

Name of Mystery Clay Pit Revealed

By

L.B. HUGH

2012

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But first a short story instigated by a visit to the area in the early “Nineteen Thirties” by the father of my American second cousin Sinclair Everitt Hugh.

Sinclair’s father was Ivor Horace Hugh(1903 – 1994), who’s acquisition at the time was two photos, one of the St Dennis Village and one of an un-named clay pit with just as its title “A St Dennis Claywork”. Great Uncle Ivor can fondly be blamed for starting the ball to roll, in getting me to establish its true title and whereabouts.

As the saying goes “to put you in the picture” and in general terms, here’s a little bit of historical information, about the area concerned.

By 1807 the village of St. Dennis already had in its immediate vicinity, seven working clay pits as well as several stone quarries, most of which were privately owned, and run by local families. If you lived where clay deposits were found and did not own that particular plot of land, there could be no argument you had to move and that is why so many small communities vanished in the never ending search for the “White Gold”. This prized clay, derived from decomposing granite, with the great potential for the china and porcelain industries, created, once deposits were found in the area, a rush to reap the monetary gains from a ready- made market.

By the end of the 1920’s, however, several of these private concerns had for one reason or another become non- profitable, so much so that the American Stock Market’s “Wall Street Crash” of 1929, was the final straw drawn in their demise. This catastrophic incident, where a share certificate issued by most companies was not even worth the paper on which it was printed, only added more problems to a period that has since become known universally as, “The Great Depression”.

The effects were felt world- wide and did to the clay industry what a similar one back in 1866 did to the Cornish tin mining community. This occurrence brought hardship to workers and owners alike, all were affected by the aptly named world slump.

Consequence was, even if they could stretch by any means in producing the finished article, with no buyers for their product and no finances in reserve these mainly family oriented ventures soon fell by the wayside.

As the old proverbial saying goes “There are winners and losers in all of life’s ups and downs” the winners being in this case being, a very entrepreneurial company trading by the name of “English China Clays Ltd”.

Buying each troubled pit as and when they became available, obviously at the right price, In fairness to them and where practical, by keeping on much of the original workforce as possible this company ended up owning most of the pits in the area known as, The Hensbarrow Mining District.

By 1932 in successfully merging with Lovering China Clay and H. D. Pochin & Co; it became with pits already acquired, the largest china clay producers in the world and until recent times the main employer in the county.

Today in comparison only a fraction of the populace remains involved in the production of this multifaceted commodity, frequently referred to as Kaolin.

Like the discarded tin and copper mines which for many years littered the cliffs and countryside of Cornwall, the desolate lunar appearance of areas created and associated with worked out china clay pits, are now being put to good use and made beneficial to the community. Disused pits are now allowed to fill with water, making good storage for this precious commodity. Also with their surrounding areas being levelled and landscaped, has been a helping hand in allowing nature to return and flourish once more.

The Eden Project is a prime example of this forward looking approach, brought about by people with sincere and enterprising vision, has been instrumental in breathing new life into those worn out industrial battle scarred regions.

Regions which, for many generations have borne the legacy from man's attempts to take more out from the land, than he could ever put back. Nature herself can heal some of these wounds, but a much more determined assistance is sometimes needed in helping her to heal her larger ones.

So you see, with St Dennis being surrounded on three sides by old and existing clay workings and the remaining side by the centuries old tin streamed Goss Moor, the term "In the thick of it" is one that has applied to several generations who have lived and grown up alongside them and is the price they have had to pay for their own survival.

Being almost central in an area referred to on ordnance survey maps as "The Hensbarrow Mining District", long before the advent of major clay production, iron and tin mining had existed prior to where many china clay pits were latterly dug. One such mine on the Trelavour Downs just east of the village had a recorded depth of 20 fathoms (120 ft – metric terms 33.50 metres) quite shallow as mines go, but when you consider granite is quite a formidable barrier when following a vein of ore, no wonder this one halted at that depth. But as one source dried up another quickly followed because as we now know, when granite decomposes china clay becomes one of its by-products.

After a visit in the mid 1700's by William Cookworthy, founder of the clays potential in producing good quality porcelain china ware, he had himself, during that visit discovered several rich deposits in and around the area. So for many once the tin had ran out or was no

longer profitable to mine, it was during its early stages back again, to the pick and shovel in attaining this new prize.

The village itself was at one time attributed with being one of the largest of its kind in the whole of England.

