

John Knowles Works, Woodville

The Mount Pleasant works operated by John Knowles & Company. Over the past five years AI Ltd has been investigating the pottery industry of Woodville, Derbyshire, focusing on the Mount Pleasant works operated by John Knowles & Company. The factory was demolished in 1993 and a housing development now occupies the site. AI Ltd was commissioned by the developers to undertake a program of investigation into the surviving industrial archaeology. During a routine site visit, a member of our staff together with a former employee of the works discovered a heap of cardboard boxes in one of the buildings due to be demolished. Further inspection revealed ledgers and correspondence dating back to 1853, along with photographs and personal papers spanning 120 years of the company's history. What had looked to be a straightforward industrial recording job had suddenly become a lot more interesting! Chairman John Hassall

The structures that we subsequently excavated and recorded on the site really came to life when we started working our way through the masses of information contained within the company archive; John Knowles & Co manufactured a variety of ceramic products utilising the local clay resources. The firm was founded in 1849 and began producing firebricks and stoneware pipes. During the twentieth century ceramic goods for use in the steel industry and radiants for the production of gas fires became the dominant products. John Marsden Knowles is best remembered in the company that took his name, but it was his earlier occupation of railway construction that led him to Woodville. It was whilst tunnelling between Castle Gresley and Moira for the Midland's Coalville to Burton-on-Trent line that Knowles came across a bed of fire-clay. When his contract under Robert Stephenson (co-creator of 'The Rocket' locomotive) finished in 1849, Knowles erected a kiln on the land and started producing firebricks. The earliest surviving company records list such notable customers such as Spear & Jackson of Sheffield, Johnson Cammell of Dronfield (the largest steelworks in the world) and Thomas Firth & Sons (producers of the first true Stainless Steel in 1913). Beehive kiln base Patented joint design After the death of Knowles in 1869 and his wife Sarah in 1871, control of the company passed to their nephew John Hassall. Although Hassall presided over the most successful period in the company's history, he was the subject of vicious attacks from the other shareholders. Twentyeight family members had been given a stake in the company following the death of Sarah Knowles. The company archive contains numerous legal documents and personal letters attesting to the infighting and greed of the shareholders. A cutting from The Times dated June 1914 found amongst John Hassall's personal papers reads; 'The most painful experience that a man can well undergo is that of being confronted suddenly by a distant relative; Most of us find ourselves born into a world apparently peopled by a legion of cousins and - fatal word- connexions; For such life is not without its anxieties.' The company diversified into producing clay sewer and drainage pipes and is responsible for a number of patents in this field. After the death of John Hassall in 1928 the company was placed under the trusteeship of Harry James Taylor. Perhaps disappointed at being denied his father's shares in the company, John Knowles Hassall becomes the focus of a tragic tale involving espionage, bankruptcy, insanity, love and eventually suicide, which forms a fascinating part of the company's history. An alliance with Radiation Ltd. in the 1930's and the takeover of the firm by Dyson Ltd. in the 1970's took away some of the magic of this family firm. Restructuring by Dyson led to the clay workings of Woodville being closed and landscaped. Finally Mount Pleasant was pulled down in the early 1990's. Gas fire radiant finishing line Our job was to record what remained of this rich industrial landscape. A beehive kiln base and tunnel kiln base were recorded in detail. Our plans and photographs could provide us with a lot of information about how products were fired but it was the contents of those dusty cardboard boxes saved from the condemned building that told the human story behind the archaeology.