

# THE LOCATION OF BRICKWORKS ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT

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## Introduction

In the second issue of 1974 the *Isle of Wight County Press* carried a brief report of the closure of Rookley Brickworks (*Isle of Wight County Press*, January 19, 1974). The closure represented the end of centuries of brickmaking on the Isle of Wight. Manufacture at Rookley had spanned fifty years, a period in which the national industry had become both highly mechanised and increasingly centralised. Despite the adoption of mechanised processes the owners of the last Island brickworks succumbed to the pressures imposed by an international market economy. High production costs, caused by the rising price of oil, made it impossible to withstand the competition of capital intensive companies on the mainland.

Over the ensuing years any remains of the clay pits and machinery have been removed or redeveloped to leave no reminder of the old works. Today a picture of the local industry, from which Rookley emerged, must be gleaned from the few documentary sources available. Poor Rate Books, Landowners' Surveys and leases provide basic evidence of brickmakers working in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, it is only with the map-makers, census recorders and geological surveyors of the nineteenth century that detailed information becomes available. This permits the observation of patterns within the rapidly developing local industry. A strong network emerges of commercial brickyards supported by the expanding towns.

## Early history

Brickmaking was reintroduced to Britain during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The craft was probably transmitted across the Channel to the South Eastern Counties from the Low Countries, and then spread throughout Britain (Woodforde 1979: 42–3). By the seventeenth century brickwork had gained popularity and the brickmakers were well-established on the Isle of Wight. Around 1613 the Corporation of Newport is reported as declaring that:

*'noe persons shall burne anye lyme or bricke within this Towne upon payne of x<sup>s</sup> everye tyme soe offendinge'* (Jones 1968: 24)

A little over a decade later a survey of the Manor of Ashey recorded the holdings of one Freeman Bounde:

*'the Brick Kiln ground with Marle out of the Marle pit in the Downe and sand from the sandpits at Coneydover . . . at rent of 4 Quarters of good and vendable white lyme and 200 good and vendable bricks'*. (*Survey of the Manor of Ashey*, Item no. 8)

Both of these references suggest that brickmaking was a daily feature of life for the Jacobean communities of the Island. Brickburning must have been quite large scale to warrant the measure taken by the Corporation to protect their towns-people from the pungent fumes and risk of fire. While at Ashey the demand for rent committed Freeman Bounde to a brickmaking operation.

## Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

The brickmakers of the seventeenth century centred their work on two areas of demand; one supplying the town as it grew in economic importance, and the other by remaining tied to the Manor, the traditional centre of economic and political life. However the records from the building of Sandown Fort reveal that both were capable of competitive production. The weekly accounts note that bricks were brought from Gosport, Freeman Bounde's kiln and a second kiln in Newport (Jones 1968: 24). The Government agents had chosen to transport bricks from established works rather than use itinerant brickmakers on site. The latter were frequently preferred for convenience and economy. Moreover the use of itinerant workers was not precluded through lack of materials, during the nineteenth century the area around Sandown and Yaverland supported a number of brickworks. To merit the cost of transport Freeman Bounde and the brickmakers of Newport must have produced readily available, good quality and competitively priced bricks.

Documentary evidence for the remainder of the seventeenth century is scarce. However, brief references appear in various Poor Rate Books between the 1670s and 1690s and again in the first decade of the eighteenth century. These are sufficient to show that brickmakers continued to meet the local demand for cheap building materials. The succession of George I brought a revival in classical architecture and a corresponding decline in the popularity of the brick. The growth of the brickmaking industry was checked further by the taxation schemes introduced to finance the American War. In 1784 green bricks were taxed at 2s.6d. per 1000, and this was raised to 4s.0d. per 1000 ten years later (Woodforde 1979: 70; see also Dobson 1850). Despite taxation bricks remained cheaper than stone and the brickmakers generally survived the period of low popularity.

