

On Broadway

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Feature Article

*John Scannell has provided us with the following article (abridged) which forms part of a larger research by him titled *Its the Pits: a story of brick, tile & pipe making in & around Oakleigh*. John has donated a copy of his work to the MFC archive.*

Brickworks in Oakleigh

Many of us will remember the old Oakleigh and Glen Iris brick works that used to occupy sites in Stamford Road and Gambles along Ferntree Gully Road in Oakleigh East. It may come as a surprise to know that over the relatively brief, yet eventful European history of the area, there were many more.

Making bricks goes on all over the world and has done for thousands of years. The basics are the same wherever you go and are similar to baking a cake or a loaf of bread. You mix the ingredients, put them into a mould, bake them, let them cool, and use them. With brick making, the process needs lots of continuous heat, usually from a fire and an insulated chamber to fire them in. Huge quantities of wood or coal were burned to make each batch.

A small brick works operated for a few years on what is now Tamar Grove. John Scott (1831-1891) was a Brickmaker who had his brick pit and kilns on Dandenong Road between Grant Street and Clyde Street in Oakleigh under what is now Tamar Grove. He operated on over 4 acres for several years. The land was part of an early sub division of Oakleigh and was designated as Section 32. Usually these blocks were 5 acres in size, but several years of rate books describe it as being either four or four and one half acres.

According to the History compiled by T.G. Newton in the early 1950s, John made the bricks for several houses in Grant Street Oakleigh, (some of which remain, No's 13 to 19) that were owned by several members of Thomas Wilkinson's family. They were known as "Wilkinsons Folly" and later "Goats Terrace." So named because of the property price collapse at the time.

It appears that John was the sole proprietor and brick maker and had just the one kiln. If that is the case, it is a wonder that he made it to the age of sixty-two. At this time, it is likely that he too operated a rectangular downdraught kiln. These are very labour intensive and

require tending twenty-four hours a day when bricks are being fired, to ensure that constant heat is maintained.

Another of the small, short-lived companies in Oakleigh was advertised in the Sands and Macdougall Directory of 1911 and 1912 as the Junction Steam Brick Co. (J.Hendy) Real High Grade Steam Bricks Oakleigh; and 1915 as the Junction Brick Co. Pty Ltd. Dandenong Rd. Oakleigh. This company appears to have had two incarnations, one as a brick works and the second as a roofing tile maker. They were located on that small triangle of land now serving as parkland (Hurst Reserve) on the corner of Dandenong and Ferntree Gully Roads. Even though they called themselves a company, there is no record of them registering as a company in Victoria. A sole trader making bricks is not an easy life and there is no further mention of this brick works.

Most people would also never have heard of the Reliance Tile Company that made roofing tiles from a plant in East Oakleigh partly on the site now occupied by the Monash University Regiment between Huntingdale Road, Parkinson and Whiton Streets. This was the location of their pit and later a kiln. The rest of the works was on the diagonally opposite corner. Originally known as "Reliance Tiles Pty Ltd", they began operating at this site from the 21st of December 1921 making "Star" brand roofing tiles. This Company was originally located in Jasper Road Bentleigh and owned the property until the 27th of August 1941.

Roofing tiles had previously been made at their works in Brighton, but production there had ceased. Thomas Ethell originally owned the company. From then it was owned by James Henry Dee and Percy Victor Dunn, operating as the Wellburn Tiling Company, continuing through the Second World War until 1962 when some of the site was sold to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, (MMBW).

Evans Brothers Pty. Ltd. tile works were located on the North side of Dandenong Road between Park Road and Lever Street on the site of the former "Excelsior" and "Eureka" Brickworks. They dug their clay from the pit beside them. The site occupied an area of approximately 2 hectares to the East of the Oakleigh Hotel.

The whole of the site formerly occupied by the tile works has since been converted into a car sales and service yard for Gary and Warren Smith, as well as other smaller commercial operations to the rear. A large car park now occupies the site at the rear and the remains of the demolished kilns lie covered in grass along the Scotchman's Creek.

The Glen Iris Brick Tile and Terra Cotta Co Pty Ltd began as a response to the Co-operative by disgruntled builders. In April 1912, the Glen Iris Brick and Tile Company entered into an agreement for the lease on a portion of land at Thornbury acquired by the late Sir Thomas Bent for the purpose of brick making. It was the intention of the company at first to establish works in the neighbourhood of

Glen Iris, hence the name. Some 40 acres of land was secured at Camberwell on one side of Gardiners Creek and 6 acres in Malvern on the other side of the creek. The intention of the company, the capital of which consists of 20,000 shares of £1 each was to build its brick making plant at the site of the clay deposit in Camberwell and to erect its kiln on the Malvern site.

The Camberwell Council however took action that prevented the company from starting operations there and caused the directors to turn their eyes in other directions. A by-law of the council provides that neither quarrying nor blasting shall be allowed in certain areas. This particular land came within the prescribed area and the council decided that the by-law should be enforced in regard to it. The Glen Iris Company has been making bricks on a small scale for about two months. As some difficulty in obtaining bricks for the kiln that was intended to build at Camberwell was feared, a small hand plant and kiln was placed on land at Oakleigh in order that requirements could be met. This small plant grew to become a large producer of bricks.

Baxter and Mc Kell who began the Oakleigh Brick Company acquired the brick works on the west side of Stamford Road from Henry Ethell. John McKell had previously been the Manager of the South Yarra Brickworks, formerly the Excelsior brick works in Chapel Street. In 1908, Abraham Felix Baxter and John McKell bought the brick works in Stamford road then owned by Henry Ethell. It appears that there had been an earlier family

involvement, from Abraham (Snr) from around 1903. At the time, three rectangular downdraught kilns operated there with capacities to accommodate from 40,000 to 60,000 bricks each. Henry did not enjoy a long retirement because he died at his home in Clyde Street, Oakleigh the following year.

Gambles, as they were known, has the distinction of being the last of the large working brick works in Oakleigh. Originally, they had a brick works in Brunswick and Preston. Joseph Gamble had operated the East Brunswick and Junction Brickworks there until his death in 1896. As well as the Oakleigh brickworks, they also operated another in the nearby suburb of Burwood.

The story goes that in 1915, James Alexander Gamble (b 29th August 1864, Fitzroy, Victoria, d 13th May 1926) was driving his Buick car along Heads Gully Road (because the Head family lived in the hollow near what later became the brick works) traveling towards Fern Tree Gully when he saw an outcrop of exposed shale near a bridge across the old frog hollow that had caused the widening of the Road in 1860. James took a sample back to Clifton Bricks and had it fired. It produced a good quality red brick.

In the 12 months ending 31st March 1975, Gambles made 10,950,153 and sold 10,869,715 For the 12 months ending 31st March 1976, Gambles made 13,185,924 bricks and only had 55,200 still in stock the next year. Gambles continued

until 1982 when production ceased and the works were demolished. The site was converted to warehousing and the brick pit, which had been used as a council waste tip was redeveloped into a public park.

John Scannell 2015