

HARRIS & PEARSON HISTORY

Harry Smith's 'Story'

PREAMBLE

My association with Harris & Pearson began in 1935, when, after leaving King Edward Grammar School Stourbridge, I was offered a position by Mr G. V. Evers of Pedmore, in one of the brickworks with which he was interested; ostensibly to study the manufacture and use of Refractories (firebricks as they were then called) and eventually to become a staff member.

I then joined Harris and Pearson, which was part of a group of companies – E.J & J Pearson, with their headquarters at the Delph in Brierley Hill, and from which we were controlled.

As far as I can gather, Harris & Pearson was in the process of restarting; (following a period of depression), and taking on more employees, and I found myself entering the portal of what was to me, the gateway to an industry which was to become the most satisfying and interesting of my working life and was eventually to bring me to Australia.

HARRIS & PEARSON

The main office as can be seen from the newspaper cutting was an imposing two-story building. As one entered from Brettell Lane, the office ground floor left, was the Works Office, and abode of Mr Charlie Salt the Works Foreman, and the office at right was the Sales Office – the occupant at this time being Mr Smallman. The main feature as far as I was concerned was the Time Clock, which was at the right hand end and had a distinctive ring. The first floor was taken up by (at left) the office of Mr Pearson (Ronnie) The Works Manager – (and I believe one of the original Pearson family), and the remaining office was the Administration Centre. After an exhaustive interview with Mr Salt, I was told that I was to begin my education in the Carpenters Shop.

THE WORKS

The main clay used at that time was the famous Stourbridge Old Mine Clay - however that was fast running out, and was being replaced by New Mine Clay, which was not as refractory. Clay was obtained from Withymoor. There were two grinding pans, one was the original and was driven by a coal fired boiler, which provided steam for an old marine engine, which in turn drove a system of driving belts, this marine engine had a huge flywheel which constantly needed chocking up and was the cause of many stoppages. The second pan had an electric motor drive and was the more efficient of the two.

These two mills provided feed for the two Pug Mills (extruders) via tempering tubs in which the ground clay was watered down to become plastic; some quite stiff for extruders, and some quite soft for the hand moulders. Most processes were labour intensive and forklifts etc were unheard of. The extruders were housed in long sheds (stoves) and were serviced by men with special long topped barrows who would run down the stove and stack the bricks for drying. The extruders made mainly bricks of 9x4½x3 dimensions and by the use of wires could be made to produce Side Arch and End Arch etc.

The extruders could also make large stiff clots for use with the presses. These were again hand operated and were known as 'Swing Presses' or 'Hand Presses'. The Swing Presses consisted of a heavy screw some 4" to 6" in diameter attached to a large circular wheel. By turning the wheel the press would move up and down. The operator (sometimes 2) stood on a platform and swung the heavy wheel, and the screw drove the top plate into the die box and pressed the bricks. Accidents were prone to happen for the press had very few safety features.

The other method of manufacture was by hand moulding, which is where I came in. Since the advent of Plastic Refractories had not yet arrived; most specially shaped bricks were made in wooden moulds; by both male and female moulders. These moulds could be quite complicated and necessitate either loose fittings in a timber frame or collapsible moulds. At one time three of us could not keep up with demand and we had to send for a Mould and Pattern Maker from Amblecote Works. The moulds could be very large as in the case of glass house tank blocks (which necessitated two moulders to handle one) or very small which normally women would make. One such lady was Nell Coleman who would make a days tally with the best of them and nine times out of ten, she would finish before them, and, at the time, she was reputed to be almost 70 years old! The men made the larger and more complicated shapes and foremost among them were the Timmins Family who also had a Fish and Chip Shop in (I think) the Delph. It was always possible to tell which moulder made which brick.

When I first started in the Carpenters Shop, my boss was an ex Delph man, Ted Pitt, who was a first class craftsman but was on the verge of retirement; he was succeeded by George Westwood another of the same ilk. During my time here, I attended Stourbridge Tech School and studied Engineering Drawing and Science, together with as much information on Firebricks as the Library could offer.

The bricks in the most part were dried in what were called "Stoves" and these were heated by means of flues running the entire length of the floor, and fed from fire boxes at the end. The area immediately above the fire box had a double thickness of brick, for the heat generated by the coal fire was considerable and this area was used to ensure that larger bricks were completely dried out. Unfortunately at one Christmas Party, one of the setters (male) fell asleep on this particular floor and as a result was fairly well burned.

