

## Western Group Hunsbury Hill Quarries

### HUNSBURY HILL QUARRIES

Owners: Northampton Coal, Iron & Wagon Co: Hunsbury Hill Coal & Iron Co Ltd from 1876: Hunsbury Hill Iron Co from 1883: P. Phipps from 23rd February 1889: P. Phipps Executors: Hunsbury Hill Iron Co from c. 1922: Richard Thomas & Co Ltd from September 1935.

The presence of outcrops of iron ore at Hunsbury Hill was recognised about 1857 or possibly earlier, but it was not until 1873 that they were developed, in association with the erection of Hunsbury Ironworks (Northampton Mercury, 30th August 1873 and other issues). MS quotes both works and quarries in production in that year and F. Whellan (History of Northamptonshire, 1874, p.262) states that 'ironstone is extensively worked at Hunsbury Hill and two furnaces are in course of erection' Initially the furnaces were fed with ore from their immediate vicinity; as however most of the ore was concentrated on the upper slopes of the hill, it soon became necessary to develop these deposits, and small workings southeast of Rothersthorpe Road were opened in the late 1870s, and a mineral line of 3ft. 8in. gauge was laid between them and the furnaces, while traffic from the latter was handled by standard gauge locomotives. The tramway was closed in 1921, long before interest in industrial tramways embraced more than a handful of enthusiasts; while the few such individuals who came later to pick up the history of this bygone line were faced with the proximity of Northampton, which swallowed up in its anonymity most of the former personnel, that in a rural community would have been more readily identifiable. These two factors however had a happy outcome when the Rushden Railway Society had the idea of reviving a former ironstone line as part of the railway preservation movement. The early demise of the ironworks and its associated tramway meant that there was no restoration of the route to agriculture; and the Northampton Development Corporation were able and willing to give financial support to the scheme. As a result, while many elements of the early history are imperfectly known, physical details of its route and appearance are to be seen today... and for many years to come, we hope. Practically the whole of the quarried area was on ground belonging to the Bouverie family, whose Delapre estate in the mid-nineteenth century embraced the Hunsbury Hill area, Delapre Abbey and Park, and much of the village of Hardingstone. The Richard Thomas & Baldwin files at Corby record that the purchase by the Northampton Coal, Iron & Wagon Co of the 12-acre works site was completed on 10th December 1873, while the Hunsbury

Hill Farm lease of 170 acres lay south of the works, bounded by the LNWR Blisworth line to the west, the 'Green Lane' (see later) to the south and the line of hedges eastwards by the acquisition from the Bouverie Estate of the Briar Hill Farm lease of 143 acres, lying between the Blisworth line (to the north), the LNWR Northampton-Road line (to the east) and Rothersthorpe Road (to the south). For most of its productive life the Hunsbury ironworks was in the possession of the Phipps family, who also owned the well-known Northampton brewery, and their control commenced in August 1877, one year after the formation of the Hunsbury Hill Coal & Iron Co Ltd, so that the various changes in title are largely nominal. Ironstone working was actively pursued on the Hunsbury Hill Farm site, up to the edge of Briar Hill Farm, but not extended thereon. About 1883 Pickering Phipps III purchased Hunsbury I Till Farm, while for many years barley for use in the brewery was grown on Briar Hill Farm. It was at this time that quarrying operations were extended to the area around the ancient earthwork of Danes Camp; this was scheduled as an Ancient Monument under the 1882 Act, and was not included in the lease, but there were numerous archaeological finds in the surrounding area. Pickering Phipps, the company chairman, took a sympathetic interest and rewarded all workmen making finds, so that archaeologists benefited by the (at that time) most thorough excavation accorded to a site of this kind. In the period of excavation for

ironstone, 1882-87, over three hundred articles were discovered, including iron weapons, implements and remains of slag that indicated the smelting of iron in bygone centuries (Victoria county History of Northamptonshire, Vol 1, p.152).

