

Changing Perceptions— A Temple to Tobacco in Camden Town

by

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Mention of Mornington Crescent for today's radio audience is most likely to bring to mind the eponymous spoof panel game, but seventy years ago it would have conjured up a very different image. The notoriety of the impending development in the gardens fronting the early nineteenth-century terrace caused hackles to rise and contributed towards the setting up of a Royal Commission to report on the future of London squares. The building which led to this outcry is a mere shadow of its former self, but had it survived in its original glory it would doubtless be listed by the Department of National Heritage and any threat to its future would engender an equal if not greater protest.

Mornington Crescent (Fig.1) on the Southampton Estate in Camden Town was named after Richard Colley Wellesley, second Earl of Mornington, Governor-General of India and eldest brother of the Duke of Wellington.¹ Like many parts of London this area was developed in the housing boom which followed the Napoleonic wars.² The first house in Mornington Crescent was rated in 1821. The remainder of the complement of thirty-six stock brick and stucco houses, ranged around an asymmetrical garden and facing Hampstead Road, was fully occupied by 1832.³

The history of Mornington Crescent followed a common pattern for leased estates, characterised by deteriorating properties and poorer occupants as the leases ran down. However, the appeal of the area to future developers was enhanced by a number of improvements in transport links. Euston station had opened in 1837, horse trams were introduced in the Hampstead Road in 1871, the underground from Charing Cross to Hampstead opened in 1907 with a station in Mornington Crescent and electric trams replaced the horses in 1909. These attractions

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Fig.1

Mornington Crescent, photographed in 1950 and studiously avoiding the Carreras factory to the right
Greater London Record Office

undoubtedly contributed to the estate trustees' decision in 1919, as the original ninety-nine year leases were about to fall in, to sell their interest in the gardens to a developer, F.G. Minter.⁴ The next year, Minter's architect E.G.W. Souster prepared development plans, the London County Council established a building line, and a predictable public outcry ensued. At the time, however, no power other than that of outright purchase existed to block the development⁵ and in 1921-2, after Minter's offer to sell the gardens for £60,000 to the Borough of St. Pancras had been turned down, the open space was rated as a garden for the last time (Fig.2). Nonetheless, Minter's proposals did not proceed smoothly, as Souster's scheme was refused by the L.C.C. in 1924. The following year the land was resold to J.A. Swain and by 1926 the first plans for a new factory for Carreras had been prepared.⁶

The tobacco firm of Carreras traced its English roots to 1843, when Don José Carreras-y-Ferrer, a member of an established family of tobacco producers, moved to London to escape the political upheavals which afflicted Spain in the 1840s. Spain's historic connections with South America had given it a long tradition in the tobacco industry. Nineteenth-century Seville was the principal centre of production and probable place of origin of cigarette making in Europe.⁷ It is therefore no coincidence that Prosper Mérimée used Seville as the setting for *Carmen*, his novel published in 1845, whose fiery heroine is the first figure in literature to be

represented accepting a cigarette and smoking.⁸ Don José Carreras apparently limited his work in England to producing fine cigars, but by 1851 his son Don José Joaquin had opened a shop off Leicester Square. From then on the company flourished, boasting 1,000 lines of tobacco products by 1874.⁹ The firm was sold in the mid-1890s to William Johnston Yapp, who saw the potential for even greater expansion. His most notable coup was to obtain the endorsement of J.M. Barrie, who confirmed in 1897 that the 'Arcadia' mixture in his novel *My Lady Nicotine* (published in 1890) was based on Carreras' 'Craven Mixture'.¹⁰ In 1903, Yapp floated the firm as a public limited company and linked up with Bernhard Baron, an American who held the rights to a cigarette-making machine and who had settled in England. He was to take a controlling interest in Carreras, becoming managing director in 1904 and in 1905 chairman as well.¹¹ In 1904 Yapp and Baron had opened their first factory to produce machine-made cigarettes and soon after introduced special offer coupons and prize competitions to promote their new 'Black Cat' brand (Fig.3). Mechanisation was spectacularly successful and the company continued to innovate; for example, the first machine-made cork-tipped cigarette, 'Craven A', was introduced in 1921. This development necessitated the building of new premises to replace their two existing factories in Theobalds Road and the City Road. The latter had opened in 1910 and was named the Arcadia Works.

