

## The Brickmakers of Coventry: An introduction

The attempt to research and record the history of every brickyard in Coventry is a mammoth task, particularly when the only information may be a simple – or even single - entry in a trade directory. Shying away from this challenge, I have concentrated instead upon a few examples, probably the most important – or those with the best supply of information. Primary amongst these are Webster Hemmings works (and its various earlier guises), C Gray Hill and the Foleshill Brick and Tile Company, but there are scraps of information about several others. We are always happy to receive information about any of these – or other - brickmakers in the city and its environs. It is very much an on-going project.

A valuable starting point is the document produced by Wilf Hopley 'A History in Brick', written in 1980 for the Coventry and District Archaeological Society, relying very much on a practical, hands-on approach. His document is reproduced here. As Mr. Hopley wrote

"Documentary evidence is very sparse, due to the destruction of many records by enemy action in World War Two. The report is based on Ordnance Survey Maps, interviews, intensive field-walking and the examination of many thousands of bricks on demolition sites all over the city".

We have the advantage of a readily accessible newspaper archive and Census returns online, plus, of course, the physical evidence contributed by brick-collectors of which Mr. Hopley was one.



WILKINS

G.B.TEW

WILKINS  
&  
WEBSTER

W & W

A

T.HILL

HISTORY

WEBSTER  
&  
HEMMINGS

IN BRICK.

TOMLINSON

THE STORY OF THE COVENTRY BRICK INDUSTRY.

by

C.GRAYHILL

W.HOPLEY.

VICTORIA  
BRICKWORKS

T.ROLLASON

FOLESHILL  
BRICK AND  
TILE CO.

J.BURKE

### A HISTORY IN BRICK.

A study of the brick - making industry in Coventry, by the Coventry and District Archaeological Society: Industrial Section. Leader: Mr. W.Hopley.

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Tiles were made at Potters Harnall and Stoke in the 14th. century. The remains of a kiln were found when Harefield Road was being constructed in 1930.

The first written reference to brickmaking is an entry in the Coventry Leet Book in 1542. Brickmakers were required to make their bricks a standard 10" x 5" x 2" under pain of a heavy fine. Records refer to a brick - kiln in Foleshill in 1775 and 'The History of Stoke' records that the lords of the manor of Stoke were renting out clay and sand - pits on Stoke Heath for brickmaking at 1/6d. per 1,000 bricks made. Clay Lane may have derived its name from this.

Street and place - names are pointers to localities where the industry was carried on - Leicester Street, Gulson Road and Broad Street were all called Brick Kiln Lane at various times in the 17th. and 18th. centuries. There are still Brick - yard plantations at Rowley Road, Baginton and Gibbet Hill Road, Westwood. The latter is the site of the Stoneleigh estate brickyard, where a substantial building still remains, with 1873 on the gable and bricks stamped 'Lord Leigh'. With the exception of the above two sites and the factory of W.Tomlinson of Barkers Butts Lane, Coundon, the main concentration of brickyards lay to the east of Coventry, following the main seam of Keuper Marl. Exhall, Victoria, Hawkesbury and Wyken Collieries produced bricks as a sideline to their main business throughout the 19th. century. It was a profitable way to use up what would otherwise have been waste products. No physical remains of brickmaking can be seen on these sites at the present time, but Victoria Colliery bricks have been found on a site near Victoria Farm.

Several yards carried on brickmaking in Longford and a building in Oban Road marks the site of the Foleshill Brick and Tile Co. ( 1850 - 1935 ). Many bricks of the name were found on this and other sites.

In 1850, seven brickfields existed to the south of Primrose Hill in one area known as Spitalmoor, now built on and occupied by Paynes Lane, Days Lane, East Street and Canterbury Street. Most of the bricks used in the extensive construction programme when the Hillfields and Chapelfields districts were built



came from these brickyards. William Day worked in Days Lane, J. Priestly at Priestly's Bridge. ( The latter yard was subsequently owned by J. Snow, then Wilkins and Snow, Wilkins and Webster, Webster and Hemmings and today by Hemmings and Son and is the only yard still in operation.)

J. Snow supplied bricks for the building of the steam - flour - mill in Cox Street and took part in the banquet at the top of the chimney for the opening ceremony; in 1854, he also supplied the bricks to build the Britannia Street area. No bricks of this name have been found: W. Tomlinson of Coundon not only supplied the bricks for, but actually built, the Old Market Hall in 1867. Only one brick of this name has been found in our searches.

At the time of our survey, a new sewer was being dug across the area once called Spitalmoor and this enabled us to find many named bricks that I am sure would otherwise have been lost. A complete list of all bricks found is given at the end of this report.

Most of these brickworks were in existence throughout the 19th. century, but few continued to function after 1905. Hemmings and Son are now the sole survivors and are still in business in Stoney Stanton Road. They occupy a large site of 40 acres or more between Foleshill Road and Priestly's Bridge and carry out all the processes of brickmaking from quarrying their own clay to making the finished article. They make some 200,000 bricks per week. The firm was established in 1880 and most of the buildings, including the chimney, are of that date - although some, of course, had to be rebuilt after damage during the last war. The present Mr. Hemmings comes from a long line of brickmakers. A predecessor was a travelling brick-master employed by the early canal companies to make bricks for bridges etc. and a later member of the family did the same for the railway builders. Mr. Harry Webster lived at what is now the Royal Court Hotel, Keresley.

The once great industry that helped to build Coventry has nearly gone, leaving but few signs of its passing. Perhaps Days' Lane and Priestly's Bridge are the last silent witnesses to a 'History in Brick'.

#### NAMED BRICKS FOUND IN COVENTRY.

Wilkins; Wilkins and Webster; W & W ; Webster and Hemmings; Victoria Brickworks; C. Grayhill; G.B. Tew; Tomlinson; T.Hill; T.Rollason; J.Burke all of Coventry, and the Foleshill Brick and Tile Company of Longford.