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## Introduction

Brickmaking as an industry is less studied by historians than other sectors of the economy, but the expansion of the built environment of London during the nineteenth century surely reminds us of the importance of the construction industry and the materials on which it depended for the history of the capital.

There are some possible reasons for this neglect. Many brickmaking operations were quite small scale, and the size of the industry as a whole came not from a few dominant businesses but rather from the aggregation of many small units. A sense of this can be got from the number of times the label 'Brickfield' appears on nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps of the London area. Many of these businesses were short-lived and had little management infrastructure, and few of them have left much in the way of records, such as account books or sales ledgers. Their history is difficult to put together and has to be reconstructed from a range of sources. Small brickfields did not have many, if any, permanent buildings and there is a consequent lack of industrial archaeology to allow later generations to visualise the nature and scale of the work that took place on them. This contrasts, for example, with the solid bulk of cotton mills or warehouses, or the surviving chimneys and winding gear of mines. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century, when the larger businesses started to erect multi-chamber continuous kilns, that the skyline in brickmaking districts became dominated by groups of tall chimneys. Nevertheless, brickmaking was an industry that made an important contribution to the economy, employing thousands of people and making possible the rapid physical development of towns and cities in the nineteenth century, as well as the infrastructure of railways, canals and docks.

Despite apparent neglect, brickmaking is studied by some academic historians and a larger number of enthusiasts, and has its own special interest group in the British Brick Society. A handful of books provides a good introduction to bricks and brickmaking, and a number of regional studies have been published that carry detailed information about brickfields in particular areas.<sup>1</sup> However, relatively little has been written on the brick industry that supplied the London market, although Alan Cox's chapter 'Bricks to build a capital', in a volume about the building materials used in London after the fire of 1666, provides a succinct introduction to how and where they were made, how they were transported to London and where they were used.<sup>2</sup>

This book draws on that research and focuses on a shorter period than does Cox, roughly from 1800 to the First World War, but looks at the industry in more detail. It examines the different groups of people with an interest in brickmaking – landowners

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- 1 J. Woodforde, *Bricks to build a house* (London, 1976); M. Hammond, *Bricks and brickmaking* (Aylesbury, 1981); C. Haynes, *Brick: a social history* (Cheltenham, 2019).
  - 2 A. Cox, 'Bricks to build a capital', in H. Hobhouse and A. Saunders (eds), *Good and proper materials: the fabric of London since the Great Fire* (London, 1989), pp. 3–17.

who had clay on their land, men and women who saw an opportunity to build a profitable business by exploiting that clay and the people who actually manufactured the bricks. This is set within an economic history framework examining supply and demand, the costs of manufacture and the way brickfields were financed.

The book is divided into four sections. In the first I consider how and why a brickmaking industry developed in the London area, and particularly how it expanded after the Great Fire; how the distinctive London stock brick was made; where the brickfields were located; and the demand and supply factors that affected the numbers of bricks that were produced. The section ends with a consideration of how manufacturers distributed the bricks from the production site to their customers.

The second section focuses on the businesses themselves and the people who ran them. It also provides some thoughts about the economics of the industry. Finally, it considers how bricks were sold and how a market for bricks developed.

Section three switches the focus to the people who actually made the bricks, known familiarly at the time as *brickies*. It examines their working lives, their homes and their habits. The workforce in nineteenth-century brickmaking was made up not only of men but also of large numbers of women and children, so a chapter looks at children's employment and how it was eventually controlled through the extension of the Factory Acts. A final chapter considers the attempts the brickies made to improve their pay and working conditions and how trade unions helped in achieving these aims.

The final section considers how the industry in the London area entered a long process of decline at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of both the exhaustion of clay reserves and competition from brickmaking in other parts of the country, particularly the area around Peterborough.