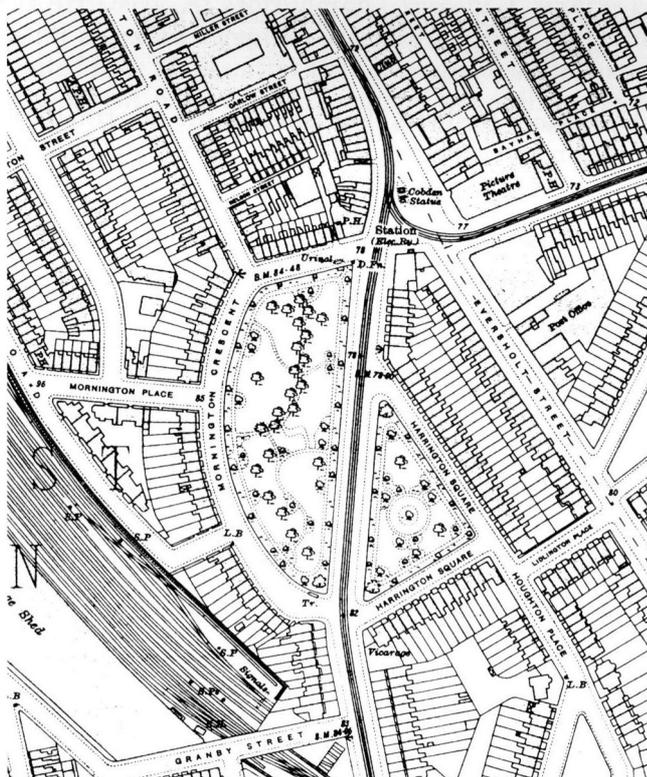


Fig. 2
Ordnance Survey map of 1913, showing the gardens in front of Mornington Crescent, the tramlines in Hampstead Road, and Mornington Crescent Station (marked Electric Railway)



Fig.3

Advertising vehicle promoting 'Black Cat' cigarettes introduced in 1904

Author's collection

It is not surprising that the tobacco business flourished in the aftermath of the Great War. Wars, social disruption and economic crises are a great stimulus to the consumption of tobacco and the consequent movement of peoples disseminates it further afield. The Thirty Years War is credited with spreading the use of tobacco throughout Europe and the Crimean War with popularising cigarette smoking.¹² During the First World War troops on both sides were issued with tobacco and its use was positively encouraged: 'The cigarette is every soldier's best friend, for the solace it brings, for the relief from hunger and fatigue it provides, for the relaxation it encourages, for the courage it summons when the fighting gets thick and hard'.¹³ Returning soldiers, having acquired the habit, continued the use of tobacco in a stressful peacetime and spread the vogue for cigarette smoking. A history of the tobacco trade published in 1926¹⁴ describes in considerable detail tobacco's reputed medicinal properties, including satisfying hunger and being good for diseases of the chest and wasting of the lungs, but most especially with being prized as a social amenity. Smoking as a social asset may be considered to continue almost to the present day, but in the 1920s it was unquestionable.

It was in this context and in an otherwise difficult economic climate that the expanding Carreras company erected their new works in 1926-8. The attribution of the building has sometimes been confused, but it appears that the initial plans were prepared by A.G. Porri and included a classical elevation.¹⁵ However, soon after these designs were made the details were changed to the newly popular

Egyptian style. This was the work of Marcus E. and Owen Hyman Collins who adapted Porri's plans and received sole credit for the design in contemporary journals.¹⁶

