

500 years of making bricks at The Dell...

by David Stabler

The brick kilns at The Dell, Great Linford, (just off Nicholas Mead) restored in the early 1980's by MKDC, were originally built in the late 1800's by coal, lime and agricultural merchant, George Osborn Price of Newport Pagnell. The first documentary reference to brick-making in the parish related to the building of Great Linford Manor House in 1697, it had been a local activity for many hundreds of years. Evidence of this once important industry is the former brick works at Fenny Stratford, Simpson, Great Woolstone, Little Woolstone and Bradwell.

The brick kilns, associated water-filled clay pits and spoil heaps were derelict for many years after brick making ceased around 1911, before the clay pits were worked out, when improved methods of clay extraction and design of continuous firing kilns made it more economical to transport bricks from Newton Longville by steam traction engine.

The brick making process employed gangs of six men, two dug out the blue Oxford clay, mostly in the wetter seasons. It was then fed continuously, by a third man, through a 'pug', a machine that beat and stirred the clay and fed it out in a strip through a 'die' onto an oiled table. A fourth man, 'the cutter off' made six bricks at a time, weighing 25 kilos, using a wire frame, similar to a cheese cutter. These 'green' bricks were loaded onto wheelbarrow by the 'runner-away', the fifth man, who took them to the sixth gang member, the 'setter-down', who placed them on duckboards to 'cure' for at least a month. The stack of green bricks was protected from the rain or hot sun by a canvas, straw or wooden roof before being loaded into the kiln for firing.

Brick making used to be exceptionally hard work, a six man gang would work 12 hours a day, with little rest or shelter from the elements, for 22 shillings a week, [£1 10p] However compared with the weekly earnings of a farm labourer, 14 shillings and 10 pence, [79p] this might have been seen as a good wage.

The three 'beehive' kilns at The Dell were of the down draught type, heat being drawn up pockets 'bags' in the side walls and down through the bricks in the 'chamber' through 'flue' openings in the floor of the kiln, by the draught from a single chimneystack that served all three kilns.

This system was preferred for its even firing temperature, up to 1,150c, which is easily controlled by adjusting dampers. The iron bands around the kilns absorbed the immense stress incurred during alternate firing and cooling. If used singly, the downdraught kiln was termed 'intermittent' because it stood idle for a week during the cooling time and another week for unloading and restocking. To overcome this problem and maintain continuous production three kilns were built and used in rotation, one firing, and another cooling whilst the third was emptied and reloaded.

One hundred and twenty tonnes of coal, brought in by narrow boat, was used for each kiln full of bricks, with fires lit in each fire-hole around the kiln rim. At one time Jack Read, who lived close by in 'Spring Cottage' on Willen Lane, was responsible for keeping them going night and day.

Each kiln could hold 20,000 to 25,000 "green bricks". Three days after the fire was lit, the kiln was glowing at 600°C and the water evaporated turning the clay a reddish brown. Over four days the temperature was carefully raised to 900°C and the 'blue' smoke disappeared from the chimney. A further 24 hours firing took the temperature to 1.150°C, after which the kiln was allowed to cool for a week before the finished bricks were ready to be unloaded.

The canal wharf adjoining the brick kilns, now used by the Lionhearts Cruising Club, was the place from where the bricks were loaded 20,000 at a time onto horse-drawn narrow boats and transported along the Grand Union Canal for building work at Wolverton, New Bradwell, Cosgrove and Castlethorpe.

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