



Harris & Pearson Oral History Project

Alan Price Interview

When did you work at Harris & Pearson?

I started in March 1961 aged 15 – straight from school.

How long did you work there for?

I worked at Harris & Pearson's until it shut – I think it was in 1972, and I was given the option of being made redundant or moving to J T Price's brickyard – Cricket Field Works – and, as I was getting married the next day, I decided that I'd better stick with the job. So I moved to Cricket Field Works until that closed later, probably somewhere about 1980.

Was Harris & Pearson's a good place to work?

It was a very happy place. The workforce was superb. We worked hard, we didn't get paid a lot of money, but we worked hard. I hardly ever had a day off, so it must have been a very happy place to work. The people were out of this world.

What was your job there?

I was a hand moulder.

What did your job at Harris & Pearson involve you doing?

Hand moulding was making bricks by hand, with wet clay into wooden moulds, and turn them out onto the floor. Everyone had their own area – which they called Stoves. You would have a large building with perhaps only two men in it, or women, because we worked with women moulders as well. The one I worked close to was Nellie Coleman, who worked until she was about 85 or 6. She was well into her 70s when I started. She only lived 3 or 4 hundred yards away from the brickyard, in Bull Street, which is just down the road.

What kinds of bricks did you make?

They would vary from a couple of ounces up to probably half-a-ton – the gas retorts for the old gas works; furnace linings, heavily dependant upon British Steel, which was one of the reasons we were given for a lot of the brickyards closing down. Towards the end we made bricks for storage heaters – they were machine made.

Did you do the same job all the time you worked at Harris & Pearson?

Yes, but if for some reason someone did not turn up in one of the gangs – the setting or the drawing of the kilns – they would ask me to go out and help. No one would come in and do the moulding, but the moulders would go out and help out. The older moulders when I started were the elite – I always thought so anyway, because you actually worked with them. When I left school, I worked with them for 3 or 4 years before I was allowed to go on my own. You were a brick makers' Paige – that's what you were called officially. You would help bringing the clay to him and rolling the clay for him. When you thought you were good enough to earn enough money, on your own, then you were given the chance.

How good were you at working out your wages?

We could work our wages out to the farthing, and when they went out the bricks were still priced in farthings! You could argue if a company ordered a brick for their firm, and it had never been made before, there'd be new moulds made by the Carpenters, and you would make that brick, and then you would have to barter with the Manager. You would come up with what you thought the brick was worth. You would fall out with the Manager some days, and argue for days. I've known arguments over a penny – an old penny – for days! The brick itself might only cost 1s, but if you were making 4 or 5 hundred a day, it was important.

Whereabouts did you work?

Outdoors – you had your own building.

Can you recall the other people who worked with you there at that time?

There were 4 of in the building I was in – two men and two women.

What were their names?

I worked with a chap called Arnold Evans – he's still alive, he lives in Brierley Hill. There was Billy Jones, Nellie Coleman, Doris Hunt, Lizzie Kendrick, Noah Evans, when I first started, the Timmins brothers.

What were conditions like?

It had under floor heating by an open fire at one end, underneath the floor, the heat would come the full length of the building. When the weather was bad, you can imagine, putting your hands into cold clay all day long – terrible! I'm just starting to get a bit of arthritis now – but I'm 59 now and you get that whether or not you worked in the brickworks.

Was it thirsty work?

You'd have this milk bottle full of tea, and you'd keep it on the stove, nearby, because it was too far to the canteen. Wherever you worked in Harris & Pearson's you had to walk, because the offices were by the Offices, at the back of The Crown pub. I think its still there, and there was a railway line that came in.

Was the canal still in use?

It was coming to the end of the canal business when I started, and just coming up to lorries, but there were no palettes and forklift trucks, everything was done by hand. If a lorry had to have 5,000 bricks on it you'd work it out – so many across, so many down, and so many high. You'd have two on the lorry and two throwing up. Eventually when they came to palettes, they still didn't have a forklift, you'd put the empty palette on the lorry and load it up – because British Steel did use palettes and forklifts. Also you would have to wheel these bricks out to get to the lorry. There was that many round kilns at Harris & Pearson that you couldn't get a lorry down anyway. I can remember loading the trains. You would actually physically walk up the line and take the brake off a truck, and shove it down.

How did the wagons get in?

British Rail would back them in off the main line, and we would walk up the line and push 'em – it wasn't difficult when you took the brake off. If we had problems, we had a lorry on hire, and we would just push them – the empty ones I mean, we wouldn't do that to the loaded ones.

Can you recall the use of the weighbridge?

Clay was brought in from everywhere – we opencast by Netherton Church. The better clay was open mined in Scotland – they would stand higher temperature. These were blended in the mills with the local open cast clay – a lot of which was rubbish on its own.

How much contact did you have with people in the Offices?

Not too much, apart from going up if you cut yourself, because you were using razor-sharp knives. You'd have to walk from wherever you were working to the office, dripping blood all the way, and the girl would virtually faint if you were covered in blood, but that's where the plasters were.

Otherwise it would just be payday?

Payday on a Friday and the payslips on Wednesdays – which would be about 3 inches by a quarter of an inch – and all that would be on it would be pounds, shillings and pence. You would keep your own record, you would keep your own book, and you would put a tally on every day. The Foreman would come round everyday and ask you what you'd done the day before, and he would book it in.

Can you recall any unusual incidents that happened during your time at Harris & Pearson?

There wasn't much of a social life after work, apart from Christmas time.

Do you recall the tramp?

Yes – there was round at Delph, which was Harold Thompson, he used to sleep in the kilns and play the violin.



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