

4. THE BRICKFIELDS

The Brickfields lie about a mile along the B1058 on the road from Bulmer Tye to Castle Hedingham. This little hamlet lies in the valley that leads into that of the Belchamp Brook and consists of only twelve houses. Nestling amongst the trees, mostly willow, one would imagine that it had remained unchanged for the past two or three centuries, but nine of the houses have been built since 1938.

On the map for 1777 we see a dwelling marked here and the old maps for the area call it Hurrell's Hole. Hurrell is a local name; and, although the relief map clearly shows it to be in a hole, the word may refer to a pond. Ponds are still there and were a natural watering place for all animals on their long and arduous journeys to and from the great fairs held in Suffolk and Norfolk and also to and from the market places in London. The drovers and all those who were in charge of animals knew of Hurrells Hole and would take their animals via this part as they knew there was always water here. The old road from Upper Houses is only a bridle path now; but was much used at one time.

Archaeological Finds

The bulls' pond that gave Bulmer its name will probably never be identified but this could be one bulls' mere. The hill above Hole Farm has a very interesting early history. A Bronze Age urn, a Saxon hut site, and a mediaeval tile kiln have all been found here. Wisborough Hill could be West Burgh (Wesborough in 1500) or even Wisgar's burgh. (W. was an important Saxon landowner in the neighbourhood) - in any event it is a site of great antiquity from its name and the finds in the area. Just across the valley is the Gestingthorpe Roman site excavated by Harold Cooper and the conjectural Roman Road mentioned later went very close to the Wesborough mound.

The three older houses are grouped together near the Hedingham Road. Brickfields House (6) where Peter Minter and his family live was formerly known as Hole Farm. George English lived here in 1871 and it was built in 1868 but on older foundations. Brickfields Cottage (5) was built at the same period with bricks from the brickfield and housed one of the sons of the English family who was a master brickmaker. For the past thirty years it has been the home of Tom Bird and his wife. Hole Cottage (4), a quaint thatched building, has had a number of interesting tenants: Sam Haille and his wife Marion, for instance, who produced their well-known pottery at the Brickfields for some years.

The English family lived at Hole Farm and ran the brickfields for many years. An English paid Hearth tax in 1671. Ernie Pilgrim of Punts Hill remembers Laura English, the last of them, passing his house every Sunday morning, on her way to Gestingthorpe church, driving her pony and trap with its little tinkling bell. Elspeth Ricks remembered her as having a gruff voice but knowing a child's weakness for home-made coffee cake and raspberry jam.

20th Century Developments

Peter Minter converted stables, barn and hayloft in 1956 into the new Hole Farm and

During the war the yard turned to making pipes used for land drainage and these were part of the war effort to increase crop growing areas. During this period the premises were out of bounds to all except those who worked in the yard, although there was an ARP post here for some of those years. Bricks from Bulmer were used in the building of airfields including those at Duxford.

Brick Making

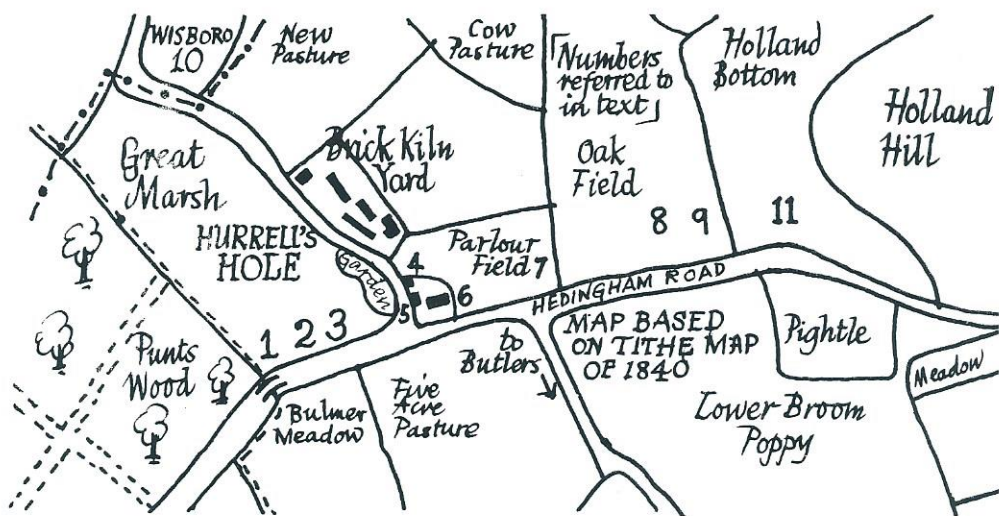
The clay for the bricks is excavated from the ground behind Hole Farm and consists of Reading Bed and London Bed clays. Whereas years ago the clay was dug and wheelbarrowed out during the winter, it is now mechanically scraped out during a fortnight in summer when a whole year's supply is obtained. The next steps are the pugmill and the making shed.

The public footpath from the Hedingham Road passes the hack rows, long, narrow, open sided buildings used for stacking the newly moulded bricks so that they can dry naturally out of doors during the summer months. In the winter they are dried in the moulding shed where the heat is tunnelled underneath the floor. The mould making is another specialised job, done by Peter Minter now and formerly by his father and the late Gordon Nears who was given a drawing or template provided by the client to work from.

Once dry the bricks are placed in the kiln which has stoke places around the inner walls. Tom Bird, an experienced craftsman, has been doing this job for forty years as well as making bricks. Up to 12,000 bricks can be stacked in the kiln and this can take up to three days. They are then fired at a temperature of 1000 degrees centigrade for about three days and left to cool. Firings take place about once a month.

During a recent geological survey of the area, trial holes were drilled to find "white" clay. None was found although Gestingthorpe had produced "Suffolk Whites" and flooring bricks before its closure. Bulmer brickworks used to bring white clay on tumbrils from Gestingthorpe in order to make pavements.

Special bricks for restoring buildings keep the brickworks busy because they are the only firm doing this type of work and have an impressive list of contracts which includes Hampton Court Palace, Marlborough House, Sutton Place and Oxborough Hall. Peter Minter has been responsible for restoring much of the brickwork and the terracotta dolphins that adorn the towers of Layer Marney Towers. Nearly all the types of Tudor brick have been made and used for chimneys, archways, mullions and transoms for windows and stairs. The basic red can be varied by dusting different sands on their wet surfaces.



Map based on the Tithe map of 1840

Out of Bounds

In 1936 the yard was producing facing bricks and ridge and peg tiles using three old 'Scotch' kilns. These rectangular kilns look very picturesque today covered with ivy and with wild flowers in the crevices. They were wasteful in fuel and a dome-shaped draught kiln was built that is still in use today; Belinda Minter has drawn it for us. Its weathered timbers and uneven roof make it look old but it was built in 1936. During the war years it could be blacked out whereas the Scotch kilns without roofs had to be put out during raids and could not be used.

One Ha'penny An Hour

Harry Rippingale was born at Wisbry Hill in 1889. He started work at 12 years alongside his father and his brothers in Bulmer Brickfields for George English. He got 2s.6d. (as a novice) for a 59 hour week. At 17 he was paid 7s.6d. There were 13 or 14 men working in the yards then and they made a lot of plain tiles. One man in the Edwardian period could make 1,200 bricks a day by hand if "another chap did the grinding of the pug for three brickmakers making at their tables". Next time you see some old Essex brickwork looking settled and right on the land from which it has been dug, spare a thought for all that work.