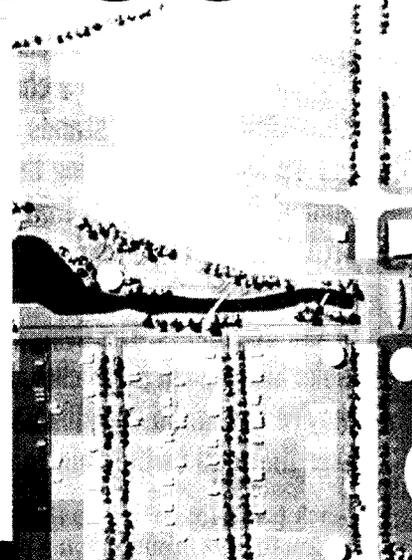
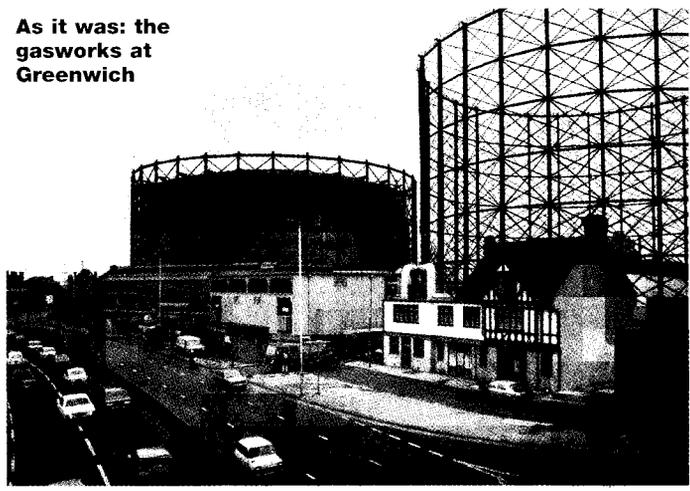


TOXIC WASTE SCAM

The Dome has been built to celebrate the best of British, but under the surface lurks environmental menace. Pete Sawyer reports

As it was: the gasworks at Greenwich



The spectacular opening ceremony of the Millennium Dome on December 31, 1999, will herald the beginning of a year-long celebration of British ideas and technology. The exhibits and attractions will open up the choices facing mankind in the 21st century — how we might work, rest and play — and opportunities to improve our local, national and global environments.

One of the 12 attractions announced for the Dome is called Living Island, which is intended to show us how we should care for our environment. In it, visitors will be given the chance to “choose how to protect their environment day by day”.

The promotional blurb on Living Island says: “All is not what it seems, and far from ‘getting away from it all’, visitors can see what they can do to make a difference to our environmental future through everyday choices.”

Instead, as visitors wend their way around the exhibition, those “everyday choices” have left an environmental legacy underneath their very feet and in rural Bedfordshire, which, some might say, has more in common with the ways of the 19th century than the brave world of the new millennium.

As *Punch* can disclose, all is not as it seems, because beneath the Dome are the remains of toxic waste, the bulk of which is now sitting in a landfill site in Bedfordshire. And these toxic waste revelations certainly won't be music to the ears of the Terrible Twins — the Minister without Portfolio, Peter Mandelson, and the Environment Secretary, John Prescott — who, between them, have promoted the whole project.

The site of the Dome is an old gasworks, which has cost millions of pounds to clean up. Despite all the money spent, it still isn't clean. In official parlance, it is simply “suitable for its intended purpose” — that of having a large tent erected on it. At one stage the site was deemed to be so badly contaminated that when the House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport



visited it, the honourable members were not even allowed out of their minibus, for fear that they might be accidentally contaminated.

The history of the clean-up operation — far from being a role model of environmental concern — is an example of “everyday choices” as they really apply to Britain in the Nineties. In effect, it was a job done to a tight budget and in a hurry.

Thousands of tonnes of hazardous waste from the site were carried off by the truckload to the Home Counties and dumped in landfill sites. It has become a classic case of Somebody Else's Problem — something for our children to sort out some time in the new millennium.

The site had been a gasworks since the 1890s. In its day it was one of the largest gasworks in the country — and in that sense some might unkindly say little has changed.

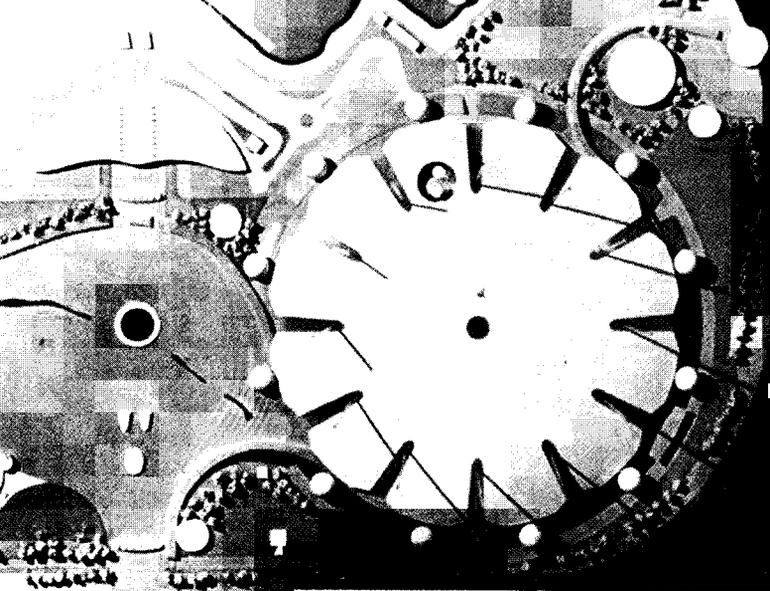
Gas was then produced from coal, which was brought in by barge from the North-east.