At Danes Camp (usually shortened to Camp Pit) the stone was at first worked as outcrop, but then under increasing cover, and when the pit was approaching exhaustion a further and much larger area was acquired; known as the Wootton lease, this covered 710 acres and extended eastwards from the Grand Union Canal, bounded by 'Green Lane' (Mere Way) on the north, and the stream to the south, as far as the Northampton-Stony Stratford road, but excluding Wootton Hall and grounds in the northeast corner. The Towcester road crossed the property and so did the LNWR line to Roadie as it emerged from [the tunnel]; to the west lay Wootton Hill Farm, while Wootton Grange lay at about the centre of the leased

area. The tramway was extended to cross 'Green Lane' immediately west of Danes Camp, and the Wootton lull pit was opened up by 1897; working edged eastwards, the tramway being taken under the Towcester road by a tunnel driven in 1912. The final workings were in the vicinity of Wootton Grange, and the area east of the Grange was never touched. Overburden in the Wootton pit reached about 18ft.

Having briefly described the quarrying areas, we can now look at the tramway serving them. The tramway left the works in a south westerly direction on an embankment trending obliquely up the hillside to the northern edge of Hunsbury Hill spinney, where it curved fairly sharply to the south south east towards Rothersthorpe Road ('Banbury Lane' on old maps, this being a drover's road of considerable antiquity) along the flank of the hill but climbing steadily; there was a stiff bank in the spinney (in shallow cutting at the southern side) and another cutting near the road, which was crossed on the level. Between here and the 'Green Lane' to the south is Danes Camp and the surrounding area is known as 'the Old Mere' while the 'Green Lane' is called Mere Way. The Wootton quarries were served by a branch that crossed Mere Way and from there on was in cutting that became progressively deeper as it followed the ironstone bed beneath rising ground, over the tunnel occupied by the LNWR Northampton-Road line, and then beneath the Towcester road via a low tunnel to the most distant workings near Wootton Grange. On this section were two bridges under farm tracks, that near the A43 being a substantial one with brick abutments and wooden fencing.

Sam Warwick, who started work as a 'horse boy' at Hunsbury Hill about 1904 at the age of fifteen recalled the hard work of those days, which was from 6.0am to 5.0pm, there were no holidays; no work (and no pay) on wet days; no pensions; no sick pay; compensation for injury sometimes but not always; the sack or suspension for offences. His wages were of the order of six shillings per week when he started; later, when in charge of the calcine bank, he received 24 shillings per week. All the quarry work was manual; the overburden was removed by pick and shovel arid carried away by the familiar barrow and plank method, and the ironstone was loaded into the wagons by long iron forks, with larger pieces by hand. A photograph shows that the wagons were filled well over the boards. When full, the loaded wagons were pulled up the gradient out of [the

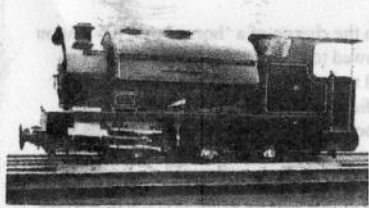
pit by horse in the charge of a 'horse boy'; the wagon were then allowed to run in pairs by gravity across Hunsbury Hill to the works, under the charge of a brakesman riding on the 'bumper', the brake being operated by foot. At the furnace end the wagons were weighed and emptied, and the contents put on the calcine bank; the normal furnace charge consisted of equal volumes of raw and calcined ore, the raw ironstone coming from other pits (presumably Blisworth) owned by the company. At one time there was a weigh hut or 'The Mere' but the use of this was discontinued before Mr. Warwick's day. The empty tubs were hauled back to the pits by horses; these animals were mostly obtained from the brewery when they were too old to haul the heavy drays.

The wagons were of wood and were built at the ironworks; the castings were made at the works but axles were bought in. They had a block of wood about 9in. thick as a buffer ('bumper') and were fitted with iron rod as a tipping lever. The content was about fifty hundredweight of ore; some larger wagons were introduced but proved to be too heavy for tipping. The terminus of the narrow gauge tramway is shown the 1X.83 OS at right angles to a standard gauge sidings at the ironworks, clearly suggesting that the wagons were end-tippers. However this system was superseded by the use of side-tippers, as shown in the photograph 'Green Lane' taken about 1900; possibly this was in connection with calcining.