With a church, three chapels, a host of shops that catered for just about every conceivable commodity required by such a substantial community, proved that it was a well deserved description.

Further proof of this was once again confirmed by another welcomed addition to this large village's amenities.

On returning from service in World War One and realizing its advantages to the community, an enterprising young man by the name of Harry Crowle started his own bus company.

Through his endeavours it became very popular, was well patronised and ran successfully for many years and opened up a completely new lifestyle for many of its patrons.

Few in numbers now, most elderly residents can still recount memories of Sunday School trips to the seaside, or just happily bussing through neighbouring villages, to distant markets and towns. But foremost in their recollections of riding in one of "Harry's Buses", was that eagerly anticipated and annual visit during the last week of September every year, to a long time favourite event. Patronised by all walks of life right across the county it was the once famous crowd puller known as "Summercourt Fair", held just a few miles away in the fields and roads, of a village bearing the same name.

Although most of the things I have mentioned are now long gone, St.Dennis village itself is thriving and for this day and age is, thankfully, still inhabited by people with a very strong community spirit.



A St.Dennis Claywork.
Postcard Courtesy Sinclair Hugh

In sending this photo to his intended, Ivor had described and brought to her attention, by placing marks on the places of interest, to remind her with affection, of what they had both found and experienced on their earlier visit to the area.

Name of Mystery Clay Pit Revealed

Because the photographer had only added as its title description, A St.Dennis Clay-Work, followed by the number 19 the problem was establishing which one it could be, as there are several in the immediate area, with features that resemble the one depicted on the postcard photo.

Luckily for me help was at hand, in the form of information supplied by the very person who had sent it to a loved one, because it held the clues, in solving the answers to my search.

With that detailed information, written in Ivor's own hand on the reverse side of the clay pit photograph, "by the way", a copy of which I feel quite privileged to be in possession of, I eagerly set off on my quest.

"Piece of cake", I thought as I ventured out on my first exploratory field trip, "know exactly where it is", I said to myself, "It's the old Trelavour pit, with the twin peaks that still rise above the village today". Well!! So much for that theory, as once I did a physical search, nothing seemed to fit with Great Uncle Ivor's photo or directions. So it was, after an unfruitful and tiring, but enjoyable afternoon, "back to the drawing board," for old smarty me.



Twin peaks from Church Road
Photograph Courtesy Trevor Rabey

Looking back from the road that leads up to the Church, the two burrows (Cornish dialect name for these tips are “Burrahs”), of which, the one on the left of the picture is known as a “Burden Burrah”, so named as it contained all the top soil and waste material prior to sinking the main pit, in order to get to the china clay. The one next to it with the pointed top is a “Sand Burrah”, this would be in continual use during the pits lifetime, to dispose of the rock and sand produced by the washing process used to separate the clay from them. (It would be several years before the full commercial use of this sand was realized, especially by the building industry). The last mound to the right could possibly be a levelled burrow and as one could rightly assume, that with their pits being on the far side of them all, it seemed to fit and correspond with Ivor’s photo. Not so! For after paying a more thorough attention to the details on his accompanying correspondence, I realized that in my haste to solve the problem, I had missed the very clues he obligingly had left in its contents.

POST CARD

FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Couldn't resist buying this view of one of our clay works for you all.

You might have forgotten such a familiar spot - but we passed close to it several times. x where Sister Watts live → shows the road we come on through the clumps. @ An old disused pump house. * The engine house where we started to look through the window (had a few x's) + place where sand is gathered before going up to the waste dump ~~~~ Iron pipe that carries the water down into the clay work bottoms, that leads the hose to wash the clay from the rocks. A Electric pump that replaced the old pump house above. = Track where trolley runs up to dump the sand

FOR ADDRESS ONLY.

* Sand dump. used for building purposes.

This clay work is about quarter mile from St. Dennis, on the St. Austell road - & opposite that New clay day - where we went the first day of our walks - Do you remember going up the ladder to investigate the mystery of the "crossing process"? Also forgetting which door you came in?

The pit might be about 60ft deep - it is wide because the clay is found in the sides of the cliffs so they in following the clay they went under instead of over.

My knowledge of clay works is limited.

Bye. Bye, dearest.

Yours for Always Ivor

I did then, what I should have done in the beginning, I typed a copy of the details he had given.

Armed with my typed copy and the photo of the Claywork that had started it all, I called on my old friend Jack Truscott who has except for his army service during WW2, lived all of his life in this area.

