HERITAGE BUILDINGS: APPLYING BsEST PRACTICE

The work of English Heritage’s specialist building services engineers is centred on the sensitive application of modern building regulations to historic buildings and monuments.

By Geraldine O’Farrell
original systems were brought back into use wherever possible. For example, the original gas lighting was restored, with the elegant gas lamps being replaced by modern units hidden ‘back of house’.

The lighting fixtures in the John Rylands Library are a testament to the engineers’ commitment to preservation. They ensured that the original lighting fixtures were carefully maintained and re-employed as much as possible. This approach not only respects the historical integrity of the building but also provides a unique experience for visitors.

In conclusion, the John Rylands Library is an important legacy of the past, preserving its historic value while integrating modern services. The engineers at the BsEST team have played a crucial role in ensuring that the building’s original elements are preserved, making it a treasure not only for Manchester but for the wider world.
In instances where lighting had to be supplemented because of a change of use, there was no attempt to blindly copy or attempt a ‘faux’ version of the original luminaires; instead modern contemporary light fittings were employed that were sympathetic to the original, or so understated as to make little visual impact. The rhythm of the building layout was used to help blend the old with the new, following locations already used by the existing installation. The brass trunkings bear a close resemblance to the cable containment systems found at the National Trust’s property Craigside in Northumberland, built by Lord Armstrong in 1863, which were manufactured using wood. Craigside was the first house to be lit using hydroelectric power and the first ‘proper installation’ of electric lighting according to Joseph Swan. These cable ways had a ridged surface to indicate where the wiring ran beneath so that nails or screws would not damage the cables beneath when the lids were fixed down.

In addition to this trunking, features such as wooden handrails on some of Craigside’s staircases were employed as cable routes – hardly adhering to the 17th edition, but it worked.

In both buildings early fuseboards still survive. As to how much discrimination between boards was achieved is another matter, but both buildings are still here, many years later, so standards must have been satisfactory at the very least.

**St Alban the Martyr**

Churches form a high proportion of an English Heritage engineer’s work, mainly because so many are buildings of great significance and they will often throw up rare survivors of relatively early lighting. One such church is the grade 2 St Alban the Martyr in Swaythling, Southampton, built in 1933 and designed by the famous architects Welch, Cachemaille-Day and Lauder. It contains hanging luminaires that were also designed by the architectural company and arranged in such a way as to show off the GLS lamps they employed. The fitting was made up of two highly decorated and gilded armatures which provided the cable route down to the individual lamps. They are very decorative but, given the lumen output of early lamps, it is doubtful they would have produced much light. One question presented to the BsEST team was whether the fittings ever had shades fitted. This question was probably prompted by the fact that bare GLS lamps are now rarely used. The team advised that the use of shades was doubtful, as lamps from that period were not very efficient and any shade would have cut down an already inadequate light output.

*Never humdrum*

There are many more instances of the weird and wonderful that could be cited in this article, but it would then run to many pages. The intention has been to provide just a flavour of the exciting, ingenious, rare and extraordinary early engineering artefacts that BsEST engineers work with and around. It is a job that is never humdrum or monotonous. Every visit to a new site will, nine times out of ten, throw up a new and unusual engineering problem or find, and that is what makes it so enjoyable.

**English Heritage:**

www.english-heritage.org.uk

**Historic Environment – Local Management:** www.helm.org.uk

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