

HESKETH BANK BRICKWORKS

A Short History of Brick Making at Hesketh Bank

Hesketh Bank stands on ridge of boulder clay which was deposited during the last ice age. In the early part of the Victorian period of expansion of industry and urban areas, this clay represented a resource for brick making that could not be readily tapped because of the relative remoteness of the area.

The West Lancashire Railway was promoted by Southport interests to link the town to Preston and East Lancashire. It also had the aim of opening up the rural area between Southport and Preston so that agricultural produce could have better access to the urban markets and so that new forms of economic activity could be initiated. In promoting the West Lancashire Railway, the opportunities presented by the clay at Hesketh Bank were specifically referred to. The Railway reached Hesketh Bank from Southport in 1878 and it believed that a brickworks was established contemporaneously. The works was set up on a site lying to the north of the new railway line and with the river bank to the east by a company with the name of 'the Ainsdale and Skelmersdale Brick Company'; a rather strange name as neither Ainsdale nor Skelmersdale are particularly local to Hesketh Bank. It is believed that some of the original directors of the brickworks were also directors of the Railway Company, but none of those known had specific links with Ainsdale or Skelmersdale.

The location of the brickworks was an excellent one with respect to transport links for despatching bricks to a wide area and for bringing in coal. The works had its own sidings off the railway line and its own jetty on the River Douglas which was used by coastal shipping at this time and also provided a link to the canal basin at Tarleton and to the canal network. At this period, the works comprised of one kiln and associated buildings in the form of a pug mill, engine house and a tall chimney, all located toward the eastern end of the site, with the clay being extracted from a pit at the western end of the site near to Station Road. Additional clay may also have come from the excavations for the Railway. The stationary steam engine providing power to the whole works was probably built by the Blackburn firm of Yates and Thom as an old Lancashire boiler that latterly remained on site for water storage had this company's name on its safety valve.

The process of brick making changed little over the years and essentially comprised:

- Excavating and transporting the clay to the works.
- Mechanical working of the clay through a pug mill where larger stones were removed or crushed and where water was introduced if necessary to bring the clay into a consistency where it could be moulded.
- Squeezing a continuous slab of clay through a die which had the cross-section of a brick onto an iron table where it was cut into individual bricks by tensioned wires held in a frame.
- Removal of the 'green' bricks by hand, on barrows, to the drying sheds which were heated by waste heat conducted from the kilns.
- Removal of the dried bricks on barrows to the kilns.
- Firing the kilns to bake the bricks. This was done using slack coal fed down tubes from a floor on the top of the kiln.

The kilns were divided into a several chambers and operated as a continuous process. One chamber would be being filled, others warming, one or two burning, several cooling and one being emptied. It would therefore take over a week before bricks were ready for removal for sale or to go into stock piles. The kilns were two level structures: the massively constructed ground level part being where the bricks were burnt and the upper level part being where the burning process was fed by slack coal dropped through firing holes in the floor. This task was undertaken by three men, working alone through three shifts round the clock.

The drying sheds were low roofed and covered a large area. They were heated by the waste heat from the kilns which passed through flues under the drying shed floor on the way to the chimney.

The whole of the process was quite labour intensive and much of the work heavy, especially the hand barrowing of bricks to and from the drying sheds and the kilns. In later years, this latter task was taken over, at least in part, by the use of fork lift trucks. In the earlier period of the brickworks, some of the bricks and tiles were hand made on benches, with some of this work being undertaken by women.

In parallel with the establishment of the brickworks, there were also plans to open up Hesketh Bank for residential development in the form of substantial, 'villa' type dwellings in the area bounded by the brickworks, the River, Beconsall Lane and Station Road with a road layout that was intended to include a promenade fronting onto the River Douglas. These plans for residential development in Hesketh Bank came to nothing at this stage, and it is difficult to believe that residential development of this type would be marketable next to a new brickworks. The land where the housing was planned eventually came to be excavated by the brickworks for the clay.

For reasons not now known, the brickworks changed hands very early in its existence and was taken over by a young, entrepreneurial Henry Alty who, it is understood, moved to Hesketh Bank from Rufford at the age of 21 at this time, having gained experience in the brick industry at Burscough. The business was destined to remain in the ownership of Henry Alty and his descendents for over 100 years.

