minister of works and buildings, asked the London County Council (LCC) to develop a reconstruction plan for London. An outcome was the 1943 *County of London Plan* by the LCC

planning’, *Journal of Urban History*, 26 (2000), 546; G.E. Cherry, *Cities and Plans* (London, 1988), 123.

³ *County of London Plan*, 126–35.

⁴ J. Guldi, *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 212.

⁵ Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, Report, Cmd 6153 (1940), 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.



Figure 1: A 'dreary industrial scene': Bankside power station, South Bank, c. 1933

Source: National Maritime Museum, Eagar Collection, P27562.

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architect John Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie. The *Plan* recognized that the war had provided an opportunity to rebuild London in a rational manner: bomb-damage had offered London a 'unique stimulus to better planning'.⁷ One concern was the indeterminate zoning or mixed-use land, which comprised a 'jumble of houses and industry' (see [Figure 1](#)).⁸

The *Plan* attacked this 'veritable peppering of whole districts with factories, in which the domestic and industrial were unhealthily intermixed'. It argued that relocation of industry from central areas would remove pollution and congestion.⁹ The plan identified two specific locations for renewal: the West End and the South Bank where the 'dreary industrial scene, with its many damaged buildings, calls for drastic action'.¹⁰ The *Plan* envisaged that the South Bank would be redeveloped with a riverside boulevard and a continuous strip of public gardens;

⁷ *County of London Plan*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

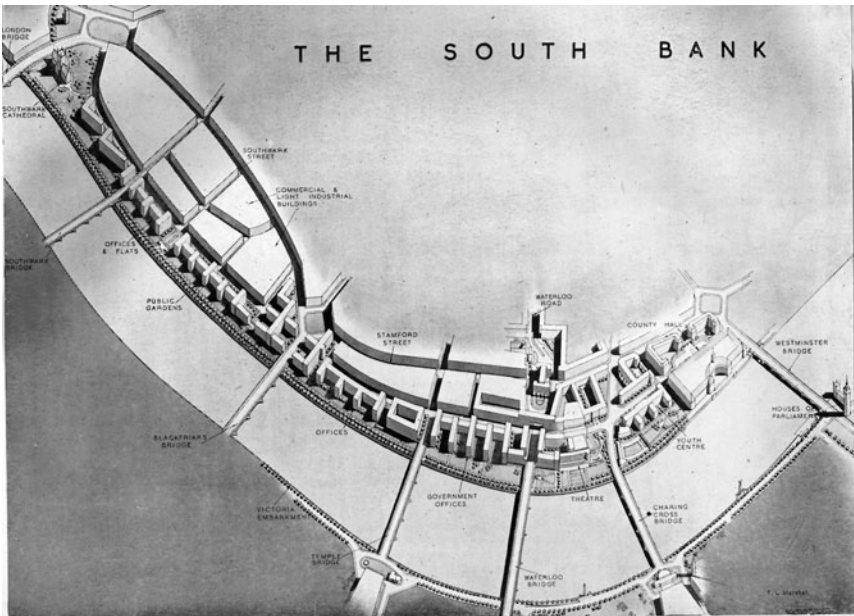


Figure 2: The proposed redevelopment of the South Bank
 Source: *County of London Plan*, Plate XLVIII. © London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, reproduced with permission.

behind this would be blocks of offices, flats, and cultural institutions, backed by commercial and light industrial buildings (see [Figure 2](#)).

Improved access to the riverfront was seen as essential.¹¹ The scale of the issue is demonstrated in an analysis of riverfront usage in [Table 1](#). Neither the City of London nor the Borough of Southwark had any open space on the riverside. In July 1945, the LCC adopted a resolution that ‘there should be greater access to the river front’ and noted that ‘the removal of a certain amount of riverside industry including the Bankside Generating Station would undoubtedly be necessary’.¹² The LCC indicated that access to the river would permit development opposite St Paul’s cathedral ‘appropriate to the importance of the historic site’; it was hoped that the vista from St Paul’s across the river to the South Bank could be terminated in ‘an important edifice of appropriate character and design, as, for instance, King’s College’.¹³

¹¹ *County of London Plan*, 177; Corporation of London, *Report of the Preliminary Draft Proposals for Post War Reconstruction in the City of London* (1944).

¹² The National Archives (TNA) HLG 79/916, Ministry of Town and Country Planning, Bankside power station development Southwark: application to minister, letter from the LCC to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 3 Sep. 1945.

¹³ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) LCC/PC/GEN/01/052, LCC, architect to the Council’s report to the Town Planning Committee, 1 May 1947.

Table 1: *Riverfront use for some London local authorities*

	Length of river frontage (feet)			
	City of London	Southwark	City of Westminster	Battersea
Wharves and warehouses	5,200	3,400	4,125	1,925
Railways	800	900	300	2,100
Industry	–	–	1,000	7,300
Public and business buildings	1,700	–	5,250	–
Residential	–	–	800	200
Open space	–	–	4,100	4,300
Total (feet)	7,700	4,300	15,575	15,825

Source: *County of London Plan*, 177.

As Gordon Cherry has remarked, there was a gap between the strategic thinking of the few academic planners, such as Abercrombie exemplified by the *Plan*, and the practical capabilities of local government.¹⁴ This point echoes contemporary commentators who noted that the ‘administrative jungle’ of local government structures prevented effective planning.¹⁵ Ken Young and Patricia Garside identify that this was partly due to the failure of central government to resolve the question of whether planning should be locally or nationally directed.¹⁶ The Ministry of Town and Country Planning was established in March 1943 to provide consistency in planning and development. The Ministry pressed for the earliest possible consultation on proposals for new power stations.¹⁷ The redevelopment of Bankside became entangled in the administrative jungle, and escalated from local authorities, through statutory bodies to central government.

