3. History

3.1 Before the Eastern Coal Drops

As London expanded in the 18th century and congestion on the narrow streets worsened, a new road was built to act as a bypass for travellers approaching from the north and west. This ‘New Road’, now Euston Road, marked the northern limit of London until the early 19th century.

To the north of the New Road, the Regent’s Canal was constructed between 1812 and 1820 linking Paddington to Limehouse. It was intended as the main canal route for goods transported from the Midlands to London, and to its docks beyond.

The Great Northern Railway was formed in 1846 to construct a railway linking London with the North of England, primarily Yorkshire. Whilst the railway always intended on carrying passenger traffic, from the outset its potential value was as a freight link to the capital. As well as its prestigious passenger terminal at King’s Cross, it also developed a large goods depot to the north of the station, adjacent to the Regent’s Canal. This allowed goods to be transported either via the canal (and on towards the docks) or via road (into the City and the West End).

Figure 8 (opposite): The St Pancras area in about 1820 showing the Regwnt’s Canal and open fields where Coal Drops Yard now stands
Figure 9 (above): View of the eastern elevation in about 1980

During the 1840s the primary source of coal in London was County Durham. Collier barges would travel down the Eastern Coast, taking around two weeks to make the voyage. The construction of the new railway allowed coal to be profitably mined in Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire and transported via rail to the Great Northern Railway’s new goods depot.

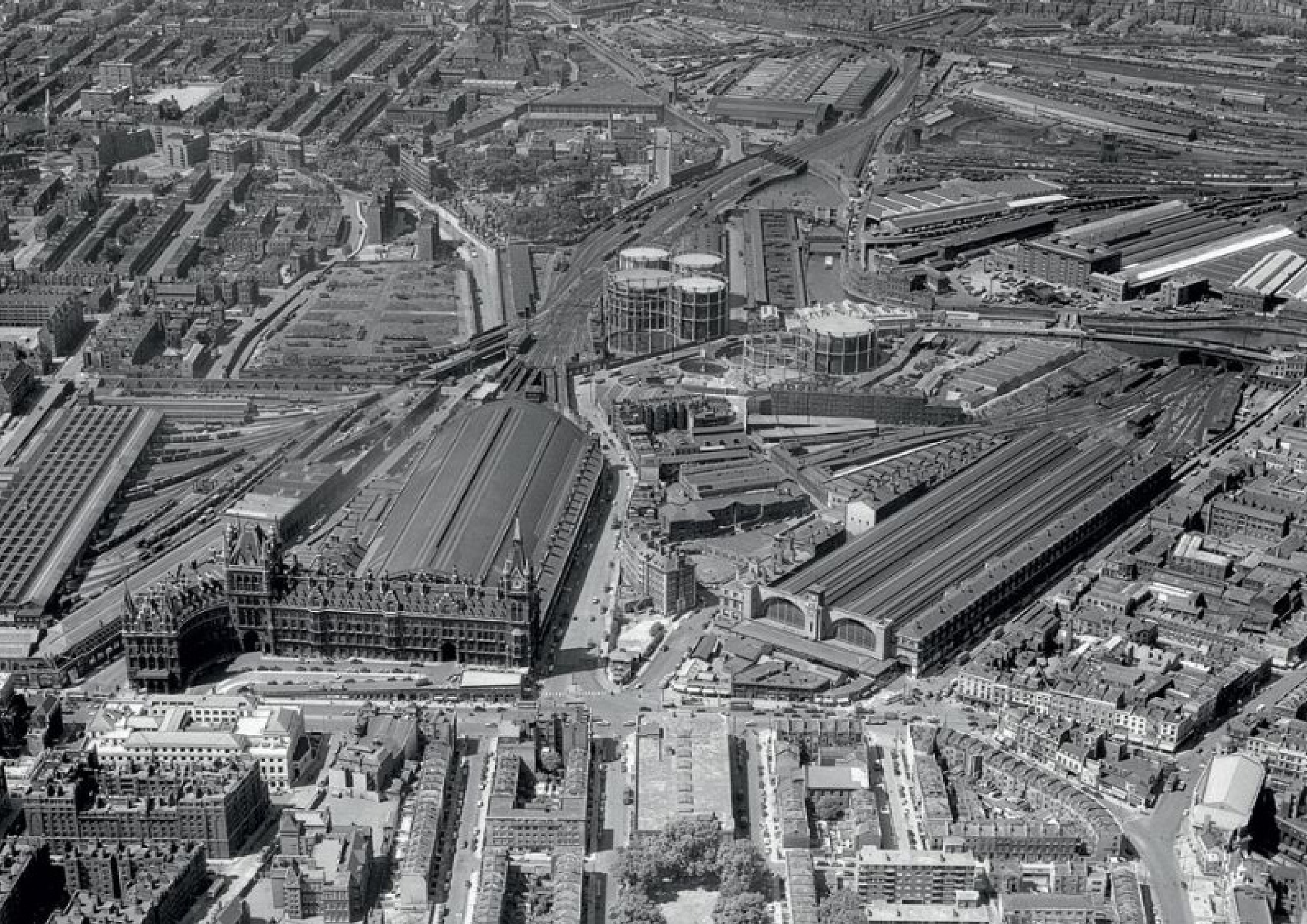
3.2 Construction & Use of the Eastern Coal Drops

