

The Colwall Brick and Tile Works – Andy Ball

The Colwall Brick and Tile works was the creation of Frederick (Fred) Ballard, one of Stephen and Maria Ballard's four sons. In doing so he was following a family tradition. His uncle Robert Ballard of Ledbury ran a brickworks in New Street, Ledbury between the 1840s until around 1867. The clay was brought from Burton's Farm to the northwest of Ledbury to the brickworks via the Gloucester and Hereford canal.ⁱ It was bricks from these brickworks that were used to build the impressive Ledbury viaduct on the Worcester to Hereford railway.

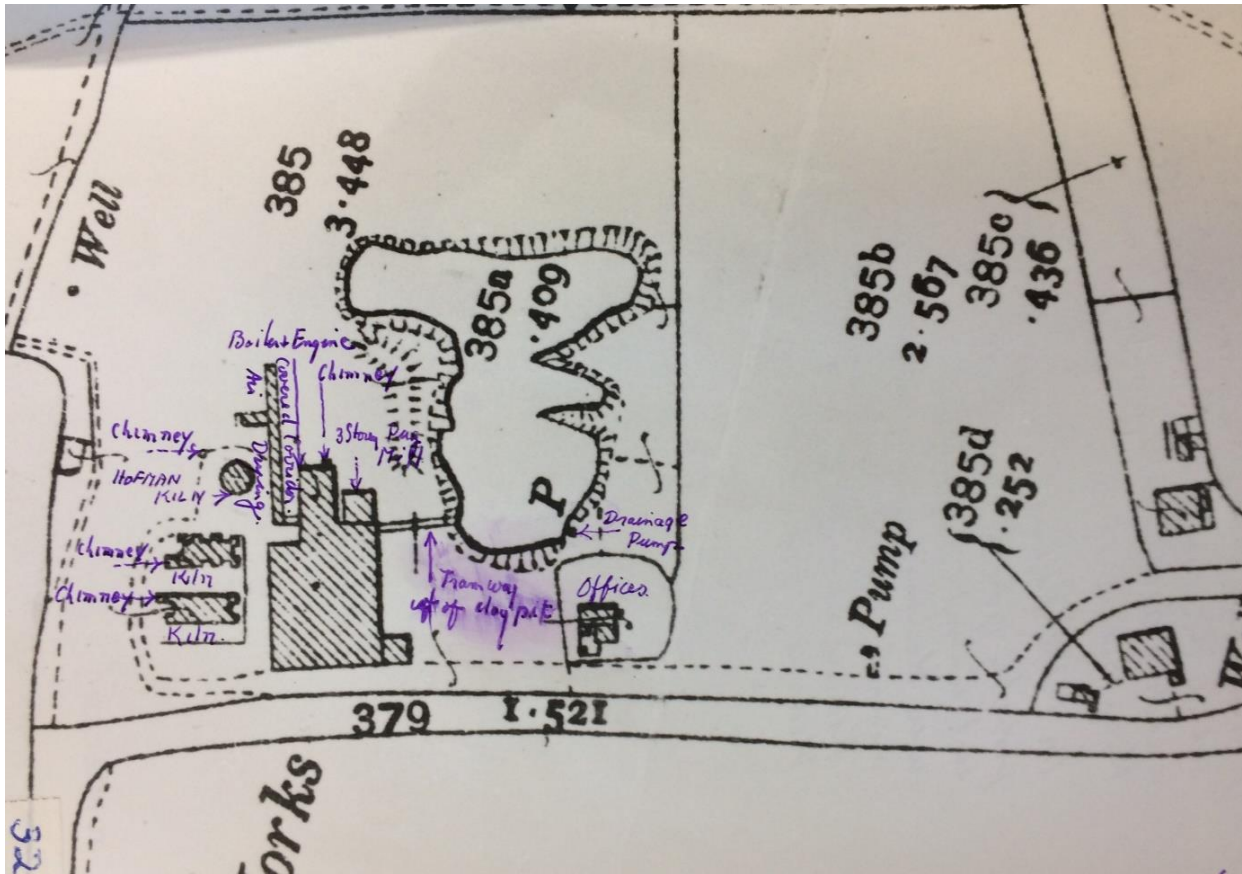
The Colwall works were established on land previously known as 'Behind the Wall' which was owned by Charles King at the time when the Colwall Tithe map was produced in the early 1840s. Subsequently the field was acquired by the Ballard family and re-modelled to a more regular outline to facilitate steam ploughing. It was also renamed 'Longlands'. The former brickworks site is now on two parcels of privately owned land at the north end of Old Orchard Lane.

The exact date of the starting of the business is uncertain. In previous historical accounts of the history of the brickworks it was thought that the business began around 1890.ⁱⁱ An account of the annual Winnings Harvest Supper from the Evesham Standard and West Midlands Observer dated Saturday 30th September 1899 includes mention that Fred Ballard stated that he was "...pleased to see representation from the different works, viz. the vinegar, ice and brick works at their annual hop picking supper." Therefore, the Colwall brick and tile works seems to have been operational in 1899.

