

# A History of the Chase Hotel, Higham Lane, Nuneaton

By Peter Lee



Talk to the old miners and brickyard workers of Nuneaton, or miners and brickyard workers sons, or their grandsons, about old Melly, Povey Harper, The Hickmans or the Knox's, The Fielding Johnsons, the Phillips, etc. etc. and one often gets back from them a sort of grudging respect. These were hard bosses but they were fair with the men they employed.

Haunchwood Brick & Tile Co. Ltd. principle directors were the Knox family who originally came from Scotland. The Knox's were a very distinguished dynasty of railway and civil engineers. Thomas Knox (1816- ?) lived in St. Andrews,

Fife. He married Janet Meldrum (1826- ?) of Scourie in 1847. He became Chief Engineer to Sir James Brunlees (1816-1892), a well known consulting engineer on some of the early railways in Scotland and abroad. Thomas Knox was given the responsibility for designing Leven Docks and was later resident engineer on the Edinburgh, Perth and Dundee Railway. He travelled to Argentina where he estimated for a contract for their early railway system.

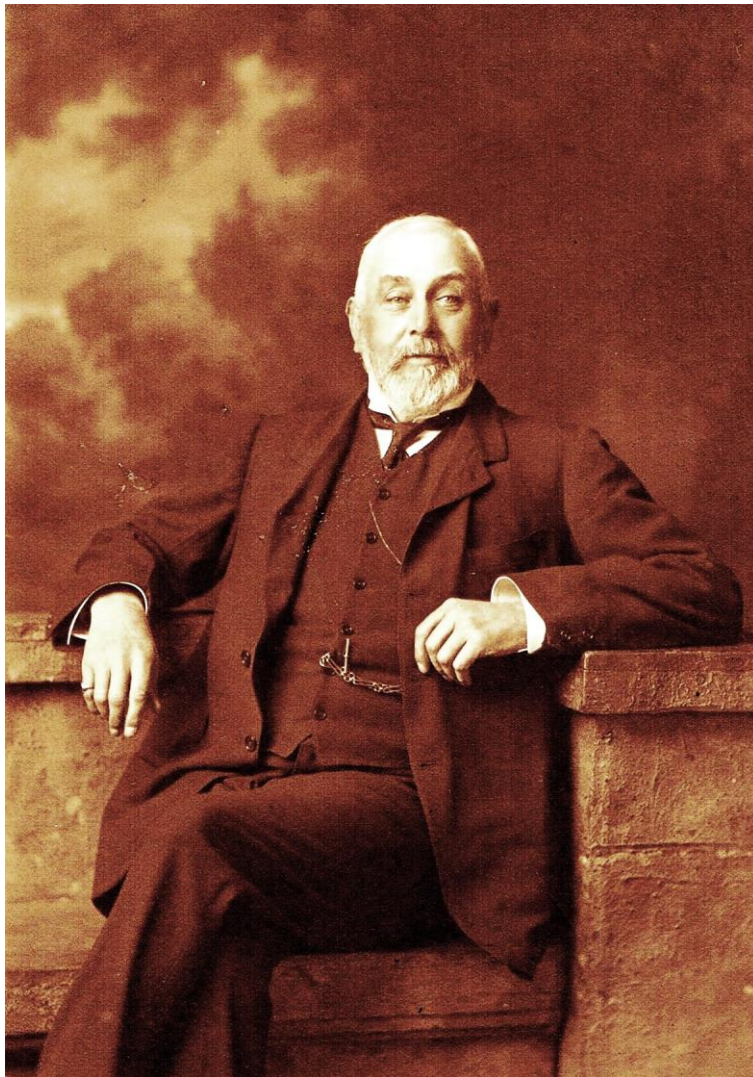
Thomas Knox had two sons, Andrew (b. 1848) and James. Andrew went to Australia where he became a sheep farmer. James went into civil engineering like his father. He was resident engineer on the first railway in Hungary, and later, closer to home on the Banbury and Cheltenham Railway. The resident engineer had the job of ensuring that as these railways were built that they conformed to the necessary standards of construction, that the builder had complied with the drawings and layout of the line, and

used the proper materials, which were in accordance with the specification laid down. It was an arduous and complex job. It gave him a good insight into what was needed to be a good brick manufacturer.