## Nineteenth century

During the early decades of the nineteenth century interest in brickwork began to revive. Writers, such as Ruskin, began to criticise the use of stucco facades and promote a new appreciation of brick (Woodforde 1979: 90). The change in fashion coincided with outside influences stimulating the growth of towns situated on the north coast of the Isle of Wight. The advent of peace brought new opportunities for trade and time for sporting activities to Cowes. The purchase of Osborne by Queen Victoria provided a boost for both East and West Cowes, while nearby Ryde enjoyed popularity through the town's proximity to Osborne and the packet service to Portsmouth.

The location of the majority of brickworks was dependent on three factors: availability of materials, demand for products, and the ability to transport the produce to the customers. The commentators of the nineteenth century (Shore 1890: 34) noted that the brickworks were concentrated on the clays of the Northern Wight (fig. 1). There were equally rich deposits to the south of the Chalk downs but these supported temporary workings only. Bristow, for example, mentions a large deposit of brickearth at Brighstone, which he describes as extending from Grange to the mill (Bristow *et al.* 1889: 251). This was only dug to provide bricks for the construction of the viaduct carrying the Military Road over the Chine. The brickworks were situated in the north of the Island not simply for access to raw materials but for the advantages of being close to the growing towns of Ryde and Cowes with their constant need for building materials.

In the first half of the nineteenth century Island brickmakers were forced to depend on water or horse-drawn transport. The barges working the inland and coastal waters were ideally suited to carrying heavy bulk cargoes such as bricks. Obviously this form of transport was only available to those who were able to find the necessary raw materials

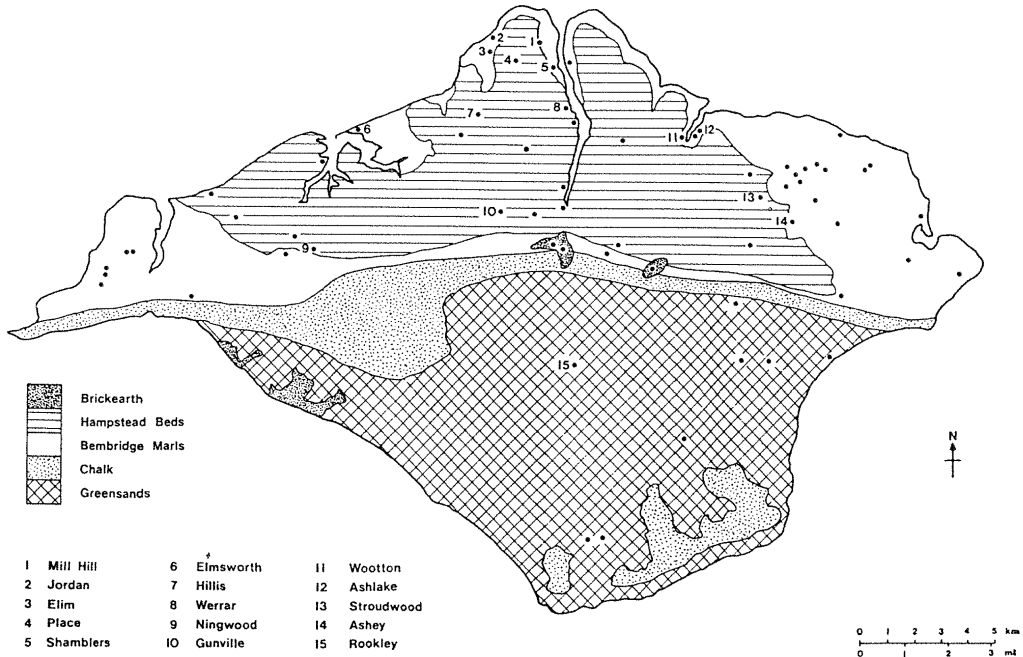


Figure 1. Sites of brickworks in the Isle of Wight.

close to navigable waterways. The northern half of the Isle of Wight provided many such sites alongside the rivers flowing into the Solent.

