

# The Pre-history of Stanley's Brickyards

By Peter Lee



A few years ago if I had shown this picture to a casual acquaintance and said it was evocative

I would have been met with either blank stares, or a pitying look and the comments – “Get a life”! The appearance on telly of Fred Dibnah has put paid to all that. Factory chimneys, rusty iron boilers, steam, smoke, oil and grease have become cherished parts of our industrial past, and I am proud to say I have always had an empathy with men who poked around derelict brickyards, wore oily caps and drank real ale. I am most grateful to Vic Holloway who took this photo out of his back bedroom window in Haunchwood Road of the lifeless remains of some of the myriad of chimneys, kilns and sheds, rusty railway tracks and weed infested brick piles that were Stanley Brothers Nr. 1 yard.

Now it's all gone swept away for housing and new roads, trim hedges and neat back gardens. Stanley Brothers business grew out of two old fashioned brickyards, which had been in use on Nuneaton Common since the 1830's at least. Those of Handley and Wheway, and another operated by Peter Unger Williams (1775-1837). Walter Handley (1783-1864) and Peter Williams were primarily farmers, and the latter also had the lease of Haunchwood Colliery. Walter Handley showed remarkable enterprise in that he built a pub – “The Black Swan”, hence Swan Lane the former name of Croft Road, he sunk a colliery called “Swan Lane Colliery” and operated a brickyard in partnership with his son in law David Wheway (1796-1868). I will save the history of Peter Williams for another article, as his story is fantastic and well worth expanding on, but by the 1860's both brickyards were available for disposal. After Walter Handley died his yard was operated by David Wheway until he too died and the yard was put up for sale by his legatees and sold with 15 acres of land in 1869. Peter Williams died in a flu epidemic in 1837 and his wife Caroline, left the Haunchwood House estate in the 1850's and this yard too was put up for lease. I understand at that time it was taken over by John Rawlins who also operated Nuneaton Colliery.

In 1858 the brick production of Warwickshire was said to be 75.5 million bricks per annum.

The sale of Handley & Wheway's brickyard was probably advertised in the building trade press because in 1869 it was taken on by a partnership of Broadbent and Stanley. Broadbents were builders merchants in Leicester and would have found a brickyard very useful to add value to their city brick trade. This soon led to the formation of one of the largest brick making enterprises in the Midlands.

The two primitive yards became Stanley Brothers Nr. 1 yard where they made bricks, roof tiles, terracotta ware, chimney pots and land drains.

The kiln seen here in the middle of the picture was a Hoffmann kiln built by the German company of that name in 1937. Unfortunately the onset of World War 2 meant that when it broke down spare parts were not available, nor engineers to fix it, so it only saw a very few years of economic life.