During his tenure on construction of the Banbury to Cheltenham Railway, he met with the girl who would later be his wife, Florence Elizabeth Sadler. (1852- ) She was the daughter of a former Mayor of Oxford.

Sometime during the mid 1860s, some time after the opening of the Nuneaton to Whitacre junction branch of the Midland Railway in 1864, James Knox was passing through the newly excavated cutting near Stockingford station, still bare from the fresh excavation, on a train. He noticed exposed in the side of the new cutting, a seam of Etruria marl clay. As a young civil engineer he would have been familiar with the types of clay found in railway construction. Everywhere new lines were built, there were set up brick kilns to make best use of building clays for the bricks for bridges and culverts, stations and the buildings along the route. He returned to Stockingford shortly afterwards to investigate and found at that time a number of brickworks which were in production making high quality blue, brindle and red engineering bricks.

It is not clear whether he started Haunchwood Brick & Tile from scratch or took over an existing works. It is thought initially the company mined the clay through a shaft, similar to a coal shaft; or it might have been an existing coal shaft that was used. This was subsequently abandoned and a new clayhole opened adjacent to the brickyard.



**James Knox (1849-1931)**

After the formation of the initial private partnership was made the business was incorporated and a limited liability company under the style: The Haunchwood Brick Co. Ltd was formed on 11th. May 1878. The firm had previously been carried on by partners: George Fowler, William Maltby, John Walter Fowler and James Knox.

The new company took over the leasehold of the former partnership, and leased sidings from the Midland Railway Company and Mr. John Nowell, the proprietor of the Haunchwood Colliery whose premises were next door to the brickworks. It had a share capital of £20,000 in 400 shares of £50 each made up as follows:

*George Fowler, Cinderhill, Nottingham; Civil and mining engineer. 69 shares.*

*William Maltby, Old Basford, Nottingham; Surgeon. 61 shares.*

*James Knox, Attleborough, Nuneaton; Civil Engineer. 32 shares.*

*Robert Walker Smith, Waverley Street, Nottingham. 24 shares.*

*Charles Bennett, Woodborough, Nottingham. Brickmaker. 10 shares.*

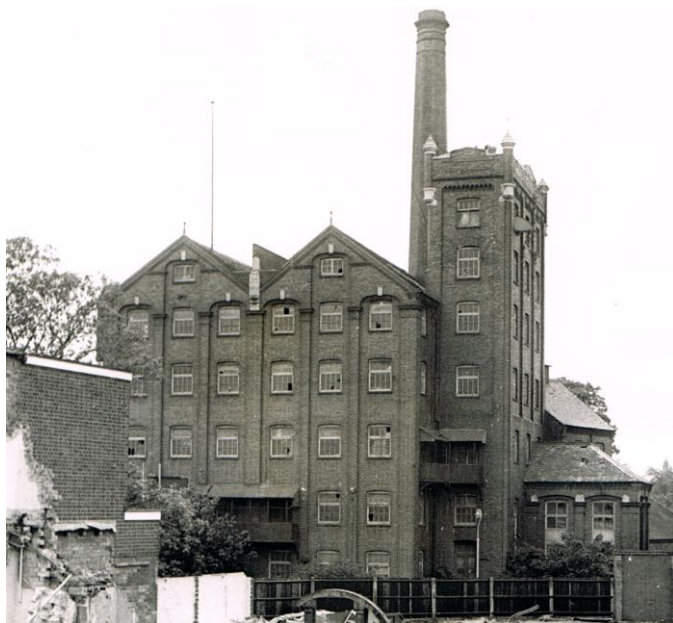
*Richard Bush Spencer, Old Basford, Nottingham. 10 shares.*

*Herbert Walker, Old Basford, Nottingham, Civil Engineer and Surveyor. 10 shares.*

