

REPORT

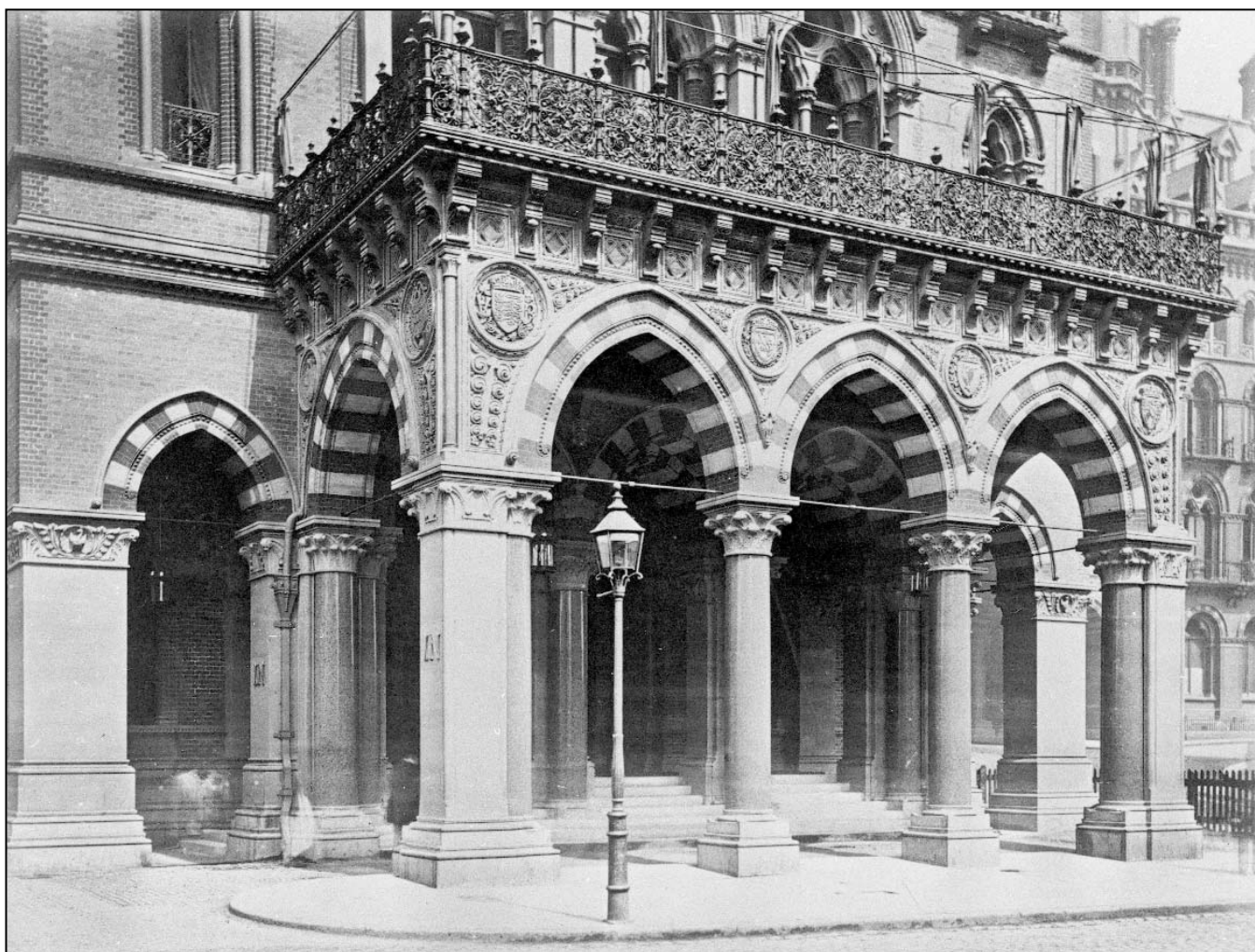
St Pancras celebrates the Midlands

The Midland was the last of the main railway companies to reach London, but it did so with a flourish. St Pancras Station has style. Not only did the Midland have the Butterley Iron Company produce the splendid giant roof that arches over the tracks and platforms, but it also built its catchment geology into the drama of the hotel across the station frontage. The Midland directors allowed their chosen architect, Gilbert G. Scott, to indulge his passion for the elaborate Gothic style.

The architectural magazine of the day, *The Builder*, hailed St Pancras as “a powerful piece of showmanship, and that was just what the company required. It made Euston appear the old fashioned muddle that it was, and King’s Cross a very ordinary piece of austere engineers’ building. The Midland Board were business men, making their choice on the broadest commercial grounds”.

What were those commercial grounds? Anyone travelling from Nottingham to London and coming out onto the terrace above Euston Road should still feel at home. There are columns and capitals carved in buff and pale pink Sherwood Sandstone from Mansfield. There are capitals carved freely in Ketton and Ancaster Stones. Some kerbs are grey-green Swithland Slate from Charnwood. The granites are not from the Midlands, but like the other stones in the visible building fabric, they were proclaiming “If you like it, we can supply it over our network of lines from the quarries to the Somers Town goods yard alongside this station”. It was a blatant advertisement, promoting their goods services at attractive rates.

The use of many different colours and textures in the materials was an integral part of Scott’s design, just as it had been in the Albert Memorial ten years earlier. He loved to feature columns of polished granite. The grandest of these flank the station entrances with Shap Granite, so easily recognised by its large feldspar crystals. Smaller columns are of Peterhead Granite, pale pink, lighter than the Shap and non-porphyrific.



The ornate main entrance to the St Pancras Hotel, now disused on Euston Road. The round columns are single blocks of polished Shap Granite, standing on unpolished plinths of the same stone, while the square columns at the corners are stacked blocks of Sherwood Sandstone from Mansfield. Capitals of the same sandstone support arches of alternating dark bricks and light Ketton limestone.

The Midland's claim to Peterhead relied on working agreements with Scottish companies including the Caledonian and the North British, and Shap lay well inside London and North Western territory, but some of the supply lines were engineered by the Midland itself. The company's role in the discovery and exploitation of the Northampton Sand Ironstone is well known. Their venture eastward from the main line to Stamford allowed them to tap the stone traffic from sources in the Welland Valley, thanks to the diversion of the Great Northern's line by the Burghley Estate.

Alongside the block of dimension stone, millions of red bricks all came from within the Midlands network. These were the special contribution of Stapleford, the product of the innovative Mr Gripper, an Essex farmer who moved to the Midlands to open up a brickworks well ahead of its times. Using a mix of Pleistocene clay and weathered Mercia Mudstone (then known as Keuper Marl), he produced at low cost a very hard surfaced red brick by using an adaptation of the Hoffman kiln from Germany. In this process, hot gases from a fired kiln chamber preheat the next chamber containing "green" bricks. This saves fuel, and it brought Gripper's rates down to 50 shillings per thousand for best "fronters" and 37 shillings per thousand for "commons" - very competitive prices indeed for the late 1860s.

Today, St Pancras is still the London gateway to the East Midlands, and its future should be assured as the permanent terminus for Eurostar trains to and from the continent. No grander entrance or departure point could be created for visitors to this country, more so if they happen to be geologists.

Eric Robinson



Dragons carved on the capitals of Mansfield sandstone.