

## Some key dates

1819 - Gas streetlights first used in Leeds  
1837 – Joint Stock Waterworks Company set up to supply water to Leeds  
1848 – First main Sewerage system constructed  
1852 – Leeds Corporation purchases Waterworks Company  
1869 – Leeds Corporation purchases 2 Gas Companies  
1893 – First electric lighting in Leeds  
1898 - Leeds Corporation purchases Electric Company  
1948 – Electricity nationalised and function transferred to the Electricity Board  
1949 – Gas nationalised and function transferred to the Gas Board  
1974 – Water and Sewerage nationalised and function transferred to Yorkshire Water

## Opening times

Monday – 9.00am – 8.00pm  
Tuesday – 9.00am – 8.00pm  
Weds – 9.00am – 8.00pm  
Thursday 9.00am – 5.00pm  
Friday – 9.00 – 5.00pm  
Saturday – 10.00am – 4.00pm  
Sunday - Closed

For more information  
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## Leeds City Council Papers: Utilities

Our Research Guides list some of the most useful, interesting and unique items in at Leeds Central Library. Many others are listed in our online and card catalogues. Items marked \* may require 24-hours notice to view.

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## Background

Leeds Corporation (now Leeds City Council) has been deeply involved in the development of the fast-growing city in the 19th century and onwards. Over 200 years of Council papers are lodged in the Central Library, and these give details of how it has contributed to making the city what it is today. Many of these papers are annual publications, while others are for specific activities.

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Leeds grew from 50,000 to 450,000. The need for fresh water supplies was becoming urgent, both due to the increasing number of people living in Leeds and the industrial pollution affecting the rivers. Alongside the need for fresh water was the need to remove sewage. On top of this, technological advances later in the century that led to the use of gas and electricity for industrial and domestic power would also create a huge change.

At the start of the century, growth was led by private enterprise and development of these vital functions was piecemeal. A more strategic and integrated approach was needed, but it wasn't until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 that Leeds Corporation was gradually given the powers to control and manage the development of Leeds.

At first, there was strong opposition for the Corporation to take on any extra duties, due to concerns that taxpayers (i.e. Property Rate payers) would be overburdened. However, the Corporation was able to show that charging for the services would be cost neutral at worst and could subsidise other spending at best.

It started by purchasing the companies already established in the gas and water supply industries and took on the duties of building the sewerage system. A similar approach was taken once electricity supply and usage had started to develop at the end of the century.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Leeds City Council continued to develop the utilities to meet the modern needs of the city.

The Council's role was different to that of a commercial enterprise. It needed to make sure that the services met the needs of the population at an affordable cost, and that the costs of providing the services didn't become a burden on the Ratepayers. Any profits were used to pay off the capital investment debts and then any surplus would be put into the General Fund to help reduce the following year's Rates. For example, in 1923, surpluses included £38k from Electricity, £53k from Gas and £24k from Waterworks, totalling £115k. This figure is the equivalent of £9m today.

In 1939, there were 17,784 Council employees, of which 1,421 worked in Electricity services, 1,403 in Gas, 149 in Sewerage and 305 in Waterworks – nearly 20% of all staff.

By the end of the Second World War, all the utility services had matured. A national infrastructure needed to be developed to join the local services together. Nationalisation became a political issue as well as a practical one and was a priority for the incoming Labour Government post-war.

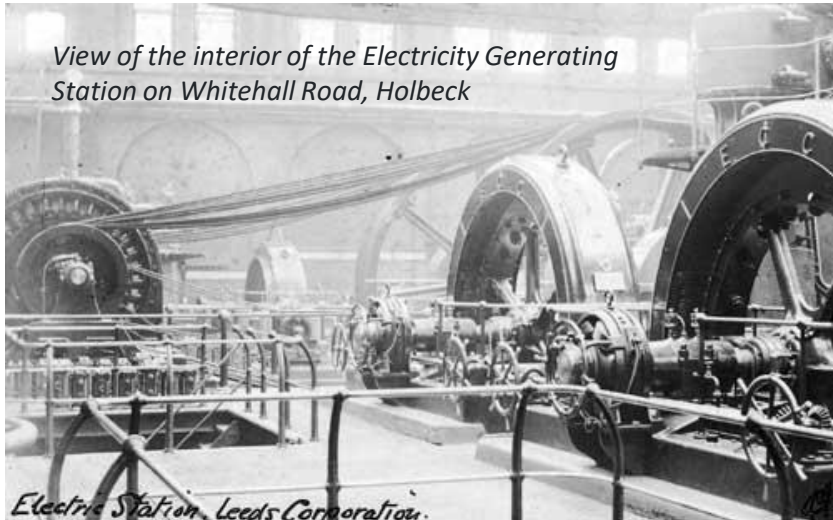
All the services were gradually transferred out of Leeds City Council control to dedicated bodies operating regionally and linked together at national level.