The process left behind some very nasty by-products, the worst of which was a vast amount of tar, containing volatile organic compounds such as benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene. All of these are compounds suspected of being carcinogenic.

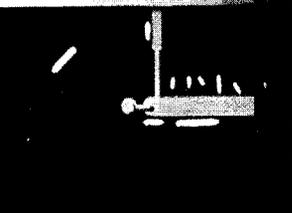
Another waste product was something called “foul lime”, which, up to the turn of the century, was used to purify the gas. This fine powder trapped arsenic and cyanide from the gas.

After the turn of the century, clinker was used to purify the gas and once again this was simply dumped on the site. As the gasworks developed, more and more by-products were found to be commercially useful. These processes in turn produced more contaminants. The processing also left a significant amount of low-level radioactive waste on the site. With the coming of North Sea gas in the late Sixties, town gasworks up and down the country closed. The 300-acre site stood vacant

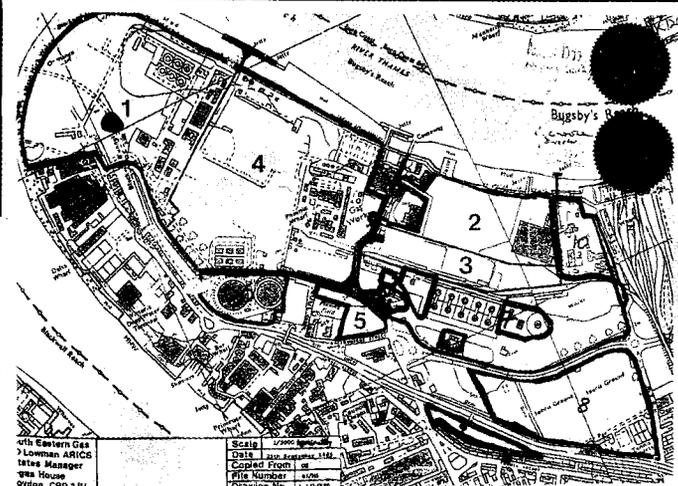
DAL AT THE DOME



Toxic waste has been moved from the Dome site to a landfill near Brogborough, Bedfordshire (above)



The British Gas plan of the works, drawn up when it sold the site. The Dome is being built above the worst areas of contamination in section 1



and derelict for years. A few workshops appeared on the site, contributing in their own way to the contaminants. On top of that, fly-tipping became common. A backhander of a few quid to the guards at the entrance allowed unscrupulous businesses to dump industrial waste on the site.

In 1989 British Gas singled out the site and put it into a separate limited company together with land at Beckton. It planned to develop the site, initially in partnership with British Urban Development Ltd, owned by a consortium of construction companies, and latterly in partnership with Port Greenwich Ltd. But the project fell through after negotiations with Greenwich council over the cost of provision of community facilities — schools and a health centre — reached a stalemate.

Eventually, in February 1997, the site was bought for £20 million from British Gas by English Partnerships, a government quango formed to promote urban regeneration. As part of the deal, British Gas had to clean up the site so that it was fit for its intended purpose. British Gas had to spend £15 million on what is termed "statutory remediation".

Most of that job was to prevent the contam-

inants leaking into the ground water. The most heavily contaminated areas were those on which the Millennium Dome was to be constructed. The tar residue produced by the gas-making process had been stored in huge tanks on the site. The largest had a diameter of some 30 metres and contained thousands of tonnes of evil-smelling tar. It was excavated to a depth of 15 metres and the tar was put onto lorries and taken to a landfill site in Bedfordshire owned and operated by Shanks & McEwan.

Some 180,000 cubic metres of material had to be removed from the site as a whole — of which 100,000 was seriously contaminated — at a cost of around £4 million. The bulk of the task was completed by August of last year.

At times it was not so much a clean-up operation as a practical exercise in industrial archaeology. To their credit, Greenwich council and the Government's own Environment Agency watched hawk-eyed as the remediation work progressed. Greenwich council dug more than 1,500 pits and boreholes to assess the extent of the site contamination. It also set up monitoring of noise and dust around the perimeter of the site.

Six years of monitoring and several million pounds of tax-payers' money later, the council now has several large cupboards full of reports and site analyses.

The council's pollution control team has gathered so much information on the site that its chief environmental officer, Paul Cooney, who heads the team, was able to present a 40-page paper detailing his experiences to his professional association's annual conference last year.

Meanwhile, John Prescott has promoted the Millennium Village — the residential development at the southern end of the Greenwich peninsula — just as Mandelson has the Dome. Several weeks ago, Prescott said that house builders must prove that no suitable urban sites exist before building in the countryside. He said that 60 per cent of all new homes should be built on so-called "brownfield" urban wasteland sites.

The Millennium Village is a high-profile example of a brownfield site. But, more to the point, the Dome site graphically illustrates the flaws in Prescott's logic when he suggests that more "brownfield sites" should be developed.

The cost of clearing up these brownfield sites to the standards needed for housing is enormous. So, invariably, the worst contaminants are simply taken away and buried elsewhere. Thus, for every brownfield site you create a landfill site. And there is so far no provision for extra funding for local councils to monitor the decontamination work.

It is questionable whether the Greenwich site would ever have been regenerated without the enormous injection of public funding created by the exhibition.

The job could have been done better and more thoroughly, but not in the timescale available. That timescale is as much a product of the indecision of the last government and the reluctance of hugely profitable British Gas to clear up its own mess, as of the political expediency of the present. British Gas, reluctant to spend its hard-earned profits on a project which may come to nothing, preferred to let the site remain derelict.

As for the residents of rural Bedfordshire, now living next to toxic waste from the Dome site, let's hope that the plastic membrane keeping the waste from their water supply is as strong as that which will eventually cover the Dome. □