Prior to establishing the business in Colwall Fred had obtained a position at the Piercy Brick and Tile Works in West Bromwich in order to gain knowledge, skills and experience.ⁱⁱⁱ This establishment was owned by Joseph Hamblet and produced a wide range of brick and tile products. Their trade catalogue from the 1880s includes numerous different product lines including bricks, tiles, roofing products, garden tiles and sanitary ware. Their specialism was the production of blue bricks.

Fred worked for that business for an unknown period and developed a good rapport with the staff there. From information on the UK Named Bricks website it is recorded that Frederick Ballard became a partner with Joseph Hamblet at the Piercy Brickworks in 1891.^{iv} Several workers subsequently joined Fred's Colwall venture and in the Worcestershire Chronicle dated 11 August 1894 there is an account of how "On Tuesday last the employees numbering 430, connected with the West Bromwich Brick and Tile Works, came to Colwall for their annual outing, and had a thorough day's enjoyment. Dinner was served at the Winnings Farm Buildings."

From an Ordnance Survey map hand-annotated by Stephen Ballard III the form and function of the Colwall brickworks complex can be determined.



The marl hole (quite a deep excavation of between 12 and 20 feet in depth) was served by a 12 inch diameter beam pump in the South West corner that removed excess water. The pump was driven by a portable steam engine. A brick-built structure and large diameter vertical metal pipe are still evident at the site.

Clay was taken out of the marl hole by means of a small tramway. Traditionally the excavated clay would have been allowed to weather for some months before use to make it more workable and to help remove unwanted salts that could make the bricks unsightly. In Stephen Ballard III's accounts of the workings of the site it's recorded that a Lancashire boiler driving a twin cylinder horizontal engine was used to wind trolleys full of clay to the top of the three-storey mill. The building housed the rolling mill and the pugmill. The clay would have been rolled and washed before it was ready for hand pressing. This was done in the traditional manner using wooden moulds and pallets.^v

The brickworkers hand threw the clay into the mould and removed any excess with a taut wire bow. After moulding, the bricks would have been dried to remove excess water before firing. It seems likely that this was done in two ways. Stephen Ballard III's written account states that they were dried out on a cast from floor steam heated from the exhaust from the steam engine. However, from the annotated map there's also evidence of a covered ground floor corridor used for air drying products before firing.

The plant utilised three kilns. There were two long Newcastle horizontal draught type kilns around 30 feet long and 11 feet high with fireholes along the sides. These had squat, square chimneys. There were used to heat bricks to 1800 degrees F. The firing process for each batch took around 5 days for the kilns to reach the required temperature and a similar time for the bricks to cool off before removal.^{vi}

Decorative bricks and terracotta tiles were fired separately in a circular Hoffman kiln running at a higher temperature. It had separate chambers round the side each with its fire and each chamber was set, burnt and cooled in sequence.

A Hoffmann kiln is a series of batch process kilns. Hoffmann kilns are the most common kiln used in production of bricks. Patented by German Friedrich Hoffmann for brickmaking in 1858, it was later used for lime-burning, and was known as the *Hoffmann continuous kiln*.^{vii}

The story goes that Fred's sister Ada made the designs for the decorative terracotta tiles, examples of which are attractively showcased on the nearby property – 'Marston' (formerly 'Labor Rest' or 'Labour Rest').



The moulds for the tiles were crafted by John Armstrong formerly of Oldbury who appears to have joined the Colwall works having probably met Fred Ballard at the Piercy Brick and Tile Works. In the 1901 national

census for Colwall Mr. Armstrong was recorded as living at 'Brighton Villas', Colwall. His occupation is listed as Steam Engine Fitter. At the time of the 1891 national census he was living at 33, Broadwell Road, Oldbury. He made the moulds from rough iron castings produced on the Colwall site using a shaping machine. It's likely that Mr Armstrong held a senior position at the Colwall works. At the previously reported annual outing of the West Bromwich brickworkers to Colwall in 1894 it was John Armstrong who proposed Fred Ballard's health.

The Colwall Brick and Tile Works relied upon a supply of coal which was brought to the village via the Worcester to Hereford railway and then delivered by horse drawn vehicles to the site. There was also a gas supply to the site from the Colwall Gas Company Works located in the grounds of what is now 'Kimberley House' in Old Church Road. The gasworks provided gas for street lighting in the village and the marl pit apparently had gas lamps present.^{viii}

Other buildings associated with the brickworks are still present in Old Orchard Lane. The former offices at the works were converted into the house now known as 'Marl Cottage'. This was substantially extended in the 1980s and is now a dormer bungalow.

Elsewhere in Old Orchard Lane Stephen Ballard III described three cottages and one boarding house serving the works. In his recollections they were called 'Labour Rest', 'Pioneer', 'Prospect' and 'Westralia'.

Immediately to the West of Old Orchard Lane 'Labour Rest' is now the semi-detached property called 'Marston'. The other half of that property is currently called 'Bramleys'.

