

WROXTON IRONSTONE WORKS

The Oxfordshire Ironstone Co Works was set up in 1917 and started production in 1919. And at one time became the second largest Ironstone Works in the Country.

The actual land was owned by Trinity and Christchurch College, Oxford who leased the property to the Developers for an initial period of 60 years.

The ironstone was to be removed from the site by rail, and a link to the main line in Banbury was built and operating by 1919: initially all the stone was shipped un-treated for further processing but later kilns were erected at site to extract the iron from the stone. The railway link to the main line was built by a German prisoner of war construction gang. At the time, the ironstone railway was regarded as the finest in the Country, with signal boxes, level crossings and telecommunication links.

Output in 1923 was around 60,000 tons: during the Second World War this increased to 30,000 tons per week – there was a corresponding increase in manpower requirements and the workforce was increased by 160 men, some of whom were Italian prisoners of war and some Polish immigrants.

In 1953 the single track line to Banbury was doubled: at this time, a maximum of 9 locomotives were in use. The four wheel engines (at the Quarry end) were given girls names and the six wheel engines (at the Banbury end) boys names.

There were some unique job titles that have long since vanished from our work place vocabulary, e.g. Rope Runner: who was responsible to the Engine Driver for among other things, changing points and cleaning out all piping.

Steam locomotives were used exclusively until 1961 when the first Diesel engine was purchased.

Maximum output from site was achieved in 1956 but declined thereafter so that by 1959 the plant was working a 3 day week. The decline continued, with a few exceptions, into the 1960's and by 1967 the plant closed and the railway track was finally removed by mid 1968.

At it's peak, the Plant was producing almost 2 million tons per year and employed around 200 men. Wroxton and Balscote between them provided around 80 personnel.

Five Year Apprenticeships were offered in various disciplines (in 1960 an apprentice would earn around £3.10s a week in his first year).

During the 48 years of operation, only two fatalities occurred, which, given the operating conditions, was an astonishing record. In the early 60's a group of 6 Quarry workers held a clandestine meeting at one of the team's houses to discuss how they might improve pay and working conditions at site. The decision was to enlist every worker as a member of, in those days, the very powerful TGWU. This put them in a strong position to negotiate with the Quarry owners.

One scary note: the explosives for blasting the stone were kept in a shed a short distance from the back of the site office!

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the men were generally very happy working at the Quarry, particularly up until diesel engines arrived (thereafter, the engine drivers' work was much more boring as there was less attention to the gauges and instrumentation required on the diesels).

Maintenance and servicing work on the engines and equipment was carried out on a Sunday. Apparently Management were not concerned at what time on a Sunday this was done but it had to be completed ready for the Monday of the new working week. It was not unusual for some of the workers to go dancing till the early hours of Sunday morning and go straight to site from the dance hall to complete their duties.

Some of the site personnel cooked their own lunch at site – which might include wild mushrooms picked from the local fields. With all the available heat around from the steam engines, there was always somewhere to slow cook a jacket potato or two!

A favourite pastime for the men was playing cards at lunchtime – 3 or 5 card brag was very popular

In 1969 the site was taken over by Peter Bennie and the quarried stone was used for building works or hard core.