

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL BLAKE MUSEUM



THE BRIDGWATER BRICK & TILE INDUSTRY



Bridgewater Brick and Tile Museum

Brickmaking had begun in Bridgewater by 1655 and in 1686-7 bricks from Mr. Balch's yard were used for rebuilding corporation property. There was a brick kiln at Hamp by 1708-9, another at Crowpill in the 1720s, and by the 1730s there were at least two on the riverside between them.

Other brickworks established in the 1760s and 1770s included those of Samuel Glover, who exported bricks to a coal mine near Kidwelly (Carms.) The Sealy family had a yard and kilns at Hamp before 1776. Bridgewater bricks were so well-known that at the end of the 18th Century, exports were being made to Bristol, Cardiff, Swansea, all growing cities, and to various ports around the Irish coast.

The making of plain tiles by hand, ridge tiles or crease tiles as they were then called, and pan tiles were added to that of brick making. Many years later the popular Bridgewater Double Roman tile was added to the growing list of products.

James Brydges, Duke of Chandos (d. 1744), attempted from 1721 onwards to introduce glass and soap making and a

distillery. The soap works failed in 1725; the distillery, east of the river, lasted little longer. Some glass makers, specializing in bottles, went bankrupt in 1728, others remained until 1733. The glasshouse survived, used by pottery and tile manufacturers, until 1942

Some of the early examples of brickwork can be seen in Castle Street, Friarn Street, Dampiet Street, Castle Street and St. Mary Street. The Lions in West Quay is another fine building where the bricks were used.



Castle Street, Bridgewater

THE BATH BRICK

Ten local brick and tile companies made Bath bricks, used for scouring polished metal, and some 8 million were produced each year in the 1880s, increasing in the 1890s to 24 million but falling by 1900 to 17 million.

Manufacture started in the 1820's, a patent for the brick being granted in 1823 John Browne also discovered a further use for the slime deposits in the river, was

granted Letters Patent for *A Certain Composition or Substance of Different Forms and Shapes when perfected and burnt would nearly resemble in colour the Stone called or known by the name of Bath Stone*. Bath brick making became a flourishing branch of the industry.

Fine particles of earth originating in the fresh water from land by the higher reaches of the river were carried down and deposited at the river's mouth, later to be brought in suspension with the high tides and deposited on the banks, mostly within two miles of the old town bridge. In places where slime batches have been worked for Bath brick manufacture to a depth of approx. 3 ft. recovery was at the rate of approximately one tenth of an inch per normal tide. It was seasonal, slime being taken from the banks during the winter months and stockpiled for manufacture in summer months.



A Bath Brick

The river was full of the town's raw sewage, so brickyard workers were very prone to infections.

The material on being extruded on the floor was then gathered by women, rolled into balls (known as obstricking) and conveyed to the makers' tables in a primitive shed to be thrown into a mould, then deposited on a board for placing in open racks for drying in the sun, the women were assisted by their children in these operations whenever possible, particularly when schools closed for the month of August.

Bath bricks were exported to France, Germany, Spain, Canada and America. Bath

Brick production formed just another line of production for those already established as brick and tile manufacturers. The decline in demand for the Bath Brick was accelerated by the introduction of substitute cleaning materials, which were widely marketed.

LATER HISTORY

By 1823 there were three brickfields at Hamp and by 1830 a fourth, worked by John Browne and William Champion, patentees of bonded ornamented bricks. Brickmaking was seasonal and wages were high in the 1830s. The firms of John Sealy, Henry James Major, and Browne and Co. were the most prominent in the 19th century, producing building brick and tiles, and the industry in 1840 was thought to employ some 1,300 workers, half of them habitually laid off in winter. About 1850 there were 16 brick and tile works within 2 miles of Bridgwater Bridge. H. J. Major employed 120 men and 100 boys in 1881. Exports of bricks, tiles, and Bath bricks were reduced after the First World War. New building in the town stimulated local demand for bricks and tiles, and peak production from 13 sites within the parish was reached in 1935-7. All but two of the brickyards reopened after 1945 but in the 1960s there was a rapid decline. Colthurst Symons's yard at Castle Field was the last to close, in 1970, because the best clay was exhausted and cheaper sources were available elsewhere.