'Westralia', based upon scrutiny of old maps, may originally been one dwelling but now comprises two properties – 'Mistletoe Cottage' and 'Westralia'.

The dwelling to the East of Old Orchard Lane now known as 'Stubb Oak', based upon reference to old maps, does seem to have been one of the original brickworks cottages. On a similar basis, to the

North and West of that dwelling 'Satis House' appears to have been built later to the other brickworks buildings.

The 1901 national census recounts how 'Labour Rest' was occupied by John Marshall a Railway Platemaker, his family, and a domestic servant.

'Westralia' was recorded as being two distinct dwellings occupied in the one house by Charles Cook, a 40 year old Brickmaker and his daughter; alongside William Smith a 30 year old Brewer's Cooper, his wife and their five children in the other.

'Speculation' was similarly occupied by a Brewer's Cooper – George Smith, his wife and daughter, together with a Boarder who was a Railway Engine Driver.

'Pioneer Cottage' was lived in by Percy Lewis and his wife Louisa and their three children. He was a Painter and Paperhanger.

The 1901 national census records another property intriguingly called 'Brick Works' with Joseph Daniells a 75 year old Brickburner, and his 62 year old wife Harriett.

Colwall bricks and tiles have a smooth and hard surface. The bricks are identifiable with their signature BALLARD COLWALL logo encased in an oval.^{ix} They were made in a large number of patterns. When the site was being cleared in the late 1970s Stephen Ballard III described how over 60 varieties of bricks were collected and taken to the garden at 'Grovesend'.^x



Estimates of the number of bricks produced during the life of the works vary between 2.5 and 4.5 million.^{xi} The marl hole was deep and extensive and there is only a small heap of spoil still present on the north side of the site so presumably the rest of the clay was processed into finished products. Based upon a rough estimate that 30,000 bricks are needed to build a medium sized house^{xii} then the Colwall brick and tileworks may have produced enough bricks to have built between around 80 and 150 dwellings. Colwall has several good examples of houses contemporary to the Brick and Tile Works which have been built with its products. Amongst these is Dumbleton Cottage just off the Walwyn Road.

Stephen Ballard III recounts that the brick and tile works closed around 1903, having most likely never been that profitable. Apparently the workers arrived at the works one day to discover the gates locked, and that was that. The reasons for closure are likely to be varied. By character Fred Ballard tended to flit from one project to another and he subsequently moved on to other things, notably involving the building of houses in Colwall. There was other significant competition locally in the brickmaking industry. For example, the Cowleigh Brickworks in Malvern was a big local concern at around the same time and may have provided stiff competition. Stephen Ballard III attributes the demise of the Colwall works to the large amount of coal required to fire the bricks especially in

competition with Fletton bricks which were made from clay which had natural qualities that made them far cheaper to fire.

The Colwall Brick and Tile Works seems to have remained a scruffy, former industrial site on the fringes of the village for many years. During the second world war the kilns were dismantled by Government order and the bricks were used to make air raid shelters. The heavy machinery was removed from site and melted down to help the war effort.^{xiii} As late as the 1960s some of the built structures apart from the office building remained on site but these have now gone and the site has slowly been reclaimed partly as an attractive garden with feature marl pond, and also as woodland.

ⁱ Old Bricks History at Your Feet (2023). English bricks page 4 letter b. Available at <https://www.brocross.com/Bricks/Penmorfa/Pages/england4.htm> (Accessed: 09 March 2023)

ⁱⁱ Davey , E. and Roseff, R. (2006), *Herefordshire Bricks and Brickmakers*. Little Logaston.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ballard, S. (1999), *Colwall Collection*. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

^{iv} Fretwell, M (2020) *UK Named Bricks – Joseph Hamblet, Brickmaker, West Bromwich*. Available at <https://uknamedbricks.blogspot.com/2020/02/joseph-hamblet-brickmaker-west-bromwich.html> (Accessed 14 December 2023)

^v Ballard, S. (1999), *Colwall Collection*. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

^{vi} Ballard, S. (1999), *Colwall Collection*. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

^{vii} Wikipedia (2023) *Hoffmann Kiln*. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoffman_kiln (Accessed: 09 March 2023)

^{viii} Ballard, S. (1999), *Colwall Collection*. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

^{ix} Old Bricks History at Your Feet (2023). English bricks page 4 letter b. Available at <https://www.brocross.com/Bricks/Penmorfa/Pages/england4.htm> (Accessed: 09 March 2023)

^x Ballard, S. (1999), *Colwall Collection*. Malvern: Cora Weaver.

^{xi} Herefordshire Through Time (2023) *Monument detail: Colwall brick and tile works, Colwall*. Available at <https://htt.herefordshire.gov.uk/her-search/monuments-search/search/Monument?ID=31561> (Accessed: 10 March 2023)

^{xii} Various (1982), *Traditional Crafts In Britain*. London: Readers Digest.

^{xiii} Ballard, S. (1999), *Colwall Collection*. Malvern: Cora Weaver.