

The Clayminer – man of steel

One of the reasons why the steel industry flourished in South Yorkshire was the easy availability of a key component in the manufacturing method – clay.

For over a hundred years, clay mining played a significant part in making the Loxley Valley what it is today, both physically and culturally. At its peak, the enterprise employed about 1000 men but – like many traditional industries, especially those dependant o coal, iron or steel – those days are long gone.

The ‘gannister’ (a type of clay especially important for high temperature steel working) was dug out of the ground in the villages and hamlets surrounding the Loxley Valley, and was of exactly the right grade to allow the development of the Bessemer process – one of the most important developments in the history of steel-making.

Unlike coal mining, digging for clay – whilst undoubtedly hard work – was not particularly dangerous, and was more akin to open cast or drift mining than deep shaft. And because there was no threat of explosions, miners worked with a lighted candle on the end of their caps!

Not all the clay was used locally; some after being taken by horse and wagon to the Wicker Railway Station (alas long since closed), found its way to other towns all over the country.

Nowadays, there is no clay mining to speak of in the area, the steel industry having declined dramatically over the last 20 years.

Both the clay miners have left their mark. Famous manufacturing names that developed in the Loxley valley are still going strong – names like Thomas W Wragg, Thomas W Marshall, Siddons Bros., Drabbles, Goslingsand JJ Dyson (which still produces a tiny amount of clay for the steel works).

The next time you catch a Rural Links bus in order to treat yourself to a pleasant ramble around the delightful countryside, keep your eyes open for the defunct entrances to the old mines. Just make sure you don't fall down one!