The Medina supported half a dozen brickworks. The 1862 Ordnance Survey map shows a works in Shamblers Copse with rails laid from the kilns to a quay. The works is recorded as opening around 1850 and the sons of the proprietor used lighters to transport bricks up and down the river (Pritchett 1939: 10–11). Perhaps the most favourable position was held by the works at Werrar, half way between Cowes and Newport just opposite the Folly Inn. These successful works first appear on a map of the Ward Estate c. 1815 (Basford pers. comm.), and were still operating in the 1960s (*Classified Telephone Directory* 1963). The long survival of brickmaking on this site may be attributed to its possessing three essential factors: an abundance of good quality clay from the underlying Hampstead Beds, a means of cheap transport on the river and a ready market in the development of the three nearby towns.

To the east a number of brickworks opened alongside the creek at Wootton. Ashlake Brickworks was auctioned in 1858 (*Isle of Wight Observer*, March 27, 1858: 1) The advertisement of the sale stressed not only the available materials and equipment but the potential for transportation. The works had a quay with sufficient water to be approached by vessels of 50 tons burthen. This was adequate for the majority of sailing barges plying the Solent between Chichester and Poole.

Water transport was exploited profitably by Edmund Pritchett at Gurnard. Jordan Brickyard was opened with the specific intention of supplying bricks to the fort being built at Freshwater (Pritchard 1939: 11). Edmund chose a site on the water-front near to the present Woodvale Hotel, and built a quay to permit the loading of barges with newly fired bricks. A vessel was essential for the Pragnells who made bricks at Elmsworth (*Calbourne Magazine*). The necessary sand to mix with the clay could only be found at the mouth of the creek which was not accessible by land. Therefore the brothers built a