The discovery by Howard Carter and the fifth Earl of Carnarvon on 29th November 1922 of the tomb of Tutankhamun with its priceless treasures aroused a huge interest which was not confined to archaeological circles. The sheer quantity of gold objects was immediately a source of wonder to the general public when photographs of the finds appeared in newspapers and periodicals. These inspired designers in a multitude of fields and began a craze for Egyptian motifs in everything from *haute couture* to wallpaper, from jewellery to ash trays. In architecture, cinemas quickly adopted the new fashion as the style was considered appropriately exotic for the newest form of public entertainment. Notable Egyptian façades and auditoria include the surviving Carlton in Islington (1930) and The Palace, Lytham St Anne's (1930), which no longer exists. Even the name of the cinema might reflect this Egyptian influence, one of the most stylish being the Luxor at Twickenham (1929), now sadly demolished. Egyptian was considered equally appropriate for modern factories, particularly those built for new and innovative products. For example, the Firestone Factory (1928)¹⁷ in west London, also now regrettably demolished, boasted multi-coloured capitals indicative of the 1920s style which has become known as Art Deco. At Mornington Crescent, Carreras considered naming their factory after an exotic Egyptian precedent. Apparently the new building was to have been called Bast House after the feline goddess Bubastis, but it has been suggested that this might have had unfortunate possibilities in English.¹⁸ As a result Carreras decided on Arcadia Works, following their 1910 factory and continuing J.M. Barrie's endorsement of thirty years earlier. However, their black cat trademark assumed a svelte Egyptian guise, very different from the fat cats of their earlier advertising (compare Figs. 3 & 11).

The Carreras factory (Fig. 4) housed a huge, integrated operation for the production of cigarettes, described at the time as 'one of the largest and best-equipped buildings of its class in Great Britain, if not in the world'.¹⁹ The nine acres of space (Fig. 5) on five floors incorporated a bonded warehouse, facilities to undertake nine separate manufacturing operations from opening the hogsheads of leaf to packing the product for shipment, and enlightened services such as a workers' welfare centre. In terms of technical and structural features, the building was exceedingly sophisticated. Services included dust extraction and full air-conditioning to maintain a constant manufacturing humidity. The automated manufacture greatly impressed contemporary commentators: 'here wonderful machines are installed; in particular should be mentioned that which is capable of turning out 1,350 cigarettes per minute, in addition to putting the cork tips on and printing in two colours the lettering on each'.²⁰

The building was built entirely of monolithic reinforced concrete using the Considère system (Fig.6). The general contractors were Sir Robert McAlpine and Sons. At the time, this was said to be the largest reinforced-concrete building in the world and a four-part series of articles in *The Architects' Journal*²¹ noted a number

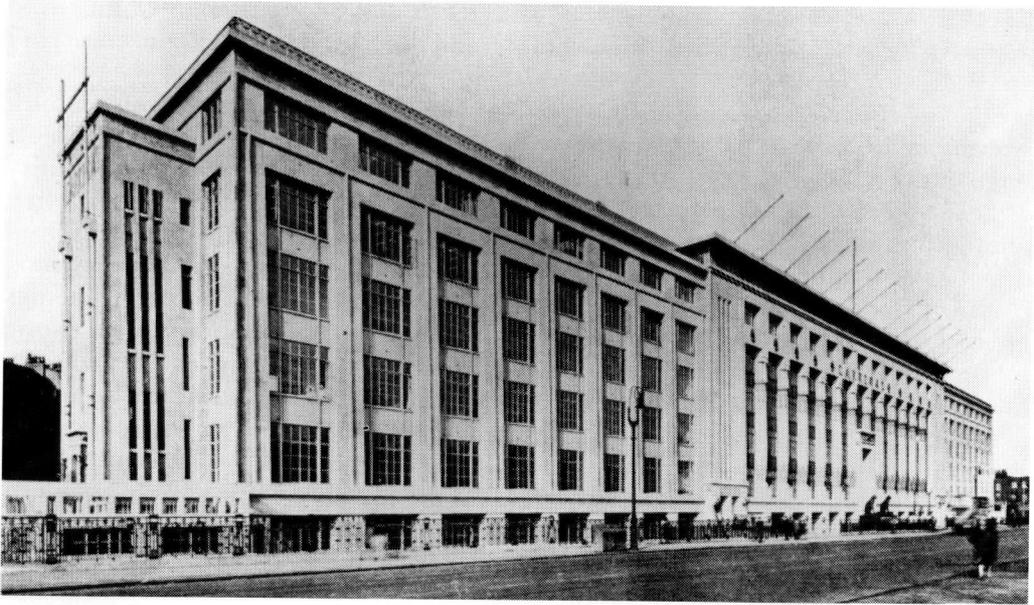


Fig. 4
The new factory facing the Hampstead Road
The Architects' Journal, 21 November 1928

