

BLUE BOULDERS OF RYE HARBOUR

If you have ever walked along the shoreline of the Nature Reserve at low tide it is probable that you have noticed the blue flints or boulders of around 2-3 inches in length that line the foreshore.

Although now a half forgotten memory, these blue flints once provided a modest living to those who collected them. They were of prime importance in the manufacture of high grade pottery as an ingredient which I believe added to both the strength and beauty of the finished product.

In their time hundreds of tons of these flints were shipped to the Stoke-on-Trent area, either by sea to Runcorn or Selby, where they were transferred into narrow boats, or else they were conveyed by rail from the railhead that until 1960 terminated close by the William the Conqueror public house at Rye Harbour.

The flints, once at Stoke-on-Trent, were mixed with coal and heated in hoppers. This made the flints very brittle, enabling them to be ground into powder, which was then added to the other ingredients in the manufacture of pottery.

Until the 1930's the flints were collected from the foreshore by specially adapted "boulder boats" capable of carrying a load of two or three tons. There is a good illustration of a Rye Harbour boulder boat, the "Sarah Elgar", photographed in 1910, in John Collard's - A Maritime History of Rye. The boulder boat would be taken from the Point, near the old railhead, the focal point of the trade and either beached along the shore at the desired spot or taken to the river mouth. When loaded it would be floated on the next tide and sailed back to Rye Harbour where it would be unloaded in its own bay. The flints were loaded into railway trucks by means of a pair of trugs and yokes to carry them with.

There is a photo in the Rye Harbour Social Club showing the flints being loaded into the railway trucks with the loaders balancing precariously on planks.

I have an account book dating from 1913 to the early 1920's when the price paid per ton was 9/- (45p). For the week ending January 14th, 1922 the account read as follows;

Ralic	2 Tons	£1 -7-6
Pope	2 Tons	£ 1-5-6
Mesher	1 Ton	9-0
E Mills	1 1/2 Ton	15-0
A Mills	1 1/4 Ton	12-6
Jottle		
Durham	2 Tons	£ 1-5-6
Chummie	3/4 Ton	6-9
Total	11 Tons	£6- 16-3

Each boulderer was licensed to pick up to a maximum of 200 tons per annum and of which he paid a royalty of 6d(2 1/2p) per ton.

Although the work was hard and the rewards not always high no doubt those who worked at it felt free and independent compared with their less fortunate brethren confined to the "dark satanic mills" and "sweat shops".

The trade petered out in the early 1950's purely for economic reasons, but in some places on the shore it is still possible to see some of the sorted piles of the "blue boulders" that were not collected.

Historical Note - when did the use of local flints in pottery commence ?

The Victoria and Albert Museum informed me that they were in use for glass making during the late 18th Century, whilst Staffordshire potters introduced calcified flint into their work around 1720-30, Josiah Wedgwood credited the accidental discovery of the use of flint in pottery to a Mr Heath of Shelton.

Sources of flint were the Sussex coast, parts of Dorset, East Anglia and France, I believe flints are still imported from France.

by Michael Alford, from the 1989 Annual Report of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve