

HUNSBURY HILL? AH YES I REMEMBER IT WELL!

THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN A TRUST NEWS LETTER DECEMBER 1977. IT IS BEING REPEATED AS WE FEEL IT WILL BE OF INTEREST TO ANY MEMBER WHO HAS NOT READ IT PREVIOUSLY.

THE ARTICLE CONSISTS OF A TRANSCRIPT OF A TAPE RECORDING MADE IN 1977 TELLING OF THE EXPERIENCES OF MR. SAM WARWICK OF BUGBROOKE A FORMER EMPLOYEE OF HUNSBURY HILL IRON WORKS.

I began work at Hunsbury Hill Furnaces when I was a lad of some fifteen or so years. My first Job was as a Horse-boy. In those days I lived with my family at Rothersthorpe and I used to walk into work. We began at 6:00 a.m. and finished at 5:00 p.m. In 1911 we moved to Bugbrooke and I bought my self a bicycle to get to work. Of course if that was out of action I'd walk in again. Used to take me a couple of hours or so. I recall....people used to say that if you came through Bugbrooke at 8:00 in the evening every one was abed! And it was true you had to go to bed early in order to get up.

As I said My job was to drive the horse as it pulled the empty wagons from the furnaces back to the pits where the iron-ore was being dug. There were four of us drivers up and down and there were three boys in each pit as well pulling the loaded wagons to the top of the gradient with their horses. Then the wagons ran down to the weighbridge and so on to the furnaces. Two pits were being workd at that time one called CAMP PIT near Rothersthorpe Road and one called WOOTTON PIT on the other side of Towcester Road through a little tunnel. A Northampton chap it was who built that tunnel. Name of Docker Johnson. Anyway for each trip to the furnace and back we used to get three halfpence and the men got sixpence. From Camp pit we averaged eight trips a day but not quite as many from Wootton pit. On Saturdays we only made about half that number because we had half a day.

To make a few more pennies the lads used to do odd jobs for the men such as cooking their breakfast on an old stove or boiling the tea. Some men gave you a penny those who were Well off gave you twopence and one chap we used to fight for it! He used to say ' I paid you little b-----s last week! ' Oh yes we used to rob him right and left mind you families were large and money scarce. I worked there for a good few years and my wages were twenty four shillings a week. We earned more after the war. At least they paid us more I don't know whether we earned it!

Conditions of employment were a lot different then. If it rained we didn't work. And the firm didn't pay. I've biked to Stony Stratford it rained all day and I didn't get a penny. All the outdoor trades were the same in those days. Goodness Knows what they'd say today. Severe frosts mind you were different. Then we just kept on working digging the iron-ore. The men who dug out the over-burden which was anything up to six feet deep were paid fourpence farthing a square yard. We had no holidays nothing. If they caught you doing anything wrong they either suspended you or sacked you. If you were ill you couldn't work so you were not paid. sometimes they payed out a

little compensation for injury. And of course with no pensions a man just kept on working as long as he was able. Sometimes we were paid in gold and the old chaps they used to take the gold coin out of their pocket to look at and cheer themselves up. Pay day was Fridays.

Most of the workforce came from the surrounding villages and a few from Northampton. They used to come in from Kislingbury Duston Flore Milton Bugbrooke Rothersthorpe and Wootton. The majority from Wootton. There were as many as four hundred men employed.

As I remember the tracks used to come up from the furnaces then went round in a bend to Camp pit and a line branched off to Wootton pit across the old Mere. There was a weighbridge at the mere but it was never used. The firm decided that the other weighbridge could cope so they saved the cost of one mans wages by not running two!

The wagons ran down in pairs to the furnaces along what we used to call the gulley and across Hunsbury Hill to the weighbridge. When they reached the furnaces they were tipped at the Cally bank where the ore was burnt with slack coal. Then the empty wagons were pulled up the hill to the pits by the horses. Coming down they had what we called a breakman on the back who stood on the bumper and had to operate the Footbrake each truck was supposed to carry fifty hundred-weight. they tried out some bigger ones carrying five tons but they were a failure no one could top the blessed things.

The clerk at the weighbridge who entered up the weights in a big book was a man called Alf Labrum and I'll tell you what he did. his hands were crippled used to come out at right angles to his wrists but he used to do the most elaboate illuminated scrolls the kind you get for long service all beautiful colours. He was the secretary at Far Cotton Working Mens Club too I recall. Next chap at the weighbridge was a Rothersthorpe man name of Jack Bullison.

