

# BRICKS – Emsworth’s most enduring land-based legacy

## Part 1 by Andrew Butler

When asked what three things epitomise the Emsworth area, most people would probably say oysters, sailing and P G Wodehouse! Sadly, very few would think of BRICKS. But in reality, brick and pottery making has been a pivotal industry in and around Emsworth since Roman times.

Brickmaking is thought to have originated in the Middle East, several thousand years ago. The Romans brought the practice to England around 50AD, and were quick to leverage the potential for brickmaking in the Emsworth area. Brickmaking needs a reliable source of material, and the Reading Clay deposits that extend along this coastline are particularly rich under Hayling Island, Emsworth, Chidham and Rowlands Castle.

Clay is heavy and bulky, so brickmaking is usually concentrated around locations where the deposits are to be found. We see the evidence of Roman bricks – which are typically much smaller and narrower than modern bricks – in the walls of local churches like St Thomas à Becket at Warblington. Those at Warblington were most likely quarried from the ruins of the local Roman villa.

The practice of brickmaking largely died when the Romans departed. The resurgence started in the early Medieval period, spurred by the inward migration of Dutch and Flemish master masons who brought the skills with them. But in Hampshire and Sussex, the demand for bricks as a building material stayed low due to the abundance of alternative materials like flint and wood. Building with brick only became fashionable again during the Tudor dynasty, epitomised by magnificent buildings like Hampton Court Palace. The Great Fire of London in 1666 demonstrated the inherent weakness of towns built largely of wood with open hearths, which led to early government legislation that drove demand for brickmaking. The industrial revolution generated an immense wave of demand.

This included not just the new factories and mills, but also the infrastructure to maintain them. So the creation of the canal network, followed by the even larger railway network, were huge markets for brick production. T R Gourvish (in 1980) calculated that during the 1840s, at least a quarter of all British brick production was consumed by the building of the railway network itself. Yet another stimulus came from the abolition of the unpopular brick tax in 1850. The brick tax was introduced in 1784, to help recover the cost of the American War of Independence, and partially compensate for the loss of North American tax revenue. Condemned throughout its short life, the Brick Tax disincentivised builders to create elaborate and high quality buildings, and forced many brickmakers into liquidation.

### *Cottage Industry*

Emsworth’s own brickmaking industry developed largely as a cottage industry, usually practised alongside other professions on a seasonal basis. Noel Pycroft recalls a Hayling Island brickmaker named Robert Barber who doubled up as a saltmaker – probably by using the heat from the brickmaking kiln or clamp to evaporate brine. Farmers would often run a small brickmaking business on the side. They would dig clay in the autumn, when the harvest was over, and then leave this over the winter to weather. Brick moulding would happen during the spring, and the firing of the bricks (which could last several weeks) would take place while everyone was busy at harvest time. The additional benefit for farmers was the ready source of building material for barns, walls and other immediate needs.

During the 1800s, multiple small brickworks sprang up in the Emsworth area. Around Emsworth, at least eleven brickyards were created between 1814 and 1894. But all remained small and largely limited to servicing the needs of the immediate community.

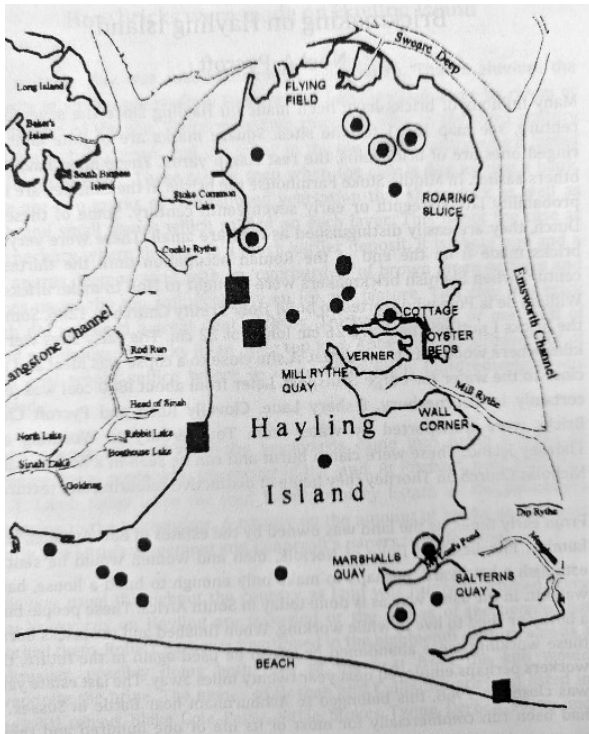


Fig. 1.