Planning London’s electricity

Towards the end of the war the need for electricity in London was crucial and urgent. The use of electricity had grown significantly since the 1930s, yet the British electricity supply industry was poorly placed to meet the projected increase in demand and the expectations of industry, commerce and the public for a secure and plentiful supply. A government report in 1942 identified that ‘the public have increasingly come to regard electricity

¹⁴ Cherry, *Cities and Plans*, 112–13 and 123.

¹⁵ Anon., ‘The Abercrombie Greater London Plan’, *Public Administration*, 23 (1945), 38, quoted in Young and Garside, *Metropolitan London*, 244.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 243–5.

¹⁷ J. Sheail, *Power in Trust: The Environmental History of the Central Electricity Generating Board* (Oxford, 1991), 31.

as a necessity and not a mere luxury'.¹⁸ Demand for electricity was rising and was expected to continue to increase.¹⁹

Prior to nationalization in 1948 the planning of electricity supplies was the responsibility of the Central Electricity Board (CEB). In 1939, the CEB identified that additional plant would be required at Bankside power station by 1943 and discussions were held with the owners, the City of London Electric Lighting Company Ltd (CLELCo).²⁰ However, long-term planning was suspended during the war and construction of new electricity plant was restricted to the minimum necessary to support the war effort.²¹ To maintain electricity supplies, older plant was kept in service beyond its planned retiral date; by the end of the war, the equipment at many power stations was old and in poor condition, leading to a shortfall in generating capability. In the winter of 1945–46, demand in London had exceeded the available supply resulting in power cuts. The CEB estimated that demand in the London area would increase by 67 per cent between 1944/45 and 1950/51 (see Figure 3).²²

The CEB asked the CLELCo to produce plans for a new power station, Bankside B, and to submit these to the planning authority, the LCC. The urgency is evident in the CEB's comment that the 'board was anxious that all this should be done as soon as practicable'.²³ The CLELCo submitted its plans in February 1945 with a formal request for planning consent.²⁴ The LCC responded that the plans could not be accepted because they would 'have a very harmful effect' on proposals for the redevelopment of the South Bank envisaged in the *Plan*. The forces were now set for the battle for Bankside: the LCC's vision for redevelopment of the South Bank and the removal of the existing power station, and the electricity industry that planned to rebuild it.

Battle joined: discussion and compromise

In September 1945, the LCC notified the Ministry of Town and Country Planning that the CLELCo's proposals for Bankside B had been reviewed. The Ministry had recently been involved in two controversial proposals for power stations at Lincoln and Durham which, like Bankside, entailed

¹⁸ Jowitt Committee report quoted in M. Chick, *Electricity and Energy Policy in Britain, France and the United States since 1945* (Cheltenham, 2007), 68.

¹⁹ R. Kelf-Cohen, *Twenty Years of Nationalisation* (London, 1969), 105–6.

²⁰ The CLELCo was established in 1891; it owned and operated Bankside power station until nationalization in April 1948. For an account of its history, see S. Murray, 'Electrifying the City: power and profit at the City of London Electric Lighting Company Limited', *London Journal*, published online 2 Aug. 2017.

²¹ L. Hannah, *Electricity before Nationalisation* (London, 1979), 307.

²² TNA HLG 79/918, application for the extension of Bankside, public inquiry, proof of evidence of Mr J. Hacking, chief engineer of the CEB.

²³ *Ibid.*, letter from the CEB to the CLELCo, 28 Jul. 1944.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, letter from the CLELCo to the LCC, 13 Feb. 1945.

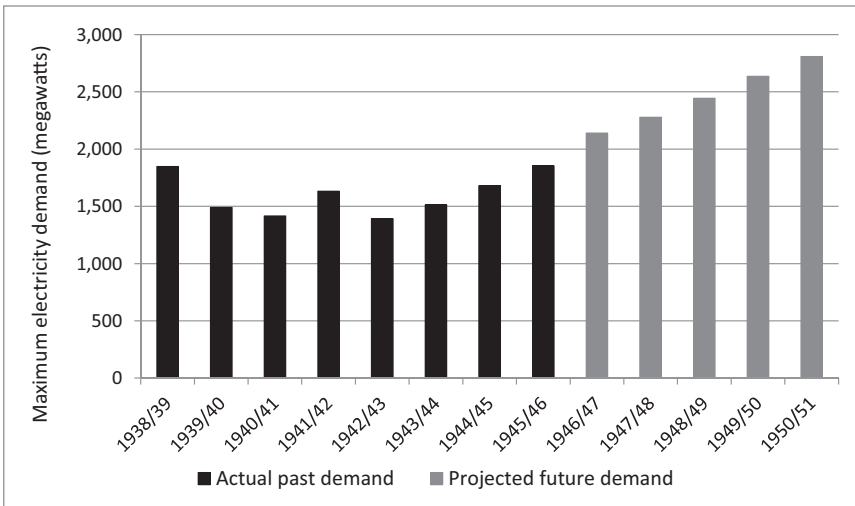


Figure 3: Actual and projected electricity demand in London, 1938–50
 Source: Data from TNA HLG 79/918, Ministry of Town and Country Planning, public inquiry, Table JH.1.

issues around industrialization and views of, or from, cathedrals.²⁵ The LCC considered that apart from any question of amenity the power station would ‘completely spoil the County of London Plan proposals for the South Bank’.²⁶ In the context of this battle, ‘amenity’ refers to the local visual and physical impact of the power station on its surroundings. The LCC proposed a compromise to relocate the power station to a site in Rotherhithe about four miles down-river. The Electricity Commission – responsible for co-ordinating electricity supplies – also had an interest since it would have to grant formal consent for the power station. The Ministry and the Commission held three meetings with the interested parties between September 1945 and July 1946.