The origins of this book go back several decades. I made my first tentative steps at researching London brickmaking in the 1970s, when I was interested in brickmaking in just a small area of West London near where I live: the village, now suburb, of Northolt in the present London Borough of Ealing. When I decided in the 1990s to work towards a doctorate in history I took the wider brickmaking area of west Middlesex as my subject – the area known in the nineteenth century as the 'Cowley district', from the village of that name near Uxbridge.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to brickmaking more recently, I have expanded the coverage in different ways: first geographically, to bring in brickmakers elsewhere in the London area and in the counties of Surrey, Essex and Kent who all supplied the London market with bricks; and secondly in terms of the people involved, both the owners and the men, women and children who worked for them. It is my hope, therefore, to have provided a rounded view of the industry during the nineteenth century.

But that is not all. I would like to think that this study will shed light on nineteenth-century economic and social life in a broader way. Although brickmaking is a distinctive industry it shares characteristics such as business structures, employment conditions, seasonality of employment and child labour with other parts of the Victorian economy. It also contributes to our understanding of the way that large cities such as London

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3 P. Hounsell, 'Cowley stocks: brickmaking in West Middlesex from 1800', PhD thesis (Thames Valley University, 2000).

interact with their hinterland and the interplay between the centre and the periphery. Brickmaking forms part of a larger network of trades and industries located on the outskirts of London – such as market gardening and dairying – that sustained the capital and allowed it to grow rapidly during the nineteenth century. There was always two-way traffic, particularly in the way that London imported food, building materials such as gravel, sand and cement, and other essentials, and in turn exported its waste materials. For example, hay came into the capital to feed the horses that provided the motive power of the capital, and the stable manure was returned to fertilise the fields on which the next crop of hay would be grown. In a similar way, the domestic refuse of London, particularly the residue from the ubiquitous coal fires, contributed the fuel to burn the bricks that were then used in the expansion of the built environment.

It is necessary to explain what this book does not attempt to do. It does not set out to document all the brickmaking firms that were active in the London area during the nineteenth century, so readers in search of a particular business or the brickmaking in a particular district may be disappointed. Other writers have done this for particular areas, as, for example, I did for the Cowley district, the Harper Smiths did for Acton and Pat Ryan for Essex.<sup>4</sup> I have drawn on their work, but my intention is different, that is to paint a more general picture of the industry in its different aspects.

Like many other industries, brickmaking has its own jargon. *Brickmaker* is a term that applies to both the person who physically made the bricks and the person who owned the brickfield. The latter were sometimes referred to as *brickmasters*, just as the former called themselves *brickies*, or in a more precise way *operative brickmakers*. The places where bricks were made were referred to both as *brickfields* and *brickworks*, the first reflecting that at the heart of any brickmaking operation was a piece of land with clay in it, the second used when a site had buildings and machinery. I have attempted to explain each new term as it is encountered in the text, but there is a glossary of terms at the back of the book for easy reference.

Lastly, I have used the units of measurement in use at the time rather than convert them into their modern decimal equivalents. So, throughout, area is delimited in acres, rods and perches and money is measured in pounds, shillings and pence. I have not generally attempted to give equivalent modern values for nineteenth-century prices; for readers keen to do that there are websites that provide conversions. However, one comparison might be instructive in comparing prices in the mid-nineteenth century with modern ones. Back then hand-made stock bricks sold for between 30s and 40s (£1.50 to £2) per thousand, while a modern hand-made stock brick costs about £2, or £2000 a thousand.<sup>5</sup>

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4 A. and T. Harper Smith, *The Brickfields of Acton*, 2nd edn (Acton, 1991); P. Ryan, *Brick in Essex: the clayworking craftsmen and gazetteer of sites* (Chelmsford, 1999).

5 See, for example, <<https://www.measuringworth.com/datasets/ukearnncpi/>> for a guide to earnings and retail prices, accessed 2 May 2022. Prices for a modern stock brick from <[www.travisperkins.co.uk/product/building-materials/bricks-and-blocks/](http://www.travisperkins.co.uk/product/building-materials/bricks-and-blocks/)>, accessed 21 December 2021.