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Believe in Brixton

Return of the high street

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Makeover: the Bon Marché annexe is now The Department Store, for mixed use, including the HQ of project architects Squire and Partners



Remodelled: layers of the building's history were scraped back, its old features combined with a contemporary gloss



Restored to glory: the annexe, entirely reimagined, now provides restaurants and shops as well as workspaces

It's good to have you back

Store's return marks new golden age for Brixton, says **Robert Bevan**

BRIXTON used to be so posh that, in its Edwardian heyday, it had no fewer than four genteel department stores, including Bon Marché. The first department store in London, Bon Marché was modelled and named after the Paris original, the first store in the world to bring different "shops" under one roof.

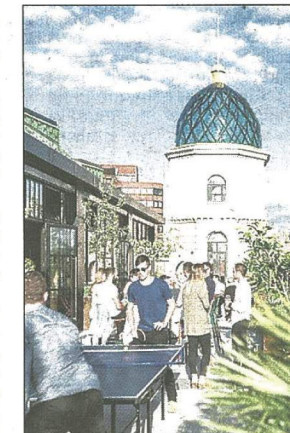
Bon Marché was opened in Brixton Road by James Smith in 1876. Smith had won big time on horses at Newmarket and decided to invest his winnings in retail.

London heritage expert and author of five books on the borough of Lambeth, Edmund Bird, says Bon Marché was the first of a string of grand department stores to open in Brixton from the later 19th century up to the Thirties. One, Morleys, founded in 1897, is still going strong. Bird says: "They reflect a golden age of smart retail establishments when Brixton was a premier shopping district."

THAT OLD FIZZ IS RETURNING

Now Bon Marché's long-derelict 1905 furniture annexe has been remodelled into a mix of workspaces, shops and restaurants. It is across the street from the original store and was connected by tunnels.

Also in the annexe is the headquarters of architectural firm Squire and Partners, which is showcasing its prowess in the refurb, stripping back the building to its shapely bones for its 150 staff to use. The site, now called The Department Store, has an almost archaeological approach to design with



Like a lighthouse: glass-paned corner turret is a retained historic feature

layer upon layer of the building's history scraped back to reveal old scars and old paint, bricks and Art Nouveau tiles.

Verdigris colour revealed and graffiti retained from the building's previous life as a squat, the makeover is teamed with glossy contemporary inserts in black steel and anodised gold, and limited-edition furniture developed with designers Minotti, Samuel Heath and Carl Hanson. In a steampunk touch, power and data cables are hidden within shiny fat brass and copper tubes.

The look, says Squire and Partners' Tim Gledstone, is not utility chic but

"decayed decadence". Acting like a lighthouse, a corner turret has had its old dome replaced with diamond-paned glass and a new top floor houses a swish dining room and bar with rugs, sofas, roof terrace and fireplace, that, licensing permitting, might soon be able to welcome outside guests in the evenings and weekends.

A GALLERY FOR LOCAL ARTISTS

The basement holds a large bike store, with showers and changing rooms next to an event space where local artists and designers can exhibit. At ground-floor level is a Making Room where artists and designers hold workshops.

The gentrification of Brixton is causing ructions in the area – understandably so where it is driving out long-standing businesses and residents, or ruining old buildings. But the protests forget Brixton's innovative and prosperous past when it led the way in urban innovations, such as having one of the first streets with electric lighting at Electric Avenue.

ALL OF Brixton's old department store buildings survive. The former Co-op has been turned into flats but others, such as the older wing of Bon Marché across the street from Squires, and the building next door that now holds Poundland and a Jobcentre, once home to the Quin and Axtens bazaar, remain.

It's a remarkable history and The Department Store demonstrates how the area could scrub up without selling out.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES JONES