

NORTHCOTE & NEW NORTHCOTE BRICK COMPANIES: A BRIEF TIME LINE

P. Michell, 2005, updated 2011, 2015

Beside Acacia Apartments is All Nations Park, Northcote Plaza and surrounding car park. This area was once the one of the largest brick producing sites in Victoria.

Since c1866 clay has been extracted from various holes in this area. However it is All Nations Park however that produced the most amount of clay. The clay hole probably dates from c1872 and grew deeper and deeper - at least 50m. The output was staggering – over 1.5 million bricks every ten days was produced for decades.

What is little known is that a smaller company New Northcote Brick Co was established in 1886 beside the much larger company. Law suits were filed yet the smaller company survived and thrived. In due course it purchased its much larger neighbour!

So many bricks were produced by these two companies (and Glen Iris Brick Co on St Georges Rd) that there was a saying **that much of Melbourne is built on Northcote clay.**

There is now little to remind of this past industry.

Gone is the early morning whistle which roused most of Northcote from their sleep.

Gone is the billowing black soot from tall smoke stacks over the Hoffman kilns.

Gone are the noisy carters and their neighing horses crowding along Separation St.

Now the only reminder of these once great giants of nineteenth century engineering is All Nations Park in Northcote and a Hoffman kiln in Dawson Street, Brunswick.

Brief Summary

- 1866 John Roberts – small pug mill at rear of hotel (cnr Separation & High Sts)
- 1872 Groom Bros – Northcote Patent Brick Co (on land behind John Roberts Hotel)
- 1882 Northcote Brick Co established taking over Groom Bros holdings.
- 1886 New Northcote Brick Co established next to Northcote Brick Co
- 1959 New Northcote changes name to Brick Industries
- 1962 Brick Industries purchases Northcote Brick Co

- 1964 Brick Industries changes name to Brick & Pipe Industries
- 1977 Craigieburn plant replaces Northcote works and latter closed.
- 1979 Last of kilns and chimneys demolished.
- 1981 Northcote Plaza opens.
- 1988 Abe Goldberg acquires Brick & Pipe Industries. Then on sold.
- 2001 All Nations Park opens (?) on the now filled in claypit.
- 2003 Brickworks Ltd (inc Austral Bricks) gain Brick & Pipe Industries after protracted mergers and takeovers. Brickworks Ltd has since 1969 cross ownership with Washington H Soul Pattinson & Co.¹

Timeline of Northcote Brick & New Northcote Brick Companies

- 1866 **John Roberts** opens **Carter's Arms Hotel** corner High & Separation Sts. Establishes small brickworks in the back field of the hotel.²
- 1872 Back land sold to Groom Brothers. They raise funds to install steam machinery and establish Northcote Patent Brick Co. At end of 1873 brick production in Shire of Jika Jika has increased from 1.2 to 2.9 million bricks per year.³
- 1881 Shire is producing 3.6 million bricks a year from small producers. Brickworks not noticed by public. Though pock marked, the district is not too disfigured by large clay holes.⁴
- 1882 **Northcote Brick Company Ltd.** established. 9 acres of land bought by syndicate from Groom Bos. The current excavation was 40 feet deep. Estimated that 16 million bricks made in the past . Only two of syndicate were local - John Roberts and George Plant (each owning a small quantity of 50 shares. Fraction of the total 30,000 issued). Company built a Hoffman kiln – the cutting edge technology of the time for brick making. Rev Caleb Booth and sister complain about the pollution of smoke and soot. Heavy traffic by brickworks on Separation St causing extensive road damage. In the first year the company was paying £238 / fortnight in salaries. Further £96 pounds / fortnight to carters.⁵
- 1883 Northcote Council formed.
- 1884 Entertainment to benefit a poor young fellow who broke his leg at local brickworks, thus leaving a widowed mother quite destitute of support for some little time to come.⁶
Northcote bricks were coloured 'cherry red' and became quite used for outer facing of structures including houses.⁷
- 1885 Complaint by Rev. Caleb Booth that smoke was no better and in addition there was the shrill steam whistle at midnight and 6am. Reply by Cr Beaver

¹ Soul Patts Cross Onwership legal stoush:
http://www.brw.com.au/p/business/ownership_carnegie_patts_perpetual_w5JMKm18rqNy5UQXqS6EbL. Accessed 8 March 2015.

