

BRICKS – Emsworth’s most enduring land-based legacy

Part 2 by Andrew Butler

My previous article in 2023 explored the history of brick making and the impact that this industry has had on the Emsworth area – in particular Hayling Island and Chidham. Most of these smaller operations were seasonal, often owned by farmers and other trades people who would make bricks alongside their other employment.

Brickworks were also frequently funded by wealthy landowners and this was the stimulus for the growth of brick making around Rowlands Castle. Landowners had a desire to create building materials as local as possible to where these materials would be used. They would sometimes create a brick making operation just for a season or two to meet an immediate need and staff this with itinerant workers who were named ‘journeymen’. These workers moved around from year to year and relied on the landowners for board and lodging.

The influence of large estates like Stansted, Staunton and Idsworth, coupled with a rich seam of local Reading Clay, provided the momentum for focus on brickmaking around Rowlands Castle. But that early momentum would provide the catalyst for something much grander.

A 1785 map of the Stansted Estate shows a brick kiln and clay pits, while brickmaking in Rowlands Castle dates back to at least 1810 when a brick kiln is shown at Red Hill on Ordnance Survey maps. Multiple other small brickmaking operations were set up to support the building of Leigh Park House.

The repeal of the hated brick tax, and the building in 1859 of the railway line to Portsmouth, created the catalyst for the formation of the Rowlands Castle Brick & Tileworks in 1888. Often known as Bastin’s – after Edward Bastin, the primary shareholder and managing director – this brickworks rapidly became the largest brick making operation in the Emsworth area.

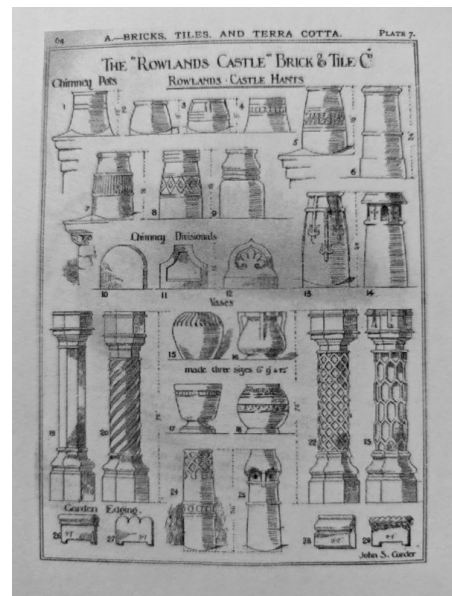


Fig. 1.

Rowlands Castle bricks (and other products) were always prized for their fine workmanship. The company was quick to exploit the Victorian fashion for ornate chimney pots, as Figure 1 shows. This image is sourced from Malcolm Smith’s *The Brickworks and the Village*, published in 2016, and is reproduced from a catalogue published around 1900. These ornate chimney pots, finials and other rooftop mouldings became a specialisation of brickworks in this whole area, and were certainly not unique to Rowlands Castle.

Figure 2 shows just a small sample of the huge range of chimney pots – curated from multiple local brickmaking sources – that have been preserved at the Bursledon Brickworks Museum. Visitors to the rooftop terrace at the Chichester Novium Museum are also able to see multiple examples of local chimney pots visible on the Chichester skyline today.

Rowlands Castle also became celebrated for their finely shaped bricks which became very popular on public buildings in the area – including our own Emsworth Museum building, for which there is strong anecdotal



Fig. 2.

evidence that Rowlands Castle bricks were used. Figure 3 shows just a sample of the variety of custom shapes on offer to buyers, which were all typically made by hand due to their complexity and small sample sizes.

Despite being formed only in 1888, Rowland Castle brickworks was able to rapidly secure some very lucrative and visible contracts, probably thanks to the family connections enjoyed by Edward Bastin. The most celebrated success was the Brighton Metropole Hotel, which was built in 1890. Edward Bastin was so proud to win this highly visible contract, that he showed an image of the Metropole Hotel prominently on the company's letterhead. Rowlands Castle was also instrumental in the rebuilding of Stansted House (after the old house was engulfed by fire in 1900) and large portions of the Royal Navy dockyard at Portsmouth.



Fig. 3.

But the glory days did not last long. The company was sold in 1909 to its works manager, Harry Robinson. In 1920, it was then sold again to Walter Tarrant, a successful developer from Surrey. Under Tarrant, the great majority of output went into the building of houses for wealthy owners around Sunningdale, Virginia Water and Wentworth.

At its heyday in 1927, Rowlands Castle was producing about 5.5 million handmade bricks and tiles a year, plus around 3 million wire-cut and pressed bricks. But in 1931, the company went into receivership. It was bailed out yet again, but fell into a terminal decline as modern building methods reduced the demand for bricks, and the larger brick companies were able to leverage scale that the smaller brickmaking concerns could not emulate.



Fig. 4.

By 1966, Rowlands Castle was producing less than 1 million bricks a year and in 1968 the business closed for good. By 1971, nearly all traces of the extensive buildings had gone – replaced ironically by a Travis Perkins builders’ yard. The celebrated brickworks office, built in a very ornate style and sometimes called the Sample House, lived on until 2007. Then it was carefully dismantled and has been in storage at the Bursledon Brick Museum ever since awaiting its reconstruction.

These days, there are few visible traces of the once extensive brickmaking industry in the Emsworth area – although the clay pits at Rowlands Castle and Maybush Copse (Chidham) can still be explored as they gradually return to the bosom of Mother Nature. And many fine local buildings – including our own Museum – still stand proud as a legacy of this local industry. Those pioneers like Noel and Albert Pycroft and Edward Bastin have left us invaluable souvenirs of the impact they have made on Emsworth and beyond.

Sources:

Figure 1 Malcolm Smith *The Brickworks and the Village*

Figure 2 Bursledon Brickmaking Museum

Figure 3 Bursledon Brickmaking Museum

Figure 4 Malcolm Smith *The Brickworks and the Village*