

The Marston Hill Brick and Tile Company, Priors Marston. **by** **Alan Flint**

Evidence for the existence and operation of a brickyard at Priors Marston during the second half of the nineteenth century remains rather sketchy. The brickyard was not mentioned in the 1850 edition of White's Directory, but the 1874 edition shows John Cockerill as manager, and his wife as brickmaker. Other oral and documentary evidence supports this, with a suggestion that the yard closed down in about 1895. Use of the site over the next forty years varied considerably, but included a slaughter house in one of the buildings, with the butcher living on site in the cottage by the roadside.

The clay of the area is well-suited to brickmaking, and so it came as no surprise that the owners - the local Alsop family - (who themselves already had brickmaking experience and connections at Napton and Cherry Orchard, Kenilworth) decided to reopen in 1939. This came to a temporary halt in 1941 when the manager, Eric Alsop, was called into the RAF. During the War, the buildings were used by the TOC Machine Tool company, evacuated from Coventry.

Following Eric Alsop's early release from the services, the brickyard was re-opened in 1945. The brick-walled, tiled-roof buildings and the machinery were renovated for both the 1939 and 1945 openings. The first 10,000 facing bricks were sold in January 1946 to Ludwells of Leamington Spa. The sales ledger subsequently shows transactions to some 232 firms, many of them local. The wage for the manager in 1939 was £3 per week, with brickmakers - depending on production levels - earning £2 per week. Wages remained the same for the 1945 re-opening. An average of five men were permanently employed at the works for the next 25 years.

The clay was dug by hand out of the adjacent hillside, ensuring that all ironstone overlap had already been removed, for this shattered in the kiln. the clay was loaded into four wheeled tipper trucks that were pushed on narrow gauge rails into the first floor of the buildings where the Pug Machine was situated. This worked the clay into a pliable state for moulding and an Auger moved it forward to the brickmakers' benches. The moulds were wood, hand-made on site to an architect's specification for any

shape - including window mullions, bullnoses, coves, chamfers, plinths. Even so, the bulk of each burning in the kiln was for standard facing bricks. Drying of the "green" bricks was on the ground floor of the same building with warm air forced through ducts from a coal-fires boiler. The two kilns were outside in the yard with a shared central chimney.

Following a fire caused by an electrical fault, a new steel framework and asbestos-clad building was erected in 1960. This was again two-storey, with the first floor level with the hillside clay face. The clay was fed into the first floor by dumper trucks where it was loaded into a 7 foot (2100 mm) circular pan. A little water was added, and it was fed, guided by channels, under two rotating steel rollers some 18 inches (450 mm) wide, linked to a central rotating drive shaft. The processed clay was forced through a grille at the base of the machine into a collecting hopper that fed onto a continuous belt with shallow metal scoops that raised it some 6 feet (1800 mm) into the Pug Machine. This had a central drive shaft with rotating paddles that worked the clay into the right pliable state for moulding. The clay was fed by Auger into a pipe with a 10 inch (250 mm) square opening at the end.

This was then stacked onto the several brickmaking benches, with metal moulds for standard facing bricks and brick for specials. The mould was set on the bench and coated in sand. The clay was then thrown into the mould to force out the air, and any surplus clay would be removed by a wire cheese-cutter type tool. An experienced brickmaker could make some 900 - 1000 bricks per day. The sanded and spaced bricks were then stacked on slatted floors, for the new building had been erected over the kilns and the surplus heat rose from the kilns rose through the slats to dry the green bricks. When ready, they were loaded into the kiln below, with about 60 facing bricks per barrow load lowered by lift.

The kilns had two coal fires per side, each with a hopper that took six barrow loads of coal that could last for up to seven hours. The coal was fed into the base of the fire by an Auger with fan-assisted draught. A series of brick-built channels and ducts under the brick floor fed narrow slots some 12 inches (300 mm) apart that distributed the heat as evenly as practical. Dampers controlled the central chimney. Heat was recorded on four thermal lances. The bricks were stacked (called setting) so heat reached all sides and the bottom 4 feet (1200 mm) were always facing bricks. In fact, the bottom 2

rows were left in for several burns as they always became very brittle. The specials were always set higher up the kiln, with the smaller fireplace bricks at the every top. If all the bricks were facing bricks, then there would be about 20,000 bricks per burn, but this could almost double in number if fireplace bricks were incorporated. A typical burn would take a 14-day cycle of setting, warming-up, intense two-day heating of up to 1000 degrees FH, cooling down, and unloading (called drawing). The doorway to the kiln (called the wicket) was bricked up and plastered over with sand and clay, apart from the inevitable spy-hole.

The colours of the bricks varied according to the type of clay and sand used, together with the proximity of the firehole, and the height of the kiln. Those close to the top of the kiln tended to be deep, rich red in colour, whilst those nearest the fires became - not unsurprisingly - almost black.

The bricks were collected by contractor, with a large number being used in civic buildings and churches, including the Church of the Holy Name in Bow, London, and a new 1960 Church in Newbury. Surprisingly, only a few buildings in Priors Marston itself have been built using local bricks - from either the old or newer yards. However, more are evident in garden walls, outbuildings and extensions, some using overburns and seconds provided - no doubt - at a cheaper rate.

From about 1960, part of the production was switched to fireplace briquettes of various shapes and sizes, sold as fireplace kits. A well-illustrated catalogue provided a range of designs, and they were actively and successfully promoted by several companies. Two fireplaces of this type were installed on the Royal Sandringham Estate.

The yard was sold by Eric Alsop in 1957 to a London Company which retained the original name and Eric as manager until 1962. A year later, the name Marston Hill Brick and Tile Company ceased when it was purchased by the Allied Brick and Tile Company and was combined with the Napton yard. The Priors Marston yard was closed in 1970 and after attempts to start a small industrial estate, the site was designated for housing. The clay face, with topsoil added, was sloped to form a more practical angle for gardeners. Houses were erected where the kilns and production buildings once stood. No sign of the brickyard remains, except for the name, many local memories, and - of course - the bricks themselves in a variety of different locations across the country.



Two views from the hill of the Marston Hill Brick and Tile Company in 1953



Bricks being prepared at the Marston Hill Brick and Tile Company in the 1950s. The gentleman on the right of the photograph is Mr. Reg Taylor.



Company notepaper in the 1930s, with the renowned Marston Fireplace