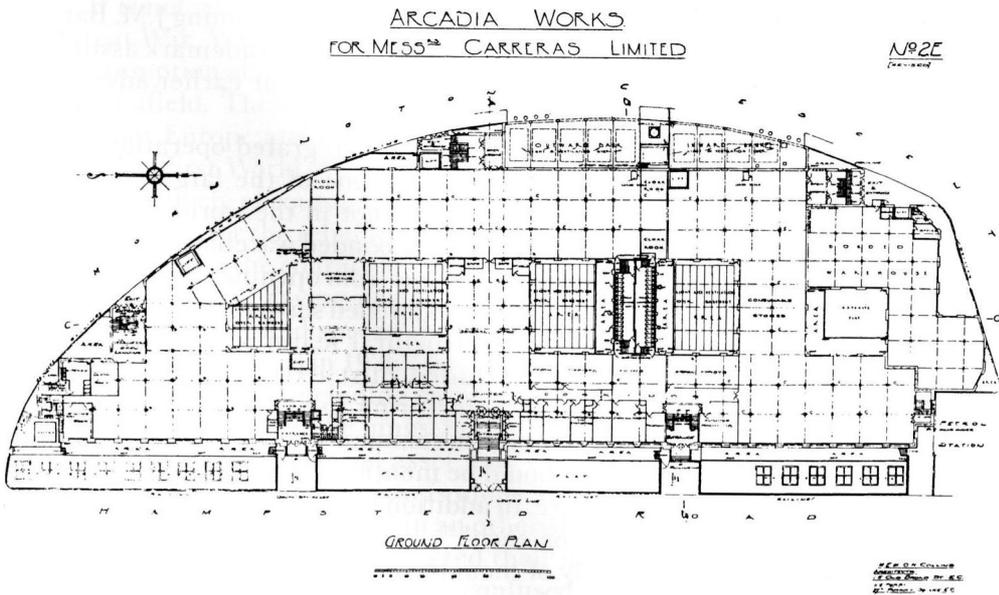


Fig. 5
Plan of the ground floor by M.E. & O.H. Collins and A.G. Porri
The Builder, 16 November 1928.



Fig. 6

The Arcadia Works under construction showing the close proximity of Mornington Crescent
The Architects' Journal, 27 June 1928

of important innovations, most of which are now taken for granted. All service ducts were run prior to casting of the concrete, staircases were constructed *in situ*, walls and expansion joints were installed between the three sections of the building, and 'Bull Dog' clips were inserted into the wet floors, to be turned up after the concrete had set to take two-inch square fillets for the maple flooring. The building's floors consisted of monolithic panels with cross-lattice reinforcement, cast with rapid-hardening 'Tunnelite' cement. The basement retaining walls also used rapid-hardening cement ('Ciment Fondu') and the roof was formed of 'Kleine' terracotta slabs covered with asphalt. *The Architects' Journal* also emphasised the mechanisation employed in the excavations for the foundations and the subsequent building operation. While this too is now taken for granted, the large numbers of construction workers shown in the illustrations would not be.

However, for the passer-by on the Hampstead Road the building's greatest impact was stylistic. The Egyptian detail was resonant not only for the 'Black Cat' symbols, but also as a high point for the use of such detailing which followed the craze for Tutankhamun (Fig. 7). Technically, all of this external decoration was integral rather than applied. The exterior walls were rendered with 'Atlas White'

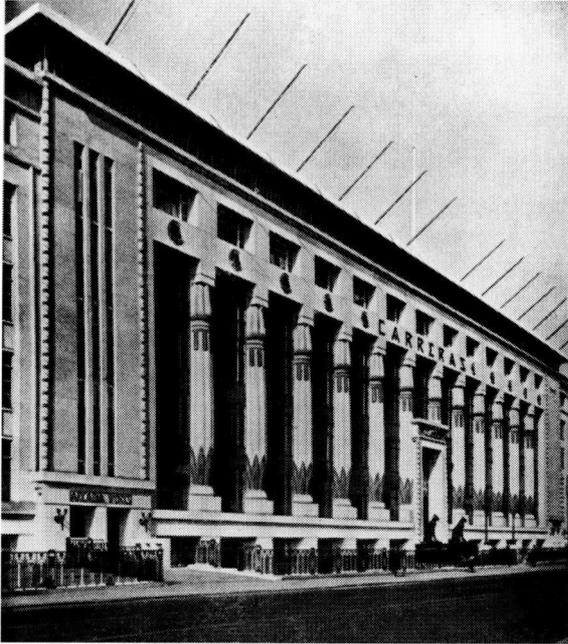


Fig. 7 (left)
The centre section showing the
Egyptian-style decoration
The Builder, 16 November 1928



