

ROUND AND ABOUT IN THE PARISH.....

Freshfield Lane Brickworks was started by Guy Charles Hardy in 1899 in order to meet the needs of the then extensive Danehurst estate. His agents imported two men named Riley Sitford and Charles Elphick from Hudson Brickworks, West Hoathly. Mr Sitford was housed at Garden Cottage, Freshfield Lane and Mr Elphick in the right hand dwelling of Step Cottages.

The bricks from 1899 to 1948 were made from a limited top layer of Grinstead clay which is



Sheffield Park Station. It was a long job off-loading by hand and carting it to the Brickworks.

Winter work was so scarce that Mr Elphick left Mr Sitford to dig the clay while he found what other employment he could, which sometimes entailed walking up to, or more than eight miles daily,

A winter time task was digging and screening sand in the pit adjacent to Cowstocks but it was a very



BRICKYARD WORKERS AT HUDSONS WEST HOATHLY BRICKWORKS

exposed by a fault running through the brickworks. The surrounding area is Upper Tonbridge Green Sand, which is unsuitable for brick making. The men had no choice but to manhandle each stage of manufacture the hard way, starting with a pick and shovel.

The original clay used was hand dug in the winter, using iron wheeled wooden navy barrows to stock pile it in a "curf".

Added to the clay was fine refuse ashes, or "towns ash" as it was known, which came from towns' dustbins and these came by rail to



silty sand and not popular with bricklayers as it tended to make mortar that stuck to the trowel. Both sand and gravel were dug on a per cubic yard piecework rate. Only daylight hours could be worked at a flat rate per hour in the winter, all time limits due to the weather were unpaid. All these rules of pay were common to manual workers employed on an hourly basis in those days.

There was no running water available so in those formative days every drop of rainwater needed to be funneled into holes from which clay had been extracted. No 'mod cons' existed, and a selection of bushes in the nearby woods provided cover for nature's needs. Vast quantities of cold tea were consumed in the summer, some of it brought down by the families when they brought food.

Working days in the summer were extremely long, say from early morning until late at night, working at a high speed throughout the day. The day work rate from the mid-twenties right round to the outbreak of war in 1939 was equivalent of 5p an hour.

A lot of the work in the early days was manually done as mechanisation had not yet crept in.

During 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic we became familiar with the word 'furlough' with the Government paying wages so that businesses could retain their staff and prevent hardship through unemployment.

Ron Wenham recalled the bad winter of 1947 when they could not make bricks for 15 weeks, but the Brickworks paid them just to clean the place up. There was no 'furlough' scheme in force then but the Brickworks looked after their staff and continued to pay them; they even had a pension scheme which was very unusual at that time.



Ron reminded me that in 1947 coal was short because of the situation after the war and it was remembered that coke was burnt on stoves. Ron referred to the fuel crises as the Shinwell Crises, after Manny Shinwell who was then in the Government of the day.

Ron provided the above photo which was taken at just about the time when the brickworks produced their two millionth brick. Ron had the job of sending up a rocket and just as he lit it, he put his cap on the top, ran off sharply and the rocket went off into the unknown with his cap attached. Naturally he never saw it again and often wondered where it landed. [Photo next page] To the far left is Shon Bennett (Manager) and to the far right is Ronald Hardy (owner).

My thanks to the late Laurence Hardy and the late Ron Wenham.



Jill Rolfe