

# A Brickworks in Ashwell Road, Oakham

by Alan McWhirr and David Smith

## Introduction

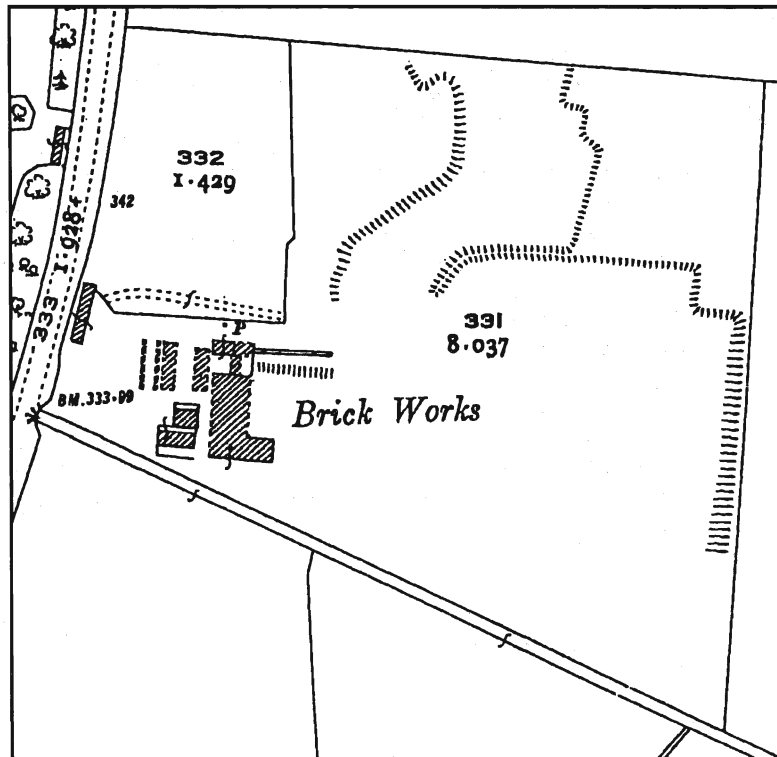
In March/April 1987 it was learnt that a nineteenth-century brick kiln and associated buildings in Ashwell Road, Oakham, were to be demolished prior to the land being used for housing. The writers visited the site and quickly recorded the main elements of the brickyard before they disappeared. Time was limited and did not permit an intensive survey of all the buildings in the yard, but detailed measurements of the kiln were taken and a photographic record made (illus. 1). The site is to the east of Ashwell Road about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile north of Oakham and the grid reference for the kiln is SK 8646 0959.

This paper records what was seen on that brief visit, it does not attempt a detailed history of the brickworks and its owners. However, a brief search through one or two commercial directories reveals that in 1881, Henry and William Hollis are listed as brick and tile makers, Ashwell Road, Oakham and at Cottesmore (Kelly's, 1881).



1. General view of the brickyard in 1987 showing the kiln in the centre background. (Photo: Alan McWhirr)





3. The 1930 edition of the 25" O.S. map. Scale 1:2500. Part of sheet IX, 2.

The production of bricks in yards of this type was usually seasonal with kiln firings taking place between spring and autumn. Few people would have been employed and most of them would probably have had other employment when brickmaking was not taking place. Quite often they were family concerns. However, the size of some of the structures shown on the O.S. map might indicate that this brickworks, at some stage of its development, grew to become more than a small family business.

There are many references to the way in which small rural brickyards, such as the one in Ashwell Road, operated. Clay was usually dug in the autumn and allowed to weather over the winter, occasionally being turned over. In the spring, the clay was finally prepared ready for brickmaking. Once made, bricks were allowed to dry before being fired in a kiln. The structures, therefore, that one is likely to find in a brickyard include somewhere for brickmakers to work, drying sheds, a kiln and in brickworks from the nineteenth century and onwards, possibly some mechanised way of puddling the clay, for example, a pugmill.



4. View of the Kiln in 1987 (Photo: Alan McWhirr)

### The kiln

The most complete of the surviving structures found on site was the kiln which in 1987 was still standing to nearly its original height (illus. 4). It was a Scotch kiln, a type introduced in the seventeenth century which originally was fuelled with wood, but during the nineteenth century coal was increasingly used. A Scotch kiln is an updraught intermittent kiln, which means that the fire is started at the bottom of the kiln and heat is gradually drawn through the kiln by the upward draught. An intermittent kiln had to be filled, heated, cooled and emptied every time the kiln was fired. Scotch kilns ranged in size and therefore in the number of bricks which could be fired at any one time. The Oakham kiln measured 23' 4" by 9' 6" (7.1 x 2.9m) internally and by comparison with other kilns whose capacity is known, it is likely that it could hold between 25-30,000 at any one firing. Detailed accounts of firings of Scotch kilns have been documented, but most of our knowledge comes from the Sussex brickyard of the Ashburnham Estate which continued in production until 1968 (Gordon 1969; Leslie 1970-1). The whole cycle from loading to emptying took between 10-12 days.