Fig. 8 (below)
The boardroom on the ground floor
The Architects' Journal, 21 November
1928

Portland cement tinted with buff-coloured sand to simulate stone. The brightly-coloured decoration was achieved by adding crushed Venetian glass - mainly green, red, blue and white - to the same 'Atlas White' cement. The Egyptian theme was carried through in the interior, particularly those areas intended to impress, such as the boardroom (Fig. 8). The parts of the exterior which were coloured included the columns (Fig. 9), the main cornice and its winged orbs (the Egyptian sun symbol), the vertical roll mouldings, the entrance cornice, the cast cats' heads along the architrave of the main entablature, and the lettering on this entablature, on the chimney - constructed in the form of an obelisk (Fig. 10) - and over the entrances. Internal light-wells were finished with the same cement mixed with white marble chippings to reduce staining and to maximise light reflection. The front windows manufactured by Henry Hope & Sons were of solid-section rolled steel, while all other internal and external windows were supplied by Crittalls.

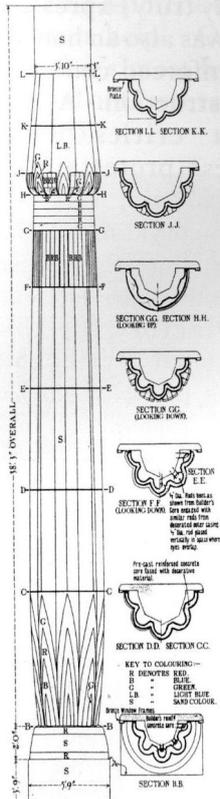


Fig. 9

The construction and the colouring of the columns on the main front Building, December 1927

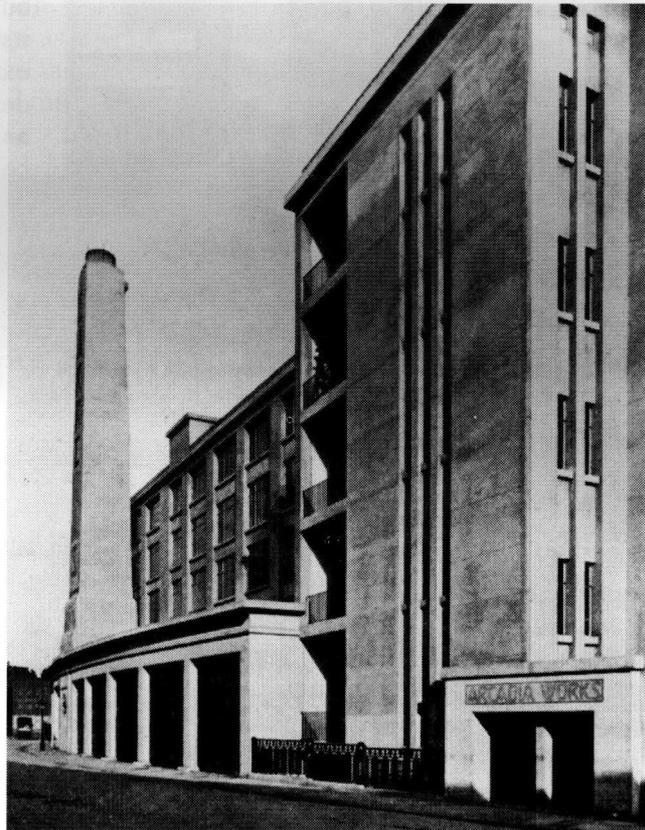


Fig. 10

The rear of the factory showing the loading bays and the obelisk chimney
The Architects' Journal, 21 November 1928



Fig. 11
The main entrance with its flanking cats
The Architects' Journal, 21 November 1928

purpose of advertisement', and contrasted this with the functional rear of the building - a 'fresh, cleanly-finished and thoroughly wholesome piece of work'. Similarly, he viewed the main working areas of the factory as 'sane and healthy' (Fig. 12), while the Egyptian-detailed boardroom was 'unsatisfactory in form and garish in its colour, decoration and lighting'. Fry's view was entirely consistent with orthodox modernism, Nikolaus Pevsner, for example, loathing this 'abominable factory', which he castigated as 'bogus-modern'.²³ Such views were undoubtedly a factor in the stripping of the external ornament in the early 1960s.

