

IT'S AS old as the estate itself and provides a rare street light on any of Kingswood's private estates. But what is that strange contraption on the grassy area opposite the tennis club that looks like a green version of Dr Who's Tardis? And why is it currently wrapped up in chains as if it might try to escape?

The cast iron structure is such a distinctive part of the Kingswood North Estate that it's incorporated in the KNECL logo and is affectionately known as our Jolly Green Giant, yet most people have no idea of the fascinating story behind this historic landmark.

To find out more, we need to travel back in time to Britain at the very start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when electricity supply was in its infancy. As electric power started replacing gas as a source of domestic heating and lighting, a battle raged between two competing forms of supply: AC (alternating current) and DC (direct current). In the end, AC won out because of the ability to step up or step down the strength of the current using transformers. And that's where the Jolly Green Giant comes in.

For it is one of the last surviving examples of an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century electric transformer pillar, thought to date from around 1914. The transformer housed within this pillar converted that high voltage AC electric current, brought in on overhead cables, to a lower voltage (240v) suitable for domestic usage. This meant electricity could be supplied directly into the new houses being built by Costain which would eventually create what is now the Kingswood North estate.

As the estate developed, in the 1920s and 30s, individual cables would feed from the transformer to supply each of the new homes. Of course, as the supply of electricity became more universal and sophisticated, the technology behind these early transformers was overtaken and soon much more efficient sub-stations were built to perform the same job, making our Jolly Green Giant – and countless others like it – redundant. It is believed it is now one of only about a dozen such structures left in the country. Interestingly, archive photos show another such transformer at the junction of Beech Drive and Woodland Way. This has long since vanished, but today a street light still stands on that corner.

It's not clear when our Jolly Green Giant was decommissioned but, as the decades wore on, it fell into a state of disrepair; its original street light dimmed, its cast iron casing eroding as the paintwork peeled away and its internal ceramic circuit boards, now disconnected, providing a cosy home for countless spider families.

Fast forward, then, to 2010 and the efforts of one resident in particular to save our electricity transformer from the scrapheap and help preserve a unique part of the estate's heritage. Determined to do something about its dilapidated state, Basil Preuveneers arranged for an electricity supply to be reconnected to enable the street lighting to work and had the structure painted. When Basil started taking an interest in it, the transformer had no power connected to it and, although light fittings were in place, they were unusable and badly corroded through age. He says he organised the new lighting arrangement and for the electricity supplier to connect an unmetered power supply for a simple annual fee.

Around the same time, an approach was made to what is now Historic England, the government's advisory body on protecting historic buildings, and they agreed to make the transformer a listed structure with Grade II status meaning it is 'of special interest, warranting every effort to preserve it'. You can read more about it by clicking on this link: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1396381>.

By 2020, however, further remedial work was clearly needed. As the pictures below show, the paintwork was peeling badly in some areas, exposing the bare metal beneath to corrosion, and nobody could check inside the structure since any keys to the metal doors on the pillar had long since disappeared. Without access to the inside, it was impossible to ascertain what restoration work needed to be done or, indeed, to be able to control the lighting.



And that's where KNECL comes in. When the company took over ownership of the estate's roads and infrastructure in 2020, it decided the structure was so iconic it should be incorporated into the KNECL logo which you can see today on all official company documents. But, aware of the sorry state it was in, the company also set about trying to find out how any restoration work might be carried out and how it could be funded.

First stop was Historic England which had originally listed the structure. However, its grants are limited to Grade I and Grade II\* listed buildings and only then for essential repairs or 'buildings at risk'. As a lower-level Grade II listed structure, our Jolly Green Giant wouldn't qualify for any grant funding.

A visit to the Amberley Museum, provided a lot of very useful background information in our quest to restore the Jolly Green Giant. The museum, near Arundel in West Sussex, tells the history of industrial, communication and transport development in the South of England and is a treasure trove of gadgets and working exhibits – among them an early transformer similar to ours (right) outside a dedicated building where visitors can learn about the development of domestic electricity supply.



Armed with this information, our next stop was Reigate and Banstead Borough Council's Conservation Officer, John McNally, who recommended talking to Surrey Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT) about potential restoration funding. KNECL arranged a site visit by Chris Reynolds, Senior Historic Buildings Officer of the Trust, who expressed enthusiasm for the project and thought the trust might look favourably on any application. However, SHBT grants are typically 10% of the costs with a maximum of £5,000 and it was clear that the JGG project would cost well above that figure. However, he was puzzled about how access might be gained to the internal workings and the power source that was clearly still working inside.

Then KNECL had a lucky break. During our conversations with Chris Reynolds, he said he had vaguely heard of a similar project in Wimbledon although the Trust hadn't been approached and he had no more information he could offer. Phone calls to

the Wimbledon Society, a registered charity dedicated to preserving the area's historic and cultural heritage, confirmed that the society had indeed started a campaign some years previously to have a similar transformer in the village restored from its very sorry state.

The society had, eventually, established that their transformer was owned by UK Power Networks (UKPN), the body responsible for all electricity cabling under our streets. Once UKPN had confirmed its ownership, the company set in train a major project to restore the Wimbledon transformer to its original condition, commissioning a condition survey from a specialist company and then hiring Savills to produce a detailed plan for restoration and hiring a highly-regarded iron and steel restoration specialist to carry out the work.



When KNECL first spoke to UKPN, the Wimbledon transformer had just been removed to the East London foundry of that specialist company, owned by Rupert Harris. Over the ensuing months, KNECL visited the foundry to check on the progress of the restoration work (see pictures here) and when the work was complete was able to see it restored to its site in a small cul de sac in Wimbledon village earlier this year. Now it was our turn . . .

KNECL persuaded UKPN to look at our transformer, not only to assess it for restoration but also to establish the nature of the power source that currently feeds the lights on top.

In August, KNECL Vice-,Chair Bob Crawley and Will Rockall, chair of the company's estate care sub-committee, met Emma Machin of UKPN and Rupert Harris on the green to examine the Jolly Green Giant. A locksmith was also there and, as you can see in the pictures below, he began by opening it up, exposing some very ancient wiring – and an awful lot of spiders' webs.



At this site meeting there was a general assumption that full restoration would go ahead provided UKPN could approve the cost. If that was the case, the likely sequence of events would be:

Rupert would provide UKPN with a price for the refurbishment within a relatively short time frame. Once (if) approved, UKPN would apply for Listed Building Consent which should take around three months to come through. Rupert would then arrange to remove the whole structure to his workshop in East London leaving the site secure after the power supply had been disconnected and made safe. Refurbishment itself is estimated to take around three months, after which the structure would be reinstalled on the green (with new locks) probably some time in the Spring of next year



In the meantime, the external metal doors have been secured with the chains and padlocks you see here. When work is completed, it is planned to put a small information board alongside the structure to explain to everyone the fascinating story behind it.

So watch out for more information on this exciting project in the months ahead.