The Ashwell Road kiln measured 29' 6" by 16' 3" (9 x 5m) externally and there were 7 fireholes on each side. The walls of the kiln survived to a height of about 12-15(?)ft. Basically it was an open-topped rectangular chamber with entrances at each of the narrow ends.

The Scotch kiln was popular in the midlands, and many of the eighteenth-century brickyards known in Leicestershire, probably had a Scotch kiln. The remnants of one survives at Diseworth (Palmer 1983, 47 and Pl 46).

### Other structures

Time did not permit a detailed examination of the other structures in the brickyard. North-west of the kiln was a long narrow building with a collapsed roof that appeared to have been open-sided and may originally have been a drying hack or shed. The roof was of common rafter form notched at the apex to accommodate a nailed ridge piece, all the timbers were of deal. Additional rigidity was given to this rudimentary roof form by every tenth rafter couple having a notched yoke at its apex and a nailed collar supporting diagonally set purlins. Residual lath work indicated a slate roof and there was evidence of Welsh slate around the structure.

To the east of the kiln the OS maps show a large structure of which nothing survived above ground level. Concealed by turf was a brick floor or hard standing and along the side of the building were a series of piles of ash. A superficial examination under the turf seemed to indicate a series of channels beneath the floor, but they could not be examined. What function, or functions, this building served is difficult to determine from the surviving evidence. Part of it could have served as a production area and the piles of ash and channels might indicate that it also was used for drying brick with some form of underfloor heating, replacing an earlier and smaller drying shed. The tracks from the clay pit seem to aim for the northern end of this building and so it seems likely that brick production was taking place within.

### Discussion

Brickmaking before industrialisation was carried out in most communities. Many villages had a small brickyard which operated on a seasonal basis. In some places the demand for brick grew to such an extent that the production season had to be extended and some of the hand processes mechanised. This may well have been the case with the brickyard on Ashwell Road, although as we do not know when it first started to produce bricks, it is possible that it originated because of the popularity of brick in the nineteenth century and was mechanised and in constant production from its very beginnings.

A survey of brick making in Rutland is long overdue. In Palmer and Neaverson's review of industrial archaeology in Rutland published in 1991, brickmaking only occupies four lines (1991, 23). It is unlikely that the concentration of brickworks found in Leicestershire will be found in Rutland, for here a good quality building stone was readily available. The remains of one works still exist in North Luffenham, the former North Luffenham Brick and Tile Works. These works are shown on the Second Edition of the 25" OS map published in 1904, although they do not seem to be mentioned in several directories published at that time (e.g. Kelly's 1895, 1900 or 1925).

A number of brickmakers are listed in Kelly's Commercial Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland for 1881 and presumably they had a brickyard not far away from their village. They are:-

William Bennett	Seaton
Grange Brickyard	Oakham
Henry and William Hollis	Oakham and Cottesmore
Thomas Nutt	Bisbrooke
William Sherwin	Langham
George Siddons	Seaton

A Samuel Walker, described as the manager of Lord Aveland's brick works, is listed in Kelly's 1881 Directory as living in North Luffenham. Lord Aveland's seat was at Normanton Park and bricks bearing the Aveland stamp have been found at the North Luffenham works.

A preliminary search of early OS maps reveals brick works at:-

Ketton	SK 976 047
Langham	SK 837 104
Manton	SK 882 042
North Luffenham	SK 925 029
Oakham	SK 864 077
Seaton	SK 909 978
Uppingham (Bisbrooke)	SK 878 992

In addition there are two names in the parish of Burley which seem to indicate brickworks:-

Brick Kiln Spinney	SK 902 114
Brick Kiln Covert	SK 888 114

A kiln is marked on the 1st edition of the 1" O.S. map 1/2 mile to the north of Uppingham on the Preston Road.

The above list of brick making sites in Rutland is not comprehensive, but it gives an indication of what can be found during a brief search of some of the readily available resources. A more detailed survey will be carried out during the next year or so and the writers would welcome any information relating to brick making sites in Rutland. It is hoped to publish a further paper in these *Transactions*.

### Documents consulted

Oakham Enclosure Map 1836; LCRO Ref DE 1381/521A  
 1" Ordnance Survey Map 1st edition Sheet 44 in the David and Charles reprint  
 25" Ordnance Survey Map 1885 sheet V, 14. (for Oakham)  
 25" Ordnance Survey Map 1904 sheet XIII, 4 (for North Luffenham)  
 25" Ordnance Survey Map 1930 sheet IX, 2. (for Oakham)  
 Various 25" OS maps from the 1885, 1904 and 1930 editions.

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