

THE BRICKWORKS

One of the biggest employers in Napton in the late 18, early 1900's was the brickyard which opened in 1879 when Mr Chas Watson began brickmaking. It became Mason and Watson in 1895 and by 1903 was owned by Messrs. Watson Nelson Ltd.

The location of the yard was ideal for transportation purposes. Being sited adjacent to the Oxford Canal meant direct access to the Thames and the Birmingham and Warwick canal system to the west and the Grand Union to the east.

The making of the bricks was a steady progression from one end of the site to the other. Beginning with the quarrying of the clay at one end of the site and ending with the transportation of the finished article, via the canal, at the other.

The clay is said to be 120 feet deep and is found in three distinct layers. The top layer is a yellow/brown clay which burns a brilliant red colour, the next is an ironstone marl which also burns red and was used mainly for the 'Windmill' brand roofing tiles and fittings. The last layer is a blue shale used for very strong metallic bricks which are equal in strength to blue bricks.

Mr Albert Eadon, who worked at the brickyard for many years recalls...

"In the twenties the clay was dug out manually with claypicks, wheeled in barrows to the edge of the quarry face and tipped down a chute to the endless chain and trolleys that conveyed it to the works. There were over a hundred men employed making 6,000,000 tiles a year on the six presses. The operators earned 2/6d (12½p) per thousand tiles, the surfacer producing the smooth finish 1/7d (8p) and the lad taking the tiles from the machine 11d (less than 5p)."

The following extract is taken from an article printed in 'The British Clayworker' in November 1903...

"In wet or showery weather some clay would be given a preliminary drying in a shed to assist grinding from where it is hauled to the machine shed and passed through a nine foot grid pan. It is then elevated and screened and has a due proportion of water administered. From here it is sent into a conveyor, where it is weathered for fourteen days.

After that it is passed through a pair of steel faced finishing rolls, pugged and conveyed into a mixer, from whence it is fed into an Edge bat machine. These bats are put by for a week and then the final operation is done by two presses by Edge and two by Gosling and Gatenbury which make the nibs and holes in one operation. There are three sheds for drying tiles, two holding 350,000 and another holding 500,000. From the drying sheds the tiles are taken direct to the kiln. The brick kiln is a continuous one by Sercombe with fourteen chambers, 105 feet high, each chamber holding about 10,000 bricks."

Mr Sam Gill worked at the brickyard and remembers the method of stacking and firing the kiln...

"At the brickworks they had kilns that were fired with coal. As the boats brought the coal it was all manhandled. They would stand out in rows outside these kilns, which were big buildings. You walked inside with your barrow all stacked up, then you sealed it all. Then, all these people, the firemen, fired the kiln getting it hotter and hotter. You had spy holes in the top, you looked down and when the colour was right you knew that the temperature was right and you went on for so many days. Then they opened where they'd bricked up the entrance and you went in to bring out the bricks to be taken to the canal or loaded onto lorries. It was a long process, now you've got recordings of heat and everything, electrical furnaces, but then it was all visual. Cherry red, white, they were experienced in the colours."

In 1938, when Mr Baird came to manage the brickworks, it was a flourishing business, owned by Allied Bricks who also owned another twelve or thirteen brickyards around the country. Before the war the old tunnel kilns were used, as previously described, but during the war the site was requisitioned by the Government and a factory making aircraft components stood on the site till 1943 or 1944. G.E.C. then took it over till the end of the war when Allied Bricks returned.

Mr Baird, with the help of Rugby M.P. Bill Brown, were able to reclaim workers from the army. After the war, with the new machinery, only fifty men were employed at the yard.

A canteen was also provided for the use of the employees. In the early 1900's the children of the village were able to earn pocket money of about 6d (2½p) a week by taking the workers their lunches to the brickyards every day.

Mr Gill remembers...

"At the brickyard dinners were brought to some people. The food would be put in a basin, there'd be a handkerchief to put it in and on the top there'd be a saucer and the pudding would be put in that with a bit of custard. It would be all tied up with a knot, a fork and spoon put through and the children would bring them their dinners."

The oldest ex-brickworker living in Napton is Mr Bill Young and he worked under eight managers over the years, from Mr Charles Watson to Mr Baird. The last manager at the brickyard was Mr Gwyther. Bill remembers the brickyard as quite a safe place to work although he does remember one or two incidents...

"Oh, there were a few lost fingers on the pressers.

My relation and another chap both lost half a finger on the 6 by 3 press.

I remember seeing there was a big wagon, with two trailers behind it, loaded up with bricks going over the bridge. One pushed the other and over they went. Yes, the steam was flying up, my last job was there, and I expected them to be killed but they came out white as snow, white as a sheet."

In 1957 the kiln, which was a tunnel kiln of Dutch design, fired by heavy oil and the longest brick kiln in Europe, was built. The hottest point of the kiln reached a temperature of 1090° C and it was never allowed to go out. Bricks in the late fifties were fetching £30 per thousand.

Another former employee of the brickworks is Esmy Dowling. He tells us about his work there...

"To get the clay out of the quarry down to the bottom level they used a lift designed, I think, by a man called Sudlow, I think from the baking family in the village. I was the last person to use it. How it operated was a full wagon going down brought an empty one up onto the level of the quarry itself and then there were tracks laid to

where the men were working. Some people had the clay tipped to them and others finished off down the bottom. The clay was all mixed up so they'd got, you know there wasn't a bad batch or a particularly good batch, it was all mixed up and you got an even texture of the clay. One day when we were broken down, where the lift ran up and down, in the clay I found a lump of wood, crystallised wood which I gave to Mr Birdall and he took it to the Oxford Museum and it was one of the first two trees which ever grew in this country. It's still there as far as I know.

The average wagons a day before you got bonus was 112 and after that you got bonus which was going some I can tell you. The stone was all drilled by hand till I left there. What it meant was one man holding a drill and another wielding a hammer up and down. The first time I ever held the drill I could hear the hammer whistle as it went past my ears and then you knew you'd got to hold it still or else. Then, when you'd got a hole started, you'd tip water in and a bag at the bottom of the drill and while he was going back with the hammer you'd give it a quarter turn 'cos the drill had got shoulders, that was to cut a hole. Then when you'd got to the required depth they'd put gelignite in and a detonator and fuse and blow it up. Then you'd got to clean every bit up after they'd blown it because if you got a little chip of the stone in it would ruin your tiles so you'd got to scrape it all up, load it onto flat bed trucks and then tipped into the tip. Every so many feet you'd get various, well, it started with soil, then you'd get a little bit of clay which was yellow clay, pipe clay which wasn't very good, then a bit of ironstone and rubbish, sand. The depth of the face onto the blue clay was ninety feet. The blue clay was not used while I was there because of the lime in it. It would have blew the bricks or the tiles would have gone all shapes.

They used to cook eggs on the shovels at the brickyard, one man managed to eat twenty one one day.

They had a ton of cement come there and one man with a wheelbarrow moved the cement in two runs, twelve cwt on the first barrow and eight on the second which wasn't bad going."

The brickyard closed in depriving Napton of yet another source of employment.