

## The Brick Fields of North Kent

Clay is clay whether it is made into the finest vase or the humblest brick. We have all enjoyed digging the local clay of our area and seeing how it fires. In these days of commercial manufacture we can lose touch with where the raw material comes from.

I was therefore fascinated to read a “Times Past” article by Bob Ogley in the Kentish Times. He has kindly given me permission to reproduce it here:

The golden years of the brick field industry were the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the 1890s, when rapid growth increased the demand for building bricks. Wherever there was suitable clay, small brickfields would open and they proliferated in areas close to the town centres. A glance at some of today’s roads gives a clue – Brickfield Farm, Longfield, Brickworks Cottages, Sevenoaks, Brick Kiln Lane, East Sutton, and Brickfield Farm Gardens, Farnborough.....there are many more.

The men who worked in the fields were quite naturally called “brickies”. At one time there were more than 5,000 men in Kent employed in the industry and for them the season began in late March or April. They worked together in gangs of six in berths or sheds located alongside the washbacks, large storage tanks for the clay. Once moulded, the bricks were stacked in hacks to dry for a few weeks. When dry, they were built into cowl for burning by men called crowders. On completion of the firing, the bricks were stacked by sorts into separate piles depending on their quality and grade. The whole process, apart from the moulding, took place out of doors.



Many years ago, as a young reporter, I spoke to some of the men who had worked in the brickfields at the beginning of the century and they told me how the clay was poured into the washback and left to set. The men sprinkled in bits of coal ash, some earth and chalk. Every “brickie” had his own job. There were temperers, moulders, flatties, crowders, sorters, horsemen, barrow loaders, who were usually just children, and pushies.

All were paid on piece work by the firm, but the responsibility for hiring and paying them rested with the moulder, the most senior man in the gang. A good brickie could make 900 bricks an hour if all went well, or about 50,000 in a week and a million in a season. They worked at such high speed that the bricks were leaving the moulder's hands every four seconds. A pushy trundled a barrow containing about 30 of them to the hacks every two minutes.

A few weeks ago, Pam Francis told me her grandfather, George Hucks, worked in the brick works next to the railway station in Kemsing. It was known as the Clayhole. She wrote: "He lived in Telston Lane, Otford and walked to work every day. In 1926 he built an asbestos bungalow and over the next three years carried home in his haversack three bricks a day until he had enough to clad his bungalow in brickwork. That meant George had collected 2,600 bricks from the Clayhole . It sounds a bit exhausting but these men were tough."

I am sure those old brickies, who, watching metropolitan Kent rise out of the woods and fields, gained great satisfaction by seeing the results of their work. How times have changed.

After reading the article questions came into my mind such as "What was a cowl and a crowder?" and "how were the bricks fired?" If anyone knows the answers maybe they could write in.

*Jane Gibson*