Hunsbury Hill Quarries. A posed photograph of a Wagon team at Green Lane crossing, 19011, showing loaded and empty wagons, horses, drivers and brakesmen.

Hunsbury Hill Quarries. Official photograph of NORTHAMPTON, the first of the set of three Locomotives (Bagnall 1955-57) supplied new in 1912 to work the main quarry system. They were of restricted height to negotiate the tunnel under the Towcester road. Unfortunately no photographs of the locomotives at work seem to have survived.



In 1912 three locomotives were obtained from W G. Bagnall Ltd to the tramway's original gauge of 3ft. Sin., and reduced clearance (8ft. 5in. from rail level) to pass the small bore of the tunnel under the Towcester road. At this time the wagons were of the same general pattern as used at Latnport and Kettering, and overall dimensions of examples measured at Finedon were 3ft. 2in. across the frames, with bodies 6ft. 10in. by 6ft. 10in. by 3ft. 0in. high, and with a total length of 9ft. 2in. The layout at the ironworks had been modified to suit the side-tipping wagons and now a brick shed for the locomotives was built at the end of the narrow gauge track. Operation of the tramway was then much simpler, the locomotive took the empty wagons to the working face and returned with a rake already filled, which was emptied at the ironworks.

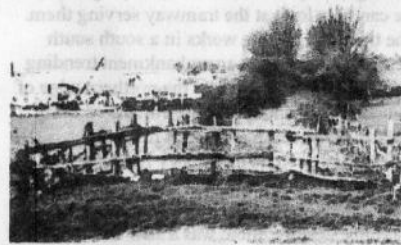
It is believed that Pickering Phipps intended to develop the ironstone reserves on Briar Hill Farm in the early years of the century. Finally, there was a standard gauge line to pits east of the tunnel over the LNWR line to Roade, presumably worked by an ironworks locomotive in the early 1880s.

World War I was a time of crisis for Hunsbury ironworks; the furnaces were damped down in October 1915 because of the 'unsatisfactory state of the pig-iron market, though the depletion of iron ore reserves and call up of employees for the armed forces were also suggested as possible reasons. However under orders from the Ministry of Munitions, the furnaces were relit in June 1917, and former employees were released from the forces. The chairman was keen to keep the works in production and to this end propounded an ambitious scheme to extend the quarrying area eastwards along the high ground south of Hardingsstone and beyond; with the tramway being operated by locomotives there would be no serious transport problems and in obtaining the ground Phipps had a close ally in Delapre Estates, who owned most of the relevant land. Two plots vital to



the scheme were glebe land owned by the church at

Hardingsstone. and Delapre Estates purchased these in 1918 to facilitate Phipp's scheme; and in that year Phipps obtained a ten-year lease to work ironstone on much of the necessary land at Hardingsstone. These included fields south of the A50, i.e. the other side of the road from the very early Quarry fields' described under the Hardingsstone Quarries section. In the event of course the quarries were never extended to these limits, and indeed did not even reach the limit of



Hunsbury Hill Quarries. The embanked trackbed of the narrow gauge tramway as it approached the ironworks site (by then occupied by John Blackwood Hodge & Co Ltd), after emerging from Hunsbury Hill Spinney (see photo in Part 1). 27th April 1963.



Hunsbury Hill Quarries. Tunnel under Towcester Road. looking southeast. 15th May 1965. This area has been much altered by building and road alterations, but the bridge parapets remained in 1987.

the Wootton lease, as the end of the war put a vastly different complexion on matters; demand fell off sharply and the plant needed a fair amount of renewal. Pickering Phipps was still anxious to go ahead with his scheme of expansion but was overruled by other directors, who preferred to confine the family fortunes to the more profitable concern of brewing. The furnaces were blown out 28th

January 1921; even so, Pickering Phipps intended to reopen the works as soon as trade improved, but he died a short time after the closure.

