

The Alternative Hobbyist

Ringling is my dominant hobby but it's less clear what comes second. Fell walking has been a lifelong passion ('what other sort of holiday is there?') but since many ringers share my love of the fells so it doesn't really tick the 'unusual' box. However, I'm sure that brickwork does.

I don't lay bricks as a hobby – the speed and quality of my workmanship is definitely 'well-meaning amateur' – but I'm interested in the brickwork itself, and what it can tell us about the history of buildings all around us.

In the beginning

By coincidence it was a ringer who first aroused my interest. Frank King (also known as 'The Cambridge University Bellringer') was having one of his houses renovated. He explained how he had insisted on the use of authentic brick bonds in some new walls, and that whereas in former times he could just have told the brickies what bond to use, he had to show them a drawing, brick by brick, to explain how things fitted together in the corners.

I think I knew that cavity walls had all bricks laid end to end and solid walls had some bricks end on, but I had no idea that there were special ways of doing this – different bonds – with different costs and strengths, or that you could tell something about the building and even the status of its original owner, by looking at the patterns.

Observing

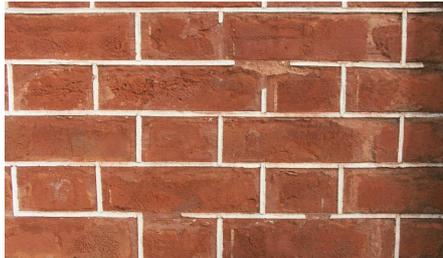
In the same way that ringers grab towers, train spotters collect engine numbers, and twitchers look out for birds, I started spotting brick bonds. The more I looked at the brickwork rather than just walking past, the more I spotted other things, that led me to ask questions.

For example in England, why is Flemish Bond so much more common than English Bond whereas in the Low Countries English Bond is more common?

Why are bricks different colours? That's easy – it depends on the type of clay the bricks are made from. Until modern times most buildings used 'stocks' (local bricks) and the local clay determined their colour. That immediately tells you something about a building that wasn't built with local bricks. – it was almost certainly higher status, because importing bricks cost more.

History

Status crops up a lot. Accurately made bricks were more costly and laying them with thin layers of mortar – 'gauge work' – was more elegant than the thick layers of mortar needed to even out the gaps between cheaper bricks. Where status is involved, fakery isn't far behind. If you build a wall with cheap bricks with mortar coloured to match, and then cut thin grooves in the mortar filled with lime putty, it looks like gauge work but is cheaper – until the lime putty starts to fall out!



Fake gauge work deteriorating

There was a transition between solid walls and cavity walls. Bricks are roughly twice as long as

they are wide, so two side by side in a solid wall is the same thickness as one across. But stand the bricks on edge and there's a gap in the middle that reduces damp penetration, and also uses fewer bricks for a given area. They were called 'rat trap' bonds, presumably because rats could get into the gaps. They are quite a few examples around and they are easy enough to spot from the characteristic shape of bricks on edge, but most people walk past without noticing them.



A rare glimpse inside a 'rat trap' wall

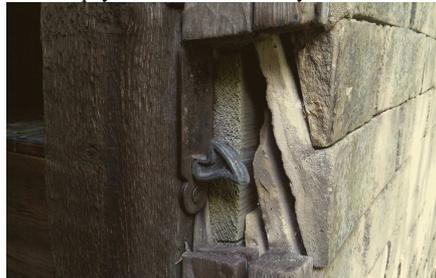
The brick tax influenced the manufacture of bricks, which for centuries had been a comfortable size for a brickie to hold. Between 1784 and 1850 the government imposed a tax on each brick, so people made them bigger to reduce the number needed, and hence the tax paid. One person took it to extremes – Joseph Wilkes of Measham in Leicestershire made bricks double the normal size – commonly known as Jumbies or Wilkes' Gobbs.



Wilkes' Gobbs in Measham

The legacy of over-sized bricks lived on after the tax was repealed. Many brickworks had mechanised while it was in force, which made it harder to revert to producing normal size bricks afterwards. Mechanisation came later in the southeast, where bigger bricks are less common.

The other way to avoid the brick tax was with 'mathematical tiles', which looked like bricks when hung on timber framed buildings, but didn't incur the tax¹. They looked like brickwork, which was a status symbol because it implied you could afford to pay the tax – more fakery.



Brick tiles close up

Collecting

Just as ringling can draw you in deeper once you start so with brickwork I found that observing led on to collecting. I can't remember the first brick. Maybe it was when I extended my house and noticed that bricks from the same brickworks but made a decade apart looked very different. More likely a discarded brick caught my eye when out walking, and having picked it up to look at it I popped it into my rucksack. On a couple of

occasions flying back from a holiday I have mentally rehearsed what I would say if asked why I had a brick in my hold baggage, but I never was.

So far there are about 70 items – several crates full. I realise that thimbles would take less space, but they wouldn't be so interesting.

Sharing

What began as a purely personal interest has become much more, and again the trigger came from ringling. When I developed our tower website it was mainly aimed at non-ringers and I created a personal website as a ploy. Plenty of cross links between them, and a diverse range of content on mine, was intended to attract search engines. I created a page for every topic I was interested in, including brickwork.

Once created, the brickwork pages grew. They account for nearly half the traffic on my website, and I receive queries from around the world.

I think I was persuaded to give my first talk on brickwork while on a ramble, when the person to whom I had been expounding on the topic turned out to be the speaker organiser for the local branch of National Trust. Since then I've been asked to give the talk to many other groups, and I hope I have helped many people to realise that if you learn how to 'read' brickwork it has a fascinating story to tell.

Oddities

Firing bricks in a kiln is a bit like baking – if you get the ingredients or the temperature wrong the result might come out burnt or misshapen. In normal times distorted bricks would be discarded as rejects but after the war when resources were scarce they were often sold off cheap and used in garden walls.



Grossly distorted bricks (rat trap bond)

Old walls often need repair, and it's quite common to see different materials used, but bricks are normally laid level – not always though.



The craziest brickwork ever!

Some things remain a mystery to me, like why a two story terraced house needs a flying buttress.



Brick flying buttress on a terraced house

For more information, see: jaharrison.me.uk/

¹ After writing this I found evidence that brick tiles were used before the tax was imposed, as a way to update timber buildings when brick became fashionable. Published in *The Ringing World* 'Alternative hobbyist' series on pp 236-7 in 2017. ringingworld.co.uk or call 01264 366620