

## Who were THE BRICKFIELD MIDGETS

**The story of how clay became one of the most important minerals to be found in the Black Country**



*E.J. & J. Pearson, Brierley Hill coal and clay mines*

Mining in the Black Country was well established prior to the Industrial Revolution because coal was found near the surface and easily dug out of drift mines. Mining records show hundreds of workings located all over the area.

Other materials like iron ore and limestone were also extracted from the geological layers underground and this led to foundries being constructed to smelt cast iron for the manufacture of many items for industry and homes.

Land owners like Lord Foley and Lord Dudley had some of the deepest and largest mines on their land and when certain types of clay were found in abundance, they saw an opportunity to make more money and changed from mining coal to clay.

The change came about, because of the demand for clay to make bricks for building the homes of an ever increasing working population and because some-deep mines brought out the more valuable 'fireclay' used by the pottery industry. Clay mining from such great depths must have been very heavy work and possibly more labour intensive than coal because of the density and

weight of clay. After bringing it to the surface, the clay would have to be transported, mostly by horse and cart to brickyards which were being set up anywhere there was space for moulding and air drying the bricks. Consignments of clay and bricks were also in demand in other parts of the country and the orders received would be transported further afield by narrowboats to places like Stourport, where the clay and bricks would be transferred to other boats and barges, to then continue down the Severn river to Bristol and beyond. Records show in the early 1800s, land owners and mine owners selling the raw material at 34 shillings a ton, compared to a best price for coal of 12 shillings a ton at that time.

Clay could therefore be a profitable commodity and many brickyards started to appear next to mines. Records shows that around 1840, there were over 750 Brick makers yards in the Black Country. Most of them were fairly small businesses and would relocate when the local clay was exhausted. It is also recorded, there were over 2,000 Bricklayers listed by trade, working hard, to meet the ever increasing need at that time for housing, factories, foundries etc.



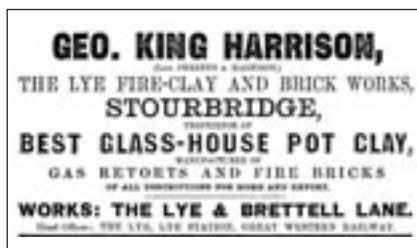
*Lord Foley  
Landowner  
Mine owner  
Brickworks owner*

*Brettell Lane  
Brickworks*



On the largest of scales, the brickworks of Stourbridge and district, used 46,000 tons of clay to produce a wide variety of furnace bricks in the 1850s. Their record books show the clay cost them 55 shillings a ton.

The businessman with the largest stocks of clay was George King Harrison, known as the 'King of Clay' because he never allowed his stock of maturing clay to fall below 50,000 tons. He owned Perrins & Harrison of Lye, and the collieries at Brettell Lane and Nagersfield. Perrins & Harrison's main business office was constructed in Brettell Lane in 1888 and it is still standing today. Like Nagersfield Colliery, off Brettell Lane, Whitley Colliery, just outside Halesowen had started as a coal mine and became much more profitable mining clay. Another large company, Harris and Pearson, in Amblecote, had four working pits and mining rights to over a hundred acres. They employed hundreds of miners and workers for their collieries and brick making businesses.



*Congreaves brickworks kiln*

The types of clay brought out of the mines varied right across the region. Lye, Stourbridge and Amblecote had deposits of the much sort after Fireclay which is resistant to high temperatures and is suitable for making the bricks to line furnaces and for the manufacture of utensils used in the metalworking industries, such as crucibles, saggars, retorts and glassware. Fireclay would make some land owners like Lord Foley and Lord Dudley very rich. Other types of clay benefitted the Hickman and Waldron families, because it was used in the construction of canals, where millions of bricks lined the sides and millions more were used to build bridges and locks.

So, bricks were in great demand throughout the Black Country and enterprising brickyards also started to make Coping Stones, Wall toppings, Paving slabs, and even Gate Posts, out of clay. Brickyard owners were constantly trying to expand their product range and could now claim, whatever could be cast in the Iron Foundries, could be made from clay.



*Above: Advertisement for George 'King' Harrison*



*Stourport-on-Severn Brickworks*

In 1860 E.J & J. Pearson Ltd was established. They owned 6 pits in the urban district of Brierley Hill and Amblecote. They mined for coal and fireclay on both sides of the river Stour. By the 1930's they had the largest output of refractories materials in the Midlands, if not England. Amalgamation with J.T.Price & Co. to form Price-Pearson Refractories Ltd came about in 1957 and in 1960 they constructed the 'state-of-the-art' Albion Works in Moor Street at a cost of £350,000.

The business was sold in the 1960's and the Withymoor area became an open cast mining site producing, with the John Hall site on the south side of Amblecote Road, some 8,000 tons of coal a week. When open cast mining ceased there the Withymoor Village was constructed with over 2,000 homes, shops, offices and local services for the area.

Prior to 1740, most of the bricks made were of the " narrow " variety. Haden Hall, Old Hill is an example of this type of construction.

The smaller 'narrow' bricks meant the construction took a lot longer and eventually, the demand to build as quickly as possible, led to the standardisation of the so called 'eleven pound' brick.



