

Bric(k)-a-brac



Jono Carpenter, Island Ranger and archaeologist, looks at the history of bricks laying about the Cement mill ruins (Jono's partner is Emma Craig, co-ranger on Matakohē-Limestone Island)

It was finding a brick at the cement ruins which was made by Emma's 4-times great uncle J. J. (Joseph James) Craig which sealed the deal when it came to accepting the position of Ranger on the island. So far we have found bricks produced by the Avondale Brick and Pottery Company, Glenburn Fireclay and Pottery Company, Drury Brick and Fireclay Pottery, and the Craig works.

Apart from the Drury product, the others were produced by companies caught up in a murky whirl of property sales and leases and commercial transactions and consolidations of the west Auckland brick industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Brick making in the area began with Daniel Pollen in the 1850s but a second phase and more intensive phase began in the 1880s. William Hunt established a brick factory at Georges St in Avondale in the early 1880s and sold to prominent flour miller, biscuit maker, and entrepreneur John Bycroft in 1887. Bycroft sold to J. J. Craig in 1896 and Craig & others sold to the Avondale Brick and Pottery in 1900. The Avondale Brick and Pottery Company was wound up ten years later, and sold to back to Craig for £3000 in mid-1916 but no conveyance was ever executed, and Craig died in September 1916. The liquidators of the Avondale Brick and Pottery finalised the sale to the widow Jessie Craig and her son Ernest in 1920.

J. M. Melville and J. Fletcher (of Fletcher Construction fame) purchased the Craig brickworks and renamed it the Brick, Tile (Auckland) Company Ltd in 1920 but by order of the Supreme Court, Brick, Tile Auckland changed its name to the Glenburn Fireclay and Pottery Company Ltd in 1923. The Craig interests in the company were not extinguished until 1929 when they were paid £8000 and in that same year the company was renamed the Amalgamated Brick and Pipe Company, and continued operations until 1969, while being colloquially known as Glenburn. Production ceased that year and the works were demolished and redeveloped as part of the Lansford Crescent industrial area.

On the basis of all of this, GLENBURN marked bricks were apparently made between 1923 and c.1929, the latter date being when the Amalgamated Brick and Pipe Co. Ltd was formed. Bricks marked J. J. CRAIG are most likely to have been made between 1896 and 1900, although it is possible that they were produced again when Craig bought out Avondale Brick and Pottery Company in 1916. Fire clay for the Auckland brick works was sourced from the Waikato and the Drury connection may lie there but those works have yet to be researched in any detail.

While the details are somewhat opaque, the seemingly long-term commercial relationship between the cement works at Limestone Island and the brick industry at Avondale is clear. Interestingly, J. J. Craig was known as a purveyor of high-quality hydraulic lime which he sourced from Whangarei, and was one of Auckland's biggest commercial operators at the turn of the century. He had the government contracts for the supply of lime, cement, coal and cartage. At its peak his companies employed 2000 men and he was the largest haulage operator in Auckland, as well as one of the largest dealers in construction materials. J. J. Craigs was bought out by N.Z. Wallboards Ltd in 1942, a subsidiary of Winstones Ltd. J. J. Craigs was fully integrated with Winstones in 1969, the year before Winstones and Golden Bay Cement bought Wilsons (N.Z.) Portland Cement Ltd. So the wheels of commerce turn and return us to Matakohē Limestone Island!



We now have a small collection of named bricks under the totara just north of the drying store as a handy teaching aid. Just looking at a pile of otherwise boring old bricks can actually teach us a lot about the connections between Limestone Island and the industrial and commercial history of New Zealand.

Sources for the above include the NZ Historic Brick Database established by Simon Bickler (<http://bickler.co.nz/bricks/index.php>) and Lisa Truttman's Timespanner blog (<http://timespanner.blogspot.co.nz>).