²⁵ The principal objection at Lincoln was to the cooling towers which would be as high as the hill on which the cathedral stands and would ruin the view from the south. Following a joint public inquiry, the developers, the Lincoln Corporation, agreed to reduce the height of towers and consent was granted in October 1944; see Sheail, *Power in Trust*, 32–3. The other proposal by the North-eastern Electricity Supply Company was for a new power station at Kepier on the River Wear north-east of Durham city centre. There were objections about spoiling views of the cathedral but the main issue was that the city was unsuited to such a large-scale industrial development. A three-day joint inquiry was held in December 1944. Following legal arguments the developer agreed to abandon the proposal on the conditions that it would receive compensation for abortive expenditure and there would be no objections to the extension of its power stations at Dunston and North Tees; see Sheail, *Power in Trust*, 33–7.

²⁶ TNA HLG 79/916, letter from the LCC to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 3 Sep. 1945.

At the first meetings, the Ministry said that *prima facie* it was desirable that the power station should be built elsewhere. The LCC was prepared to buy the Rotherhithe site and exchange it for Bankside. The commissioners emphasized the importance of ensuring that the cost of electricity was not increased, and the time for getting a power station commissioned should not be affected: the Rotherhithe proposal was more expensive and new plans would have to be drawn up. The CEB foresaw technical problems in routing cables from the site through docks and across swing bridges together with the additional cost of installing cables from Rotherhithe to the electricity distribution sub-station at Bankside. The CEB's position was that further power stations would be needed to meet the projected electricity demand; the Rotherhithe site might therefore be in addition, rather than an alternative, to Bankside. The CLELCo's architect, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, insisted Bankside was a 'grand opportunity for fine architectural treatment' and suggested that continuous gardens along the riverside could be dull and a coal wharf would add interest to the scene.²⁷

Despite its insistence that Bankside was required to address critical electricity shortages, the CEB did not press for further discussion but rather, in view of the contested nature of the proposal, deferred Bankside in the power station programme. Discussions reconvened in July 1946. The CEB estimated the additional cost of the Rotherhithe site was £662,000 and was therefore financially unattractive.²⁸ The CLELCo offered to compromise by setting back the power station by 180 feet to allow the riverside public gardens to be developed. The question of air pollution from Bankside was raised by the Corporation of London: the issue was the damage caused by corrosive fumes and the repair cost of the stonework of buildings in the City of London down-wind of Bankside – estimated to be about £300,000 per annum.²⁹ This secondary concern about material damage contrasts with the controversy over Battersea power station in the late 1920s which was principally framed around the material and health effects of air pollution.

Planning Battersea power station, 1927–29

The London Power Company (LPC) planned to build a new power station at Battersea in 1927. Unlike Bankside, the concern was not about the location: Battersea was an industrial area (see [Table 1](#)). The principal

²⁷ Sir Giles had been recommended to the CLELCo by its consulting engineer Sir Leonard Pearce who had worked with him on designs for Battersea power station. His grandfather, George Gilbert Scott, had also been involved in a planning battle: the architectural 'battle of styles' over gothic revival or Italianate designs for the Foreign Office building in the 1860s; see M.H. Port, *Imperial London: Civil Government Building in London, 1850–1915* (New Haven, 1995).

²⁸ TNA HLG 79/916, file note on transmission arrangements and costs for alternative generating station sites at Bankside and Surrey Docks, 25 Mar. 1946.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, note of a meeting at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning on 23 Jul. 1946.

objections were to the effects of air pollution. Bill Luckin claims the controversy involved a debate not just about the damaging effects of fumes and dust on health but that the power station would harm buildings, works of art and parks and gardens, and hence damage part of the social fabric of London.³⁰ The LPC sought consent from the electricity commissioners in February 1927 which was granted in October subject to the provision of means to consume smoke, to prevent corrosive and toxic sulphur dioxide emissions and to prevent any nuisance.³¹ In February 1928, the Royal Borough of Kensington appealed to the minister of health, Neville Chamberlain, to 'secure abandonment of a scheme...so detrimental to the health of those living in central and West London'. Ministers, briefed by the electricity commissioners, argued that the new power station would allow older stations to be closed, and the wider availability of electricity would reduce domestic coal consumption and hence local air pollution, as consumers switched from coal to electric fires.³² The issue entered the public realm on 9 April 1929 in a letter to *The Times* from several concerned organizations.³³ They claimed that prevailing winds would blow fumes from Battersea over a large area of Westminster and the West End. The cabinet discussed the matter and was assured that the conditions imposed by the commissioners would prevent the emission of harmful vapours. Furthermore, an Act of Parliament would be needed to deprive the LPC of its legal right to build Battersea.³⁴ Like Bankside, an alternative location had been proposed: a power station in the East Kent coalfield could provide electricity. However, this was considered impracticable because of cost and the adverse impact of transmission lines.³⁵ The commissioners held an informal inquiry which was 'a tepid affair' with just three objectors, although protests and public debate continued until the end of October 1929.³⁶ To meet the consent conditions to remove smoke and fumes, the LPC installed a flue-gas washing plant at a capital cost of £250,000.³⁷ During the Bankside public inquiry in 1947, it was claimed that since commissioning in 1933 there had only been six complaints about vapour from Battersea's chimneys.³⁸

³⁰ B. Luckin, *Questions of Power: Electricity and the Environment in Inter-war Britain* (Manchester, 1990), 4 and 138–55.

