

## 'That was brickmaking'

Part of a transcript from a tape recorded interview with Mr Frank Purse

by Pauline Roenisch

*In the mid 19th century many brickworks were established around Enfield and Edmonton, on the extensive areas of brickearth in the Lea Valley. As London grew, urban development overtook the industry, and the 20th century saw its decline as the pits became worked out.*

*Mr Purse began working with bricks in 1929 near Enfield, and over the years worked in every capacity, from hand to machine, in brickworks in the area. He talked to me in April 1977, on the site of the last surviving brickworks in Enfield, which had stopped production only a year earlier. My interview with him proved to be an important link with the early days of brickmaking as he relates here.*

I was ready to leave school. In those days you never had any career officers or anything like that, you just left school to earn to help the household along .....

I started right from the beginning making them by hand. I really enjoyed it. It was the type of men you worked with in those days ..... a different type of post-war generation, they worked hard, they drank hard; fortunately, I was sensible enough not to get on that side of it. It was very good money. My father was a foreman bricklayer and was taking somewhere round about £4 a week for some of the biggest projects up in London, big firms. I was taking more than my father, at 18 years of age. I got £5 10s in brickmaking – it was all piece work you see, ..... so much per 1000 and so on, and how you worked was how much you took at the end of the week. It used to be from half past six in the morning till six o'clock at night, a full day's work with your normal break times, of course.

We nearly always started the brickmaking season on Good Friday. The men would be recalled to the brickworks (if they wanted to go back of course) round about a week beforehand – get everything ready, you see, the final pieces, and then ..... they started their first brick; even if they only made 100, they'd start brickmaking on Good Friday.

..... The first week's production was put outside, because obviously there was still thoughts of frost coming, so there [were] bales of straw handy so that if the forecast, or if the word ..... those old brickmakers never relied on the wireless for forecasts, they could just look at the cloud and see, and believe me this is true. They could say, "well, better cover up with straw tonight", so they'd sprinkle all straw over their soft bricks. Then in the morning that would all have to be removed, and removed in their own time. They never got paid – 'cause you see you were on piece-work, half past six was your time, you started brickmaking. Well, if you only started at half past six, time you removed all that straw



Plate 1. Mr Frank Purse on the site of Gabriel's brickworks, Enfield, in April 1977.

you'd lost an hour's work, so they used to get in at half past five .....

If it rained that was it, you just stopped brickmaking. And if the old brickmakers, again getting back to the weather, the old brickmakers used to say, "it might rain about 10 in the morning", and the old moulder – usually he was the oldest one of the gang, you see – he would walk out, "oh well, might as well put your coats on, we'll do no more today", and invariably that man was never wrong, because if he was everybody had gone home. But he might turn round and say, "there's a chance of it clearing up about lunch-time", and then you'd hang around till lunch-time; and perhaps he might be a little bit out, perhaps by half past one the sun came out and then you got work, then you'd done two, three hours more work which was all your wages, you see.

I will say this, we had good breaks. We had half an hour breaks not 10 minutes or quarter of an hour ones. You had to. You sat down on the barrow – that was a good seat 'cause they got backs to them – or in nice warm weather you came outside and sat out on stacks of bricks, and you'd mostly have what you called in those days – which to me was fun, you see – what you'd call a 'drum-up'. They'd have a big drum, something like a five gallon drum, and you'd just make a wood fire and boil the drum up with water, put a quarter of a pound of tea in it, pour a bottle of milk in it and a pound of sugar and then you just dipped your cup in it. In hot weather, a nice cup of cold tea. When I look back I don't know really how I stuck it; my mother, if only she'd known what I was working amongst, she wouldn't [have] allowed me. You know the chap with his cup, you see, got all clay on his hands and he'd dip his cup in and drink, and stick his cup down on the ground, so when he went again to pick it up



there was a rim of sand or dirt on the bottom. But it didn't matter, at the end of the day when the drum was empty and you went to clean it out ready for the morning, that much of grit and clay [was] at the bottom. But they always reckoned it made them strong and healthy; I don't know, it didn't do me any harm. No, it didn't take me long before I started taking a flask to work and I was very much on my own; you know, although I sort of mucked in with the rest, I did really keep a little bit away from them.