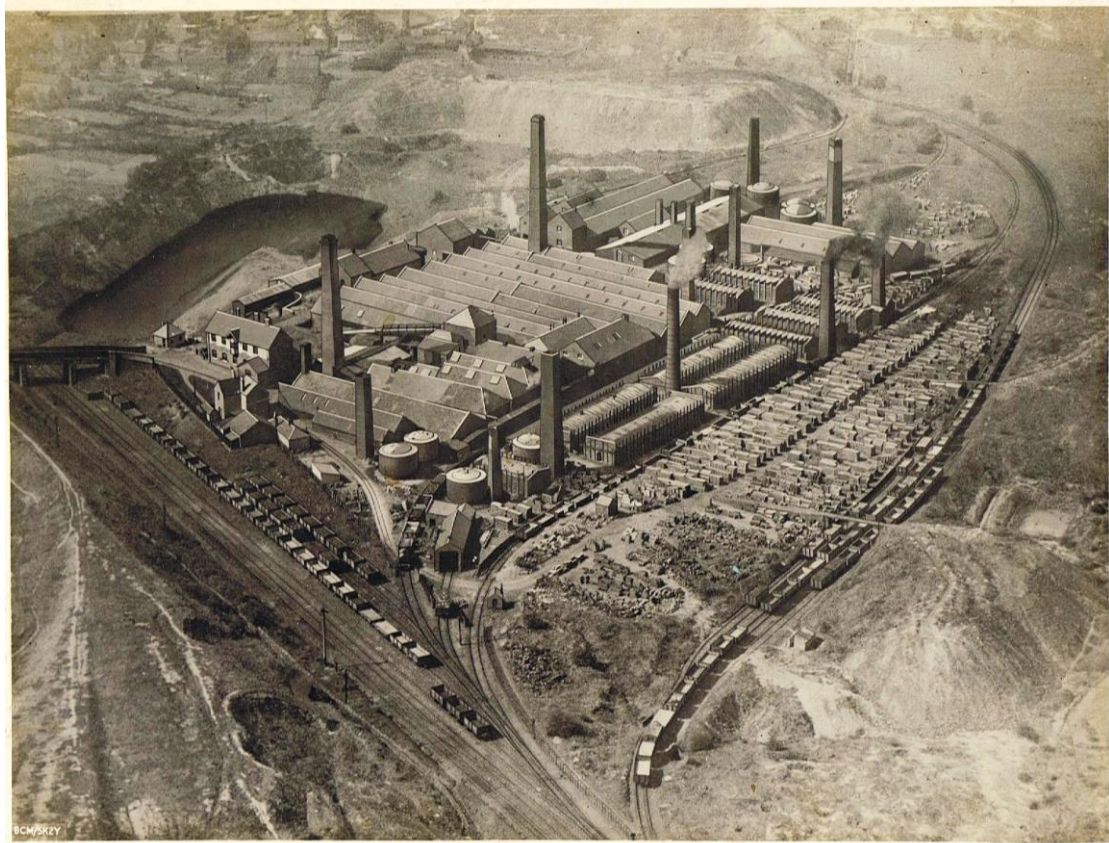
The new company entitled: Haunchwood Brick Co. under the steady guidance of Mr. James Knox, continued to consolidate and to produce some of the very finest clay products to rival those from any other producer in Great Britain or overseas. A vast range of products were manufactured. Haunchwood Blue bricks were made from Etruria Marl. They were amongst the hardest and densest water resistant bricks manufactured in England. They were marketed as having high compressive strength, low water absorption, resistance against attack in acidic or alkaline conditions and resistance to abrasion. The new flour mill in Nuneaton erected in 1885 was one of the finest local structures featuring Haunchwood Blues. In addition to standard shaped bricks, special brick shapes were made such as bullnose, coping bricks, header and stretcher plinths, cants, squints, culvert arch, channels and kerbs.

Paviors were made in standard square and diamond patterns, hexagonal and square panelled.

In addition to blue bricks they made facing bricks such as blue brindles, brown brindles and Class B engineering for shafts and drainage channels etc. They made a wide variety of other clayware, salt glazed pipes for drainage and sewage, path edgings, chimney pots in a bewildering array of shapes and patterns. Flue linings and briquettes for fire places. Another well known product made at Haunchwood were "Rosemary" roof tiles and finials. (Which are still being made today in Bedworth).



