



A British Gas engineer services a gas-powered lamp near Westminster Abbey in central London. —AFP photos



A British Gas engineer attaches a stepladder to a gas-powered lamp before servicing it, near Westminster Abbey in central London.

Shine on: Campaigners save London's historic gas lamps

Intrigued tourists watch as Paul Doy climbs a ladder outside London's Westminster Abbey and lifts the globe of a gas street lamp. Winding its timer, he then ignites a small cloth mesh, creating a distinctive soft warm light that illuminates the darkness. "I like the historical aspect of it," said Doy, even if it means getting up at 5:00 am to tend to the lamps in the fashionable district of Covent Garden. "It's mainly winding the 100-year-old mechanical clocks" in the lamps "and setting the times for those, especially now as well, because we're losing light much earlier," he told AFP.

The 200-year-old nightly ritual nearly became history, however, over local authority plans to replace 174 gas-powered lamps protected by a heritage order with eco-friendly LED bulbs. The plan by the City of Westminster council caused uproar among some residents and heritage lovers, and even sparked a question in parliament. But on Tuesday, the council said it had decided to scrap the move. Instead, it will convert 94 other gas lamps which are not protected.

Tim Bryars, who owns a small bookshop in Covent Garden, stumbled across the plan by chance just over a year ago. "One morning, I went out of my shop, there are a couple of guys from the council digging a hole in front of my bookshop," he said. "I said, 'what are you doing?' And they said, 'Don't worry, we're just looking to see how easy it will be to convert your gas lamps to electricity.' He fronted a campaign to save them and on Wednesday called the council's U-turn "a good first step". "Basically they are admitting we were right but they have to do more," he told AFP. "We actually need a firm policy commitment to positively preserving the gas lamps, not just keeping a few until they become troublesome."

'London's DNA'

London has more than 1,000 gas street lamps,

which were installed at the beginning of the 19th century. At the time, they were considered a major innovation in a city with dark, dirty and often dangerous streets. In central London, they still light up parts of The Mall avenue leading to Buckingham Palace, the back streets of Covent Garden, and around Westminster Abbey. The atmospheric light they give out is evocative of Charles Dickens novels, Mary Poppins and Sherlock Holmes.

"They are an incredibly important part of the fabric of London's history. They are in London's DNA," said Luke Honey, an antiques writer who was also involved in the campaign. "They are just beautiful things. The quality of light is incredibly natural," he said in Goodwin's Court near Covent

Garden, said to be the inspiration for Diagon Alley in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series.

"I am afraid reproduction LEDs just don't replicate the beauty of original lamps and also the quality of that particular gas light," Joe Fuller, head of the maintenance team for old street lamps at British Gas, accepted that some of the replacements "look very nice". "But they're still different from the originals," he said. "I think it's really key that we maintain that heritage and keep as many as we possibly can."

Consultation

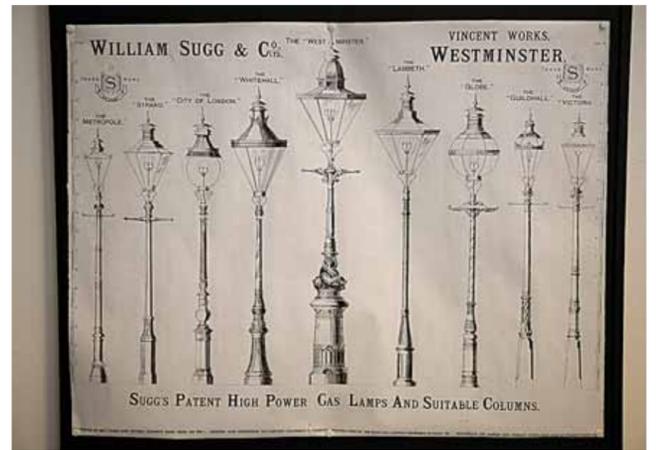
Previous attempts to replace the gas lamps caused a similar outcry and forced the council to abandon its plans. But a change of leadership

revived the project, as part of an overall aim to reduce carbon emissions—and improve public safety. The council had been trying to convince naysayers in a public consultation exercise, which ended on Sunday.

Paul Dimoldenberg, the council's cabinet member for city management and air quality, said the lamps were "increasingly difficult to maintain and repair". "In a street where gas lamps break down... the streets are in darkness for longer, and therefore they are not as safe as they should be for pedestrians or anybody using the streets in the dark," he added. But in abandoning the move, he said the council acknowledged "the strong heritage issues at stake". —AFP



Gas-lamp covers are seen as engineers gather at their workshop in London.



A poster displaying different types of gas-powered lamps is pictured at the British Gas repair centre in London.