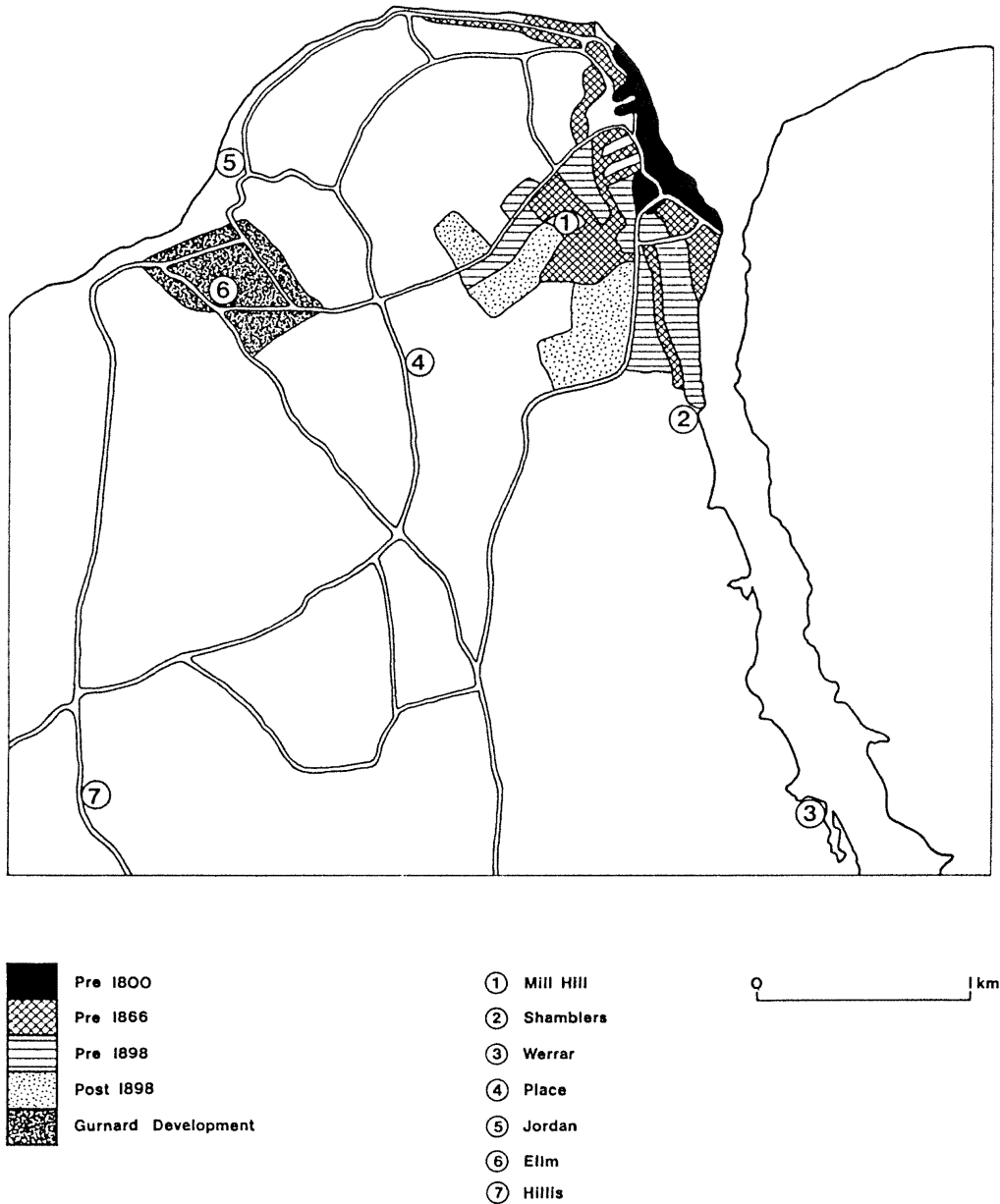


Figure 2. The main building developments and brickworks in the Cowes area in the nineteenth century.

boat. Based on the timber barges of the Medina the vessel carried 3500 bricks to the slipway at Shalfleet or the bridge below Newtown town hall (*Calbourne Magazine*).

Those brickmakers operating some distance from waterways were dependent on horse transport. The poor condition of the roads undoubtedly shortened the distance that a

horse might draw a load of bricks in one day. This was a problem shared by those using water transport once the bricks had been off-loaded onto a wharf and needed carting to the building site. However, for brickmakers who had chosen sites with good deposits of sand and clay the difficulties of road transport were not overwhelming. Thus the successful works at Ningwood supplied bricks for the prison at Horsebridge Hill. Horses drew cartloads of 1000 bricks the five or more miles to the building site (Pritchett 1939: 9–10). Their popular 'white' bricks were used in building the new resort of Brighton and were regularly carted to Yarmouth before being shipped to Fareham (Pritchett 1939: 8).

The problems of transport were minimised by siting brickworks close to growing towns or particular building sites where a demand for bricks was guaranteed. This produced a series of brickworks grouped around an expanding town, each new works being sited further into the countryside as the development spread outwards. Ryde provides the clearest example of a large number of brickworks opening at a time of rapid expansion for the town, but Cowes gives an indication of the pattern of development.

The early development of Cowes began in the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century the town expanded as a naval shipbuilding and victualling centre. By 1800 the town buildings were concentrated on the waterfront at the mouth of the river. A field name on a map of c. 1815 marks the site of an early brickworks on Mill Hill Road (Basford pers. comm.). Possibly long disused this works had been ideally situated to supply bricks for the initial development of the town. The continued success of the shipbuilders and the new prosperity from the patronage of yachtsmen promoted the expansion of the town. By the mid-1860s the site on Mill Hill Road had been engulfed and a large development had appeared to the south of the original town (fig. 2). The brickworks in Shamblers Copse was well placed to benefit from the construction of this artisan housing. Towards the end of the century the builders moved away from the river in the direction of Gurnard and a new works opened near to Place Farm. The Pritchetts were quick to exploit the demand for bricks, the Elim Yard was started on the strength of knowledge that a building site was to open in Gurnard (Pritchett 1939: 12).