Fry's outrage may now

It is not surprising to find that the building elicited a range of responses, given the polemical nature of architectural debate in the 1920s. Indeed, even the architects themselves appear to have felt the need to justify the use of Egyptian motifs, taking great pains to stress that details such as the cats guarding the entrance (Fig. 11) were archaeologically correct (they were modelled on originals at the British Museum) and that the building not only truly expressed its purpose but was also an honest example of reinforced concrete design and construction. As far as modernist critics were concerned, these protestations were, of course, in vain. Maxwell Fry, reviewing the building for *The Architects' Journal*,²² saw the façade as 'a piece of ponderous scenery secured to a factory for the



Fig. 12
The examining and machine-packing room
The Architects' Journal, 21 November 1928

seem somewhat overwrought and, in any event, the building was popular - another disadvantage for strict theoreticians. However, not all of the professional reaction was negative. In a 1928 review which stands as a model of aesthetic tolerance, *Building* magazine maintained, predictably, that the Egyptian dressing became less satisfactory and the structure and composition more beautiful the more the building was studied, but went on to say:

But one must not take this Egyptian decoration too seriously. It is not beyond a joke: it *is* a joke. And an architectural joke is good once in a while. In any case, fancy dress is no less decent than ordinary dress. Here it provides relief to what many would consider the gaunt outlines of a factory, and by means of its bright colours it provides a note of jollity in all that solemn symphony of building that stretches from Euston Road to Camden Town, along the Hampstead Road.²⁴

The new Arcadia Works (Fig. 13) opened officially on 3rd November 1928 and each of the 3,000 employees was presented with a commemorative medal bearing a portrait of the chairman, Bernhard Baron, and inscribed 'My thanks for all your help'. On the reverse was a view of the new works and the inscription 'London's most hygienic tobacco factory'.²⁵ Baron died in 1929, when the issued capital of Carreras Ltd. was £1.7 million, having increased tenfold since floatation in 1903.