³¹ Sheail, *Power in Trust*, 7–8.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ The signatories included the mayors of Chelsea and Westminster, the editor of the *Lancet*, the treasurer of St Thomas' Hospital, a past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects and chair of the Coal Smoke Abatement Society.

³⁴ Sheail, *Power in Trust*, 12.

³⁵ Luckin, *Questions*, 142 and 148. The long-distance transmission of electricity from power stations adjacent to coal fields was established practice in Germany; see T.P. Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880–1930* (Baltimore, 1983), 175–200.

³⁶ Luckin, *Questions*, 139.

³⁷ Sheail, *Power in Trust*, 18.

³⁸ TNA POWE 12/798, Ministry of Fuel and Power, evidence given by Sir Leonard Pearce, public inquiry, day 1, fol. 36.

However, formal complaints are likely to have been a fraction of actual nuisances caused by the power station.

Public inquiry and escalation

For Bankside power station, the Ministry of Town and Country Planning indicated that, in recognition of the importance of the issues raised, it would be necessary to hold a public inquiry before any decision was made. The power station required consent from both the Ministry and the Electricity Commission; they took the pragmatic approach of holding a five-day joint inquiry in January 1947.³⁹ Despite the important planning principles involved and the significant local impact, the inquiry, like Battersea, 'was remarkable on account of the small number of objectors'.⁴⁰ Only three written protests were made, and no members of the public nor any learned societies or institutions made representations.⁴¹ The inquiry discussed three factors that militated against the generating station. First, the visual effect on St Paul's cathedral; second, the power station would prevent the realization of the South Bank redevelopment; and finally, amenity issues. The threat to St Paul's was significant: the cathedral had acquired an important symbolic status since the Blitz when it became 'the pre-eminent symbol of national resistance and sacrifice'.⁴² The inquiry considered the riverside boulevard and the practical consideration of attracting other developments to the area if the power station was built.⁴³ Patrick Abercrombie, appearing as an expert witness for the LCC, was asked whether it would be possible to 'attract good class businesses and commercial premises and institutions'. He replied that the power station 'would have a damaging effect on any attempt to attract that type of development' and said it would be appropriate to keep the Bankside area free from major industry.⁴⁴ An amenity objection was to the handling and storage of large quantities of coal at the power station. Despite Scott's claims for an 'interesting' coal wharf, there were concerns about coal dust and the view from neighbouring properties. The inquiry report noted that these objections would be obviated if oil were used instead of coal, although the inspector stated that 'the extra cost of burning oil would be considerable; indeed it would probably be prohibitive'.⁴⁵ Bankside was later specified for oil-firing although the extra cost was not initially considered. For the promoters, the chief engineer of the CEB,

³⁹ TNA POWE 12/798, public inquiry.

⁴⁰ TNA HLG 79/918, inspector's report, paragraph 1.

⁴¹ TNA POWE 12/798, public inquiry, day 1, fol. 3, and day 2, fols. 3–4.

⁴² R. Thorne, 'The setting of St Paul's cathedral in the twentieth century', *London Journal*, 16 (1991), 118.

⁴³ TNA HLG 79/918, inspector's report, paragraphs 27–31.

⁴⁴ TNA POWE 12/798, evidence of Sir Patrick Abercrombie at the public inquiry, day 3, fols. 33 and 44.

⁴⁵ TNA HLG 79/918, inspector's report, paragraph 57.

John Hacking, argued that the 'Bankside site is technically one of the best for electricity generation in the London area.'⁴⁶ The site was adjacent to the river which facilitated the supply of cooling water and fuel, and was in the middle of a large consumer area. The suitability of the site was unsurprising: the CLELCo had selected Bankside in 1891 as the optimal location for generating electricity for the City; these factors still pertained in 1947.⁴⁷

The inquiry identified that although the implementation of the two proposals were mutually exclusive in space, it did not follow that they were in time. The need for electricity was more immediate than the long-term redevelopment and deindustrialization of the South Bank. Counsel for the LCC argued that the minister of town and country planning was the 'Minister of Posterity' and should take a longer view.⁴⁸ The inquiry inspector proposed a compromise solution and recommended that the application should be rejected, and a temporary power station with a life of 15 or 20 years should be constructed. Although this was a pragmatic proposal the inquiry had not resolved the essential conflict between rational urban planning and the crucial need for electricity. The Electricity Commission noted that 'it was not disputed and cannot be disputed that there is urgent need for a substantial and rapid expansion of the generating plant...especially in the area of Greater London'.⁴⁹ The commissioners saw 'no sufficient ground for withholding their consent' for the new power station. The proposal then escalated as ministers became directly involved.

The inquiry report was submitted to the minister of town and country planning, Lewis Silkin. Between 1940 and 1945, Silkin had been chairman of the LCC Town Planning Committee that had sponsored the *County of London Plan*; he was therefore not disinterested in the affair. He set out his position in a memorandum where he reiterated the arguments about the interference with the *Plan*, and the 'thoroughly inappropriate neighbour' for St Paul's. He attached 'by far the strongest objection to the first point' and was concerned about the continued industrialization of the area. He claimed the Rotherhithe site was 'a perfectly good alternative' and argued the delay in completing Rotherhithe was not significant, although the additional capital cost was then £907,000.⁵⁰ He overruled his inspector's compromise proposal for a temporary building, disregarded the commissioner's opinion and urged his ministerial colleagues 'to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, public inquiry, proof of evidence of Mr J. Hacking.