*Mr Purse then went on to talk about 'burning', the last stage of brickmaking. A brief description of the process is as follows.*

*Moulded raw bricks were first left in a drying chamber for about five days, which removed about 25% of the moisture. They were then ready for loading into the kiln for burning (down draught kilns held 20,000-100,000 bricks). Slow fires were started in the fireholes of the kiln, which after three days reached 600 degrees C. The heat was then raised to 900 degrees C over two days, the disappearance of light blue smoke from the chimney indicating that the carbonaceous matter had been burned out. The temperature was then raised to 1150 degrees C (taking 24 hours), and the bricks became very hard. The kilns were then allowed to cool, which took about a week.*

*Mr Purse continued .....*

When I first started burning I'd done most of the other work. I was getting fed up and I went and saw this old chap who had been a burner for 40 years, he was in his 60s somewhere; he wanted somebody to help him, 'cause you do your burning by two of you doing it — see two 12-hour shifts like — got to have somebody there all the time whilst you're burning. I had heard that he wanted somebody to teach, if there was anybody interested. So of course I went and saw the governor, as we called him, and he said, "yes, by all means, if he'll teach you." In those days it wasn't the governor who says, "you go there, you go here." Same as that old burner, the governor couldn't say to that old burner, "you teach him how to do this." It was that old burner [who decided], and fortunately I got on the right side of him and he says, "so you'd like to come with me, you'd like to learn burning would you?" And I said, "Yes, sure." "But you're interested?" So I said, "Yes." "I don't want to waste my time, you know." And I said, "Oh I'll like it, I'm sure." So I went with him. Well for three months I stopped with him .... learning the different temperatures and so on. By the way, I only did the daytime with him — [he] lived on the job if he was on his own. That's why this old chap — it was getting too much for him — wanted somebody to take the 12-hour shift off him so he could go home at night.

[Then] one night — oh well, afternoon, four o'clock — he said to me, "you better pop home and get yourself some food." I said, "What for?" He said, "well, I want you to come on with me tonight." I was just turned 16. "I want you to come on and stop with me at night, so it gives you some idea what it's like burning at night. Whereas you'll see all those colours I've taught you," he says, "you'll find them much different at night."

At night they looked white; where they looked like a primrose red during the day, it was just white, and I was saying, "it's too hot isn't it in this one, too hot." You know, 'cause it looked so different, that's what it was all about, that's why it took me such a time to learn, you see. Nowadays it's all done by clocks, I mean anybody within a couple of months can learn brick burning, it took years, I really mean years ..... Well, when I thought of taking this on, he said, "Well, of course, you know you'll never learn brick burning." I thought to myself, "well surely I'm as good as what you are?" ..... I said, "Oh why?" "Well," he says, "it's one of those jobs you never learn." In other words in every kiln you burn something different, and you learn something different and you learn more. And it was true, that's if you're interested, you have to watch what is happening in the kilns and so on. For instance, you could burn one kiln and by your own guessing, 1100 degrees; another kiln you burn at 1100 and you probably did some bricks in by over-melting them. You had to recognise that by looking through. These are different things you learnt.

[The weather affected every kiln differently.] Now your kilns were burnt by chimney draught, very important that, very important. When you get a storm, when you get down draughts, you get the wind changing round as you know; it always comes against the wind, the storm, so you get a change of wind in a couple of hours and your fires are different all round the kilns — one minute they are all as they should be, the next hour you've reversed it. You've kept them up high, and those low.

Anyway, I went back with him that night and of course I learnt quite a bit — it wasn't easy. By the way that was coal firing where you had 25 tons of coal to break up, and when I say break up — it used to be delivered in those days in pieces of hundred weight sizes — you had to break it up with a hammer, big hammer, seven pound hammer, then shovel it into the fire holes. They were all hand fed in those days, and you had to judge by your eyes how much coal to put on. Your eyes were your thermometers. That was brick burning.

*Mr Purse saw and experienced many changes in the industry up to the present day. He went on to describe in detail the methods of working at Gabriel's brickworks in Hoe Lane, Enfield. The interview was recorded at this site, which contained four down draught beehive kilns. Brickmaking there is described briefly in a report by the Enfield Archaeological Society<sup>1</sup>, and a survey of brick type kiln types is given by M. Hammond.<sup>2</sup>*

#### Acknowledgements

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#### References

1. *Industrial Archaeology in Enfield, Research Report No. 2* (1971). Enfield Archaeological Society.
2. Hammond M.D.P. (1977). Brick kilns: An illustrated survey. *J.A. Review* 1, 171-92.