Taiwan's newest party wants to make mahjong great again

As Taiwan hurtles towards becoming a "super-aged" society, a new political party has emerged with an unusual and somewhat singular platform—making mahjong great again. The centuries-old Chinese tile game is popular in Taiwan, especially among the elderly, but thanks to a quirk of legal history from the island's martial law era, it inhabits something of a grey space. While playing mahjong is legal, the game is treated with suspicion by authorities as gambling in public places is prohibited.

Organized crime groups have long maintained a lucrative side hustle by hosting illegal betting matches, while gaming parlors, both legitimate businesses and more shady ones, often find themselves raided or inspected by police. Step forward Kuo Hsi, the 65-year-old owner of a parlor in the southern city of Kaohsiung who has decided it is high time to allow betting on mahjong games and has launched a new political party to achieve that goal.

The niche Mahjong the Greatest party wants the game declared a "legitimate recreation" and for gambling and prize money to be allowed. "Let's be frank. You can put a bet on anything if you want to gamble. Even rock, paper, scissors. Why do we insist on branding mahjong as a form of gambling?" he told AFP from his parlor, the unmistakable clatter of mahjong tiles creating a hypnotic soundtrack. "Any form of competition, gaming, golf, tennis, badminton, they all have some form of prize in the end. They all do. When there are prizes, competitors will do their best to train themselves physically and mentally. Mahjong playing is exactly the same," he added.

'Ridiculous'

Max Chang, 31, a gaming consultant who has been playing mahjong with his family since he was young, is among the party's first members. "I identify very much with Kuo's ideals. As a young man who plays mahjong frequently, I am always wary about people calling the police on us," he told AFP.

Echoing that sentiment, 62-year-old housewife and party member Amy Huang said: "I look forward to playing mahjong openly and not having to hide."

Huang said her mother-in-law, who taught her how to play, was taken to a police station once for betting in a game with friends, an incident she described as "ridiculous". Kuo knows he has some way to go to break into Taiwan's political mainstream. The current membership of the Mahjong the Greatest party—which was founded last month—is 120 people, but he is "optimistic" that he can get 10,000 registered party members by the end of this year. Kuo has applied to authorities to register the party and is hopeful that it will be approved soon. He aims to get enough political momentum going to secure a referendum next year to amend the law. Taiwan's vibrant democratic system allows for regular referendums to decide key decisions. On November 26, Taiwan holds local elections and one of the referendum questions on the ballot is whether to lower the voting age from 20 to 18. Kuo also hopes to secure at least one lawmaker-at-large seat in 2024 when Taiwan will elect a new president and parliament.

Ageing society

As a parlor owner, Kuo has strong business reasons to see mahjong gambling allowed and regulated. But he also has a more altruistic goal, believing that bringing mahjong out of the grey space will help Taiwan's elderly live happier, more sociable lives. Nearly 17 percent of Taiwan's 23.5 million-strong population is over 65.

The island is projected to join Japan and reach "super-aged" status in 2025 when that proportion reaches 20 percent. "Taiwan is an ageing society with more and more senior citizens, especially in remote areas, and they mostly stay at home watching TV," Kuo said. "If they can get together with people of their age to play mahjong, to chat with others, it will help improve their quality of life and bring happiness. This is a good activity for them." —AFP



Fench-Malian singer Aya Coco Danioko aka Aya Nakamura (center) answers hosts' questions upon her arrival to attend the 24th edition of the NRJ Music Awards ceremony. —AFP

Afropop star Aya Nakamura faces court over domestic violence

Franco-Malian singer Aya Nakamura will appear in court on Thursday in Paris along with her former partner after they were charged with domestic violence following a row at their home in August. The singer behind the 2018 sensation "Djadja"—which has nearly 900 million views on YouTube—is one of the biggest-selling francophone artists worldwide.

The court appearance for the 27-year-old star, whose real name is Aya Danioko, came after police were called several times in the early hours of August 7 to the Paris home she shared with partner Vladimir Boudnikoff, a music video producer. They have both been charged with domestic violence.

"We did stupid things that night but that's life too," Boudnikoff wrote on Instagram after the fight with Nakamura, with whom he has a daughter. Nakamura, one of few francophone pop artists to break into English-speaking markets, was born in Mali but grew up in the Paris suburbs. She has been hailed for rapping and singing about female empowerment and black identity, mixing French, the capital's distinctive slang, Arabic and her family's native Bambara language. —AFP



Mahjong players moving their tiles during a round of the game at a parlor in Kaohsiung. —AFP photos



This picture shows Kuo Hsi (center), founder of Taiwan's Mahjong the Greatest party, posing with his party flag at his parlor in Kaohsiung.



An employee wearing a vest showing the logo of the Mahjong the Greatest party, at a mahjong parlor in Kaohsiung.