Richard Thomas & Co Ltd acquired the ironworks (which had remained derelict, complete with most of the equipment, locomotives, tramways and all since 1921) in September 1935, along with the associated land, freehold and leasehold; this included the Hunsbury Hill Farm area (170 acres) owned by Phipps, the Briar Hill Farm area (143 acres) owned by Delapre Estates, and the Wootton area (710 acres).

The last two leased areas were for 27 years from 29th September 1935. The small area south of the A50 at Hardingsstone, leased by Phipps in 1918, was not taken up by Richard Thomas however. The odd period of 27 years suggests that possibly it was the unexpired portion of a lease allotted to the Hunsbury Iron Co.

The 'takeover' by Richard Thomas did not appear to alter matters very much, and hopes that the ironworks might be reopened soon dwindled as the months of idleness lengthened, and eventually the works were demolished. Richard Thomas had intentions of reopening the quarries, however, and at a meeting with the consulting engineering firm of H. A. Brassert & Co held at Irthlingborough 8th June 1937 to discuss the development of their newly acquired Northamptonshire properties it was

revealed that their application for the reinstatement of the level crossing of the ironstone tramway with the Rothersthorpe Road had been refused by the local authority, but that they were considering an application to the Ministry of Transport for such permission. To work the quarries they proposed using the temporary plant (a diesel digger and a steam transporter) released from the reopened Finedon (Buccleuch) quarries is when the larger machines for the latter were delivered. These smaller machines would be used at Danes Camp and possibly on Briar Hill also 'if it is desired to open up this property to assist production. There was no reopening however and the company concentrated their attentions on the Finedon area, for this purpose taking narrow gauge rails, locomotive WOOTTON and some twenty wagons from Hunsbury Hill for opening up the Buccleuch site. It is not clear whether the whole of the narrow gauge tramway was lifted at this period, but it seems likely, as some of it must have been taken up; and two standard gauge locomotives were



cut up about the same time, suggesting a clearing-up operation. However, the rest of the locomotives were until 1940/1; the last in service, possibly on clearance work, was WHISTON, which was transferred to Fine quarries. It was a pity that none of the Ragtalls survived to the post World War II period, when they could have been noted and photographed by the then much greater number of people interested in industrial railways. They had done less than ten years work and were of an unusual design; but it was not to be.

The ironworks site was acquired by the engineering firm of John Blackwood, Hodge & Co Ltd, the surviving buildings were modified to their requirements and new ones were added. Richard Thomas & Baldwin Ltd (who had succeeded Richard Thomas & Co Ltd in 1945) were still considering reopening the quarries; a report dated 18th June 1952 by T.W.F. Spencer to RIB states that could be loaded into road vehicles and conveyed 120 yards to a loading site in Hunsbury Works yard, as in sale to Blackwood Hodge they had reserved siding rights. Further, according to Mr. Ansell, Agent for Delapre Estates, the Wootton lease was extended to 2 September 1977; but again, nothing practical transpired and RTB later said that the ore at Hardingsstone (presumably the Wootton area) was of uncertain quality and that they did not intend to work it, despite the lease. Thus, at the Hunsbury Hill Ironworks site, the remains of the narrow gauge, always on the perimeter of operations were unaffected and were allowed to return to nature unhampered and the locomotive shed was converted into a workshop and store. The embankment remained in position but at the western end was a bridge where it crossed an accommodation road for farm vehicles, and this bridge was removed. The route through Hunsbury Hill spinney and across the fields was easily traceable though somewhat overgrown, and the crossing of Rothersthorpe Road was marked by a slight ledge in the otherwise smooth slope of the road. The fields towards the ironworks were sunk below road level where ore had been extracted. South of the road the most prominent traces were the final gullet of a roughly circular quarry near Danes Camp, but these too were filled with undergrowth, as was also the course further south towards the Towcester road. The cutting here was sided and on either hand could be seen the ventilation shafts of the BR tunnel. The bridge under the A43 (Northampton-Towcester) was marked by fairly ornate

