

# FAVERSHAM SOCIETY ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH GROUP

## FRONT BRENTS, FAVERSHAM

### Report for Keyhole Pit K92

#### Introduction

The flourishing town of Faversham was established on the east bank of Faversham Creek from Anglo-Saxon times. Even at such an early period easy access to Watling Street, the main trading route to and from London and Canterbury, influenced development.

The small community on the west bank of Faversham Creek known as The Brents was not established until the early nineteenth century. This settlement was outside of the parish of St Mary's, Faversham in the parish of North Preston. To complicate matters further, when the creek was 'straightened' in 1840-44 a portion of Faversham parish was detached and became in essence part of The Brents known as Crab Island. The derivation of 'Brents' may come from the Middle English word 'brent' meaning steep – a perfect description of the land to the west ascending to the Davington plateau.

Originally consisting of Front Brents, running beside to the creek, Brent Road running north towards Brent Hill and Church Road, almost parallel to Front Brents but higher up the slope. Three cul de sacs – Court's Opening, Shop Opening and Top Opening - led off to the west from Church Road.

The community of about 120 dwellings housing mariners, oystermen and brick workers had three places of worship - a Methodist Chapel (1847-\*\*\*\*), a Mormon church (1866) and St John's ,an Anglican church (1881-2003) founded by Mrs Hall, wife of the Gunpowder Works owner, John Hall. There were also three shops and three pubs, The Albion (1847 -to date), The Willow Tap (c1840- 2000) and The Brents Tavern (1831-to date).

Besides the traditional maritime occupations – bargemen, fishermen and oyster dredgers – at various times there have been a number of small boat builders and repairers on the creek and, north of The Brents, a barge builder Whites and the shipbuilders Pollocks (1916-1970) all giving employment to Brents residents. Further employment was provided by an iron foundry, sawmill and brickworks. To the south the creek ended in the Creek Basin created by the draw bridge with sluice gates. Three coal yards, the gasworks and boatyards bordered the basin. As the tide ebbed water was retained within the sluice gates and released at low water to scour the mud from the creek.

#### **The Brents – some oral history.**

The Faversham Harbour Master's office once sat to the left of the draw bridge on the Brents side of the creek. The Harbour Master's duties included supervision of the operation of the bridge and sluice gates, the berthing of vessels and maintaining a log of the activity within the port to ensure the collection of dues and tolls.

John Cotton started as a barge crewman in 1946, later becoming mate on the barges *Pretoria*, *Edith*, *James and Ann* and the *Esther*. John was Harbour Master in 1968-9. When a ship was loaded with a cargo for Faversham the ship's agent would inform the Harbour Master who arranged

for the bridge to be opened. Some larger vessels could only enter the creek on a spring tide about every other week. After being Harbour Master John became a River Inspector.

Turning right into Front Brents there is a large house at the end of the terrace – Bridge House - now the residence of local councilor Mike Henderson. This was once the Brents Coffee Tavern which traded in the 1880s to provide ‘cheap accommodation to the public on Temperance Principles’, and later the home of Herbert Richards who was an early campaigner for the preservation of historic Faversham.

The Wade family lived in number 10 Church Road, they were a family of ten in a two up – two down cottage. Daughter Janet now Mrs Brian Alexander once asked her mother why she had so many children and was told it was due to the cold and having to go to bed early to keep warm!

There was a close community spirit which was manifested once a week when a tin bath was taken into a kitchen and filled with hot water boiled on the stove. The water was continually replenished as one by one the children of the terrace were bathed. In successive weeks the bath moved down the terrace. When the bath was not one of the local lads kept his collection of frogs, toads and newts in it.

Another daughter, Val, well remembers the Brents VE day celebration party. She dressed in rhubarb leaves with a card around her neck showing Chad with the legend ‘Wot no rhubarb’. Janet and brother Colin were the ‘Bisto Kids’. Another brother Michael with Michael Coe – still babes in prams- were dressed as bride and groom. Neighbour Dave White was a black minstrel with a banjo.

