





Another brick in the wall

One brick might be a humble entity, but put many in the right hands and you have a work of art. Jack Watkins examines the history of this seemingly simple building material

THERE are probably more buildings in England constructed of brick than any other material,' wrote Nathaniel Lloyd in his *A History of English Brickwork* in 1925. 'Amongst these are some of the most interesting, the most picturesque and the most serviceable structures that we have in any material.' For many years, Lloyd's book, with its lucid text and striking black-and-white photographs, was the standard work on the subject and he emphasised the continuing value of bricks, both for durability and adaptability. 'There is almost no limit to the variety of form, textures and colours in which brick can be produced, nor to the multitude of ways in which it can be used,' he argued.

As one of the more environmentally friendly building materials, bricks still have a place in 21st-century construction and designs utilising them feature in the annual awards of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). They draw on an inspirational national heritage. It's fair to say, however, that their story is relatively untold. Lloyd's pioneering tome stopped with the Georgians and, although R. W. Brunskill provided a fuller picture and brought bricks into the 21st century with his authoritative *Brick and Clay Building in Britain*, Carolyne Haynes's recent *Brick: A Social History* takes a wider angle and makes an arcane topic more digestible to the general reader.

An architect by profession, Dr Haynes is project manager of the Brickworks Museum at Swanwick, near Southampton, Hampshire, formerly the Bursledon Brickworks. It was comments from museum visitors that persuaded her to expand the book's scope 'and to include

more stories about workers. The general consensus was that the social history was the interesting bit,' explains Dr Haynes.

The museum holds examples of bricks from all periods, not least the Victorian, when makers stamped their names into the middle of them—the Bursledon Brickworks Company or 'BBC' is a prime example, manufacturing 26,000 bricks a day when it was at its peak of production. The company closed in 1974, unable to keep up with the demands of the new Health and Safety at Work Act, but, in its heyday, its state-of-the-art infrastructure reflected the 19th-century industry's increasing mechanisation and standardisation.

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In earlier times, brick-making was largely about itinerant makers moving around the country, setting up kilns on building sites. This created fascinating diversity, explains Dr Haynes: 'Medieval bricks varied in size and each brick-maker had his—and, on occasion, her—own moulds. You can follow a brick-maker around an area by measuring the bricks. After the brick tax came in at the end of the 18th century, size tended to be standardised and it becomes much harder to tell them apart by measurement alone.'

Although brick use in this country pre-dated the Roman occupation, the latter were masters of making hard, tile-like bricks. These were so enduring that they were reused in buildings of the Saxon period, notably

St Albans Cathedral, Hertfordshire, and several in Colchester in Essex, including St Botolph's Priory.

Between the Roman departure and the later Middle Ages, brick was rarely used, although locally produced examples were employed for the quoins, pillars and decorative mouldings on the standing monastic buildings of Coggeshall Abbey, Essex. Historic England's listing citation for the mid-12th-century complex describes these as 'some of the earliest examples of medieval brick construction in the British Isles'. Lloyd reckoned Little Wenham Hall in neighbouring Suffolk, built between 1270 and 1280, was 'probably the earliest brick-dwelling house of its kind in England'.

It was in the late-medieval and early-Tudor period that a truly skilled class of brick-makers and brick-layers arose, having learnt from visiting Continental craftsmen. 'Tudor bricks are fantastic,' believes Dr Haynes, citing Hampton Court Palace, Surrey, and Compton Wynyates, Warwickshire, as examples of what the period's brick-makers could achieve. 'They mainly used red brick and then the burnt heads, which they used for the diaper patterning you see at Hampton Court and Lambeth Palace [London SE1]. Bricks could also vary in colour, depending on where they were in the kiln. If they weren't getting hot enough, they could be a lighter pink.'

Bricks were also affected by fashion and the preferences of a property owner. The Palladian architect Isaac Ware published a translation of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* in 1738 and opined that red brick was 'fiery and disagreeable to the eye'—he contested that grey was more harmonious with the stone dressings of most great houses. Although Ware's opinion is arguable (Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex, looks resplendent with stone quoins and red brick), Holkham Hall in Norfolk used light-grey bricks made at a nearby brickyard specially established for the purpose, →



The brick arches of the 19th-century Ouse Valley Viaduct in West Sussex

Alamy, Getty



Above: William Butterfield's Keble College in Oxford. Below: Workers at the London Brick Company in Bedford stack newly fired bricks

The beauty of bricks

- Brick-making was formerly a seasonal and drawn-out process. The unsettled political climate of Britain after the Roman departure may account for the lapse in use during the Saxon period
- Some of the most striking early examples in the late-medieval period were the private castles of grandees who had fought in the royal wars on the Continent and studied the homes of their French counterparts—take Caister Castle, Norfolk, and Tattershall Castle, Lincolnshire
- Serious fires in towns and cities spurred the wider use of brick in the 17th century for its fire-resistant qualities
- The Brickworks Museum's steam-powered machinery and vast kiln chambers reflect the 19th-century move away from seasonality and the production of bricks on a massive scale for an expanding urban population



with costly Italian brick-makers hired for the task. Brunskill writes that the colour was chosen by the architect William Kent 'so it could masquerade as stone from a distance'.

Many consider the Georgian period to mark a high point in the skilled use of bricks, yet Dr Haynes relishes the Victorian taste for polychrome: red, yellow and blue bricks created some staggering eyecatchers. The master of their use was William Butterfield,

the architect of Keble College, Oxford ('quite shocking for its time,' says Dr Haynes), and his glorious, if somewhat hidden London West End gem, All Saints Church.

Although the infrastructure of the Brickworks Museum is also Victorian, the displays are being developed to tell the entire history of industry, from its elementary beginnings to the present day. 'Our long-term aim is to become the National

Collection of Bricks and Brickmaking Artefacts,' shares Dr Haynes. 'As the only remaining brick factory in the UK that has all its original buildings and machinery, we feel it is perfectly placed to become a centre of brick-making history.'

The Brickworks Museum is celebrating its 125th anniversary this year with a summer of activities (01489 576248; www.thebrickworksmuseum.org)