⁴⁷ Anon., 'City of London Electric Lighting Company's works', *Electrical Review*, 44 (10 Mar. 1899), 232.

⁴⁸ TNA POWE 12/798, public inquiry, day 4, fol. 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, letter from the electricity commissioners to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 29 Jan. 1947, paragraphs 1 and 11.

⁵⁰ TNA HLG 79/916, memorandum by the minister of town and country planning, 1 Mar. 1947, paragraph 8(ii).

concur in my proposal to refuse permission for a new power station on Bankside'.⁵¹

Another actor, the Ministry of Fuel and Power, now joined the battle for Bankside and, with the random contingency of the weather, played a decisive role in the decision-making process. The Ministry was established in 1942 to plan and co-ordinate strategic energy matters. Prior to March 1947, the Ministry had not contributed to the Bankside discussions since electricity policy was the responsibility of the Commission. In early 1947, the country was suffering the worst peace-time fuel crisis of the twentieth century. This was the consequence of exceptionally bad weather together with the delayed recovery of the coal industry following the war. There were severe shortages of domestic and industrial coal and power cuts for five hours every day.⁵² This was embarrassing for the government and the minister, Emanuel Shinwell, was perceived to have mismanaged the situation.⁵³ The approval of Bankside would have helped Shinwell's position: he could demonstrate that new power stations were being authorized. He did not comment directly on the Bankside matter but sent the commissioners' statement in support of Bankside 'for information' to the lord president's committee.⁵⁴ This was a counter position to Silkin's paper proposing refusal. A meeting of the committee, including Shinwell and Silkin, discussed the matter but there was no consensus. Hugh Dalton, the acting lord president, noted that 'ministers being somewhat divided' proposed that the issue should go to the cabinet for colleagues 'to decide one way or the other'.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, another significant issue was raised; the prime minister, Clement Attlee, saw Shinwell's letter and, in a characteristically terse personal note, asked Shinwell 'should not the new Station be designed for oil fuel?'⁵⁶ Attlee's question was in reference to the visual screening of Bankside's coal store: oil-firing would eliminate this unsightly feature. Attlee's thinking was influenced by the ongoing fuel crisis: an oil-fired power station could continue to operate during a coal shortage.⁵⁷ His

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 4 and 12.

⁵² D. Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945–51* (London, 2008), 193–200; Hannah, *Electricity before Nationalisation*, 314–18.

⁵³ See e.g. A.J. Robertson, *The Bleak Midwinter 1947* (Manchester, 1987), 68–70; also Hugh Dalton's acerbic comments about 'Shinbad' in B. Pimlott (ed.), *The Political Diaries of Hugh Dalton 1918–40, 1945–60* (London, 1986), 390.

⁵⁴ TNA PREM 8/591, Prime Minister's Office, memorandum by the minister of fuel and power, LP (47)48, 11 Mar. 1947. The commissioners' letter was addressed to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning; Silkin had not circulated the letter but Shinwell ensured that it was available to the committee.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, memorandum by the chancellor of the exchequer CP (47)110, 26 Mar. 1947.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, personal note from prime minister to the minister of fuel and power, 15 Mar. 1947.

⁵⁷ Another context for Attlee's question was the government's coal-to-oil conversion programme for industry in response to the national shortage of coal. See TNA POWE 14/494, conversion of power station boilers from coal to oil firing, letter from the CEB to the Ministry of Fuel and Power, 22 Jul. 1946.

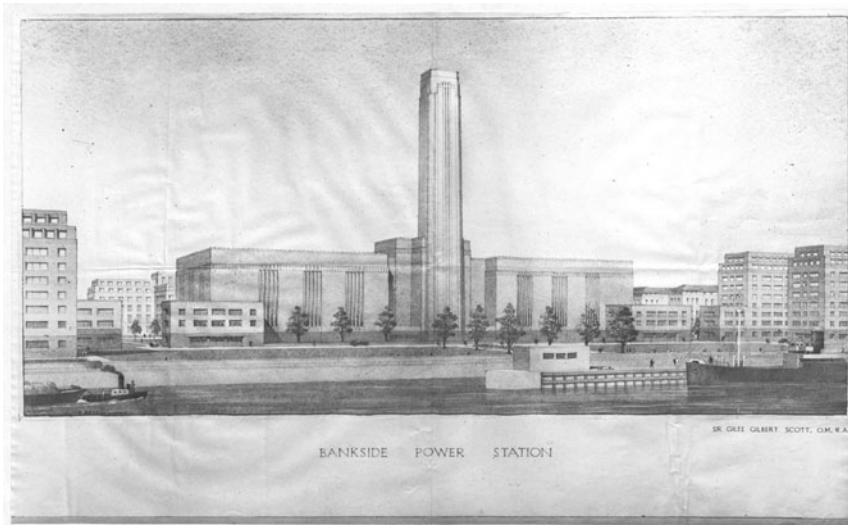


Figure 4: Perspective of the oil-fired Bankside power station, May 1947
 Source: TNA POWE 12/798, Electricity Commission, Bankside reconstruction and extension, 1945–50, reproduced with permission.

comment was therefore not solely about visual amenity but also the diversity and availability of fuel supplies.

