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# Contents

Editorial: Brick, Social Housing, and the Stirling Prize	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	2
How to Research Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Brickmakers								
by David Cufley	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	5
Review Article: Local Solutions to a National Problem — the <i>Deserving Poor</i>								
by David H. Kennett	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	9
Brickmaking in the Black Country — Collaborative Studentship between the Black Country Living Museum and the University of Birmingham								
by Elizabeth Thompson	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	16
The Mutford, Suffolk, Brick Inscription								
by Terence Paul Smith	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	18
Clay Building Products in Ripon								
by Mike Chapman	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	19
Brick for a Day: York Handmade Brick Company, Alne, North Yorkshire								
by Mike Chapman	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	25
Brick for a Day: Forterra's King's Dyke Works, Whittlesea, Cambridgeshire								
by Mike Chapman	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	30
Brick Query: Phorpres Hollow Blocks								
from John Bowmer, with responses from Michael Chapman, Michael Hammett, David H. Kennett, and Michael Oliver	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	40
Brick Query: Paving Bricks in the USA and Great Britain								
from Sam Pervis, with responses from Michael Chapman, Martyn Fretwell, Michael Hammett, and David H. Kennett	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	47
Brick Query: A Brick and Wall Query, Settle, North Yorkshire								
from Mike Chapman	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	53
Book Review: Making a Mark								
by Terence Paul Smith	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	54
<i>Front Cover:</i>								
The Forterra Works at Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire								

# How to Research Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Brickmakers

David Cufley

In *British Brick Society Information*, 143, November 2019, the editor mentioned 'different authors requesting information about specific brickmakers' and asking about nineteenth- and twentieth-century research sources. This article is the author's experience in producing an index for use by family and local historians of the owners and workers on the brickfields. The note cited from the recent *BBS Information* suggests the use of trade directories but there are additional sources that can be used. The one problem with early directories is that they list trades by parish without giving a precise address. This is because everyone knew where the brickfields were and because the areas were not fully built up, strangers visiting the parish could either see or smell where the brickfields were located. In larger parishes with good clay soil, there may be more than one brickfield, each under different ownership.

Today these sites may be lost from local memory because they have become housing estates, built over with factories, or in rarer cases returned to agricultural use. The attached flow diagram (fig.1) is the author's summary of sources that could be used to help discover the brickmakers, the workers, and their brickmaking sites. The sources may even help with knowledge of the products, manufacturing equipment, and layout of the brickfield. We are fortunate that the internet provides us with search engines for discovering sources, which finds some original document images available online. Do not ignore American websites as some of these have digitised images of early books and magazines published in the UK.

Discovering brickfield workers and owners gathered from the census, local histories, and directories is typical family history research, mainly for England and Wales but with some entries from other counties in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The data collected by the author also has a few overseas entries for British-born brickmakers. Our major archive is the National Archive at Kew (TNA) The most extensive of these catalogue search engines is the TNA's called 'Discovery'. 'Discovery' has been extended as it not only covers the national archives' '1000 years of history' but allows one to find records from over 2,500 archives across the UK (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>). The other archives, museums, and record offices have started to make their catalogues available online. This enables visits to be planned or digitised documents obtained for a fee without visiting the archive. record

Having ancestors who were brickmakers, my early research followed the normal family history path of birth, marriage, and death certificates and census records. This did not answer the questions of what was involved in this occupation. Being a largely seasonal trade meant that most workers moved around the counties: only the brickfield owners and key workers stayed for more than one season. This led to my study of the brickfields and their place within the local community.

The reason for my ancestor's main move from Dartford, Kent, to East Wickham, Kent, was found to be their working for the same Dawson family of brickfield owners.

Expanding the research to understand the Dawsons and their trade and production was needed to complete the story of my ancestors' working lives. It also led to discovering the period of manufacture the Dawsons were involved in and what happened to their brickfields when they ceased production.

There are many local and county histories produced by county and local history volunteer groups. The most reliable professionally-produced county history is the *Victoria History of the Counties of England* (VCH), which is a national historic survey, beginning in 1899. The scope of the volumes includes social, economic, and industrial histories of each county as well as topography and geology. The topographical volumes of the VCH so far completed include a detailed description of each parish that is essential reading as a preliminary source for brickmaking and other industrial history research. Volumes of the VCH are available online on the 'British History Online' website (<https://british-history.ac.uk>).

This method of research shows the three aspects — of people, places, and businesses — are interwoven and from the attached diagram (fig.1), it is hoped it will help others find the brickyard site's history. The method applies to brickfields and workers throughout the UK brickfields.