² Lemon, p 72

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Lemon, p 78

⁶ Lemon, p 80

⁷ West Australian, 28 July 1887.

- (Northcote council) that everyone suffers from smoke from brickworks and the whistle is good to wake people up.⁸
- 1886 Mid. Second Hoffman kiln in operation. Third on the way. At end of 1886 demand for bricks suddenly declined. One kiln shut down.⁹
A second syndicate bought land in Dennis St. adjoining the larger works. They built their own kiln - **New Northcote Brick Co. Ltd.** Is established.
- 1887 Demand increased again. In August - in one fortnight orders for 1.5 million bricks. Shares issued to raise capital for fourth kiln.¹⁰
[Northcote Council became heavily dependent on Northcote Brick Co after its expansions from this period on.]
October - Northcote Branch of Carters' Union formed. Entrance fee of 2/6 and weekly subscription 3d / horse. By March 1888 had 96 members owning 206 horses and they had a strike for 1.5 days against New Northcote Brick Co. The strike occurred the week after the Northcote Brick manufactories annual picnic at Mordialloc.¹¹
New Northcote - Early months slump in sales
- 1888 Fourth kiln close to completion in February. Fortnight's order reached height of 2.5 million bricks. Increased dividends. A fifth kiln ordered and new machinery, and land bought to run a railway siding. Siding completed before the main railway opened. Over 500 people employed plus 100 carters.¹²
Northcote Brick Co produced 16 million bricks in 4 months.¹³ Brick prices 45/- per thousand.¹⁴
Strike by carters for 1 ½ days.
April – New Northcote declares £2031 after expenses. Allocated £960 dividends, £200 bad debts, £570 extinction of preliminary expenses, £300 carried forward.¹⁵
- 1889 Dense smoke sometimes billowed from half a dozen great kilns at the brick factories.¹⁶
January - demand slumps. Brick price cut, by reducing wages to carters. (A month before carters had agreed to raise wages because of horse feed increases.) Carters go on strike. Worsens because of maritime strike – nil coal. Both brick companies involved. Though mostly against Northcote Brick Co. Company threatens to evict carters living in company cottages. 100 carters on strike and picket the works. Leader supports strike. On 24 January a 'Brunswick Crawler' arrives to collect bricks but only takes one load. 'Scabby Brunswick Blackleg'. Strike lasts a week, then settled via Northcote Council interceding. Mr S Newman (president of Northcote Carters Union) is fined a pound in court for insulting behaviour to Brunswick Crawler.¹⁷

⁸ Lemon, p 83

⁹ Lemon, p 106

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Lemon, p 83

¹⁴ Lemon, p 107

¹⁵ Leader Newspaper, April 28 1888

¹⁶ Lemon, p 78

¹⁷ Lemon, p 106/7

Total output of Northcote and New Northcote 58.5 million bricks. 536 men employed.¹⁸