Henry Alty managed to make the works into one of the largest and most successful ones in the area, not least because of its excellent transport links and in time a second kiln was built. This kiln was of the *Hoffman* type. Probably around this time the area of drying sheds was considerably expanded. In the latter part of the Victorian period the local towns were growing at a very fast rate, Southport was at that period completing more than two houses per day, and so there was a very healthy local market for the bricks. The jetty on the River Douglas was linked to the works by a narrow gauge, inclined railway and there was a scotch derrick on the jetty which could lift the wagon loads of bricks directly into the holds of canal barges or coastal ships. The latter included the well known steam coasting vessels ('*Puffers*') used on the Clyde and the west of Scotland. Henry saw the possibilities of expanding this market by taking control of some of the costs of transport and commissioned the construction of a small steam ship to be used for the transport of bricks to the Fylde. This ship was of 45 tons displacement and was built by the Lytham Shipbuilding & Engineering Company (their builder's number 272). It was 62 feet in length, had a 12

horse power condensing steam engine and was in effect a slightly smaller version of a *Puffer*. It was launched on 31st July 1899 and was appropriately named '*Fylde*'.

In addition to bricks, the works also produced tiles. These were not roofing tiles but what are known as 'land drainage tiles' which were butt jointed pipes of 3 inch (75mm) or 4 inch (100mm) diameter used for draining fields where the ground water table was high. There was a strong demand for these in this low lying area with clay and peaty soils and where farming has always been orientated toward arable production.

The works became a major employer of local labour and in its heyday probably employed over 100 people. The business also branched out into other fields which included a large timber yard and steam saw mill and the supply and construction of greenhouses for the expanding local market garden businesses. In due course, a number of houses were also built along Station Road, Hesketh Bank; this activity was probably undertaken to cover periods when demand in the other activities was slack.

In order to address the building boom post World War 2 associated with national reconstruction, some expansion and modernisation of the works was undertaken. Mains electricity replaced the stationary steam engine and a third kiln was built. This was of the Staffordshire transverse arch type and was built to the west of the existing works, on the site of the earliest clay pit which had been in-filled. This kiln had its own chimney, somewhat shorter than the one serving the rest of the works. In the post war period, the method of excavating and transporting clay was changed from a continuous bucket excavator and cable or chain hauled 15 inch gauge railway with small wagons to a large dragline excavator. This dragline excavator was made by Ransomes and Rapier (works number 490) and is believed to have been electrically powered and bought second-hand from an open cast coal site. This machine loaded clay into a cable hauled 2 foot 6inch gauge railway with large hopper wagons with bottom opening doors.

The business also found a niche in supplying building materials and horticultural supplies. Initially focussing on the local market gardeners, this was an area of activity that was set to expand and the business operated from depots in Lytham, Hoole, Burscough and Cranage (Cheshire) as well as the Hesketh Bank site.

The nature of boulder clay is such that it is suitable only for the production of common bricks and in the post war period demand for these became gradually weaker. Production became focussed on the most recent kiln and the two older kilns were only occasionally used through the 1960s in short periods when there were more orders. In about 1967 the large clay pit had been worked out, after extending nearly to the rear gardens of houses in Station Road and Beconsall Lane and reaching a depth of over 18 metres (well below sea level). New clay workings were opened up to the south of the old Southport – Preston railway line which had been closed in 1964 and removed. These clay workings were undertaken with a Ruston Bucyrus 22RB dragline excavator and a large, second hand (ex army), Albion dump truck.

Demand for common bricks began to fall drastically at the end of the 1960s as builders were using concrete blocks instead. Whilst there was still some demand for

drainage tiles, plastic drainage pipes were starting to be introduced to the market. At this time, there were still five works in the West Lancashire area producing common bricks and drainage tiles. One by one they began to close down. Brick making at Hesketh Bank finished in 1970 and the very last of the local works producing clay bricks (Burscough Brick & Tile Works and Littlewood's at Croston) closed down only a few years later.

Alty's other business areas were still viable and more of the old brickworks was devoted to these activities. The very large area of drying sheds were used for storage as was the newest of the kilns after removal of much of its internal brickwork.

The tall chimney was felled spectacularly in 1975 by a specialist contractor using explosives and the two older kilns were demolished around the same time. The drying sheds were demolished and replaced by a new storage building in about 2003.

Despite the removal of these features, the site still contains substantial remains of the former brick making. A tall pug mill building still stands as does the last of the kilns and its associated chimney. These represent the most intact features from all of the nine or so brickworks sites which were to be found in the area stretching between Preston, Chorley and Southport and it is to be hoped that their importance in terms of heritage comes to be appreciated so that they can be conserved. It should be noted that the site is an active, private, commercial business and access should not be undertaken without the site owner's permission.

Other brickworks in the western part of Lancashire were located at:

- Brown Edge, Scarisbrick,
- Mawdesley,
- Banks,
- Longton Bridge (Bentley's)
- Croston (Two works: Compton's and Littlewood's)
- Burscough (Two works: Bridge's and Burscough Brick & Tile (this one was also known as Thoroughgood's)).

The first three works had closed down by the early 20th Century and the works at Longton Bridge, Croston and Burscough all survived into the 1960's although Bridge's had moved over to producing concrete bricks by this period.

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