The well known works at Hillis do not fit into the pattern surrounding the expansion of Cowes. The works were originally opened (1856) to supply agricultural drainage pipes for the Ward Estate (Pritchett 1939: 15). The subsequent success of the works must be attributed to the diligence of the proprietors and their introduction of machinery and new kilns.

In comparison with the busy port of Cowes, Ryde was little more than a village. As late as 1770 John Potts, a yeoman, opened a kiln well within the boundaries of the present town (*Lind Papers*). This was to the west of the High Street in the area now occupied by Woolworths. The town only began to expand after the Napoleonic Wars. Naval officers, ashore on half pay, took advantage of the regular packet services to Portsmouth and enjoyed residences on the Island. This early building boom was not exploited by brickmakers and the Newchurch Tithe Map shows no works in the area. This contrasts sharply with the older towns of St. Helens and Brading where over half a dozen field names reveal the presence, or past existence, of brickyards.

In 1845 Queen Victoria purchased Osborne House and sealed the future of the Island as a fashionable resort. Ryde was the main landing point for visitors from the mainland and quickly benefited from the new popularity of the Island. By the 1860s a ring of brickworks had opened to supply the needs of the growing town. (1862 Ordnance Survey maps). These were situated either on main routes into the town or in areas of new development. The link between supply and demand is illustrated by the entry in a Directory of 1859 (White 1859). The few brickmakers listed were also builders, clearly they would have found no difficulty in disposing of their produce.

Ryde continued to develop for several decades. The opening of the railway to Sandown and Shanklin in 1864 enhanced the role of the town as a staging point for tourists. The spreading buildings slowly over-took the original ring of brickworks; each

old works is now contained within a modern area of Ryde, at Swanmore, Haylands, Oakfield and Elmfield. Only the brickyards furthest into the country at Ashe and Stroud Wood continued working into the twentieth century.

The influx of visitors which had stimulated the growth of Ryde soon began to affect the rural areas of the Island. During the late 1860s and the 1870s the small village of Shanklin underwent the earliest stages of its development into the present seaside resort. However the expansion of the towns on the south east coast did not produce rings of 'urban fringe' brickworks comparable to those spawned by the growth of Cowes and Ryde. Writing in 1889 Bristow *et al.* (p. 251) described the brickworks in the area: at Borthwood, near Sandown, brickearth had been found in association with gravel, and at Gatten, near Shanklin, and at Rookley, brickworks had opened where the laying of the railway had opened faces in the clay.

The opening of the railways to Sandown and Shanklin, and later to Newport, introduced three new considerations in locating brickworks on the Island. Firstly, the growth of the seaside towns was accelerated thus creating a demand for building materials in the south east of the Island. Secondly, the railway cuttings revealed clays running through the Lower Greensand, which indicated the possibility of commercial brickmaking taking place away from the rich clays of the northern Wight. Thirdly the railways provided the first viable alternative to horse or water transport.

The expansion of Shanklin and the location of suitable clays in the area re-created the conditions which had produced the 'urban fringe' brickworks around Cowes and Ryde. However, improving methods of transport were eroding the advantage to be gained by siting brickworks close to a ready market. The gradual opening of railways supported the evolution of an Island-wide system of supply and demand. Having carted his bricks to the rail termini the brickmaker had the opportunity to send his bricks further and faster. Over the decades of railway building the Island brickmakers took advantage of the new form of transport. In 1905 Henry Dowty paid the Freshwater, Yarmouth and Newport Railway Company to lay a siding to his works at Shalfleet (Sprake 1967). A second brickworks at Lee Copse, similarly far removed from any town, had been served by the Wellow siding since 1892 (Sprake 1967).