Fifth kiln still being built. Brick prices still falling 35/- / thousand.¹⁹

- 1890 Production stopped. Bricks sold from stockpile. Applied to Council to waive the annual rates as kilns closed - rejected. The reason for rejection was that Northcote wanted to become a Town and needed annual valuations of £100,000, which it had reached. This was a rise of £24,078 in six years. No doubt ably assisted by the brick companies' rates.²⁰
Maritime strike dried up coal supplies forcing New Northcote Brick Co to cut production and Northcote Brick Co to stop making bricks for at least 2 months – only using two out of five kilns. People saw it as a temporary hardship. Representatives from Trades Hall came out. It was thought at the time a slight interruption to normal working conditions.²¹
Pride in brickworks in speech given by Governor.²²
Northcote Brick Co resumes work late in November with only 2 of 5 kilns and only 100 men. It and New Northcote 47 million bricks. 420 men employed.
The brick companies provided about 3/4 of factory jobs in Northcote at this time. (Not including farming jobs, or casual labourers. Thus when company is closed affects municipality.²³
- 1891 June 22 - Formation of Trades Hall's progressive Political League at Jones' Commercial Hotel in High St an attempt to get men into parliament - not successful. This was the forerunner of the Australian Labor Party.²⁴
July - Northcote Brick Co. stops production. Sells stock pile. Works manager Thomas Weatherall leaves. Huge rain storm floods both Brick Companies works. New Northcote Brick has 100 men out of work for a week due to flooding. Later Northcote Brick Co. resumes limited scale production but cuts wages. Remaining workers strike and company gives in - pay is preserved from 10d to 4.5d/hour. Production falls to 19 million bricks and income from over £100,000 pounds to £38,053. Shortly after New Northcote closes temporarily - prior to this it had dismissed all but the married employees. Its kilns remained unused until April 1892. Both companies opened and closed erratically as only small orders were made.²⁵
- 1892 September - Northcote Brick Co. reopens briefly employing 50 men after being idle for 4 months.²⁶
cally over the next twelve months. Only opening as small orders came in.
- 1893 12 million bricks in stockpile between Northcote Brick & New Northcote. Autumn and winter both companies shut.²⁷

¹⁸ Lemon, p 112

¹⁹ Lemon, p 107

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Lemon, p 108

²² Lemon, p 110

²³ Lemon, p 112

²⁴ Lemon, p 112

²⁵ Ibid, p 113

²⁶ Ibid, p 115

- 1894 By April Northcote Brick Co. had sold its stockpile. In September won a big contract for 2 million bricks. Production from the two factories rose to 20 million bricks.
For second year Northcote had produced more bricks than strike beleaguered Hoffmans.²⁸
- 1895 Surprisingly Northcote Brick Co. pays shareholders a dividend of 3d a share.²⁹
- 1896 August - Brick companies agreed to amalgamate into a Co-Operative Brick Co. of the five major brick makers of Melbourne. They would co-operate to control production rates, and set brick prices and to share profits. Good for shareholders, not so for Northcote (and Preston) workers. For the next decade Northcote limited its output to give other works a greater slice of the market.³⁰
- 1898 **Westmorelands Pottery Co.** established in Clyde St, Thornbury. Established by G Westmoreland [ex manager of Northcote Brick]. (In 1933 approx 40 people employed.)³¹
Photo of Northcote Brick Co showing Hoffman kilns and works. Eight tall chimneys.³²
- 1899 Brunswick once more greatest brick producing municipality.³³
Still a main employer - Northcote Brick has less than 100 men. New Northcote shut.
- 1900 Northcote Brick Co installs 100 light compound dynamo, 69 lamps, 2 arc lights and a polished marble switchboard so it could work its clay pits and kilns at night.³⁴
- 1904 Modernisation of Northcote Brick. Thompson compound condensing machines and water-tube boilers. Duplicate plant erected also.³⁵
- 1914 Northcote Brick Co predicts worsening conditions due to World War I.³⁶
- 1915 Westmorelands pottery in Thornbury changes name to **Northcote Tile & Pottery Company.**³⁷
Further upgrades to steam plant at Northcote Brick.³⁸
- 1917 Political and industrial trouble. Strikes including coal and shipping. Northcote Brick closed for many weeks. Directors recommend no dividend payments.³⁹
- 1919 End of war and boom time again.
April - Northcote Brick installs a large new steam plant - it had been on order for more than four years.⁴⁰

²⁷ Ibid, p 116

²⁸ Ibid, p 130

²⁹ Ibid, p 130

³⁰ Ibid, p 130

³¹ Northcote Jubilee, p 22

³² Beckett, G. Museum Victoria image. Ref MM008226 – Biggest Family Album in Australia