Approval and aftermath

The cabinet met on 1 April 1947; Silkin argued that two winters' delay for the Rotherhithe site was a small price to pay for preserving the South Bank redevelopment plan.⁵⁸ Shinwell countered that his efforts to expedite the provision of new generating capacity – already in a critical position because of the fuel crisis – would be frustrated if he constantly faced objections on the grounds of amenity.⁵⁹ The cabinet resolved that the new station should be erected at Bankside, conditional on the electricity being generated by oil and that the building should be set back from the river (see Figure 4). The decision to make Bankside oil-fired was therefore imposed on the developers without consultation or a technical or financial evaluation of the implications. The intent was to improve the visual amenity by removing the coal store, but the decision was to have an impact on the design and the economic operation of the power station.

⁵⁸ TNA CAB/128/9, cabinet office, conclusions of a meeting of the cabinet held on 1 Apr. 1947, CM (47)34, fol. 237.

⁵⁹ TNA CAB/195/5, cabinet secretary's minutes CM 34(47), fol. 189, on 1 Apr. 1947.

Up to April 1947, the battle for Bankside had only concerned a limited number of individuals and organizations. In view of the possible objections, no announcement of the cabinet's decision was made. The matter was first raised in the House of Commons on 22 April when Silkin was asked whether he was aware of the threat to the dominance of St Paul's from the power station. Silkin, bound by collective cabinet responsibility, was in the position of having to defend the approval of the power station against which he had consistently argued. He maintained that the future of the South Bank would not be prejudiced and that the government 'gave long and careful thought to the matter'.⁶⁰ This was reported in the press: a hostile leader in *The Times* spoke of a 'hasty opportunism, grasping for brief temporary advantage at the expense of the future, which makes havoc of ordered planning'.⁶¹ The developers defended the decision by pointing to the crucial need for electricity.⁶² There were also private letters of protest to Silkin from several organizations and notable architects and planners.⁶³ The Royal Institute of British Architects' comments are typical: 'this scheme would not be in the truest and most lasting interests of the public...it would seriously prejudice the South Bank scheme of the County of London Plan as cultural institutions, university authorities or business firms would not wish to take adjoining sites and the area would have to be zoned for industrial purposes'.⁶⁴

In the face of public criticism, the government held a press conference at the old Bankside A power station on 6 May 1947. On the relationship with St Paul's, Silkin observed that the two buildings were half a mile apart and there were few places where both could be seen. As one correspondent noted, 'he convinced everyone that whatever was done with the site it could hardly be used for an uglier building than the one now on it' (Figure 1).⁶⁵ Silkin's efforts in support of Bankside were then countered by former colleagues at the LCC in an attempt to change the government's decision. John Forshaw, the LCC planner and co-author of the *County of London Plan*, was 'extremely concerned' about the damage which the decision would cause to the *Plan* and met with Lord Latham the leader of the LCC.⁶⁶ Latham wrote to the lord president of the Council, Herbert

⁶⁰ *House of Commons Debates (HC Debates)*, vol. 436, cols. 780–3, 22 Apr. 1947. Although apparently with little thought to the implications of oil-firing.

⁶¹ *Times*, 'The Bankside power station', 30 Apr. 1947, 5.

⁶² H.J. Randall, the managing director of the CLELCo, *Times*, 1 May, 5; Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, *Times*, 13 May, 5; and Leonard Pearce, the consulting engineer for the CLELCo, *Times*, 5 May, 5.

⁶³ Letters of protest include those from the City of Westminster; the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; the Royal Society of Arts; the London Society; the Corporation of London; and the dean of St Paul's cathedral. See TNA HLG 79/916, HLG 79/917 and HLG 79/324.

⁶⁴ TNA HLG 79/917, letter from RIBA to Lewis Silkin, 6 May 1947.

⁶⁵ 'On-the-spot arguments for Bankside power station', *Manchester Guardian*, 7 May 1947, 3.

⁶⁶ TNA CAB 124/432, proposed construction of electricity generating station at Bankside, 1946–48, cabinet office note to lord president, 30 Apr. 1947.

Morrison, and said 'we here are very disturbed at the prospect of a new and larger power station' which would 'strike at the very heart of good planning'.⁶⁷

Silkin's discomfort at his enforced *volte-face* is revealed in a letter to Morrison; he said reopening the Bankside question would 'place me personally in a somewhat embarrassing position' and made the point that 'not only I myself but the Government as a whole, I feel, [would] be discredited if we were to deviate from that position now'.⁶⁸ In the face of hostile reactions, ministers were concerned about the decision and the cabinet returned to the matter on 15 May.⁶⁹ Latham was to raise a motion in the House of Lords to call attention to the Bankside proposal in which he would feel bound to express the objections of the LCC. The cabinet noted that it would be important for the lord chancellor, Viscount Jowitt, in defending the government's position, to know whether there was any prospect for the decision being reconsidered. The cabinet invited Morrison and other interested ministers to reconsider the issue. In the Lords, Jowitt emphasized the critical need for electricity and dismissed the concern about the domination of St Paul's by echoing Silkin's comment about the distance between the buildings.⁷⁰ The debate demonstrates that the key arguments around Bankside – planning versus power – had not changed in the two years since the LCC first objected to the proposal.

The implications of oil-firing became apparent. The CEB noted that the change enabled substantial capital economies to be made, but would entail an increase in running costs since oil was more expensive than coal.⁷¹ A financial and amenity advantage was that coal handling equipment was no longer required, which enabled the height of the building to be lowered from 140 to 85 feet, reducing its visual profile (Figure 4). However, since oil contained up to 4 per cent sulphur (coal contains 1.0–1.5 per cent) a cleaning plant was required to remove sulphur from the flue-gases. The plant added to the capital and running costs, estimated to be about £450,000 per annum.⁷² Morrison, Silkin, Shinwell and George Isaacs discussed the matter.⁷³ They noted that on this occasion the visual amenity advantage of oil-firing, by eliminating the coal store, would warrant the additional expense but this cost should not be over-looked in future decisions. This was reported to the cabinet on 22 May 1947. A virtue was made of the decision by noting that there were advantages in having at least one oil-fired power station on the Thames to provide a

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, letter from Lord Latham to Herbert Morrison, 2 May 1947.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, letter from Lewis Silkin to Herbert Morrison, 6 May 1947.