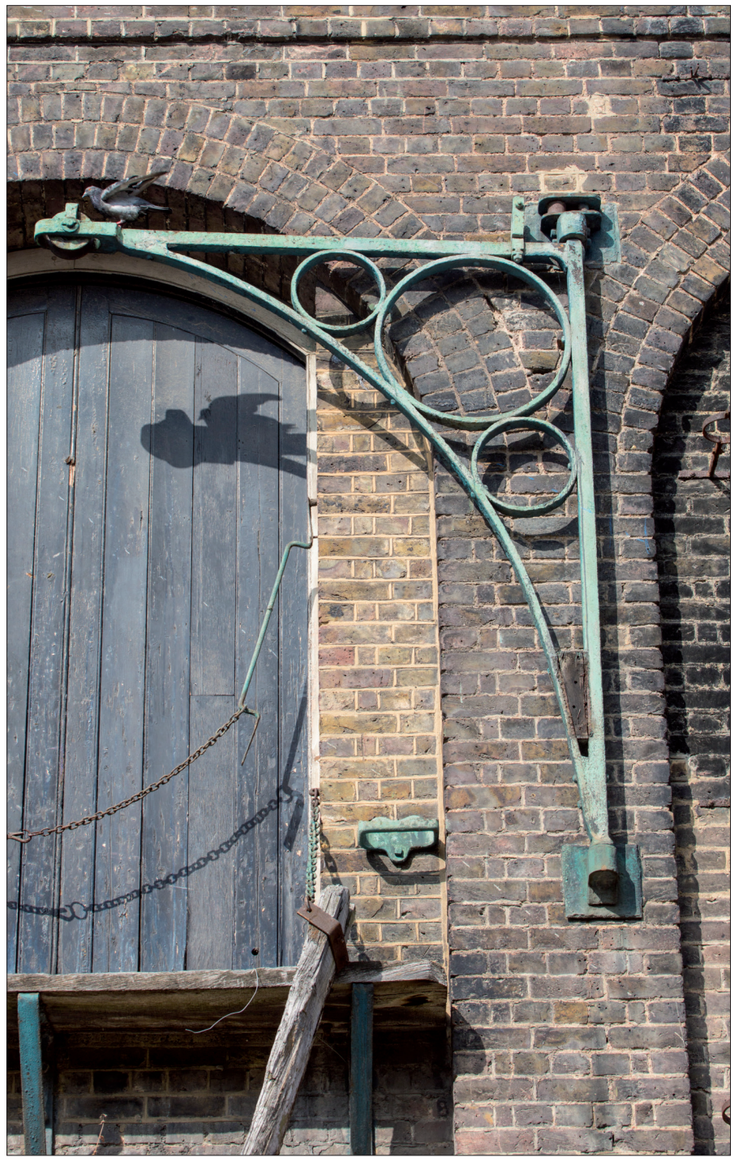
To facilitate the swift transfer from railway wagons to barges or carts, in about 1851 a large set of coal drops were erected, 25 bays long. These allowed loaded wagons to enter at high level on tracks and deposit their load into a hopper level. The wagons could then be reversed out. Coal in the hoppers was then loaded into carts using the cellular bays below. This shift, from sea to rail, reduced the time taken to get coals from the coalfield into London from two weeks to just eight hours, in much larger quantities and without being affected by bad weather.