parapets. the main walls of red brick with a layer of blue bricks near ground level and a layer of larger blue bricks at the top, the whole between pillars surmounted by tetrahedral concrete slabs. Inevitably some vandalism had occurred but the parapets were largely intact, though the bridge had been filled in beneath. Towards Wootton Grange the course was clear but overgrown, and covered at one point by the earthworks of a gas pipeline. Traces of a trailing junction to the working face could be seen and the ground was below road level. Like Duston, these remains would in the ordinary course of events have been engulfed in the enlarging Northampton, and indeed new roads have obliterated sections between Rothersthorpe Road and the ironworks site. However, as stated above, other sections have been saved by the preservation movement, though the origins of this were indirect, as is so often the case. The Rushden Railway Society was formed in December 1971 with the intentions of purchasing and restoring No. 87 (and also No. 86 if possible) that had been lying in local yards since the closure of the Wellingborough Iron Co's metre gauge line five years earlier: providing a building to house these and other relics from the Northamptonshire ironstone quarries: and running the locomotive(s) from time to time on rails laid on a former local BR line or ironstone quarry trackbed. Realisation of these aims was hampered by the smallness of the Society, who concentrated their efforts on the restoration of No.87; but the turning point came with the idea of utilizing part of the course of the Hunsbury Hill tramway, that had by then come to the notice of Northampton Development Corporation. This body, in partnership with Northampton County Borough Council, had been made responsible for enlarging the city to house eventually a further 100,000 people. A master plan published by the NDC in 1968 included a major residential area built around the slopes of Hunsbury Hill, with the Iron Age hill fort of Danes Camp in the centre; and in the planning proposals was the comment The Development Corporation proposes to retain the disused ironstone railway system... this will create an opportunity of reinstating a rare narrow gauge track as an element of real interest in the park. It may be possible to establish a museum related to the ironstone workings, the railway and Danes Camps The proposals complemented nicely the activities of the Rushden Railway Society, which was re-formed in June 1973 under the style of the Northamptonshire Ironstone Railway Trust Ltd. The NIRT was much better fitted to attract members and get things done, and gradually plans were matured. In February 1975 the Trust was given access to a small area near Green Lane (Mere Way) to assemble items that had already been acquired. The former railway site and land were made available to the Trust on 1st October 1975 by the NDC and the affected tenant, Mr. Rose. Work then began in earnest in clearing the site, laying track and generally preparing for the arrival of exhibits.

The Trust lost no time in constructing and filling a temporary compound on the site bordering Green Lane, commencing with stock obtained direct from industry; these included the two Pecketts Nos. 86 and 87, but the first locomotive on the Hunsbury Hill scene in the widest sense was a standard gauge diesel donated by a firm near Norwich and which Blackwood Hodge kindly accommodated on a length of track outside the former narrow gauge shed. The NIRT was unfortunate in being formed too late to acquire much material direct from the ironstone quarrying industry, as by 1974 the heavy programme of contraction which had closed thirty systems in fifteen years had ended; in this period many locomotives in particular were given or sold at nominal sums to many preservation bodies all over the country. As a result, none of the stock in the possession of the NIRT, except for the Pecketts, had any direct connection with ironstone, though most of the items had associations with the county. However, by the autumn of 1975, they were able to put into execution plans for laying track and generally open up the site, with the hope always before them of obtaining genuine ironstone exhibits secondhand. One of the first tasks was to clear selected parts of the route of half a century's growth; this included the irregular circular formation near Danes Camp, which it was intended to relay with metre gauge track. In clearing away the undergrowth, a section of the



Hunsbury Hill Quarries. Trackbed of ironstone line with Danes Camp in the background. 27th April 1963. This route was laid with track by the N.I.R.T., first with metre gauge (1976) and then with standard gauge (1982).