Colin Wade was born with a crippled right leg. As a boy he had a pram adapted so he could rest his bad leg and scoot along with the good one. He collected coal from a local merchant in half hundredweight bags and delivered them along the Brents and was paid in sweets. He later made horseradish sauce which he supplied to a local shop. He minced up the roots in his mother’s meat mincer wearing goggles – but his eyes still streamed with tears. After a while the shop told him that they wouldn’t require his sauce any longer. He later found that the alternative supplier had undercut him by adding parsnip to the radish and watered down the vinegar. The shop came back to him later but he took some persuading to resupply them.

Though trained as a cobbler Colin only earned pennies so he went to work at Marley’s factory where he earned good money and saved for a good private pension.

Though unable to walk at all with out crutches he had a motor bike and was a proud ‘greaser’ in the sixties. He was once stopped by the police for riding at 114 mph on his bike which was a registered disabled vehicle! He became friendly with the local cops who would ‘put him up’ in the station when he was locked out by his parents. He later graduated to a car and then had a boat on the creek. Colin believed he was lucky to be born crippled rather than be disabled later in life. Now retired he tends his garden and goes fishing.

## **Location of the pit.**

The grassed area to the east of the Albion public house is the former site of five small terraced houses and then a block of four more substantial dwellings. Being that the excavation was intended for public view it was decided it should be located to expose the front and flank walls of the most easterly house of the block of four.

## **The procedures**

A two metre square was pegged out using the planning square and the area delineated marked with string. The position of the square was recorded by measurements to the adjacent house. The turf [context 01] was carefully removed from the square, rolled and set aside in plastic bags. The pit was then hand excavated using single contexts, each of which was fully recorded. All excavated soil was carefully observed for finds and the spoil heap scanned with a metal detector. Finds were

set aside for each context and cleaned and recorded by our finds team on site. Any features revealed were carefully recorded. Finally the spoil was put back into the excavation, tamped down and the turf replaced.

## **The findings**

The turf having been removed the next context 02 which was a dark brown soil directly beneath the turf containing small inclusions of red brick, slate, concrete, plaster, glass and nails – typical of demolition. Other small inclusions of oyster and cockle shell, pottery and bone were evidence of a domestic dwelling. Context 02 was carefully taken out by spade.

Context 03, the front brickwall of the property, was found close to the surface of 02. Nine inch (225mm) brickwork is usually of Flemish Bond - headers laid to bond the inside and outside skins – however in this instance the only face brickwork above ground is a single course of Stretcher Bond. It is possible that there were alternative courses incorporating headers and stretchers. The exterior brickwork was good quality red brick above the original ground level and yellow stock bricks below on a stepped three course foundation. The internal finish was probably plaster on lathes on battens fixed to the wall.

Excavation was continued by toveling out the material from the outside of the wall, towards the creek, designated context 04 being similar to 02 but with larger inclusions. Excavation revealed what appeared to be a capped off gas pipe with a brick surround, and an airbrick. Context 05, within the wall was carefully removed showing the remains of the wooden wallplate, set on mortar, which would have carried the suspended ground floor joists.

Context 05 contained lathe and plaster work - remains of the ceilings, internal partition walls and wall finish described above. Time constraints dictated that further excavation inside the building should be by slots dug to the side and rear of the dwelling, contexts 06, 07, 08 and 09. These revealed much building material – brick, slate, tarmac, window glass, metal window and door fittings, electrical wiring – and the reminds of shellfish – oyster, whelk, cockle and winkle along with sherds of domestic pottery, vessel glass and clay tobacco pipe .

## **Interpretation**

A very straight forward excavation which could be easily understood by our public spectators. The wall exposed proved to be of high quality brickwork most easily proven by the three course brick foundation. Other buildings along the creek were of much lower quality which raises the query as to why this particular terrace was demolished. The most likely explanation being neglect and lack of repair by landlords during the late twenties and thirties and the rationing of building materials post World War II.