³³ Lemon, p 131

³⁴ Ibid, p 149

³⁵ Northcote Jubilee, p 16

³⁶ Lemon, p 165

³⁷ Northcote Jubilee, p 22

³⁸ Williams, T M. Letter

³⁹ Lemon, p 179

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 186

- 1920s Brick companies had enjoyed spectacular profits due to building boom.⁴¹
 Motor transport replaces horse and carts at New Northcote. Northcote Brick still using wooden carts and horses.
 Great Depression begins.
- 1931 Brick kilns idle. Non smoking chimneys stood against the unusually clear sky.⁴²
- 1932 Fire destroys *Northcote Tile & Pottery*. New present building dates from this period. 35-40 people employed.⁴³
- 1933 Jubilee Year for Northcote Council. Special publication promotes Northcote and its industries including brick and pottery works.⁴⁴
 Northcote Brick is reputed to be one of the largest sites in Australia – 12 acres. Wages bill exceeds £50,000 p.a. Exports to Western Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁵
- 1935/6 Northcote Brick employing 100 people at the works (fewer than in the 1920s). The brick companies were making ‘merely modest profits’.⁴⁶
- 1936 Northcote Council buys clay hole behind Carters Arms Hotel for use as a tip. Residents assured that one day it would be a park. Residents complain about the smell of the rotting refuse.⁴⁷
- 1937 New Northcote buys 40 acres at Burwood for £3000.
- 1948 Council names a small part of the brickworks building site Thomson Reserve.⁴⁸
 New Northcote – Introduction of wire cut bricks at Burwood. Next two decades major innovations and acquisitions by this company. Registers the name – Nubrik for its new products.⁴⁹
- 1950 New Northcote – 4 down draft kilns at Burwood producing 100,000 bricks / week.
- 1956 New Northcote – begins aggressive acquisitions of other brick companies. Accident at Northcote Brick – Jim Datille, Reid St (Northcote) was working the face of the quarry and heard a rumbling. A workmate yelled a warning and Datille srcambles away. However a rock weighing about a ton pinned and crushed his leg.⁵⁰
- 1959 New Northcote – changes name to **Brick Industries**.⁵¹

⁴¹ Ibid, p 214

⁴² Ibid, p 214

⁴³ Northcote Jubilee, p 22

⁴⁴ Northcote Jubilee

⁴⁵ Ibid, p 16

⁴⁶ Lemon, p 227

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 254

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 255

⁴⁹ Brickmasters, p 392

⁵⁰ The Leader, 15 Feb 1956

⁵¹ Delisted companies list - <http://www.delisted.com.au/company/brick-industries-limited>. Accessed 8 March 2015.

- 1960 New Northcote – further acquisitions and improvements at Burwood plant. Nubrik bircks being produced.
- 1961 Northcote Brick - Much of old filled land used for car parking for High St. shoppers.
New Northcote now largest brick manufacturer in Victoria.
- 1962 **Brick Industries purchases Northcote Brick Co.**⁵² One out dated Hoffman kiln demolished and wire cut kiln installed.
- 1963-66 Brick Industries purchases many other rivals (inc Halletts of SA) and becomes the second largest brick manufacture in Australia.⁵³
- 1964 **New Northcote changes name to Brick and Pipe Industries.**⁵⁴
- 1969 Beginning of interest in Scoresby.
- 1977 Brick & Pipe Ind - **new plant at Craigieburn replaces Northcote operations. The end of brickworks in Northcote.** Company retains 40% interest in land sold to Northcote Council. Large hole used by council for use as tip. (Now All Nations Park) Decommissioning of equipment and demolition of kilns begin.⁵⁵
- 1979 Last remnants of the brickworks - five remaining brick chimneys of Hoffman kilns demolished.⁵⁶
RMIT plan for redevelopment of Hoffman kilns and processing buildings. Two and four storey buildings. Four Hoffman kilns. All extant.
- 1981 October - Establishment of Northcote Plaza.⁵⁷ Various plans for the old clay which is being filled with rubbish. Mid to late 1980s demolition of Carters Arms Hotel cnr High & Separations Streets.
- 1987 Brick & Pipe purchases Clifton Brick Co (which was 40% owned by Angliss family).⁵⁸
- 1988 Brick & Pipe Ind shares sold to Abe Godlberg. Then sold to Pioneer International. Pioneer then sold to Hanson in 1998. Acquired by Bristile in 2001. Brickworks Ltd then acquired in 2003.⁵⁹
- 1994 City of Darebin formed.
- 1995 Draft masterplan for Northcote Tip.
- 1996 ‘Himalayas’ of rubbish being filled on site. Public consultation of site usage. Unanimous support for a parkland.
- 2001 Naming of parkland ‘All Nations Park’ by City of Darebin.
- 2004 Brickworks through various acquisitions now largest brick-maker in Australia with overseas interests in Hong Kong and Dubai.
- 2008 Building of Acacia Apartments overlooking All Nations Park.