Phipps owned both the brewery and the ironworks and when the horses were too worn out to pull the brewery drays they sent them up to the hill to pull the trucks. I used to have a horse called 'Ben' who weighed a ton or so they told us. He was a big one and no mistake. then I drove another one called 'Bob' who had a tail no longer than my hand. He'd go to anyone if he had fly on him to get it knocked off! They were certainly some rum old characters. We boys didn't actually look after the horses although we had to wash the mud off their legs each night. there was a horse-keeper employed name of Stanley. He was nicknamed 'Dancedoor' because they said danced on the door in a pub one night. Nicknames were common then. I remember another chap we used to call 'choppy'. He went to Northampton one day and bought a pair of white moleskin trousers like all the men wore. when he got home he found they were to long and his wife refused to shorten them he did no more took the trousers to the chopping block and cut off the ends with a chopper! Next day he came to work with the ends all ragged where he'd chopped and so he became known as 'Choppy'. They used to wear white moleskin trousers with straps round the legs called 'Hump straps'. A man wasn't made up unless he had some hump straps.

The actual track was maintained by old railway men three in all. they used to put new sleepers in and all that. Their pay was fourpence fathing an hour which is what the men in the pits and the yards used to get on what they called 'Day work'. Mind you if us boys had to do day work we only got a penny farthing an hour!

All the quarrying was done by hand we had no mechanisation. The overburden was removed by pick and shovel into a barrow and wheeled across a plank to replace that already dug so the trench moved forward all the time. There was never a shortage of tools to work with - no slacking on that score! There were nine men in Camp pit filling the wagons and six in Wootton pit. The fillers as they were called used big iron forks to put the iron ore in the trucks and they put very large pieces in by hand the ore from Wootton pit was very hard but that from Camp pit was soft and the head man preferred it.

He used to say that there was more iron in it. We had some ore from other places to mix with our own of course. Some came from Blisworth some from Brixworth and some from Duston. I can remember the little railway that used to run to Duston pits across what we used to call the piles.

My next job after being horse-boy was on the Cally bank and I was there until the furnaces closed down in 1920. As I've said the ore was tipped on the cally bank. We used to have a block of wood about nine inches thick on the bumper and a piece of iron rail as a lever tip it up and over it went. That's if the iron bar didn't slip and hit you on the head! It's a wonder we weren't killed a dozen times over. They used to pay three halfpence a ton to tip it so we tipped fifteen hundred tons a week.

On the Cally bank itself the first job was 'Slacking-up' or shovelling the dusty slack coal into place. Of course on a windy day it all blew back into your eyes and face each time you shovelled it. So before we went home we used to have a wash in a bucket. All very crude in those days.

They had two furnaces and they called them 'Number one' and 'Number two'. The charge was raised on a platform by means of a steam engine at the top. they used two barrow loads of raw ironstone at 12cwt. two barrowloads of calcinated ironstone at 11wt. two barrowloads of coal at 6cwt. each. Five barrow loads of coke and two barrowloads of lime. Big iron barrows of iron they used and it went on day after day year after year. The furnace never went out not in its lifetime until it was worn out. then it had to be extinguished and rebuilt usually after about seven or eight years. They used hot blast engines and a wonderful piece of kit they were.

The furnaces used to do both pig iron and castings. They had a moulding shop in the yard and when they were on 'best iron' They used to cast drain tops man hole covers and that sort of thing. Iron was run out into a big iron pot and cast. There was a clay pit in the yard and they used that clay mixed with fire brick to stop the hole.

They used to make a lot of the iron bits for their wagons too. Axles were bought but the rest of the parts were made in the works. They built all their own wagons.

The manager was a man named Marshall he had a house in Victoria Road near Northampton Hospital. He was in charge of the furnaces and the pits. They had three foremen one in charge of the pits and two in the

yard. Two of them came from Rothersthorpe and one lived in the row of cottages near the ironworks. The firm owned the cottages and several of the staff lived in them.

During the great war they closed the iron works down but then a Middlesbrough firm took them over and reopened them to make a special iron for ships plates. I did hear that attempts were made to get the old workforce back from the war - I was in Salonica at the time - but they wouldn't wear it.

Hunsbury Hill iron works was a very busy place towards the end. We had three little locomotives called WOOTTON HARDINGSTONE and NORTHAMPTON. There were two or three trains a day bringing coal to those old sidings. We used to have a Cracking Plant for the slag which was put through a screen then sent away by rail. They used to pay the 'pig lifters' two pence a ton to load it. The canal was used more in those days with beer boats coal boats and all sorts. There were sand boats from Milton brick boats from Gayton lime from Roade then of course Phipps had one and so did Mannings. Oh yes all very smart turnouts they were too.

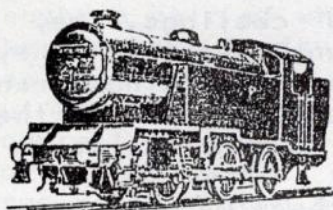
Eventually the selling price of iron slumped and it was costing more to produce a ton than they could sell it for. They stopped mining in 1920 then used up the calcinated ore in the yard before closing down in 1921 about Febuary time I think it was. And thats it. Nothing there now except Blackwood Hodge. All gone.....

Ah well the work was har and the pay was poor but I've lived to tell the tale.