Meanwhile, Hayling Island saw a huge surge in brickmaking capacity. Figure 1 shows a map reproduced from Noel Pycroft's book, entitled *Brickmaking on Hayling Island*. The squares show lime kilns, the ringed circles show brick kilns and plain filled circles show yards where firing clamps were used.

The ability to transport bricks by sea was a natural advantage for Hayling Island brickmakers. Many buildings on Thorney Island, and further afield as far as Worthing, were built from Hayling Island bricks.

Figure 2 shows the *Langstone* being loaded. This was a well known lugger that now lies



derelict in Langstone harbour. For many years, the *Langstone* transported brick cargoes from both Tournerbury and the Bursledon Brickmaking Company dock at Swanwick.

The Pycroft brickworks was – by far – the best known brickworks on Hayling Island, thanks largely to the multiple generations of an iconic family who created it. The Pycroft family had been brickmakers in the Portsmouth area since before 1750. The first family-owned brickworks opened in the late 1870s, at Velder Avenue in Eastney. But by the turn of the last century, the family had relocated to Hayling Island, and the first yard was started in 1911 in Copse Lane by the grandfather of Noel Pycroft. Noel's father opened the better known Northney site in 1934, and they produced hand-made bricks using very traditional methods until 1989. Instead of using one or more purpose-built kilns, Pycroft would fire the bricks using what is known as a clamp. A clamp is just a form of mobile kiln, and has two advantages. They can be built anywhere there is level, dry ground. And they can be as large as physical limitations allow. Pycroft clamps typically held about 50,000 bricks, and the largest they ever built (in 1947) contained 140,000 bricks. But the clamps used in some other brickworks could hold over a million bricks. Figure 3 shows a typical clamp built at the Pycroft facility.



Fig. 2. left and Fig. 3. above

Continued overleaf

## BRICKS contd

At first glance, this looks to be a flimsy and ramshackle affair. But a huge amount of effort – and experience – went into the creation of these structures. The unfired bricks inside – known as ‘green’ bricks – were carefully positioned to create air channels for the hot air that would circulate for several weeks after being lit. The whole structure would be covered by corrugated iron, which helped protect the bricks from the rain and helped contain the immense heat. This could reach over 1100° centigrade!

Noel’s memoirs relay some fascinating anecdotes about the challenges they faced when procuring both clay and the all important ash. The seam of clay at the Northney site was only about one metre deep, and was soon exhausted. So bricks were made from brick earth transported to the Pycroft site from numerous sources, including house foundations, graves and even sewage trenches. The sources of ash were even more eclectic. To quote from Noel’s book *“I have dug out from the ballast hole, Havant Road, the bricks fired with this ash, burnt a lovely colour due to the ammonia of rotted contents from the toilet buckets, which had been emptied on it from the gun site guardhouse for five years. This produced a stronger smell when burning but lovely bricks.”*

A 1974 short film about the working of Pycroft Brickworks is available online, courtesy of the British Film Institute.

Fig. 4.



Meanwhile, Noel’s uncle – Albert Pycroft – created his own brickworks at Cot Lane, Chidham just after WWII. Albert was a wildfowler during the winter, and only produced bricks as a summer activity. The Museum possesses a self-published book, written by Graham Fielder in 1974, and donated by Albert’s grandson Aaron, which details the story of the Chidham brickyard. Figure 4 shows Albert and his team preparing bricks ready for firing at the Chidham facility.

Chidham bricks were considered exceptional quality, and were a popular choice for the wave of council house, school and other civic building that took place post-war. But the Chidham brickyard eventually succumbed to the economic pressures that faced all small brickyards. Albert’s brickworks now lives on as Maybush Copse community woodland, where numerous clues to its industrial past can still be observed.

In the next edition, we will continue to explore the history of brickmaking in the Emsworth area, with a visit to the largest and most successful brickmaking operation at Rowlands Castle.

### Sources:

Figure 1 Noel Pycroft, *Brickmaking on Hayling Island*

Figure 2 Bursledon Brickmaking Museum

Figure 3 Bursledon Brickmaking Museum

Figure 4 Graham Fielder *Hand Brickmaking*