POTTERY

No doubt, clay goods were produced in the area long before it was specifically mentioned in historical records but, apart from bricks and tiles, pottery became a most important line of manufacture in Bridgwater, particularly after the closing of the glass factory which was established in about 1704, although the exact date is not known. The huge conical stack was built in North Gate, measuring at the base 75 feet and rising in a taper to a height of 120 feet

with a top diameter of approximately six feet. Within the cone three small kilns were constructed, which in later years were easily adapted for pottery manufacture.



Demolishing the Glass Cone, 1942

Household glazed utensils were produced for which a great demand was created, particularly washing pans, pitchers, bacon salters, bed pans and other miscellaneous articles. Glazed sanitary pipes also became an important item of manufacture until 1900.

Flower pots were made in sizes from two inches to 10 inches and the making of garden vases in many artistic shapes became well known. Examples of decorative architectural pottery may be seen on Victorian and Edwardian buildings throughout the town.

The demand for pottery and the like practically ceased in the 1930's with the growing use of enamel utensils and plastic flower pots and, in April 1942, the huge cone at the Pottery, a Bridgwater landmark for many years, was demolished, providing 1,500 tons of hardcore for the runways of airfields at Ilton and Westonzoyland, only the lower courses of the base of the cone remain.

FLUCTUATING EMPLOYMENT & POVERTY

In 1840 the commercial manufacture of bricks and tiles had become a viable force in the town's economy and became the chief basic industry, practically all goods being hand made. Of a population of 10,500, at least 1,300 were employed in the industry being approximately 50% of the employable male population but employment in the winter months was uncertain because of the seasonal character of manufacture and the entire absence of artificial drying methods.

The number to be retained after the end of September of each year fell to about 50%. Those retained were engaged in clay winning and storage, for a day's pay of 2/3d. but bad weather often denied the workers a full week's work with the result that poverty in Bridgwater in the winter months was severe, many having an income for the week of 3/6d. by Parish Relief; others found casual employment.

Trade unionism in the Borough grew in strength, particularly in the brick and tile industry in the last quarter of the 19th Century. Strikes occurred for better conditions in 1886 and 1890. A third strike occurred in 1896. Disorder broke out in the town with rioting and overturning of wagons of tiles in Penel Orlieu and on the town bridge. The Riot Act was read and the police and army were brought in to restore order.

The settlement brought an increase in the "day work" rates to 15/- per week for men and 3/- for boys under 16 years of age, and a concession in the reduction of number of working hours was also granted, Monday to Friday 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturdays 6 a.m. to 2p.m. (no mid-day break). There were also prolonged discussions on piecework rates and minor concessions were obtained.

MECHANISATION

The first extruding machine, whereby clay was forced through in a continuous ribbon, was reputed to have been made in Bridgwater in 1875 by Messrs. Murch & Culverwell. This machine was stimulated, by an early and primitive device for the extrusion of clay in South Wales in 1860.

Extrusion was effected merely by a crude shaft and knives, propelling the clay forward and through an orifice of the desired tile design or in brick form.

The Germans, having acquired some knowledge of this machine, greatly improved upon the design and gave careful study to the technique, eventually becoming experts in this particular field



Mechanised tile making

The degree of perfection that had been reached in extrusion machines by 1898 made roofing tiles by this process a reality and special plant was installed for this purpose at the Old Chilton Works primarily for interlocking tiles for which a great demand was created, calling for more plant to meet, in particular, the demands from the Colonies.

Hand made tiles were the main products of most manufacturers in the area and continued to be until well into the 20th Century before the close of the industry in 1970.

SOURCES

Victoria County History of Somerset, vol 6
 Edmund Porter, *Bridgwater Industries, Past*

and Present

NOTE: The Blake Museum's collection of brick and tile artefacts is on loan to the Somerset Brick and Tile Museum, Wylde's Road, Bridgwater

Blake Museum is owned by Bridgwater Town Council

and managed by volunteers from the Friends of Blake Museum.

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www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk

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