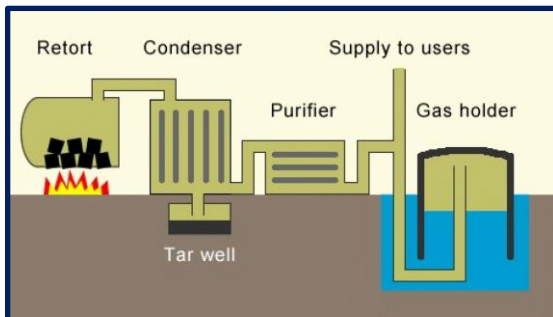




Gas in Weston

Coal gas is the result of heating coal to create coke, which burns hotter with less waste and so is good for use in steam engines.



How coal gas is produced and supplied © National Gas Museum

Manufactured coal gas was very expensive to begin with. As a result demand came from businesses and public buildings rather than households. Local councils were very keen to put in gas-fired street lighting as a means to improve their towns and attract more and better trades.

The larger gas companies obtained special Acts of Parliament which gave them permission to dig up the roads to install mains pipes.

A company to provide gas to Weston-super-Mare was formed in 1840 with capital of £2,500 in £20 shares. The 36 initial shareholders included three inn keepers, three builders, a fruiterer, a tailor and draper, a chemist, a surgeon and a coal merchant.

The first works were on the site of the Dolphin Square development in Oxford Street, being approached by Gas Street (later the new High Street). The Company began its' supply in 1841, the same year that the railway arrived in Weston. At first there were 30 consumers and 42 public lamps.

Street lights were lit throughout the year, except for 39 nights when there was a full moon and lighting was considered unnecessary!

The local Commissioners had leased the gas-works believing that this would be the cheapest way to provide street lighting. But the works were too small to cater for the needs of a growing town and in 1851 the lease was cancelled.

A new coal carbonising works was built in Drove Road at a cost of £3191, with gas production starting in 1856. The coal used was either brought in by rail or by sea from Cardiff to Knightstone Harbour.

As Weston grew extra gas-holders were erected in 1889 and in 1911, when it was decided to update much of the plant. However, the outbreak of war in 1914 delayed the reconstruction of the works which was not completed until June 1915.



Roy Edwards, a stoker, charging the chambers in which the coal was carbonised © Weston Museum

After this the company continued to expand, taking over areas served previously by other gas providers at Worle, Cheddar, Burnham, Highbridge, Axbridge and Banwell.

Because of the wider area now covered, the company's title was changed to the Weston-super-Mare and District Gas Company in January 1935.

Between the wars the works also produced hydrogen for use in airships, including the ill-fated R101.

R101 was built as an experiment, a chance to try out new technologies in airship design. It was an attempt by the government to gain a place for Britain in transcontinental passenger travel, at the time led by Germany. But politicians insisted the airship should pay for itself as a commercial vessel.



The airship R101

As a result problems, which are a part of any experimental design, were never fixed. Flight trials were sacrificed in favour of VIP sightseeing, and the airship's officers were pressed to make a flight to India for which the airship was not ready and without regard to weather.

On 5 October 1930 the R101 departed. It was so overloaded with fuel and the personal baggage of the Air Minister, Lord Thomson (who brought crates of silverware, china, champagne, a carpet, and his 20-year old valet) it could barely take off.

After struggling to cross the Channel the airship was battered with wind and rain. This damaged its' nose and broke open bags in the bow releasing hydrogen, the lighter than air gas which made the airship fly. The R101 crashed into a hillside in northern France and moments later erupted into flame. The fire destroyed the airship in minutes and killed 46 of the passengers and crew - including Lord Thomson.

After the R101 disaster Britain abandoned any attempts to build a rigid airship.

After the Second World War further expansion plans were approved. Negotiations were completed to supply gas in bulk to Yatton and Clevedon and to lay a pipe line to supply Wells and Glastonbury. Wedmore Gas Company was bought from the South Western Gas & Water Corporation and supplied from Weston in November 1947.

By the time the gas industry was nationalised in 1948, Weston had one of the finest gas businesses in the country, supplying most of North Somerset. Sales of gas on a peak day equalled the entire annual output in 1841.

After nationalisation gas supply was reorganised and centralised. Coal gas production ended in Weston on 28th February 1968. The gas-holders, which many people will remember, were still used but for storage only. They were dismantled along with the rest of the gasworks in 2014. The site remains empty.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council