Firing of the dried brick was done in round Down Draft Kilns or the new 'Belgian' Continuous Kiln, which had been completed just before I arrived, and was the first step in modernisation of the plant. All kilns were coal fired by hand but the 'Belgian' had the advantage of never stopping for setting or discharging.

All setting, except that of gas retorts (which required special handling by a separate gang due to their size and shape) was done by women carriers, in charge of a male setter, these women wore a large padded bustle around their waist on which they would rest the dried brick, ready for the setter to place in situ. Some of the distances walked by these women, and the weight they carried would tax the strength of a man – no wonder that one would not answer them back or make suggestive remarks!! But they kept at it all day and seemed to thrive on it – the head setter Billy Mailley must certainly have had a way with him.

The factory was well placed for the ingress and egress of raw materials and finished product, having the canal (cut) on one side, and the railway siding on the other, with Brettell Lane at the front for use of road transport. One of my most disliked jobs was to have to 'block off' railway trucks to prevent the load of bricks from moving. Inevitably by the time it had been shunted about half a dozen times, it had shifted, and my excuse was that the 'nails were not long enough' did not seem to wash at all well!!! Which brings me to relate the story of my first ever job at Harris & Pearson: - Ted Pitt, having looked me over said "I've just the job for you, take this hammer and report to Ronnie Pearson's office and Charlie Salt will tell you what to do". I did so, and was given a handful of tacks, and told to go

to Mr Pearson's office and tack the lino down. Since Mr Pearson was in his office, I had to work around his desk and I thought this most unbecoming for a grammar school boy - "was this what higher education was all about"??

The foregoing was all about work at Harris & Pearson pre World War Two. As far as I was concerned it came to an end in 1939 (September) in this fashion: - On this particular Sunday myself and George Westwood were working overtime to get out some moulds needed for (as I remember) a large coke oven order. I was en route from the carpenters shop to the stove to check out sizes and fit etc of a fairly large mould, when George shouted that war had been declared. I forthwith dropped the mould in the middle of the yard; said good day to George, grabbed my bike and headed home. Next day (Monday) I joined the R.A.F. - I have often wondered who picked up, or fell over, that mould - never found out!

POST WAR 1946

I returned in February 1946 and obviously great changes had been made during my absence. The progress made necessary for higher quality refractories, had resulted in the demand for brick made of the lower grade Stourbridge New Mine Clay having to be bolstered by the importation of Castle Carey Higher Alumina Clay for the production of stiff plastic material.

With production of higher refractories, new methods of production were introduced, one of which was the introduction of the 'Slip Casting Method'. This was under the control of Dr S.C (?) Waterton with whom I worked in the manufacture of the new type of mould required for this type of production. Slip Casting also required new plant, and accordingly a new mixer and blunger were installed, and more stringent quality control was introduced. The higher alumina product made; obviously required higher firing and more control over heating and cooling and so a new gas fired kiln (reputed to be able to fire to 1400°C) was built. Since Slip Cast Blocks were used in the local glass industry, and the method of building glass smelting tanks required them to be almost joint free, great accuracy in block dimensions was of maximum priority, and so the old existing grinding machine was updated to accommodate the new harder blocks.

However, technology had made such great advances during the war that refractory requirements were entirely different and higher quality, and speed of installation was the norm. Gone were the Low Alumina Bricks, they were rapidly being replaced by the new castable and mouldable refractories, which by their very existence spelt the death knell to old time installation, which required special shapes and lots of jointing and was labour intensive.

It was obvious to me that the industry was in decline when E.J & J Pearson built a small plant on the opposite side of Brettell Lane, (basically adjacent to Rutter Bros foundry) for production of the new breed of refractories. I therefore decided that it was time to look for fresh fields and pastures new. For a short time I obtained a job at George King Harrison in charge of production.

During the war, my squadron had many Australians, and listening to their banter, and often serious talk, I gradually came to think that here was the opportunity for which I was looking !! After talking it over with my wife we decided to make the break and I obtained a position in Queensland, but on arrival in Adelaide, I was approached by a representative of Adelaide Potteries with an offer I could not refuse - that of developing a viable refractory industry in South Australia!! 1952 was a very good year for my family and me.

But that is another story

Harry Smith