N.I.R.T. Sept 1986.

#### COUNTY COUNCIL GRANT.

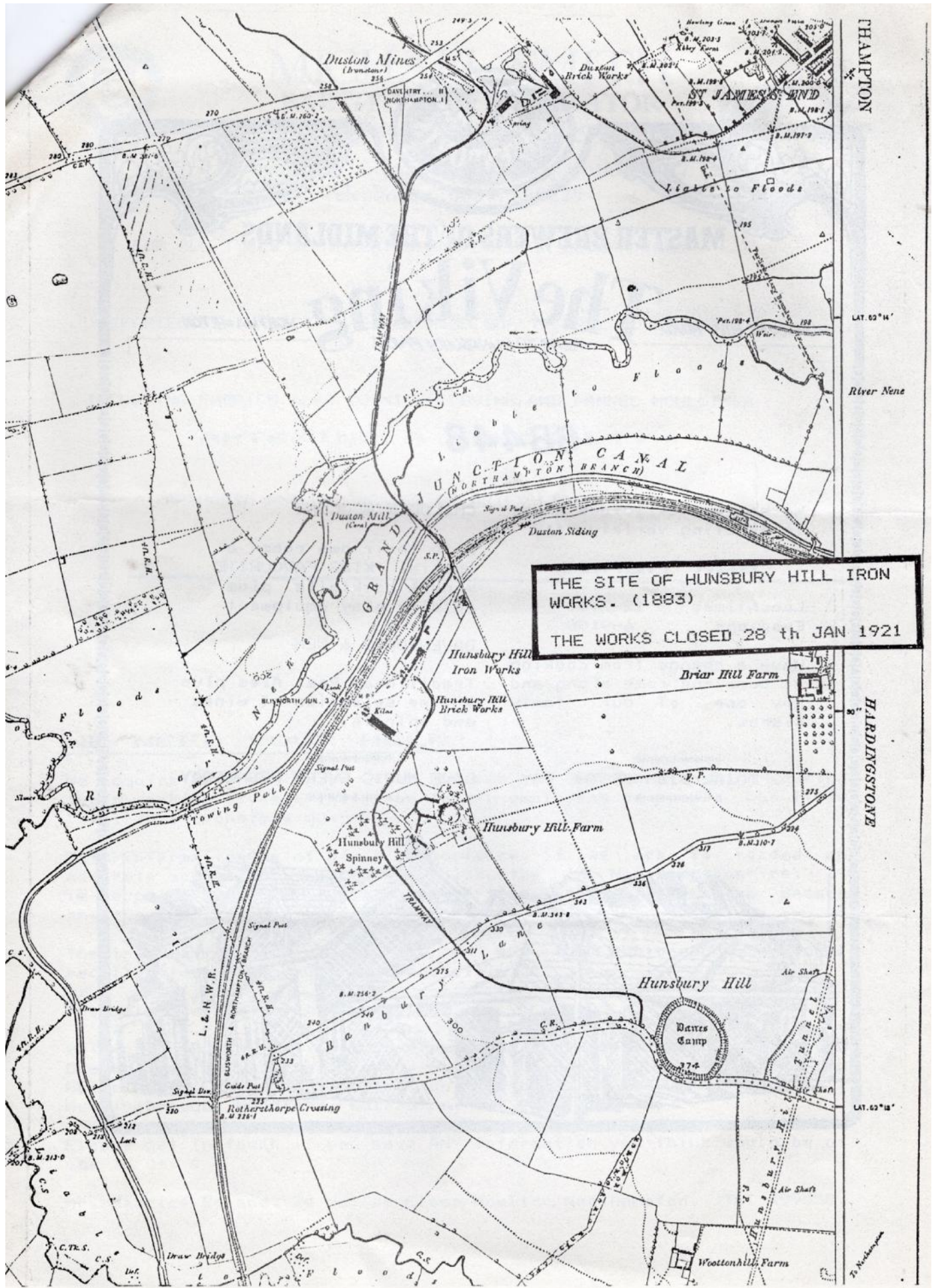
We have recently recived a grant from Northmptonshire County Council for the sum of £750.00. This is to go towards the restoration of our first steam locomotive. This grant plus what we have raised so far has incresed the fund to get No. 14 steaming to £1,350.00 it is hoped that we will have raised or have pledged enough money by June of next year to carry out the nesasary repair work to give us steam in 1987.



33a Stanley Road  
Northampton  
NN5 5EH

NEW      OLD  
          n  
BOUGHT      SOLD

**TRAINS 'n' THINGS**  
**MODEL RAILWAY SPECIALIST**  
Telephone 55828



THE SITE OF HUNSBURY HILL IRON WORKS. (1883)  
 THE WORKS CLOSED 28 th JAN 1921

CHAMPTON

LAT. 52° 14'

River Nene

HARDINGSTONE

LAT. 52° 12'