*Boats being loaded with bricks at the canal side*



*Haden Hill Hall*



*It took millions of bricks to build canals, their locks, tunnels and bridges*



*Above: Women workers at a brickworks*

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Bricks were made by hand and it was labour intensive, heavy, repetitive work. Many of the brick yards that sprang up near to pits and building sites would employ mainly women and children because they were 'cheap labour'.

The women who took up this type of work did so because apart from working at a home furnace making nails or chain, there was little opportunity to earn any money to help feed and cloth their families.

Grandmothers, mothers and Aunts often worked with other younger female family members including children. There are several recorded instances, of girls as young as 4, helping out in the yards and records show less than one in ten ever went to school and consequently couldn't read or write and didn't even know how old they were.

The 'pecking order' was strict and the 'Queen' who moulded and formed the bricks, employed a team to work with, negotiated their wages and paid them by results.

These young girls were called " Pages " and they would carry the wet clay from the tipped pile or store area to the work benches where it was pressed and formed in basic wooden box type moulds.

The 'Pages' carried the clay either in front of them, clasped in their arms or balanced on their heads. It was extremely hard work and every day they would be expected to transport as much as 14 tons to the moulding benches.

Carrying such heavy weights day after day for up to 15 hours had a detrimental effect on their bodies and postures. The 'Pages' would struggle after a few hours to have enough energy to keep up with the moulder and they developed a shuffling gait when walking, and most suffered with either bow-legged, knock-kneed, or had a pronounced hump-back for the rest of their lives.

The "Queens" worked with a team of three girls, aiming to produce about 3,000 bricks a day and getting paid 3s 0d for them. The days were long and it was a precarious existence because sometimes bad weather would soak

## The Blackcountryman

and spoil the drying bricks and they would not get paid for the work done. At the time, a girl could hope to earn up to 4s Od a week which amounted to a half-penny an hour for a 75 hour week. It was said that, in comparison, their wages and working conditions "made them worse off than Egyptian slave labour".

The town of Oldbury had 7 brick yards in 1866 and as one brick master reported "Oldbury produced the cheapest bricks in the Black Country". The people of Oldbury were not pleased with this fact because the so-called 'Brickfield Midgets' were the only group of females, who had a worse reputation than the women who worked the pit banks.



*Transferring bricks from boat to barge*

They were said to be foul mouthed, rough, and forever in the towns beer shops. The citizens of Oldbury campaigned long and hard, to eradicate this blot on their landscape, but all to no avail, because at that time there was very little choice of alternative employment for women in the area.

## OLDBURY brick yards & employee records:

### **Mr Davis's Brickyard, Greets Green, Oldbury.**

Manager: Samuel Pickley

Employing: 15 Moulders, and over 40 girls

Comments: All employees swore like troopers, and drank like fish.

Named Employees & age: Robert Hall, (10), Ann Watling, (17), Eliza Bennett, (16), Selina Bennett, (19), Maria Bryan, (17), and her cousin, Maria Bryan, (19).

### **Mr George Wood's Yard.**

Manager: Mrs Wood (wife of owner)

Employing: 4 Moulders and 15 girls

Comment: She tried to ban swearing during working hours, but gave it up as bad job.

Named Employees & age: N/A but youngest girl was 11 yrs old.

### **Mr Joseph Kendrick's Yard.**

Manager: William Langfort

Employing: 5 Moulders, and 30 girls

Named Employees & age: Eliza Astyn, (17), her sister, Maryanne Astyn (8), and as a helper, their younger sister (4).

## **OLDBURY brick yards & employee records:**

### **Mr James Saddlers Yard.**

Manager: James Hale

Employing: 10 Moulders, and 40 girls

Comments: Some girls didn't know how old they were.

Named Employees & age: Elizabeth Heardman (20), Mary Holden (16?), Mary Tonks (17), Susanna Garotty (11?), Rosina Williams (17?), Maria Hardy (10), and Selina Parkes (10?).

### **Mr Astyns Yard.**

Manager: N/A

Employing: 6 Moulders, and 25 young girls plus a couple of boys.

Named Employees & age: Jeremiah Laughlin,(9?), George Rose,(7?), who started at the yard when he was 4, and Betty Hoghead,(9?).

### **Mr William Bennett's Yard.**

Manager: N/A

Employing: 5 Moulders and 25 girls

Named Employees & age: Ann Conner, (10?), Selina Harris 11.

### **Messers Saddler Brothers Yard.**

Manager: James Hale

Employing: 6 Moulders and 30 girls and boys.

Comment: The manager also worked at James Saddlers Yard (above)

Named Employees & age: Robert Whitehouse,(10) Lucy Phillips,(13), Anna Stanley,(13).

The girls were the only two who could read. But not very well they said.

*It is appalling to think that children younger than 11 years of age were given into this kind of working environment where they were treated no better than slaves, while keeping them in poverty and ruining their health and physic.*

*Just like the removal of old mine workings, over 100 years of time and development has removed all the traces of brickyard locations and the old " Marleholes " have all been filled in. Child labour and the right to education is now governed by law in this country but, as we know, even in the 21st Century, it is a sad fact that our laws do not operate all around the World.*