

## **BRICKYARD RODBOURNE , MALMESBURY**

From a talk by Christina Staff for Malmesbury History Society

I became aware of the Rodbourne Brickyard many years back when I was resident in Rodbourne. A neighbour spoke about quarrying the site for bricks.

Later when exploring the site in winter; the clay pits were full of an iron stained water; some of the metal tracking was still evident, as was the narrow bridge crossing it. There was at one time a floor of tar covered tiles; all that remained of a former site building. I remember also that the remains of a kiln were evident set into the bank of a previously excavated clay pit.

There were several brickyards and tilerys in the area around Malmesbury; the Foss Tilery at Shipton Moyne; Lord Suffolk also had one at Charlton Park and another in Garsdon. There was also a brickyard just to the north of Stanton St Quentin - to the east of the Malmesbury Chippenham Road.

Drainage pipes, pots for chimneys, pots for forcing rhubarb and seakale, and also some vases were made at various yards such as Luckington, Charlton Park, Garsdon and Shipton Moyne. The Tanner family are associated with brickworks at Luckington and Acton Turville as well as at Rodbourne.

As the crow flies the brickyard is exactly 4 km from Malmesbury Abbey and lies to the south of the Corston to Rodbourne road before you reach the hamlet. Rodbourne is situated on beds of Kellaways Clay; we know about the stratigraphy as the strata was exposed when a railway cutting was put through Rodbourne during the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century a borehole was drilled in Rodbourne and examined by Dr. R. Cave, B.Sc., PH.D. Cave described the alluvium as a brown mottled clay, and said it extended to nine feet in depth under one foot of topsoil. It is this clay that was excellent for producing bricks.

The Wiltshire Ordnance Survey map Sheet XIII Surveyed: 1885, Published: 1888 quite clearly shows the brickyard, its associated buildings and the clay pits too.

The Tanner family's first known connection with brick making at Rodbourne occurred in the third quarter of the eighteenth century; documented specifically from a will of 1778 when Mary Tanner inherited from Sarah Lane a family relative. This relative (a sister or an aunt) is said to have been in possession of the land in 1740. It is however possible that the site may have had a slightly longer use for brick making, since the document of 1740 refers to pits; mention of pits is unusual in eighteenth-century leases and conveyances. Jean Ritchie in an online memoir says that when Robert Charles Tanner, died in 1956 bricks had been made at Rodbourne by her relatives the Tanners for almost two hundred years.

According to British History online there was a brickworks at the west end of Rodbourne village in 1839; and in 1848 Richard Tanner made bricks and tiles there. In 1867 George Tanner also produced pipes, and in 1911 Robert Tanner made bricks and tiles, burned lime, and also owned a quarry. In the 1930's he also produced small bricks for fireplaces. The brickyard is said to have closed circa 1940, possibly as early as September 1939 at the time that the WW II blackout regulations came into force.

It is known that after the Second World War there was an effort to reopen the brickyard but competition from larger yards meant that this was not a long-term economic option.

A tabletop tomb in the churchyard of The Church of the Holy Rood Rodbourne marks the of 19<sup>th</sup> century resting place of Charles and Alice Tanner. It is the only grave to feature brickwork and indicates that the family were proud of their bricks.



**Plate 1.** The 19<sup>th</sup> century resting place of Charles and Alice Tanner in the churchyard at Rodbourne  
© Christina Staff

Notes made by Simon Verity sculptor in 1976 describe in detail the process of brick making at the site. It is thought that these notes are available at The Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre. Simon also made some excellent sketches of the brick and tile making processes; his research was based on interviews with people who had known the site when it was in operation. Simon had intended to write a book about the brickyard.

The clay was dug by hand and then mixed in a horse driven pug mill, the bricks were then formed in a pine mould. Newly formed bricks were then placed in drying stacks, the outsides of which were covered in tar to prevent weathering. The bricks could be drying for several months before firing. Up to 10.000 bricks were fired at one time in either the Scotch Kiln or a Bar Kiln both of which were in use post war. Firing a kiln used 10 tons of coal. There was also a third kiln at the Rodbourne site - a limekiln, Simon mentions that farmers in Rodbourne used to collect the lime to whitewash the walls of cowsheds.



**Plate 2.** Colonel the post war brickyard horse loaned by Charles Reynolds (pictured).

Tiles were said to be made to order but were not popular to make as they had an undulating surface. Pipes made in Rodbourne were extruded in differing sizes and cut into the required length.

A small brick was made in Rodbourne specifically for fireplaces; engraver Robin Tanner chose bricks for his fireplaces at Chapel Field the house he and his wife Heather built at Kington Langley. He describes his visit there in his autobiography *Double Harness*, "*fortunately we found a one man brickfield where beautiful handmade bricks were made, and one day we went to choose what we wanted for our fireplaces and the main chimney stack and the smaller one for the etching room. The brick maker whose name was Tanner, seemed to think it natural that we should select from several firings just those we liked best. For he had made them all with love, and he handled each one with care. We made neat piles of plum coloured and grey ones; a few were dark purplish brown, and the bulk were muted reds and ochre's.*"

These fireplace bricks were also said to be used by a Bristol brewery in their public houses; such fireplaces were also at one time to be found in Rodbourne houses. The fireplaces date to the latter years of the Arts and Crafts period. Some houses and cottages in Upper Seagry are thought to have been built from Rodbourne brick.



**Plates 3 & 4.** Detail of brickwork in a Seagry cottage © Christina Staff

The brickyard, still so called, is now officially classed as scrubland with the permitted occasional grazing of sheep.

**Sources:**

With thanks to Judith Verity for the gift of Simon Verity's notes taken in 1976 and to Bryan Hillman farmer; Rodbourne, for more recent information. The photograph of Colonel with Charles Reynolds is used with grateful thanks to Cynthia Atwell. Thanks also to Jerome Tait for allowing me to take close up images of the bricks in his Seagry cottage.

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/wilts/vol14/pp127-168>

[https://britishbricksoc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/BBS\\_120\\_2012\\_May\\_.pdf](https://britishbricksoc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/BBS_120_2012_May_.pdf)

<https://www.iwhistory.org.uk/brickmaking/>

<https://webapps.bgs.ac.uk/Memoirs/docs/B01649.html>

Institute of Geological Sciences Malmesbury Sheet 251

*Double Harness*, Robin Tanner Impact Books (Second Edition 1991)