The success of the Eastern Coal Drops led to the construction of another set, the Western Coal Drops, less than ten years later. To further speed up the process, a viaduct was constructed along the western side of the Eastern Coal Drops and a ‘traverser’ installed at the southern end. This allowed wagons to come in from the north, deposit their coal, and then return via the viaduct to avoid the time involved reversing it out of the building.

In about 1890, the southern 15 bays were converted from coal drops to warehousing. This required alterations to the internal levels, resulting in the formation of a distinct mezzanine level with windows along the east wall. The northern ten bays remained in use as coal drops. At a similar time the Western Coal Drops were totally altered and incorporated into a (now demolished) warehouse to the west with a cast iron road viaduct on the east façade.

In the 1920s the Eastern Coal Drops viaduct was reconstructed in blue engineering bricks.





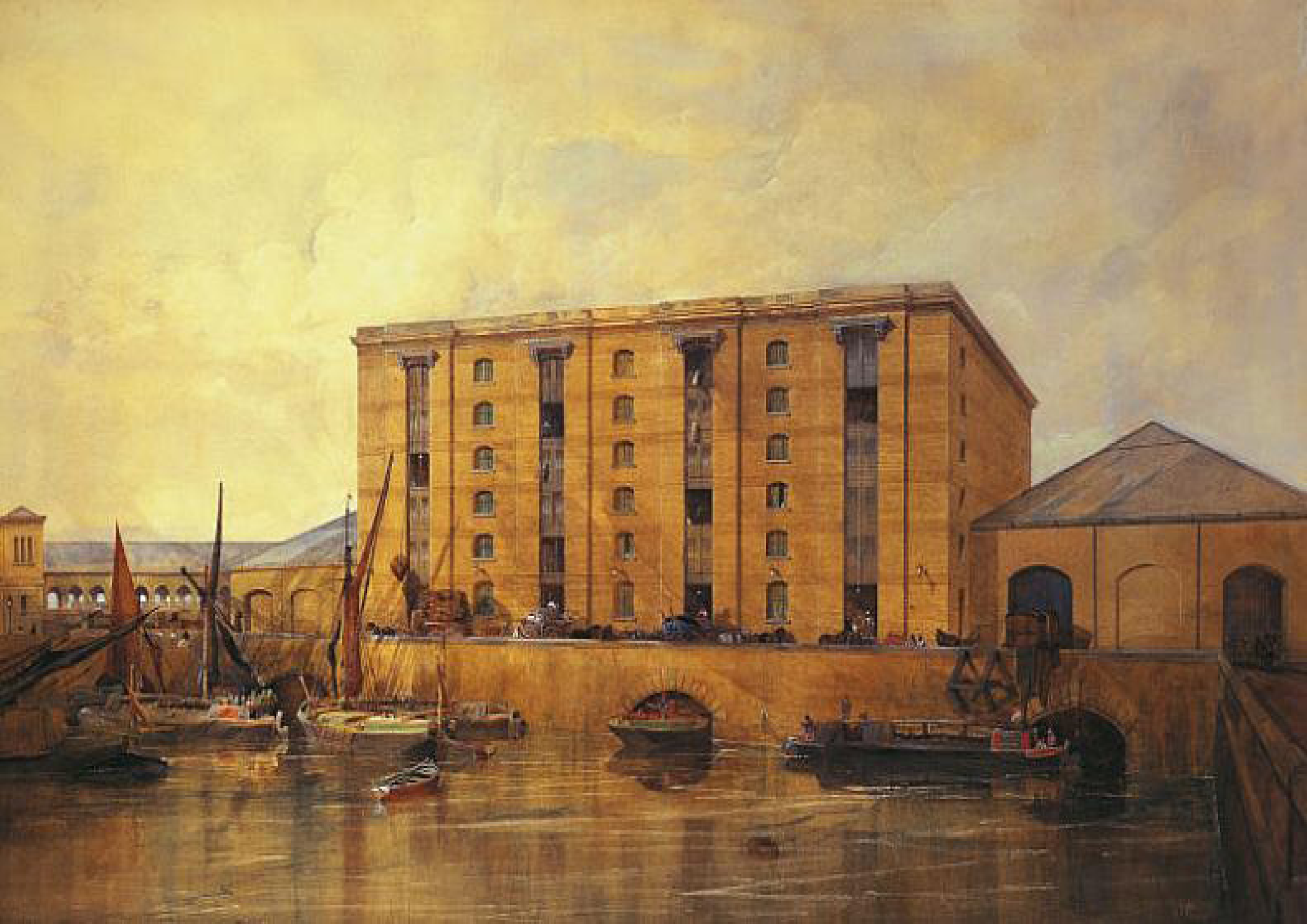
3.3 Decline & Rehabilitation of the Eastern Coal Drops