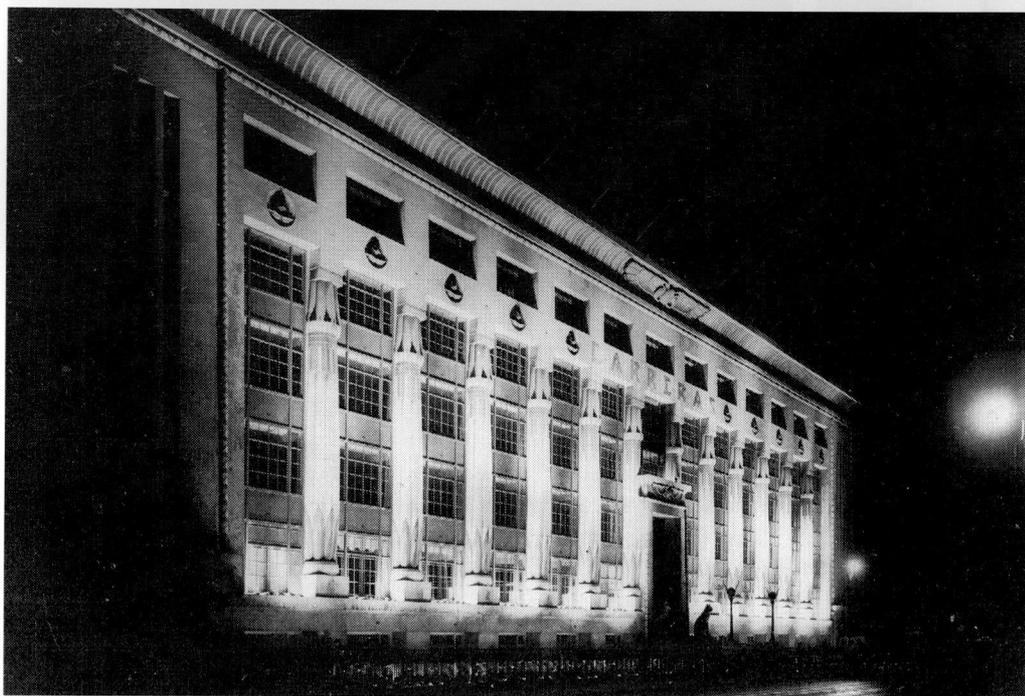


Fig. 13
The new Arcadia Works floodlit soon after completion
Camden Local History Library



Fig. 14

View from Hampstead Road showing the corner decoration added in 1931; photographed c.1955
Carreras-Rothmans

Alterations to the new building began almost immediately after it was opened. The most notable addition to the external decoration was the multi-coloured neon lighting installed in 1931. The corner display featured an illuminated cigarette with curling smoke and the title 'Craven A' (Fig. 14). This coincided with the introduction by Carreras of 'Clubs', smaller cigarettes than the standard, which with their coupons were to prove extremely successful. Carreras became a founding member of the Tobacco Trades Association in 1933, one result of which was the end of promotional coupons. Subsequent alterations to the building included a new switch room in 1936, despite the extensive and innovatory electrical provision when new. In 1937 Mornington Court was built at the corner of Mornington Crescent and Arlington Street, mimicking Carreras' Egyptian style. The factory's lavatories and roof-top plant were upgraded in 1941. Immediately after the Second World War there was an extensive rearrangement of offices, medical and welfare facilities, and auto-sprinklers, generators, a telephone exchange and a stabilised tray elevator were installed. In 1948 the lavatory blocks were renovated, the following year a bakery and roof-top stores were added and in 1950 there were yet more offices and the staircase towers were enclosed. These alterations and additions reflected the expansion of the company. In 1953 the firm acquired Murray, Sons & Co. of Belfast and shortly afterwards moved their primary manufacturing operation to Basildon

in Essex. The closure of the Camden Town factory, being such a large employer of local labour, caused considerable difficulties in the area. In addition, the cost of the move and this expansion overstretched the Baron family's financial resources and in 1958 the business was sold to the Rembrandt Tobacco Company and merged with Rothmans (which had been controlled by Rembrandt since 1954).²⁶

The Arcadia Works was sold in 1959 for conversion to offices. The only decorative features which appear to have been retained by Carreras-Rothmans were the large stone cats flanking the main entrance, one of which was taken to the new factory in Basildon and the other moved to Jamaica.²⁷ The refitting for offices was carried out in 1960-2 and the new name, Greater London House, dates from 1961. The conversion included the complete obliteration of all the Egyptian detail which was well out of fashion in the 1960s. This stripping down was most marked on the main façade, where the coloured glass decoration of the columns was removed along with the cats' heads and the remainder of what *Building* had described as the factory's 'note of jollity', to create another nondescript piece of the 'solemn symphony of building'²⁸ along the Hampstead Road.

The office block remains (Fig. 15) as a reminder of what has been called an 'environmental crime'²⁹ and there can be few examples of a single building bringing about such a fundamental change in thought. The Royal Commission on London