Hunshury Hill Quarries. During the course of clearing the circular route for the installation of metre gauge track, some of the original 3ft. 8in gauge track was uncovered, and is being examined here by members of the photographer's family. 1st August 1976.



original 3ft. 8in. track was exposed, and one is tempted to go back 90 years when, almost on the same spot, quarriers at Danes Camp were unearthing exhibits of interest to the archaeologists of the day. The cutting south of Green Lane was exposed by a bulldozer, excavator and a lot of manual labour, for a considerable distance. Between Rothersthorpe Road and Danes Camp some mixed standard and metre gauge track was laid in late 1975, and a new headquarters was established, including a compound to which the material in the temporary compound was later moved. There was also a 2ft. gauge line laid on the south side of Green Lane opposite the original compound; this was in April 1976.

The NIRT had moved in none too soon. Urban roadway extension in time vicinity of Rothersthorpe road had, in the blanketing manner of modern earth-moving machinery, obliterated some traces of the former tramway; Briar Hill Farm is now a housing estate, while Hunsbury Hill Farm was still owned by the British Steel Corporation, assuccessors to Richard Thomas & Baldwins Ltd. Sadly, the later 1970s did not maintain the promise of the formative years. The 2ft. line was not operated after the one season and rapidly became overgrown; the Danes Camp loop was cleared again — but very slowly and by 1979 the trackbed was far from complete, so that there was little to interest the casual visitor. On the other hand, a locomotive and wagon formerly at Irchester quarries were acquired. This trend was reversed in the 1980s; the NDC were completing their road-building programme in the vicinity, and provided the Trust with fresh capital, enabling them to go ahead with a revised and more ambitious scheme. By the end of 1982 the circular layout was complete, but using standard gauge, with the locomotives and other exhibits on a central site; a branch from this was laid across Green Lane and extended towards the Towcester road. These new plans gave a layout more attractive to the general public at the expense of a further departure from the concept of retaining as much as possible of

the original Hunsbury Hill system. Indeed, it is true to say that the more interesting remains of the Hunsbury Hill tramway are outside the Country Park rather than in it. At the rear of the new church can be seen the trackbed in a shallow cutting between hedges, traceable across the road below; across the field beyond the course can be made out, and there is a very strongly marked cutting through Hunsbury Hill spinney (now designated a nature reserve) with its steep slope downwards to the bend at the bottom; how the horses must have panted and the Bagnalls barked, climbing through the spinney! Below the latter lies the new doer road, with the trackbed continued on an embankment among trees on the other side to the rear of Blackwood Hodges works, where the former narrow gauge locomotive shed still remains (1982). At the other end the system the cutting towards the Wootton pit is on the fringe of the Park and the 1975 clearance had turned the trackbed into an unofficial footpath along which we can stroll and in imagination relive bygone days. The ironstone face is very well marked on the north side, towards the former Towcester Road bridge the route is waterlogged and filled with bulrushes. The bridge under the A43 road still (1987) survives with its parapets, but is difficult to find in the complete reorganization of road layout, while the route to the Wootton pit beyond under urban redevelopment—but we must be thankful for the sites that have been preserved for us.

#### Grid References

732593 Tipping dock from op (second Site)  
731578 Cutting through Hunsbury Hill spinney (south end)  
732593 Locomotive shed  
732586 Level crossing with Rothersthorpe road  
742578 Bridge under Towcester road  
743577 Terminus of Wootton pit

#### Locomotives

Gauge; 3ft. 8in.  
HARDINGSTONE 0-6-0ST OC WB 1955  
1912 13x 18in. 2ft 9 1/4 in. New  
09/1912 Scr 1940  
WOOTTON 0-6-0ST OC WB  
1956 1912 13x 18in. 2ft.9 1/4 in  
New 11/1912 (I)  
NORTHAMPTON 0-6-0ST OC WB 1957  
1912 13x 18in. 2ft.9 1/4 in. New  
12/1912 Scr 1940

Richard Thomas & Co Ltd, Finedon Quarries, 1937

#### Footnotes

Agreement with Northamptonshire County Council  
11th January 1912.  
Northamptonshire Ironstone Railway Trust. Newsletter  
February 1977.  
Banbury Guardian. 11th May 1917.

