

Hunsbury Hill Ironworks, near Northampton (SP 731 593)

Iron ore quarries at Hunsbury Hill were opened by the Northampton Coal, Iron and Wagon Company, Far Cotton, and these had become extensive by the early 1870s. The company decided to erect blast furnaces on the east side of the Blisworth – Northampton railway, about 1 mile from Bridge Street Station.



Two furnaces were constructed by Howson of Middlesborough and the first was put in blast on October 23, 1874, followed by the second on November 20, 1874. The blast air seems to have been pre-heated from the beginning of operations since a 15-year-old boy was reported to have been killed during the construction of stoves for the furnaces. These stoves were described as consisting of large iron pipes placed upright in groups. Soon after the start of production, the Northampton Coal, Iron and Wagon Company were advertising that they were "prepared to receive offers for slag made at their furnaces, Hunsbury Hill, loaded into carts or wagons or delivered by rail to any neighboring station." By the end of January 1875, the Hardingstone Local Board made reference to getting slag for road repairs from the N.C.I.&W. Co. but had already, received a complaint about the use of large lumps of slag in the road by a Mr. Butlin (Apparently no connection with the Wellingborough ironmaster) who had broken a spring on his brougham on the road.

In 1875 the Hunsbury Hill Coal & Iron Co. Ltd. was formed to operate the furnaces but these were not entirely satisfactory and were both out of work by 1877. The company invited Butlin: from Wellingborough, to advise on the furnaces and he recommended a reduction in size to 7400 cubic feet capacity. After this the furnaces worked better producing approximately 260 tons of iron per furnace per week. Nevertheless, the company got into financial difficulties when the iron trade slumped and Pickering Phipps (well-known for his brewing activities in Northampton and Towcester, and a major shareholder in the company) bought out the other shareholders in 1888 to form the Hunsbury Hill Iron Co. He must have stock-piled the pig iron production because when the price rose he was able to sell some 80,000 tons for nearly £15,000 in 1889.



In 1890 one of the furnaces was rebuilt and in the same year, after the death of Pickering Phipps, the furnaces were run by the executors of his estate. Besides the quarries at Hunsbury Hill, the N.C.I. & W. Co. worked pits at Blisworth (about half a mile northwest of Blisworth church and on the north side of the Gayton - Blisworth road) from about 1873. The ore was transported by narrow gauge tramway to a wharf by the canal where it was discharged into narrow boats fitted with removable tubs.

In earlier days, the boats took the ore all the way to Hunsbury Hill, to unload onto rail wagons running on a narrow gauge track laid on the wharf, the track running on a sharp curve under the Blisworth - Northampton railway line and up to the furnace area. This procedure was still in use in 1908 since in that year the Grand Junction Canal Co. made a new "winding pool" for turning the boats at Hunsbury. To avoid the trouble of passing through the 15 locks between Blisworth and the ironworks, the narrow boats were later unloaded at a wharf just to the north of the railway bridge over the canal at the east end of Blisworth station. A crane lifted the tubs out of the boats and above railway wagons into which the ore was discharged for transport to the ironworks.

In the 1880s the Hunsbury workings were extended into the site of the Iron Age settlement. By the time of the First World War, the reserves of iron ore were nearly exhausted and with the call-up of men for the armed forces, it is said that the company would have closed the works in 1917 except for the great war-time demand for iron. After the war there was a high demand for iron but the company could not survive the first recession in the iron trade and the furnaces were blown out on January 28, 1921, and the quarries closed. Although the works were idle, the name of the company changed to the Hunsbury Iron Co. in 1922. The works were acquired by Richard Thomas & Co. Ltd. in September 1935 and there was speculation that the site was to be developed to include steelworks and rolling mills, as had just been completed at Corby by Stewarts & Lloyds. However, the new owners soon dismantled the blast furnaces. During the Second World War, the site was taken over by John Blackwood Hodge & Co. Ltd who continue in business there. Amongst the buildings erected by the new owners, one or two remain from the ironworks. There is also the bridge carrying the lane (now called Euclid Avenue) from Rothersthorpe Road over the track of the railway connection into the works, a few yards before crossing the Blisworth - Northampton railway line.