⁵² Lemon, p 270

⁵³ Nubrik, p ?

⁵⁴ Delisted companies list - <http://www.delisted.com.au/company/brick-industries-limited>. Accessed 8 March 2015.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p 270

⁵⁶ Ibid, p 270

⁵⁷ Ibid, p 270

⁵⁸ Brickmasters, p 392

⁵⁹ Ibid, p 393

Most of the **Northcote Pottery** site has been cleared. Few structures and facade left. Latter incorporated into apartments built on site (c2011).
2009 Acacia Apartments facing All Nations Park is built.

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Horrific accidents & deaths at the brickworks as reported in the press.

CRUSHED BY EARTH.

MELBOURNE, January 21

A fatal accident occurred at the Northcote Brick works this afternoon. The victim was John Fahey, a labourer, aged 44, of Mitchell Street, who was admitted to the Melbourne Hospital, a few minutes to 4 o'clock, and died several hours later. Fahey was working in a clayhole 120. ft deep 'barring' the wall.

He was about 40 ft. from the bottom of the hole when earth, weighing about two or three tons, suddenly became detached 60 ft. above his head, and crashed down the side of the wall. It fell on him, crushed his limbs, and inflicted internal injuries.

Fahey was married, and left three little girls.

Argus, 22 January 1913

CRUSHED TO DEATH.

Shocking injuries which resulted in his death, were sustained by Leslie G. Oliver (27), living in Northcote, near Melbourne, and employed at the Northcote Brick Company's works. He was working at a brick moulding machine, and became entangled in the shafting and jammed between the cogs of the machine. Before it could be stopped he had been crushed to death.

Adelaide Advertiser 11 Oct, 1918

WIDOWS APPEAL FAILS.

Risk Needlessly Taken.

A claim recently came before Judge Wasley, sitting as arbitrator under the Workers' Compensation act in which Mary Jane Campbell sued, the Northcote Brick Co. for damages on account of her husband, Alexander B Campbell. The accident which caused Campbell's death, occurred at a clay pit in Northcote, where Campbell was at the time engaged in a partly open shed in boiling some water for lunch.

Following an explosion which was designed to blast a large mass of clay, Campbell was struck by a piece of material. He died two days later. Judge Wasley held that Campbell had taken a risk which he should not have taken in being where he was. He had been warned by the foreman not to be in that place when blasting was in progress.

The claim was therefore dismissed. Campbell's widow appealed against the decision, and yesterday the State Full Court dismissed the appeal with costs.

Argus, 15 March 1921

ACCIDENTS - Truck Falls Down Quarry.

MELBOURNE, Sept. 19.— The driver of a motor truck, Noel Rainsbury (21), of Derby Street, Kew, had a remarkable escape from serious injury this afternoon, when his vehicle ran backwards over the side of a quarry and fell 150ft., finally landing in a waterhole about 40ft. deep, at the Northcote Brick works. Rainsbury had backed the truck to the edge of the quarry, in order to tip some earth into the excavation, and was about to leave the driver's cabin when the earth on which the rear wheels were resting gave way and the vehicle fell down the steep embankment at a fast rate. The driver was thrown clear during the fall and escaped with minor abrasions, but the truck, after being badly damaged by the bumping, dropped into a hole containing about 40ft. of water and sank.

Leader, 1927

ACCIDENT AT NORTHCOTE BRICK CO

Jim Datille, Reid St (Northcote) was working the face of the quarry and heard a rumbling. A workmate yelled a warning and Datille scrambles away. A rock weighing about a ton lands on him pinning his now crushed leg.

Leader, 15 Feb 1956