

## My Days in the Rowlands Castle Brickyard

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Brickmaking had been in Rowlands since the nineteenth century, and during its heyday it employed as many as a hundred people. Most of our family had worked at brickworks at some time during their lives, my father being one, before he joined the Navy. When Dad worked at the brickyard, he mentioned how hard it was in those days, as they were on piecework. His first job was unloading railway wagons of coal using a wheelbarrow. He ran it to feed two Lancaster boilers. Conditions were tough then, the work was hard manual labour, you had to work at the pace of the machines, it was harder than working in the woods and a lot noisier, with the machines rumbling away. You were on the go all the time. When I started at the brickworks in 1965, things had not changed much; the buildings were in a poor state of repair with broken windows. It was cold and draughty and damp, the roof leaked in places and the lighting was poor. People of today

would not work in those conditions now.

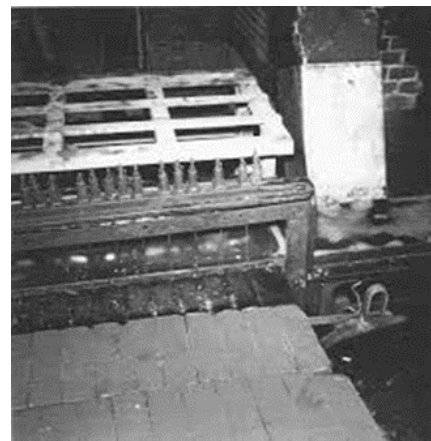
I suppose things had not really changed much since the 1930s but having worked in the woods previously, I was well accustomed to poor conditions. My Uncle Frank and Geoff, and my cousin Dave Jacobs were permanent staff, Uncle Doug was the lorry driver for a short while. Uncle Geoff operated a Ruston- Bucyrus digger with an uplift bucket, digging clay from a thirty-foot clay seam. The clay was unloaded into side tipping wagons around quarter of a ton at a time. They ran on a 2ft narrow gauge rail track, and, with no electrical power in the pit, those wagons were manually pushed along the 400 hundred yards (366 metres) of track using brute force; once you got them up to a good speed, you jumped on the back, standing on the chassis. To control the speed of the wagon, we used a wooden shaft jammed against the wheel acting as a brake to slow them down. If you were not fast enough you could lose control of the wagons on the corners and end up coming off the track. At the end of the track there was a ramp, the wagons were attached to a wire hawser and hauled up into the rolling mill.

Coopy Picture of Rowlands Castle  
Brickworks. Winding house ramp used to pull skips  
of clay from pit. circ 1965



Cousin Dave Jacobs operated the winch that raised and lowered these wagons. He also operated the rolling mill which consisted of two Bennett & Sayer 38-ton rollers, in a 9 ft diameter pan. This was a very noisy job as those rollers rumbled around, crushing the clay. Water was added to soften it before forcing it through  $\frac{3}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch gratings. It was forced through two horizontal rollers below, and into a trough, via an Archimedes screw which forced the clay through a die to form the clay slug at the table.

My first job was working on the cutting table. A slug of clay would be cut into a pre-set length, then slid along the table on rollers to a ram. This pushed it through ten wires into bricks on the table. These were known as green bricks; they were stacked on strips of wood on shelves on stillages, carrying around two hundred bricks a time. The strips of wood allowed the air to circulate during the drying process. We mainly produced two types of brick: sand-face and wire-cuts.



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The charge hand or floorwalker, Jack Burt, was a stern old stick! He would get wild with us lads for skylarking around and this eventually led to us being split up.

I was banished outside to the pit; nobody ever volunteered for that job - it was the worst place to work as you were out in all weathers.

Conditions in the pit were atrocious, you were out in all weathers. In the winter it was perishingly cold and wet, in the summer it was hot and like a dust bowl.

The only shelter was an old tin shack at the bottom of the winding ramp which was very basic, with a wooden bench inside so we could get out of the weather for our lunch breaks. During the cold weather, we'd have a fire going in an oil drum to keep us warm; there were no toilets outside, so we had to make the best of it, the pit was big enough.

During the summer months, the ground would dry and crack and become very dusty and, when the rains came in the autumn, those cracks filled with water. Then, during the frosty weather, the water would freeze, forcing the clay to crack apart causing large lumps to come crashing down from the face. We would go up onto the top of the clay face using iron bars to force the clay apart to make the area safer.

There was one occasion when Geoff and I were working under the digger replacing some worn roller bearings on the turntable, when a large lump of clay broke away from the face, striking the back of the digger, knocking it along the sleeper mats; that was a scary moment, but this was just one of the many hazards that we faced daily. There was not a lot of Health and Safety on site then, you just had to put up with it. It certainly wouldn't happen today.

In the wintertime the pit was a more dangerous place. Wet and slippery, the clay became very sticky and clung to your boots, making it hard going underfoot with puddles everywhere. We could be wet all day in the pouring rain. I now understand what those poor soldiers went through in the trenches during The Great War; still we were lucky nobody was shooting at us.



After spending a couple of seasons outside, I managed to get back into the mill again. This time, I was running dry bricks from the tunnels to the setters in the kilns, using either the electric trucks or crowding barrows. Keeping the setters going was very demanding. It was hot work in those kilns that were known as Hoffman Kilns. There were twelve separate kiln chambers, each taking approximately 12,000 dry green bricks. Once filled the entrance was sealed up with bricks and plastered over with a clay and sand mix, this was known as a wicket. Once the setters had filled one kiln they moved into the next empty chamber.

The firing of the bricks took around fourteen days: this was known as a continuous burning process. It was looked after by Frank Hudson and Alf Sawyer. They worked shifts, feeding coal through openings in the roof of the kilns; the kilns were enclosed by a covered roof area, which kept the weather out and the heat in. They had a small office/mess room set above the kilns which monitored the temperatures. This was a nice, warm place and the favourite haunt for cats- I've never seen so many cats in one place!



When the firing of the bricks was completed, the kiln chamber was allowed to cool down for two or three days. The entrance (wicket) door was broken down to allow further cooling. Once the temperature had dropped enough, the process of removing the bricks got underway.

The bricks were stacked out in the yard ready for dispatch. Once the setters had emptied the kiln, they would then prepare it ready for refilling before moving onto the next kiln and so the process continued.

Working in those kilns was very warm and dusty. We always drank plenty of fluids and we were known as barrow boys, myself and Sully Sullivan, an Irishman. Between us we looked after the setters. Sully was fit for his age: he cycled in daily from Waterlooville about 5 miles away.

Being the boy in the team, I was often sent down the village, to buy bottles of pop for the lads, and whiskey for Sully. Yes - I had my fair share of whisky too; I could have easily have become an alcoholic with all the drinking on the job.

To sustain any sort of viable living, the brickworks was committed to producing 100,000 bricks a week. This was a high demand for such a small works like Rowlands Castle; they were unable to compete with those large brick companies like the London Brick Company. By 1968 the workforce had reduced to 35 men and eventually the brickworks closed. The workers moved on to other jobs but this loss had an impact on the supporting service industries around the area. The site became a builders merchants and is now a housing estate, where the residents often dig up clues to the past in the form of broken bricks in their gardens.