⁶⁹ TNA CAB 128/9, cabinet meeting on 15 May 1947, CM 47(47), fol. 35.

⁷⁰ *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 147, cols. 846–7, 19 May 1947.

⁷¹ TNA HLG 79/917, letter from J. Hacking to Sir John Kennedy, 15 May 1947.

⁷² TNA CAB 129/19, lord president's memorandum, CP (47)160, 21 May 1947.

⁷³ George Isaacs was the minister of labour and national service and MP for Southwark North where Bankside was located.

diversity of supply. The decision to proceed with the new power station was affirmed.⁷⁴

With cabinet approval, the Electricity Commission issued its formal consent. The decision was announced in the Commons on 23 May and there was a lengthy debate, again largely hostile to the proposal. In defending the decision, Silkin noted that democracy 'is a very complex system' and that he had been called upon 'to make a decision on this most difficult matter after having heard all the evidence'; and, as demonstrated, against his personal views.⁷⁵ In public, the controversy was relatively short-lived: leaders and letters appeared in the press from 23 April until mid-June 1947, but there were few comments thereafter. The *fait accompli* may have led to the lack of public interest in the Bankside controversy; this is broadly comparable with the public debate over Battersea. Construction of the new Bankside B power station commenced in late 1947 to the designs of Sir Giles Scott (Figure 4) and was commissioned in December 1952. Stephen Heathorn observes that both Battersea and Bankside 'were erected with the aesthetic considerations of London's cityscape firmly in mind. In both cases, it was expected that good design – of the buildings themselves and of the technology developed to mitigate their pollution – would minimize their negative impact on the city.'⁷⁶

Legacies of the battle

The grand plans for the post-war planning and rebuilding of London were relatively short-lived. The *County of London Plan* was never formally adopted by the LCC, which developed a new plan in 1951 under the framework of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947.⁷⁷ The construction and extension of power stations was covered by Section 35 of the Act whereby bodies seeking authorization from a government department were 'deemed to have secured planning consent as part of that authority'.⁷⁸ Thus, the electricity authority – the British Electricity Authority (BEA) from 1948 – required sole approval from the Ministry of Fuel and Power to construct or extend a power station. This arrangement eliminated the Bankside issue whereby ministries took opposing positions on developments. Furthermore, the Ministry of Fuel and Power with its strategic overview of energy supplies was likely to be more sympathetic to power station developments than the Ministry of Town and Country

⁷⁴ TNA CAB 128/9, cabinet minutes, 22 May 1947, CM (47)49, fol. 49.

⁷⁵ *HC Debates*, vol. 437, cols. 2688–725, 23 May 1947; Silkin's comments are at col. 2717.

⁷⁶ S. Heathorn, 'Aesthetic politics and heritage nostalgia: electrical generating superstations in the London cityscape since 1927', *London Journal*, 38 (2013), 126.

⁷⁷ Gold, 'In spite of planning', 549. Charles Holden and William Holford's 1944 City of London Plan was also not adopted 'in the face of market freedoms and a new fashion in architecture', J. White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and its People* (London, 2008), 42.

⁷⁸ Sheail, *Power in Trust*, 45.

Planning. The battle for Bankside can be contrasted with the remarkably uncontroversial development of two of Britain's first nuclear power stations at Bradwell in Essex and Berkeley in Gloucestershire in 1956. The local member of parliament for the Bradwell area said there were 'no real objections' and the proposed power station was of 'national importance'.⁷⁹ Consent was granted in July 1956 after a four-and-a-half-day public inquiry. Since the local authority at Berkeley had not raised objections, no inquiry was held and planning consent was granted a week after Bradwell.

Electricity nationalization in 1948 abolished several protagonists of the battle for Bankside, thus further clearing the administrative jungle.⁸⁰ The simplified planning process is demonstrated in the application by the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) for permission to build the second, eastern, half of Bankside B power station.⁸¹ The LCC only required that the materials used should match the existing station.⁸² No other bodies or individuals raised objections to the development. The speed of the process is evident: the CEGB submitted its application on 18 April and on 7 August 1958 the Ministry of Power granted consent.⁸³ Bankside B power station was completed in 1963 (see [Figure 4](#)). It was used extensively to take advantage of relatively cheap fuel oil during the 1950s and 1960s. The station occasionally caused a local nuisance; the flue-gas washing plant cooled the gases which, under certain atmospheric conditions, 'drooped' from the chimney to ground level.⁸⁴ A turning point for Bankside was 1973 when oil price increases made oil-fired generation expensive. The power station became increasingly uneconomic and was closed in October 1981. The derelict power station became a 'gloomy presence' on the South Bank and there were proposals for it to be redeveloped for other uses, or to be demolished.⁸⁵

The South Bank underwent a gradual evolution. In November 1947, the LCC zoned the Bankside area for business; riverfront open space; residential areas; offices and 'technical institutions, including the Bankside Generating Station'.⁸⁶ The term 'industry' was not used but the reality was that the power station was located in the midst of residential and

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 93–4.

⁸⁰ The CLELCo, the CEB and the Electricity Commission were abolished, ownership of power stations, including the incomplete Bankside B, was vested in the BEA.