In his eighty five years he has witnessed several changes to the village and the surrounding clay pits, also if I had not been so impetuous his rustic and homely old cottage, should have been my first port of call.

So here I was knocking on his door, just like a novice seeking the wisdom of an Oracle, knowing full well, for me, there would be no disappointment generated by my visit.

Having been made welcome, Jack with his usual familiar warm and friendly manner, bade me "Grab a chair and make yourself comfortable". This I did by heading for one beside his kitchen table, because I wanted, as the saying goes "to put my cards on the table".

Which in this case was an enlarged photo showing the particular Clay-work in question, together with the typed copy of Ivor's written reminiscences, about his and Doris's visit, he had so ably written about on its reverse side.

Before Jack could utter his inevitable, but genuine, "to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit", his fond and truly sincere greeting as always, I placed the two articles in front of him as he sat down on the opposite side of the table.

Looking down at them for a moment he focused his attention on the photo, then with a wry and mildly amused smile, looked straight across at me and said, “well Brian I now know the reason for your unexpected, but welcomed presence here today”.

Having me dead to rights with his follow up of, “ I assume you don’t know where this is do you?”, demolished any form of barriers I had intended to put up to cover my failings and grudgingly had to admit, that he was right in his assumption.

His “I bet you thought it was Trelavour Pit”, only added to my dismissive but amused admission, that he was right.

“New Hendra!” he exclaimed in a slightly smug self assured way and then continued by stating, “That’s definitely New Hendra! and the reason I recognize it, is because my father worked for a while in one of the two clay-dries nearby”. He then went on to describe some of the practices that as he put it, were a part of the way of life during “the old days”.

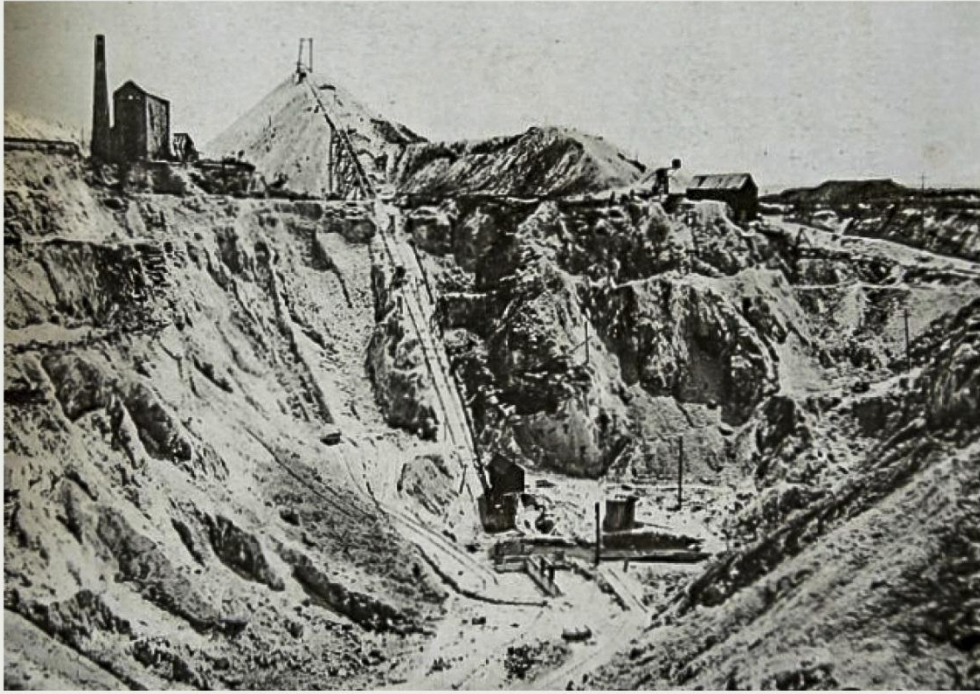
It was not uncommon in those days for local men to have their crib, (food for a meal break) delivered by their own, or fellow workers wives, to their place of work.

Sometimes it fell on the children to perform this task and a freshly baked hot pasty, handed to a hungry and hard working “dryman”, was always appreciated.

Jack as a young lad had performed this labour many times, so got to know his surroundings very well and could relate to all of the things and places Ivor Hugh had detailed in his short but revealing letter to Doris.

The term New Hendra now threw a new light on the matter, as I had discounted the “Hendra pit” I had found from old photos. Because after looking for similarities with the picture Sinclair had sent me, I noticed that the chimney of the old engine house was on the wrong side, as you can see from the photo I have included on the following page, taken some time in the early 1900s. When as I stated in an earlier passage about most clay pits with noticeably several resembling features. One has only to compare both photographs to see what I had meant by similarities.