During the late 20th century as freight switched from railways to roads, and the use of coal in London declined, the Goods Yard entered a period of serious decline. Buildings were either left vacant or were used for light industry and storage. The building was listed in 1983, primarily for its industrial archaeology then surviving in the northern ten bays. In 1985 a major fire gutted these ten northern bays, destroying their surviving internal timber structures and roof.

The southern 15 bays were converted into a nightclub, ‘Bagley’s’, in the 1990s. This remained open until 2007. Since 2007 the whole Goods Yard site has been redeveloped by Argent. The transformation of this derelict industrial site into a major mixed-use development has been one of the most lauded urban regeneration projects in Europe.

As part of the masterplan, the Coal Drops were identified as a suitable location for retail use. Heatherwick Studio were appointed to design a new extension to link the two coal drops buildings. This link took the form of a roof-level bridge with curved slate roofs to house the new principal retail unit. The two historic buildings were repaired, upgraded and altered to form a number of smaller retail units and stair cores to link the three levels. The redeveloped Coal Drops Yard opened in October 2018.

Figure 10 (opposite): Aerial photograph of King’s Cross
Figure 11 (above): The northern end showing the original timber coal drops equipment in about 1980



4. Significance

4.1 Setting

The Eastern Coal Drops is surrounded by many of the most important structures of the Goods Yard to have survived, namely the Granary Building (now Central St Martins), the Fish & Coal Offices (now Tom Dixon) and the Western Coal Drops (now part of the Coal Drops Yard development). These buildings, along with associated viaducts and other industrial fragments, were all constructed by the Great Northern Railway in the 1850s. Together they give a sense of the utilitarian stock-brick aesthetic with Italianate touches that Lewis Cubitt used across the King's Cross estate.

Interest is derived from its importance relating to typology and function with the history of goods yards, and in particular, the increased popularity of moving freight by rail in the mid-Victorian period. Key to its setting is also the adjacent canal, with which it was intrinsically linked.

The setting of all of the surrounding buildings has been changed as part of the King's Cross masterplan. Large residential and office buildings now frame views of the Coal Drops from all directions. The immediate surroundings have been changed from private industrial land to public space.

It has **very high group value** with the adjacent listed and unlisted historic buildings.

4.2 Aesthetic Value

The Eastern Coal Drops is a partially intact, though heavily modified, example of a utilitarian railway goods building. Dating from 1851, it was evidently designed with function in mind, though its simple repetitive facades are not without architectural intent, and its scale and setting add to its grandeur. The building is believed to have been designed by Lewis Cubitt.

