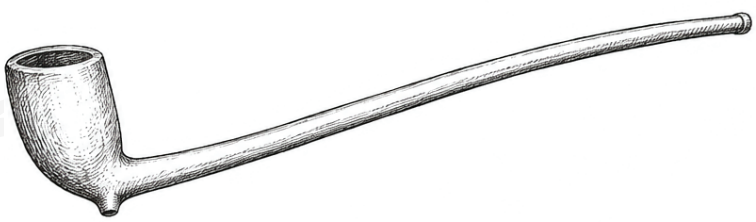
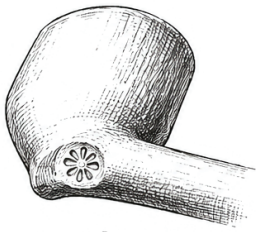
Fancy a Broseley? The Story of the Pipes That Put Our Town on the Map.
By Emma Buckley

Walk through the labyrinth of jitties around Broseley Wood and you will see them: little cylinders of white, small fragments of a vanished industry and craft. These are the remains of white clay pipes that put Broseley on the map, sustaining an extensive trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At its peak, Broseley was the world leader of clay pipe manufacturing, producing millions of clay pipes, the remains of which have been unearthed across the British Isles and as far afield as colonial Virginia — Jamestown and Williamsburg — and even Jamaica.

Why did the tiny medieval settlement of Broseley transform, over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, into the significant world leading clay pipe manufacturer it became by the nineteenth century? Indeed, the question, "Would you like a Broseley?" meant you were being offered the long-stemmed, churchwarden-style or Dutch Long Straw pipe that Broseley — and particularly the Southorn pipe works — specialised in.





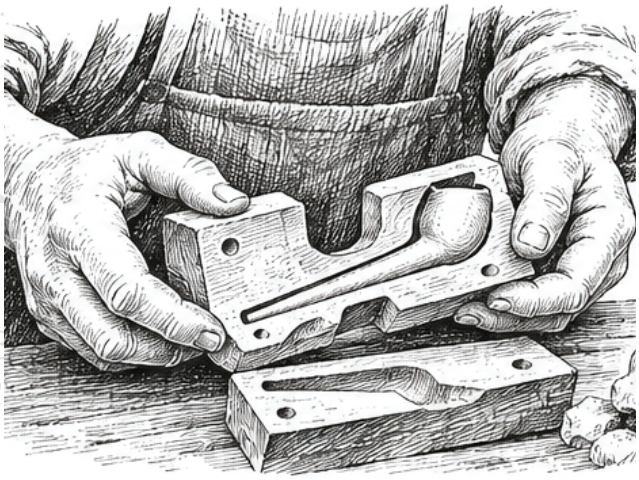
The notion of a side-gig is familiar to us, but it is not a new phenomenon: the enterprising residents of Broseley and nearby Benthall and Much Wenlock were already engaging in such endeavours through tapping into the increasing availability of tobacco at lower prices. As the doctoral research of pipe historian Dr David Higgins has shown, Broseley had a rich supply of the raw materials required for successful pipe manufacturing: the refined white clay to form the pipes, the rough clay for the kilns, and the coal to fire those kilns to the required thousand-degree temperature. As a result, initially, clay pipe making was something of a cottage industry: it could be quickly established with a small investment and provided an additional



income stream for accomplished craftsmen (and some women) who were probably farm labourers as well. These craftsmen and women had their own individual stamps, found at the base of the pipes beneath the bowl and their skilled work was much valued by hawkers and traders who sought out the pipe makers to sell their products. This is where geography comes in: the River Severn proved an important trading route for the sought-after clay pipes, moving boxed and crated pipes downstream to Gloucester and Bristol or

upstream into the Midlands.

As a result of this, the initial Humble cottage industry proved so successful that by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, larger-scale production had been fully established in Broseley, principally at the Southorn works at Legges Hill, alongside the rival Crown Pipeworks on King Street, originally owned by Rowland Smitheman. Interestingly, during this time, the gender of the pipe making artisans shifted to a female dominated workforce. It is estimated that a skilled pipe maker could produce around 1,000 pipes a day.