A quick glance would fool anyone and in this case I was quite proud of myself in spotting the difference, but then had mistakenly, gone off in the wrong direction.



HENDRA CLAY WORKS, St.Dennis, Cornwall.
producing the finest quality potting clay in the world.

“But there are no Clay-dries a quarter of a mile from St Dennis on the St Austell road!” I had adamantly said to Jack. Turning to me with that once again self satisfying lovely smile, I just knew he was going to come out with a gem. He then stated, “Aha! but you see there was and although both are now long gone, if you look amongst the tall trees near to the Nanpean end of the road, there still remains the chimney of the one my father worked in”. Adding to the fact that this Dry had its own light railway in order to take the finished dried clay to a nearby Great Western Railway wharf. From there it left for shipment by rail to the potteries “up country”, or to ports such as Fowey and Falmouth for exportation to countries all around the world.

Continuing on, Jack pointed to the row of houses on the right side of the photograph where, by putting a cross above one of them Ivor had indicated that someone known to him and Doris as “Sister Watts” had lived. “There you are”, Jack said, “Those are the houses going up the Currian Road at Nanpean village and before all of the trees, that have since been planted, one could see them from the St Dennis to St Austell main road”. He further added, “They were built for the workers and are, as you well know, still there to this day”.

Looking at his smiling face I knew that by him giving all this new information, it was beginning to dawn on me where I had gone wrong from the start, in my search for this elusive pit.

As for the reference to “Sister Watts”, I have since found out that until recent times a family called Watts with strong Methodist leanings, had lived in that particular house marked with a cross. As Ivor and Doris were of the same religious persuasion, it was then easy to assume the connection between them, was due to this fact.

Thanking Jack for his help and unquestionable knowledge of the surrounding clay area, I then did as he told me and headed out on the road that led from St Dennis to St Austell.

Rigorously following his directions I made my way along that road to a certain point, then pushing my way through the undergrowth, suddenly amongst the trees that had obscured it from the road, there it was rising above me, an old ivy covered chimney stack. I remember thinking, of all the years of passing this place I never once gave it a thought or even knew it was there. It wasn't the tallest of stacks as there are many around the county still standing and most of them three times as tall, but this one overgrown with ivy and below tree level, is lost to view from the passing main road. Only a few traces are left of the building that once housed a process that although lengthy, for its time was considered to be the most efficient way in producing the end product known as China Clay. Its pitched roofed drying pans and flues, long gone to a wide sandy road that saddles the perimeter of the now abandoned clay pit.

The pit itself that once fed its hungry, baking hot, and clog trodden surface, is now being used to dispose of the unwanted by-product from china clay extraction. Namely the waste called Mica for which, even in this day and age there is, no known commercial use.

Sitting there on a large boulder and peering through the undergrowth, I could well visualise and imagine the clatter of the dry-men's large shovels as they sweated and toiled, throwing off the baked clay from the hot pan down into the storage linhay, that lay below. They must have really looked forward to a nice brew of tea and especially that, "lovely, mother's", freshly baked in an old Cornish range, "Ansome Pasty".





Hendra Pit as it is today with its main sand burrow being long ago levelled, allowing time and nature to take its course. Still to be seen raising their top most parts above the ever encroaching foliage, is the chimney and remains of the New Hendra engine house, the very one that Ivor and Doris had peered into and lingered for a moment or two on their journey, to savour a few stolen kisses.

With the whole surrounding area now also overgrown, these two stubborn and refusing to go without a fight structures, seem to be a poignant reminder of what it was once like during its hay day and industrious past.

Never one to stand in the way of progress, I nevertheless admit to suffering pangs of nostalgia whenever I wander around these remnants of our past and wonder what the “old timers” who worked them would say, if they could see them today.

I well remember as a child, when surroundings, lifestyles, long accustomed and familiar, were being swept away in the name of progress, those from the generations who had lived alongside them for so long, with resignation, would always come up with this old Cornish, gem of a phrase,

“Well I never! My ansome, whatever er’em goi’n do next! do’ee naw?”.

In coming to the end of this little project in no way do I profess perfection, but only that I have enjoyed every moment from its conception to its conclusion and have been rewarded by the fact that in some way I’ve shared, (even though, it is, several decades later), Ivor and Doris’s 1930s visit to St Dennis.