## **Twentieth century**

In the first half of the nineteenth century brickmakers on the Isle of Wight had worked in an industry based on each local district. Lack of transport provided a buffer against competition. Following the integration forced by the railways, the arrival of effective road transport would destroy the fragmented nature of the local industry. This final stage was heralded by the opening of Gunville Brickworks in 1900 (Pritchett 1939: 24). The site had the natural advantage of lying over two types of clay as well as sand; this would provide for manufacturing a variety of wares. The Pritchetts introduced modern machinery, including heated drying sheds to permit all year round production of bricks. To ensure a good return on their investment the company sought to reach as many customers as possible. The telephone was installed and a steam road engine and wagon was purchased. The ability to supply bricks directly to building sites anywhere on the Island would have enabled the Pritchetts to squeeze out many small brickmakers who relied on traditional, seasonal methods of production. Fortunately for those employed in the smaller yards, the investors in Gunville lost confidence and the works failed.

The ambitious venture at Gunville provided an indication of the future nature of brickmaking on the Island. Once improved transport destroyed the advantage enjoyed by those brickworks sited close to building sites, or sources of transport such as rivers or railways, the balance of factors to be considered in locating a brickworks would alter. The quality of raw materials, the variety and excellence of the wares manufactured and the speed and cost of production would become increasingly important.

The First World War, with the introduction of conscription, forced many brickworks to close (*First Report of the Committee on the Brick Industry 1942*). The government failed to implement a programme of 'caretaking' and a large number of works did not re-open. The last, and only partially completed, Ordnance Survey of the inter-war years shows less than a dozen brickworks on the Isle of Wight (1938 and 1942 Ordnance Survey maps). Only a handful of these survived into the 1950s (*Classified Telephone Directories 1947, 1958, 1963*). In relation to prospective markets these post-war brickworks are scattered at random across the Island. However they possessed the necessary qualities to over-ride the once all-important factor of having transport to carry the bricks to the customer. The quality of clays available at Werrar and Gunville has already been mentioned, and the works at Downend lay on a large deposit of rich brickearth. The works at Rookley and Hillis had the benefit of mechanised brickmaking machines, heated drying sheds and modern efficient kilns. In addition the works produced a variety of building and ornamental wares.

## Conclusions

The changing patterns in the location of brickworks on the Island can be split into four basic phases. Each phase reflects progress in the slow movement from an economy based on numerous isolated communities to an integrated economy where the system of supply and demand, along with the competition inherent in such a system, had become Island-wide. The first phase was that of association with the Manor. Although the building of Sandown Fort demonstrated the ability to supply bricks further afield, the brickmakers chose to be close to the political and economic centre. The practice of brickmaking to serve a highly localised unit is recorded in the field names on the Tithe Maps. These indicate that small brickpits had been worked independently within many parishes.

The second phase accompanied the rapid expansion of the towns in the north of the Island. The brickmakers polarised between the 'urban fringes' and the waterways. One section sought the benefits of proximity to a virtually guaranteed market, the other endeavoured to use cheap transport to achieve a wider distribution of their goods. Both groups were being drawn into competing for a market rather than relying on the demand for bricks within a designated area such as their own parish. The ability to transport goods was increased by the construction of the railways. During the third phase, therefore, brickmakers took advantage of the railways and had sidings laid to their works. The towns on the south east coast expanded after the railways were built. Their growth did not precipitate a movement of brickmakers to the fringe of the towns and this may be attributed to the improvement in transport having decreased the benefit derived by siting a works near to the localised demand.

The fourth phase came after the advent of powered road transport which further forced economic integration between districts. Brickmakers no longer sought sites near to towns, waterways or railways, but concentrated on finding excellent materials from which to produce a wide range of high quality wares by cheaper and faster methods of manufacture. The ability to distribute goods throughout the Island forced every brickmaker to compete for his share of the market for bricks, pipes and ornamental ware.

The closure of Rookley Brickworks appears as an epitaph to the development of a 'county', rather than 'district', brickmaking industry on the Isle of Wight. While improving transport had broken down the fragmented nature of the Island industry, the growth of the national infrastructure had breached the economic boundaries between regions of the country. Thus the Island brickmakers were pushed into competition with mainland firms. Rookley was simply a minor casualty in the continuing development of a nationally based brickmaking industry.

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