

Brick making in Bexley

The clays and brickearths of the Cray and East Wickham valleys were laid down by rivers which flowed perhaps 200,000 years ago.

They were no doubt used in Roman times. Certainly by the early 16th century, Lesnes Abbey had a tile kiln at Baldwins. A kiln recently found in Tile Kiln Lane, Bexley was in use in the 18th century.

The spectacular growth of London, which came with the building of the railways, used many millions of bricks. By the early years of the last century, firms like Norris of Erith, Furner of Slade Green, and Rutter of Crayford, had filled the land between Erith and Crayford with brick-kilns. There were also brickworks at Footscray, at East Wickham and at Longlands near Sidcup.

Briefly, this is how bricks were made in Rutters Pit about 1900. The raw materials were brickearth, chalk, and barge-loads of rubbish sent down from London. During the winter the chalk and brickearth were dug out and fed into large mills, which mixed them to a creamy consistency with water. This "malm" was then pumped into the large pits, called "backs", to dry. Meanwhile, the rubbish was sieved. The fine ashes from it were spread on top of the drying malm. The coarse "rough-stuff" was sieved for fuel.

During the summer months, the bricks were made. Each moulder would be paid by the thousand for the bricks he made but had to pay the members of his "fellowship". These were the temperer, flattie, loader, pusher-out and off-bearer.

The temperer barrowed the malm into mill, a machine rather like a giant mincer, which was driven from a steam engine by means of a chain. When it emerged from the mill the malm was cut into lumps by the flattie.

The moulder threw the clay into the mould and then turned the bricks out onto wooden trays. These were loaded onto a flat barrow, and the pusher-out and off-bearer took them and stacked them to dry. The bricks were dried on acks - long blades of concrete 10 inches wide and perhaps a hundred yards long. The dried bricks were stacked for

firing by men called "crowders". They used barrows holding 60 raw bricks, which they then pushed down the sloping acks at a run.

The kiln consisted simply of a long pile of raw bricks some 5 feet high, covered with inflammable rubbish and cased in with waste bricks. The crowders had to work fast, for one end of the kiln would be set alight while they were still working at the other.

During the summer, the brick makers worked from 6am to 6pm, taking half an hour for lunch and a few minutes break in the afternoon. Brickmaking could only be done in dry weather, and a long period of rain meant tight belts in Crayford.

After the First World War the brick-earth at Crayford began to run out, and competition from machine-made bricks was growing. For a number of years Rutters went on making quality red bricks, chimney pots and pottery.