The transfer of Electricity and Gas functions were moved to Electricity Boards and Gas Boards in 1948 and 1949 respectively. Water and Sewerage functions were maintained by the Council until 1974, when these functions were transferred to Yorkshire Water in 1974.

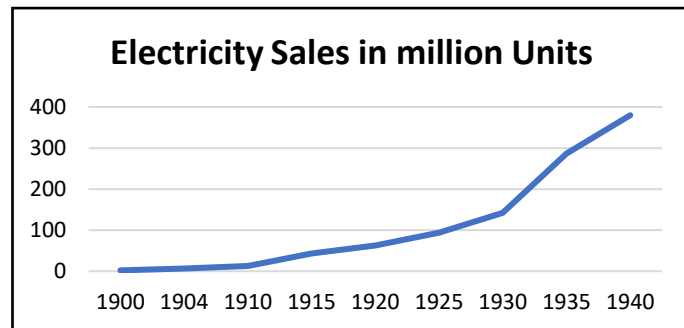
All these services have since been privatised.

## Electricity

Electricity was first supplied in Leeds in May 1893 by the Yorkshire House to House Electricity Company. Leeds Corporation purchased the undertaking and took control of electricity supply in Leeds in 1898. The Corporation had been experimenting with electric power before this time and had invited tenders for lighting the Town Hall in 1883. The main Library was set up in 1886.

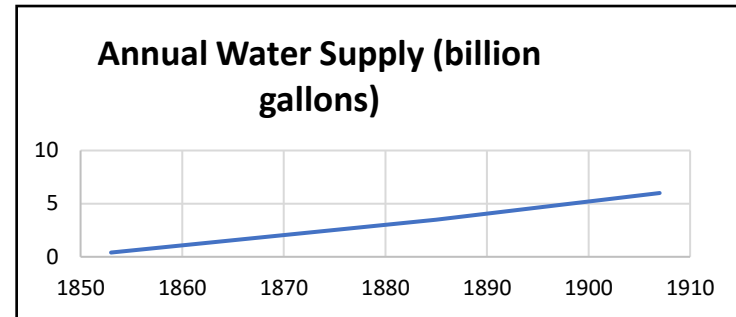


The use of electricity boomed after 1900. For example, in 1913, the sale of electricity increased by 30% over the previous year. Power and heating sales grew by 26%, and the rapid move to electrification of the tramways meant that sales for traction purpose increased by 238%.

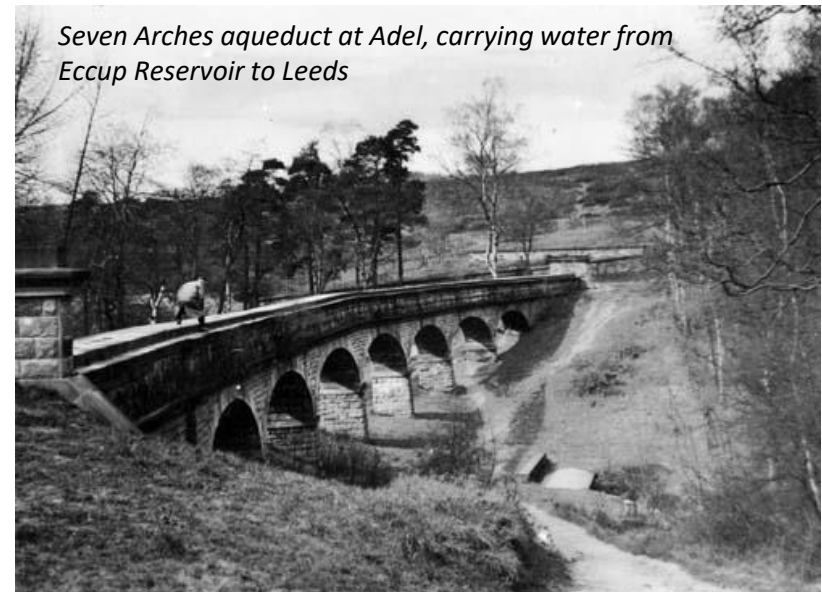


## Water

Clean water for the burgeoning town became urgent following another cholera outbreak in 1832. In 1837 a joint stock company was set up to supply water to the area by way of building reservoirs. This company was purchased by the Corporation in 1852.

