

THE LOCAL BRICK INDUSTRY

The "Northam" Brick Company's plant at Eye has a model situation absolutely adjacent the M. and G.N. Railway's line, and within a stone's throw of the Station. It has, further, the additional facility of being practically the only brickyard served by that Railway in this district, and therefore, possesses a great advantage in being able to transport their substantial commodity to their different markets without delay.

In many respects this Company are exceptionally fortunate. They possess about seventy acres of the adjacent land, the top soil of which, about 5ft. in depth, covering the valuable clay deposits, is principally composed of a very fine gravel, which finds a ready market, and every ton of which is saleable. The immediate top soil is carted straight away and utilised by the Railway Company for the construction of their new double line to Lynn.

Ald. T. L. Barrett, of Peterborough, is Chairman of the Company, and takes an active interest in the development. Mr. C. Dack, Mr. Heath, and Mr. J. W. Buckle are also associated with the venture, which has been actively afoot for over eighteen months. The clay deposit, which extends to a tremendous depth, is a very valuable and practically inexhaustible one, and consists of two distinct qualities of shale, one not essentially differing from the common Fletton "knots," except, perhaps, that it is a little harder, whilst the other produces a very good brick of a respectable white colour.

The working manager at the yard is Mr. J. Jones, a gentleman of very wide experience in brick manufacture. He can claim to have been associated with the earlier efforts of brickmakers in the district, having, in 1881, been employed by the then firm of Messrs. Barrett and Hardy, at Fletton.

The firm is at present young, and is experimenting as to the best way of treating the clay at their disposal. They are making white facing bricks by the semi-dry and plastic methods, and also the commoner variety, which they call "mingles." They do not dig clay there which is plastic in its original state, but it is "pugged," and ground, and watered, until a very fair state of "plasticity" is attained. They are now turning out splendid bricks, better than which none are manufactured in the district, and week by week they are finding out methods of improvement in production. Every different clay requires different treatment. The Fletton clay is nearly all of one description, and the same method is used universally in that district. At Eye, at

present, although a very valuable brick is made, yet they are confident that they will hit upon a speciality.

They have already carted one innovation, as far as the district is concerned, viz., the Mettle-Lien of a Belgian Kiln, the result of which has simply justified the experiment, especially in the production of facing bricks. The essential difference between the Belgian Kiln and the Hoffman Kiln is that the former is fired from the bottom, whilst the latter is fired from the top, on the down-draught principle. The consequence is that the coal and carbonaceous dust does not become fused into the brick skin and so crust the face or spoil the whiteness. The period of burning is about the same as with the ordinary kilns.

So keen is the demand for bricks that it is impossible to meet it. Additional kilns are in course of construction, and the capacity of the eight brick presses is taxed to the utmost during the day although night work is dispensed with. They employ about 100 hands. They have attained a depth of over 50 feet already, although in a small area, so the value of the clay, if only from an inexhaustible point of view, may be imagined. They are just executing a huge order for a Waterworks Company, and every brick that is not absolutely perfect is cast aside for home construction purposes.

The noticeable characteristic about the plant is the thoroughness in workmanship everywhere evident. The machinery has been fitted with careful attention to detail, and is driven by a splendid double slow speed steam engine, well governed, with a huge fly-wheel, 55ft. in circumference, which makes the revolutions very regular. The main shaft is driven from the fly-wheel by about eight 1½in. cotton ropes running in grooves. A machine shop is being fitted up with planing and drilling machines, lathes, &c., and a black-smith's forge, so that a breakdown may be readily repaired. The engineer in charge of the main engines is in electric communication with every machine, so that if an accident of any kind occurs he knows instantly, and closes his stop valve.

Space this week will not allow of further details of this most interesting yard, but later, with permission, we hope to be able to mention a few facts which we have not touched upon in this short notice.