The building facades are composed almost entirely of yellow stock bricks, with a Welsh slate roof covering the southern section. At yard level are colonnades of cast iron Tuscan columns. The brickwork above has decorative circles within the spandrels and within the upper arcade are recessed brick panels. These materials reflect the industrialisation of building materials and the ease of transportation in the Victorian period.

To the western side stands a 1920s blue engineering brick arcaded viaduct. This viaduct has less ornamentation than the principal building and reflects the shift towards a more utilitarian architecture in the 20th century.

The historic building has been transformed by its conversion with new glazing and openings, with extensive restoration to the formerly derelict northern end, and by the creation of the glass and slate roof extension by Heatherwick Studio.

Overall it has **moderate aesthetic value**.

4.3 Communal Value

Despite the history of the Eastern Coal Drops being little-known to the general public, the building facilitated a transformation in the capital by increasing the availability of coal and thereby reducing the cost of the most commonly used fuel for industry, transport and domestic uses. It allowed London to develop a network of suburbs linked by railways. The building is one of the only public coal drop structures that is publicly accessible.

Its subsequent re-use, particularly its temporary use as a nightclub, gives the building importance to those who visited it, yet were probably unaware of its historic origins.

It has **moderate communal value**.

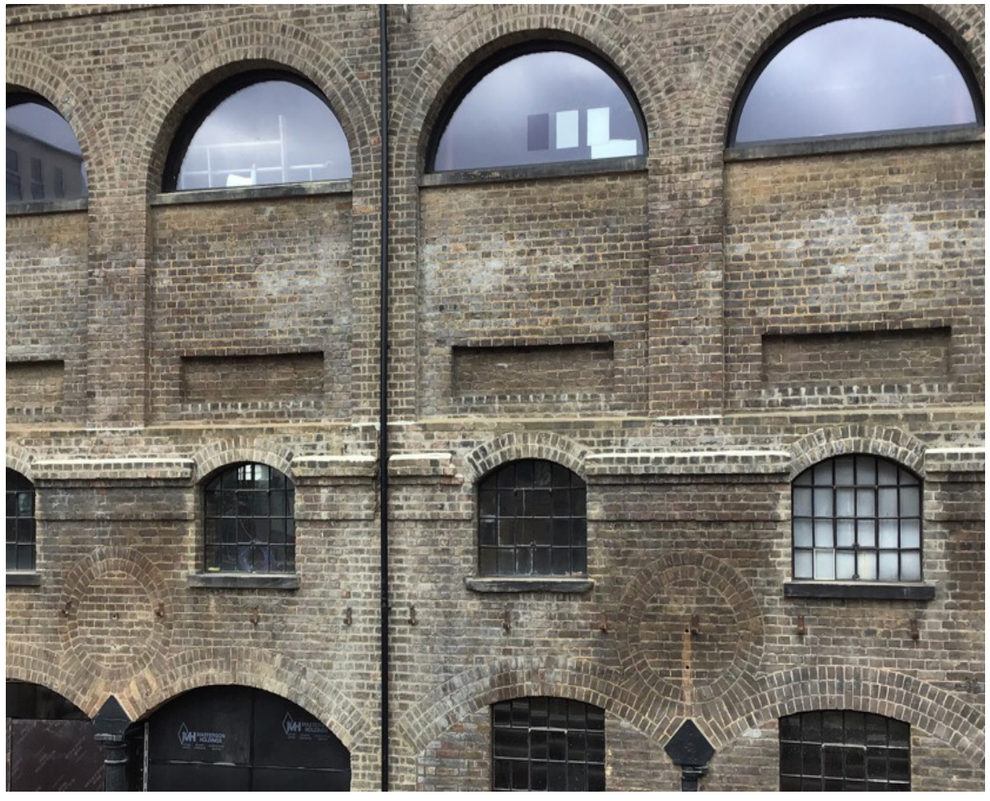


Figure 12 (opposite): Painting by Cubitt of the Granary with the Coal Drops behind showing the original canal basin
Figure 13 (right): The east elevation of the ECD following conservation and repair in 2018