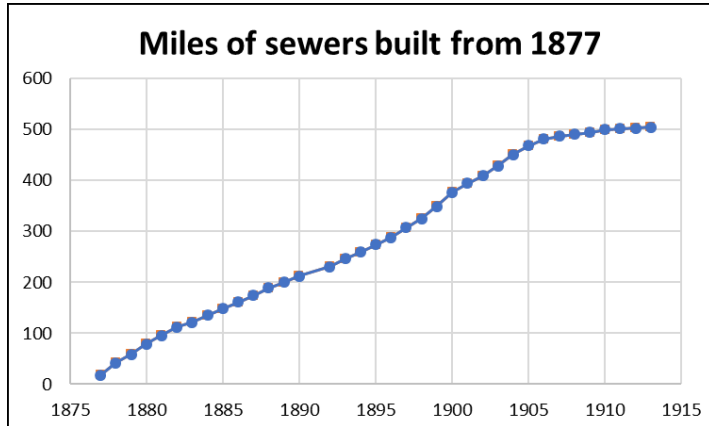


After much deliberation, the Corporation decided to go ahead with new reservoirs in Washburn Valley, with Swinsty and Fewston built in 1878 and 1879 respectively. Other sites considered but rejected included Haweswater in the Lake District!



## Sewage

In 1842 the Leeds Improvement Act gave the Leeds Corporation unlimited legal rights to build sewers. The first main sewage system was constructed in 1848 and discharged raw sewage into the river Aire at Knostrop.

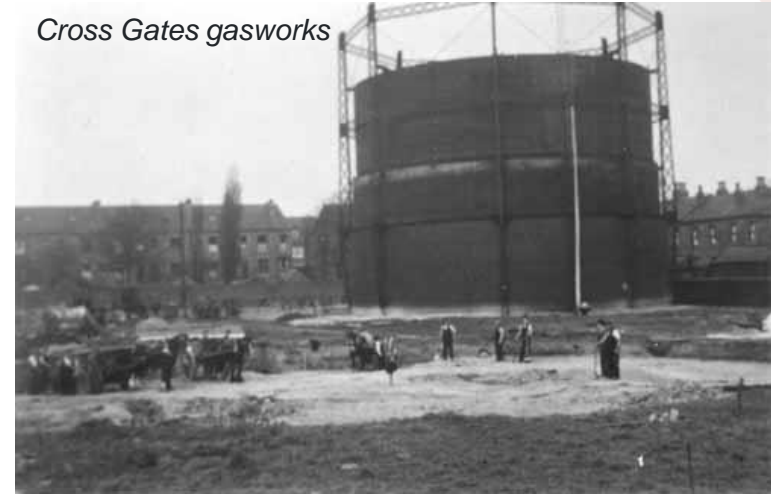


In the latter half of the century, the target for purification of sewerage had become urgent due to landowners taking out an injunction in 1870 to stop gross pollution. Despite some settling tanks being introduced in 1874, it wasn't until 1908, when a portion of the Temple Newsam Estate was made available at Thorpe Stapleton, that adequate treatment and disposal was finally achieved for the major part of Leeds.



## Gas

Gas manufacture and supply had started in earnest towards the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Leeds, with gas street lighting introduced in 1819 to replace oil lighting. The Corporation purchased two gas companies in 1869 to take control of the industry in Leeds. By this time, gas was being used for lighting and heating and cooking soon followed. By the end of the century, the industry had become relatively mature.



Records in the Library include an internal report from 1888 where a sub-committee had been tasked with looking into the supply of poor-quality coal used to generate the coal gas. It later transpired that much of this poor-quality coal came from collieries owned by members of the Gas Committee. It followed an earlier report from 1882 which showed a lack of oversight for staffing costs.

It was only 2 years later that the Leeds Gas Strike of 1890 occurred when the Corporation tried to replace staff with cheaper labour. The strike was settled in favour of the strikers and became a landmark in the Trades Union movement in Leeds.