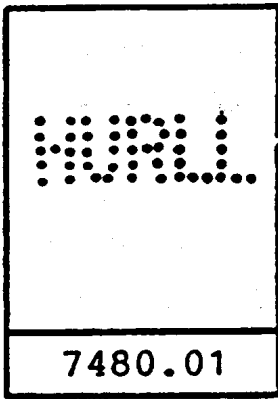


HISTORY OF PERFIN USERS

PETER & MARK HURLL LTD., COATBRIDGE By Ian C. Burns.



Peter and Mark Hurll came from Ireland and were founders of the business, Peter & Mark Hurll Ltd. They had substantial interests in the Knightswood area of Glasgow. For example they had kilns at Temple in the 1900's. Overlooking the district above Temple was Redholme, a Hurll mansion (brick of course). The Hurll's Garscube Brick and Pipe-works were well known. However, my main interest in them is the fact that they operated a fireclay mine at Birkhill, only a few miles from Falkirk. The mine is in the Avon Gorge. What appear as caves are actually abandoned mines.

The number 1 mine was opened in 1916 by Peter and Mark Hurll Ltd. However, a geological fault was found and no further fireclay was found beyond it. Another tunnel was tried but again it was found to be of no use. Thus, in 1932, the present mine was begun. This tunnel was free of faults and the mine grew to over six miles of tunnels with a central road extending over half a mile into the side of the gorge.

The fireclay mined here was used to make firebricks for industrial furnaces, steam locomotive fireboxes and domestic fireplaces. Gradually, as many of the foundries which used furnaces closed down the firebrick business dwindled. When the Birkhill mine finally closed it could have gone the way of many other industrial sites, being left to rot. However, Central Regional Council acquired the mine in 1987 and it has been turned into a tourist attraction, being at the end of the steam railway from Bo'ness, the headquarters of the Scottish Railway Preservation Society.

Fireclay is not, as you would think, soft and pliable like other clays, but is rock-hard. It is mined by shot-firing with gelignite, just as in a coal-mine. Once the explosions had finished the miners set to work digging out the fireclay, putting it into wagons, called hutches, which were then pulled to the entrance by train. At this stage the clay was coarse and granular and was taken to the crusher where it was crushed into a powder form by great rollers crushing tons of clay in a great trough.

This crushing mill is now waiting to be restored. From here the clay powder was put into railway wagons, covered with sheets and sent off to the brickworks at Glenboig, near Coatbridge, and other locations. The Birkhill fireclay was of a very high quality and, as such, was in great demand. This led to a good export trade, the final consignment from this mine being sent to Sweden. It was taken in bags, by lorry, to Leith and shipped over to Sweden. At its peak the Birkhill mine employed over 80 miners. Birkhill was the last underground fireclay mine to be worked in Scotland.

Today, only a few opencast mines are in existence, mainly as a sideline to the mining of coal. So, the end has come to another piece of Scottish industrial history.