Ivor's postcard photograph of St Dennis village, probably acquired from a local shop at the time of their visit.

Several of these houses still remain, with of course many additions added over latter years. Of the three chapels that once served the community, only one remains, it's just below the church that still commands the high ground at the top of the photo.

In summing up I hope that anyone reading my little amateurish foray into the world of investigative journalism doesn't pick too many holes in its presentation. Because I really do know a little about the clay industry, as among my earlier and varied occupations, was a spell of working within the industry itself.

I found it to be, at the time an interesting although somewhat physically demanding, a most enjoyable and memorable period during a long working career.



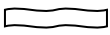
Raking out the fires, shambling dried clay and just posing, up among the rafters of Number One Clay Dry, Goonvean China Clay Pit. The year 1973.


Ivor's Postcard to Doris

Information regarding one of the clay pits situated in the St Dennis area which was producing, during and just after the first quarter of the 20th Century. As this information is from correspondence written with affection in that simple and sincere way that all people in love do, I feel quite privileged to be in possession of such a treasure from times gone by and intend to treat it with the utmost respect. A copy of that correspondence is as follows.

Couldn't resist buying this view of one of our clay works for you doll.

You might have forgotten such a familiar spot but we passed close to it several times.

X Where sister Watts lives → shows the road we came up through the downs. ⊕ An old disused pump house. ☆ The engine house where we stopped to look through the window & (had a few xxss) ⊕ Place where the sand is gathered before going up to the waste dump.  Iron pipe that carries the water down into the clay work bottoms, that feeds the hose to wash the clay from the rocks. ⬆ Electric pump that replaced the old pump house above. \ \ Track where the trolley runs up to dump the sand.

 Sand dump, used for building purposes.

This clay work is about quarter mile from St Dennis on the St Austell road - & opposite that new clay dry – where we went the first day of our walks – do you remember going up the ladder to investigate the mystery of the “Pressing Process?” also forgetting which door you came in?

The pit might be about 60 ft deep – it is wide because the clay is found in the sides of the cliffs. So in following the clay they grow wider instead of deeper.

My knowledge of clay works is limited.

Bye. Bye. dearest.

Yours for always Ivor.

xxxxxxx

Although Ivor admits in the closing that his knowledge had been limited about the clay industry, his description of the images in the photo of the clay pit are precise and mainly correct in their functions. So while he had been in the area, time was being taken not only to look around but to also find out, what it was, what it was for, and how it was used. A short letter it may be, but it, and the photo with the description “A St.Dennis Clayworks”. If looked at long enough and with a little leg work from anyone who has lived nearby or worked in the industry, contains all the information needed in establishing which particular pit this was.

With the chequered history of many of them in, or surrounding the parish periodically opening and closing, also relocating with changing perimeters, Ivor's directions were invaluable.

Today Fir Trees



Today fir trees hide the terrace of houses built on the Nanpean side of New Hendra Pit. Built by the clay companies to house their workers, now most privately owned, all have stood the test of time and are still in an excellent state of repair. The trees were planted to shield their occupants from the noise and dust arising from a conveyor belt system constructed for the purpose of carrying away sand and rubble, during the temporary reopening of the pit during the 1970s. Only to be closed again a few years later after exhausting whatever commercially viable clay was left from its once high yielding depths.

Faintly visible in the top right hand corner of the original black and white photo is the X Ivor had drawn to mark above the house where Sister Watts had lived and as you can see from this one taken quite recently, even rooftops are no longer visible.

What is most striking to the eye when visiting all of these worked out clay- pits, is nature's wonderful way in reclaiming her battered domains.

Who knows, perhaps the little Cornish hamlet that once existed here long ago and was known to its inhabitants as "Hendre", an old Cornish word meaning "a winter homestead" will itself, one day return.

Overgrown Hidden and Forgotten

The old chimney stack of a once very productive clay dry, standing defiantly alongside the “New Hendra Pit”, which itself is now abandoned and relegated to receiving the waste produced in china clay extraction, is a very poignant reminder of a way of life long gone.

Overtaken many years ago by more advanced and improved clay drying techniques, its continuing and persistent presence is a credit to the men that built it. Because like so many surviving structures from our Cornish heritage past, “They were certainly built to last” and in tribute, I add the following.

There is a saying and I quote “Time marches on”, so be it, but in doing so the cost would be too great, if we ever forget the precious and enduring legacy left to us all, by those “True and hearty, Men of Clay.”



L. B. HUGH

St Dennis 2012