⁸¹ TNA POWE 14/1116, Ministry of Power, siting of new power stations: extension to Bankside Borough of Southwark, letter from the CEGB to the Ministry of Power, 18 Apr. 1958. The Ministry of Fuel and Power was renamed the Ministry of Power in 1957. The BEA was reformed as the Central Electricity Authority in 1955 then as the CEGB in 1958.

⁸² *Ibid.*, letter from the CEGB to the architect to the LCC, 27 Jun. 1958.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Ministry of Power, form of consent, 7 Aug. 1958.

⁸⁴ E.g. *Times*, C.E. Wallis letter to the editor, 5 Oct. 1959, 11.

⁸⁵ S. Murray, 'Bankside power station: planning, politics and pollution', *Local Historian*, 33 (2003), 108–9.

⁸⁶ LMA LCC/PC/GEN/01/052, LCC Town Planning Committee, report on Bankside generating station – replanning of surrounding area, dated 20 Nov. 1947 (TP 939), fol. 1.

commercial premises against the principles of the *Plan*. The County of London Development Plan was adopted in 1955, which proposed the development of the South Bank with priority given to new government offices. Several large office blocks – reputedly the largest in the country – were built in the Bankside area during the following decade.⁸⁷ The South Bank also became deindustrialized; this was not a result of strategic planning but was part of the wider narrative of ‘unplanned London’.⁸⁸ Deindustrialization was principally driven by the loss of riverside commerce and industry associated with the decline of wharfage and the eastward shift of the Port of London. In the early 1980s, the Borough of Southwark developed a regeneration policy and zoned the Bankside area for housing in response to a chronic shortage and a waiting list of 4,000 families in north Southwark.⁸⁹

By the late 1970s, there was a growing interest in the preservation of Britain’s industrial architectural heritage, with both professional and public appeals to save Battersea and Bankside power stations.⁹⁰ Battersea was heritage ‘listed’ in 1980. However, in the run-up to privatization of the electricity industry in 1990, formal listing of Bankside was refused: it was seen by the government as an asset to exploit, listing would have constrained potential redevelopment. The Tate Gallery, looking for a new space to house its modern art collection, purchased the building in 1995 and transformed it to Tate Modern which opened in 2000. This has engendered a renaissance of the area, bringing in new jobs, commerce, residents and tourists.⁹¹ The South Bank of the 2010s, with its riverside walk, public spaces, office and residential buildings, shops, cultural institutions including Shakespeare’s Globe, closely resembles the 1943 vision of the *County of London Plan* (Figure 2).

Conclusion

The proposal to redevelop Bankside power station from 1945 placed it at the nexus of a conflict – the battle for Bankside – between two plans for the post-war recovery, renewal and modernization of London: the *County of London Plan*, and the electricity industry’s aspiration to meet

⁸⁷ E.V. Marmaras, ‘Central London under reconstruction policy and planning, 1940–59’, University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 1992, 221. The largest building, St Christopher’s House, was demolished in 2003. The office building boom was brought to an end by the incoming Labour administration in 1964; see P. Hall, *Urban and Regional Planning* (Newton Abbot, 1975), 144.

⁸⁸ M. Hebbert, *London: More by Fortune than Design* (Chichester, 1998).

⁸⁹ Southwark Local History Library, Bankside file, ‘The Bankside battle’, *Through the Roof; The Bulletin of the Campaign for Housing in Central London*, 2 (1985).

⁹⁰ Heathorn, ‘Aesthetic politics’, 134–42.

⁹¹ P. Teedon, ‘Designing a place called Bankside: on defining an unknown space in London’, *European Planning Studies*, 9 (2001), 459–81; C. Dean, C. Donnellan and A. Pratt, ‘Tate Modern: pushing the limits of regeneration’, *City, Culture and Society*, 1 (2010), 79–87.

the rising demand for electricity. This article has argued that the issues raised – rational, long-term urban planning, and the immediate needs of commerce and industry to aid post-war recovery – were of such importance that the Bankside proposal became an issue of national significance with the decision escalated to the highest level of government. The turns within the administrative jungle of the electricity industry and government have been explored; reflecting the notion that there are ‘few aspects of the built environment that have not been shaped by government’.⁹² This included the actions of individuals and organizations to deploy, develop and shift the arguments and influence the decision-making process. The planning decision was resolved in favour of the electricity industry through these political manoeuvrings and the contingency of the ‘bleak midwinter’ of 1947 which had turned a fuel and energy shortage into a crisis. The cabinet’s condition for oil-firing – ostensibly for amenity benefits but in the context of a coal shortage – did not address the financial costs and was imposed on the developer without consultation about its implications. The complexity and length of the process, over two years, was a product of the planning system and the electricity industry as they were then constituted; planning was simplified under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 and by the nationalization of the electricity industry in 1948. This introduced ‘deemed planning consent’ and reduced the number of protagonists involved in such proposals. The battle for Bankside in its urban setting contrasts with the relatively uncontroversial approval of the hazardous, but rural, nuclear power stations at Berkeley and Bradwell in 1956.

Battersea and Bankside power stations were controversial additions to London’s cityscape, although the objections were framed around different issues. For Battersea, upwind of Westminster, the concerns were the material and health effects of air pollution, whereas for Bankside they centred on the continued industrialization of the South Bank and the visual affront to St Paul’s cathedral. The legacies of the battle for Bankside: the unplanned deindustrialization of the South Bank, an appreciation of the architectural merits of industrial infrastructure and the transformation of Bankside power station into Tate Modern have fashioned a locality which now resembles that in the *County of London Plan*.

⁹² Guldi, *Roads to Power*, 4.