

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2001

## Brickmaking in Berkshire

*Brickmaking in Berkshire* was the subject of Dennis Johnson's talk to the Wargrave Local History Society for their May meeting.

Dennis - who is the Secretary of the Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group - included both 'Berkshire as it was' and 'Berkshire as it is'. The area had a number of brickworks, and the growth of the industry was largely fortuitous., due to the presence of suitable materials. There were the Oxford clays in the north of the (old) county - further south a band of chalk - also important to the process - occurs, and then the Reading and London clays stretch right across the county from the west to Slough.

The Romans were the first brick makers in the area, some having been found near Abingdon. Typically they were 9 inches square and 2 inches thick (so more like tiles), but also there were special bricks with holes in, used as part of the Roman central heating system. After the Romans left Britain, brickmaking died out, and buildings made in the Dark Ages used bricks robbed from older buildings.

Brickmaking was re-started in the 15th and 16th centuries. Typical Elizabethan bricks were smaller than modern ones, and expensive items, so were only used for important buildings, such as Hampton Court. Simpler houses were timber framed, with wattle and daub infill, or if - say - a wealthy farmer, with some brick infill. These bricks would usually be made on an individual basis, for a specific building, and this practice continued until the 19th century - the remains of a kiln exist, for example, at Tadley made for the building of just 2 or 3 cottages.

Reading bricks have a distinctive red colour, although by different firing a yellow variety can be obtained, whilst by adding chalk, a white brick results. Many houses in the Reading area made use of these to create decorative patterns in their brickwork. The London clay would also make red or yellow bricks, and the works in the Bracknell and Wokingham area exported most of their production (particularly the yellow) to London - some yards having railway connections for the purpose.

Dennis then explained the basic process of brick making - digging out clay in the winter, allowing it to weather, then feeding it to a pug mill to mix it with other ingredients (such as chalk or sand). The actual bricks were moulded during the summer - an Act of Parliament only allowed this to occur from March to October, as the quality of bricks made in winter was poor, for the clay needed to dry before being used. The moulder - in charge of a team of 6 men - could make maybe 1000 bricks per hour by hand, and these 'green' bricks were left out to dry for several weeks before being fired in a kiln. The correct firing conditions was the key to success. The earliest firings were done by heaping the bricks and fuel together and covering with turf, but simple kilns followed - a single 'clamp' of a brick arch covered with turf being one of the earliest, followed by

round brick kilns. These were not fast enough, however, and various other styles were developed to give a continuous process. Another innovation to speed up brickmaking was the development of machine extrusion of the clay, which had only to be cut into brick sized lengths.

Dennis concluded with illustrations of the various types of kilns, and a particular look at several local brick making concerns, such as the Star Brick Works at Knowl Hill, Collier's Brick Works in Reading and Coopers Maidenhead Brick and Tile Co., and a number of local examples of the bricklayers art.

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