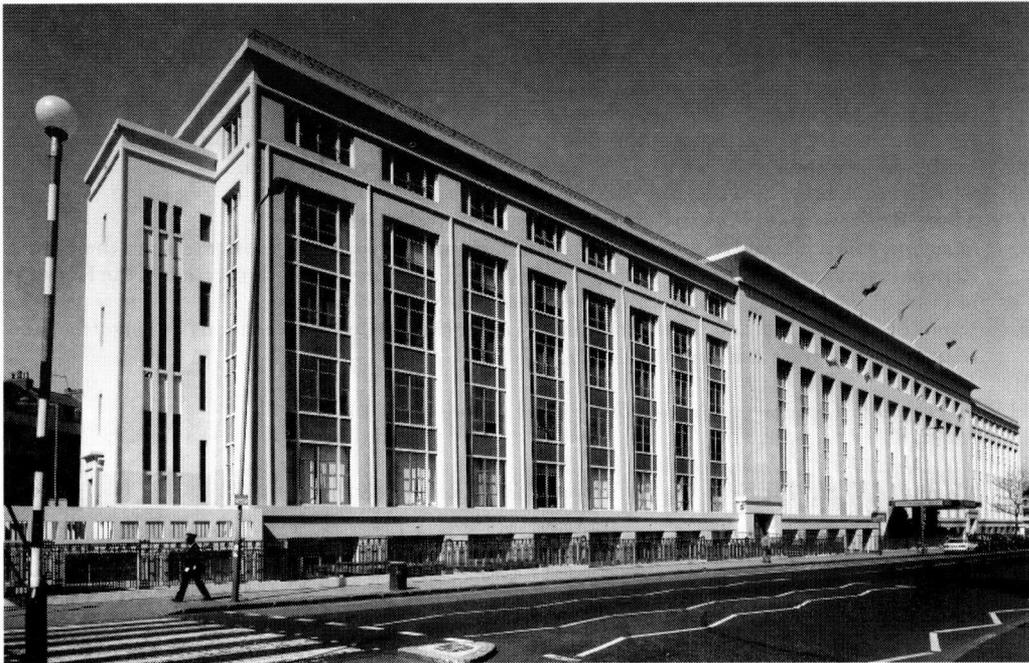


Fig. 15
Greater London House photographed in 1995
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Squares³⁰ was set up as a direct result of the Arcadia Works occupying Mornington Crescent gardens. Their report published in 1928 explored in some detail the background to this case and the slightly earlier example of Endsleigh Gardens, also on the Southampton Estate, which had been sold in 1922 for the building of Friends House, Euston Road (1925-7). However, it is clear that it was the development in Mornington Crescent which had caused the greater public disquiet and led to the London County Council making an application to the government for an enquiry. The resulting Royal Commission report stimulated a proper concern for town planning in London and free-for-all development came to an end. Despite this positive outcome, however, the loss of its flamboyant decoration makes the skeletal remains of the Carreras factory an even more poignant reminder of the Egyptian 'temple' which once stood as a blatant advertisement for the cigarette.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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2. Summerson, J., 'The Beginnings of an Early Victorian Suburb', *London Topographical Record*, XXVII (1995), 28.
3. *Survey of London*, *op cit*, note 1.
4. Greater London Record Office, Building Act case files, GLC/AR/BR/17/45804.
5. The Royal Commission on London Squares (see note 30) was of the opinion that the owners could have objected to the development under the terms of the original Estate Management Act, but that they were ignorant of this provision and even had they known would have been unable to face the risk of what might have proved expensive litigation.
6. GLRO, *op cit*, note 4.
7. Klein, R., *Cigarettes are Sublime*, (Durham, South Carolina, 1993), 6-7.
8. *Ibid*, 110; Mérimée was the second Inspector General of Historical Monuments to the French Republic, appointed in 1834, see Chatenet, M., 'The Inventory and the Protection of the Heritage in France', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 39 (1995), 42.
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10. *Ibid*.
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27. Camden Local History Library card index (ex inf. Carreras-Rothmans).
28. *op cit*, note 24.
29. Hudson, K., *The Archaeology of the Consumer Society*, (London, 1983), 8.
30. The Commission under the chairmanship of the seventh Marquess of Londonderry was appointed by Royal Warrant dated 5th August 1927. The commissioners held a preliminary meeting on 18th October 1927, met fifteen times thereafter and submitted their findings on 11th September 1928. *Report of the Royal Commission on London Squares*, HMSO, Cmd. 3196, (1928).

Squaring has subsequently been completed at the ground level. The Crescent gardens. Their report published in 1991, also provides the background to this case and the subsequent events which have taken place also on the Southampton Estate, which had been sold to the Friends House. Equally important for the present study is the account of the development in Mornington Crescent which had caused the greater than expected and led to the London County Council's decision to acquire the site. The Commission's report also contains a list of references and a list of names of persons who had been consulted. The skeletal remains of the Carreras factory an even more poignant reminder of the Egyptian 'temple' which once stood as a blatant advertisement for the cigarette.

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