## **Black Cottages – oral history**

At the north end of the Brents, built upon the small portion of Faversham parish isolated by the straightening of the creek and known as Crab Island, were Black Cottages. Built ca. 1845 the six terraced dwellings were originally built to house workers from the nearby saw mill. The isolated bend of the creek was spanned by a wooden bridge at the southern end. The ‘dead’ water was used as a ‘log pond’ to season timbers. There were originally gates at the northern end to prevent the logs following the ebbing tide. When the logs had seasoned they were towed to the saw mill for conversion.

The slate roofed cottages were 'two up – two down' with an outhouse and an earth closet. They were of a timber framed construction with weather-boarded exteriors which were coated with tar every two years giving rise to their name, though many referred to them as 'The Brents'.

Though there was gas lighting to the ground floor rooms but candles were used to light the bedrooms. There was no mains water supply, all residents used a single well located to the rear of number six. Little more than a hole in the ground the water was contaminated by the high tide and could not be used until an hour or two after high water, this necessitated the residents filling buckets before the tide, particularly over night, so as to have water when required.

The houses were subject to flooding and tenants were allowed free coal from the council on such occasions to aid drying out. The poor condition of the cottages was brought to the attention of the council after severe flooding in March 1949 when it was noted that their position across the creek had led to them missing out on any improvements in services carried out in the rest of the town. After the 1953 floods the cottages were inspected by local MP Percy Twist who was so appalled by the conditions in which the tenants lived that he insisted that all the residents be re-housed. The council purchased the cottages from their owners and demolished them.

Though originally built to house sawmill workers the censuses show that they soon became the homes of general and brickfield labourers, bargemen and oyster dredgers and, at one time, a 'cow-keeper and dairyman.' It seems to have been a small tight-knit group within the wider Brents community. However, such were the poor living conditions that few wished to remain there if other local accommodation were available.

Henry Woods, aged 88, had lived at number 2 from the age of four in 1928 with just a short period, aged ten, when he moved in with his grandparents. He remembered the privations but savored the well water which was cold but tasted good.

Brian Weaver's family were long time residents there at number 4. Brian's grandfather had been a huffler – a pilot who guided vessels up and down the creek - and his uncle Edgar was a bargemen who had won the Coasting Class championship in 1937 as 'sail man' on the Northdown which is still in existence at Brest in France. Brian brought along a photograph of his grandmother and her daughter Ivy, aged seventeen, taken outside of number 3.

### No 1 Black Cottages

1871	John Couley	Labourer
1881	Frederick Cary	General Labourer
1891	Frederick Carey	Cowkeeper
1901	Edward Oliver	Brickmaker
1926	Thomas Boodle Percy Turner	
1939	Daniel G Payne	

### No 2

1871	George Gowers	Labourer at Powder Works
1881	Henry Brown	Brickmaker
1891	John Lodge	Mariner
1901	Henry Arnold	Oyster Dredger
1926	Edward John Turner Charlie Woods	
1939	Nellie Wood	

### No 3

1871	John Bunting	Mariner
1881	James Pack	Cowman
1891	Thomas Little	Brickfield Labourer
1901	Thomas Arnold	Oyster Dredger
1926	Annie M Aylward	
1939	Stanley G Brown	

### No 4

1871	Unoccupied	
1881	Daniel Wise	Dredger
1891	Elizabeth Shrubsole	
1901	William Shrubsole	Mariner
1926	Margaret E Weaver Frank Hill	
1939	Annie Warner	

### No 5

1871	Unoccupied	
1881	Thomas Little	General Labourer
1891	Eliza Arnold	
1901	Charles Skinner	Brickmaker
1926	Edward Ruck	
1939	Edward Ruck	

No 6

1871	Edward Cook	Mariner at Sea
1881	Occupier away	
1891	William Elloitt	Waterman / General Labourer
1901	Walter Patching	Barge Porter
1926	Unoccupied	
1939	Jim Saunders	