The skill and quality of Broseley pipes, and the industry's focus on a plain, distinctive style throughout its existence, meant that Broseley became the capital of major clay pipe manufacturing of the early industrial era. However, changing consumption habits inevitably saw clay pipes eclipsed by other means of smoking tobacco, as briar pipes, cigars and cigarettes became the preferred medium. One by one, the pipe works of Broseley ceased operation, until the Southorn Works in King Street — one of the last clay tobacco pipe manufacturers left in Britain — finally closed circa 1960.

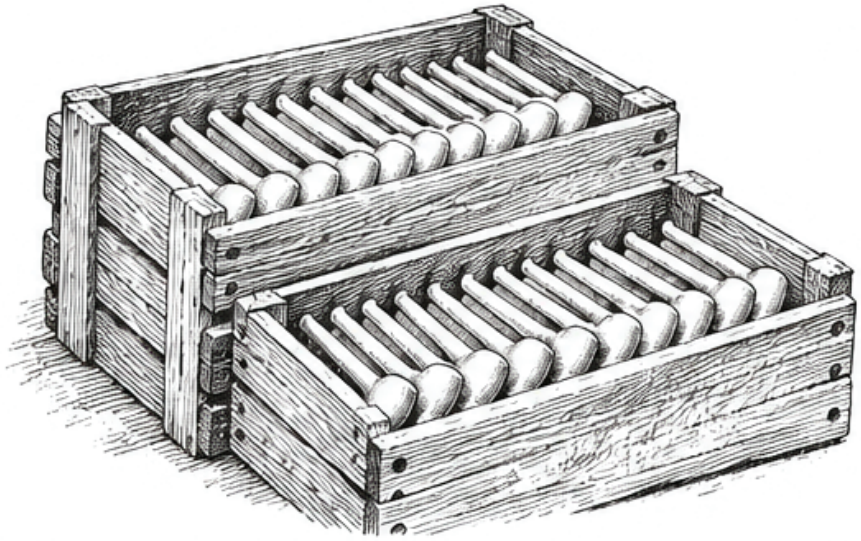
However, that was not the end of the story- the site itself survived, remarkably untouched, for decades afterwards. In 1991 it was acquired by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. Today, Broseley Pipeworks stands as one of ten museum sites within the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site recently acquired by the National Trust.

The historical interest in clay pipes continues to resonate and gain greater prominence: contemporary historians are realising that clay pipes serve as important relics of the everyday, ordinary people whose labour and customs shaped communities across Britain. The communal nature of clay pipe sharing and smoking is increasingly seen as a foundation of the pub culture we enjoy today.

Sadly, the production of clay pipes is now practised by only a tiny handful of passionate artisans, and the craft is listed as Critically Endangered on the Heritage Crafts Red List — considered at serious risk of disappearing from the UK altogether. However, Dr David Higgins, Chairman of both the Society for Clay Pipe Research and the National Pipe Archive has long championed the idea that modern technology could help preserve this near-vanished art, since 3D printers can now recreate the rare historic pipe moulds held by

museums and the national archive.

That idea has since been put into practice by James Ashwell, a Bristol-based professional clay pipemaker and one of only a handful of people in the country still practising the craft. In 2024, Ashwell secured an Endangered Crafts Fund grant from Heritage Crafts to 3D-print new pipe moulds from scans of historical pipes, and took up a residency at Broseley Pipeworks to test those moulds using a real gin press on the very site where the tradition was once practised at industrial scale. Our own Kerry has forged links with Ashwell as part of this work.



Even though British clay pipemaking has dropped significantly from its nineteenth-century heyday, the people who painstakingly created these elegant objects of communal pastime and relaxation are still with us through the stamps that link each fragment to its maker — George Deakin, Griffith Powell, Noah Roden, Richard Legge, Edwin Southorn, William Southorn, Mary Southorn to name but a few— vanished artisans of an almost-forgotten artform, yet still present with us to this day.