# How to research Brickmakers and Brickmaking Locations

Start with known Details

Agree target for research

Business  
 Directories  
 Trade Directories  
 Directory Adverts  
 Places  
 OS Maps NLS

Tithe Maps and Schedules  
 Estate Maps  
 VCH  
 1910-1915 Valuation Office Survey

Newspapers BNL  
 Criminal and Civil Cases  
 Bankruptcy  
 Advertisements  
 Local and County Histories

Books and Company Histories  
 Guilds and Trade  
 Trade Journals  
 London Gazette  
 Property sale details  
 Local Archives and Record Offices

Museums  
 Photographs and Postcards  
 Drawings Sketches and Paintings

TNA 'Discovery'  
 Deeds  
 Land Taxes  
 Factories Act Registers

Repeat this research for each person found and for each event in their lives

Get Certificates Births  
 Check Census Returns  
 1911, 1901, 1891, 1881, 1871, 1861, 1851 and 1841  
 Non-Conformist Registers  
 Parish Registers

Get Certificates Marriages  
 Get Certificates Deaths  
 Check Churchyards, Gravestones and MIs  
 Check for Obituaries

Check for Wills and Probate records

Repeat

Figure 1 by David Cufley

Legend. BNL=British Newspaper Library; Mis= Monumental Inscriptions; NLS=National Library of Scotland; TNA=The National Archive at Kew; VCH=Victoria History of the Counties of England

The business research leads, as is suggested, through directories but one needs to understand the sites by using maps. Old England and Wales Ordnance Survey maps are available online through the National Library of Scotland (NLS). Prior to these are the Tithe Maps and their schedules of plots with ownership, tenancy, name, usage, and acreage.

The object of the author's project was to provide an index to brickmakers and other brickfield workers who frequently travelled from one brickfield to another, as their work was seasonal. It was not only bricks that were manufactured in the brickfields but also other ceramic products such as tiles, chimney and flower pots, crocks, drain-pipes, sugar moulds, and terracotta ware. So, trade descriptions of the workers can sometimes be misleading as they were not just brickmakers, skintlers, and kneaders but also potters and mould makers.

Help is needed to determine how long the brickfields were in operation. The brickfields around London and other city suburbs closed as the extent of building land caught up with and overtook them. Elsewhere alongside railways and canals, brickfields were open up to produce bricks for the new forms of transport and then continued after construction works had been completed as they had transport links to building sites in the developing towns and cities. The archival and printed resources also need to provide brickfield addresses to discover where the brickfields, brickyards, or brick kilns were in any parish. These addresses may help with census searches and movements of the workforces.

Frequently the families of brickmakers married members of other brickmaking families. The sources can sometimes help with connecting these inter-marriages. They show that brickfield berths — sometimes known as stools — included men and women as well as children. A berth typically was approximately six people. In a lot of cases it was only the 'brickmaker' who was employed, the other members of his team were contributing to the manufacture. The stool or berth, being led by the moulder, who was paid per 1000 bricks at the kiln for the stool. An example of this was Rutters' Brickfield at Crayford, Kent, in 1873 (*The Times*, 16 September 1873, page 8, column d) where their foreman claimed in court that they only employed 22 moulders, *i.e.* less than 50 employees lower limit required under the Factory Act. He said that they had no control over the gang engaged by the moulders. The judge disagreed and found Rutters guilty and fined them for not complying with the Act.

The population of the brick industry in England and Wales is estimated according to J.H. Clapham's *Economic History of Modern Britain Volume II*, based on the factory inspectors reports of 1870 to be 1,770 works with an average number of work-people per works of 12.7, a total of 22,479 workers.<sup>1</sup> If we apply the Rutters case above, this may well be a serious underestimation of the industry. Marion Bowley in her book *Innovations in Building Materials* states that in the 1924 Census of Production for the whole brick and fireclay industry there was an average of 43.8 work-people in about 1,600 production units, a total workforce of 70,080.<sup>2</sup>

The 1851 Census tally for Brickmakers and Dealers is given by the Registrar General's Office (RGO) as 31,169 people.<sup>3</sup> In 1841, Frederick Spackman's *An Analysis of the Occupations of the People* gives a total of 17,221 persons for England and Wales and the 'Isles' in the British seas, which does not include labourers.<sup>4</sup> The total for Kent is stated as 627, which seems very low when the breakdown shows 612 male workers and only six female workers. Again, these figures exclude labourers. The number of men employed in the industry in Kent reached a maximum 5,113 in 1901 having risen from 3,335 in 1891, according to Michael Winstanley's *Life in Kent at the Turn of the Century*<sup>5</sup> and the VCH Kent volume.<sup>6</sup> The decline in the brickmaking industry in Kent can be seen by the fact that there were only 3,198 men employed in 1911. Many left to find alternative employment and hundreds were driven to emigrate.

What these surveys show is that there are a lot of brickmaking sites to discover and they all required workforces, some of which were not permanent employees.

The number of sources varies with each area and parish and requires local knowledge. It is not possible within the space limitation of this article to cover in detail all the sources in figure 1 or the more obscure sources that may exist in a limited number of archives or private collections.

It is hoped that this article with its figure 1 will help any researcher state their exploration of a place, business, or its people. Writing up the research by the authors will help us discover further sources and the history of brickmaking.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. F.W. Spackman, *An Analysis of the Occupations of the People*, reprinted New York: A.M. Kelley, 1969, in the *Economic Classics* series. Original publication, 1847, Appendix, Table p.17 and p.148, Summary of persons engaged in manufactures'
5. M. Winstanley, *Life in Kent at the Turn of the Century*, Folkstone: William Dawson, 1978, p.178.
6. *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, Kent, Vol III*, London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1932, p.393.