**Nuneaton flour mill was entirely built from Haunchwood blue bricks. It was a magnificent structure and dominated the centre of Nuneaton. Here it is seen before demolition in 1972. (Geoff Edmands Collection)**



**An aerial view of Haunchwood Brick & Tile Nr. 1 works in the mid 1920's. Clay holes can be seen to the left, and above the bridge which carried the road to the main office block. The slag heap above the works was the pit tip of Haunchwood Old or (Nowells) Colliery which dated back to 1732. The sidings in the foreground were classified at one time as Nowells sidings. On the right are the stacking yards full of terracotta products awaiting a customer, and to the right of that the branch line which went up to the colliery. (Haunchwood Brick & Tile Collection / Geoff Edmands)**

Eventually there were three Haunchwood Brick & Tile Company yards in the Nuneaton area. No. 1 yard at Stockingford specialised in blue, brindled and hard red bricks, grey bricks and paviers, briquettes etc. chimney pots and flue linings etc.

At No. 2 yard situated at Heath End, the company made red facing bricks, common red bricks and red flooring quarry tiles. No. 3 yard was in Bermuda Road. At No. 3 yard salt glazed stoneware pipes and fittings were manufactured. Years ago these glazed pipes came in a large range of sizes and types of fittings. They were made impervious to the penetration of water by adding salt in large quantities during the firing process. I think I am right in saying that this type of pipe is no longer produced. Anti pollution laws might have stopped this type of coating being applied. Socket and spigot pipes have been largely replaced by clay pipes with a plastic sleeve joint, or in many cases nowadays by plastics. The Salt Union company supplied Haunchwood with the glazing materials. You could often see their wagons parked in the brick company sidings up until the Second World War.



**James Meldrum Knox D.S.O. & Bar (1878-1918). Photographed here in his uniform as captain of the Nuneaton Fire Brigade. There is a fine oil painting of him in Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery as well.**

James Knox became the proud father of nine sons. All of whom went on to good careers, and held their head high amongst Nuneaton folk. The eldest was Colonel James Meldrum Knox D.S.O. and Bar. He served in the Boer War. He trained, like his father as a civil engineer and worked on Bristol Docks. He later returned to Nuneaton and became Captain of the Nuneaton Volunteer Company of the 7th. Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and there he rose to the rank of Colonel. He was awarded the D.S.O. and bar and was mentioned five times in despatches. He volunteered for service during World War One. He commanded the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regt. He was killed in Italy at the Asiago plateau when a shell hit his headquarters camp on the San Sisto Road on 23rd September 1918, and there is a memorial to him at the Granezza British Cemetary. At the time his men remembered how well liked he was. A portrait of him is in the Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery.

**CECIL LEONARD KNOX. V.C. (1889-1943)**



We have read recently about Haunchwood Brick & Tile Co Ltd, and the Knox family. The son of James Knox (along with eight other brothers), Cecil Knox was born on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1889. He resided at "The Chase", Higham Road, Nuneaton, which to quote Peter Lee, (who knows about such things), "was the perfect advert for Haunchwood Brick & Tile products". He was educated at Oundle School, (motto: "God Grant Grace"), as a boarder, which specialised in science and engineering. After schooling he was articled to a firm of electrical engineers in Birmingham.

Cecil trained at the RE depot Chatham, which is still in use today and also contains the stunning RE museum. He was appointed as a "Temporary" (a term used for all WW1 non regular officers) Second Lieutenant. Posted to Bhurtpore barracks Tidworth yet another fine Victorian edifice, also occupied by the British army in 2012; for further training. Then onto Northern Ireland, usually then called Ulster. Where he was posted to 150 Field Company RE, who were a constituent part of the famed 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division. This was formed from Carson's Ulster Volunteer Force, almost entirely of Protestants who opposed Home Rule. They became a division in Kitchener's "New Armies", and adopted as the divisional sign The "Red Hand" of Ulster.

Moving via Sussex they arrived in France between 3-6 October 1915. They were committed from the first day of the Somme offensive, and the division in their attempt to reach Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt suffered some 5500 men killed wounded and missing in just a few hours! This attack is still revered in Northern Ireland today, especially by Orange Lodges. The striking memorial to the "Missing of the Somme", designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, is now situated at Thiepval, where are the names of **73367 soldiers** who died in 1916-17, and have **no** known graves! Close by is the Ulster Tower, that commemorates both the Irish of the Battle of the Somme and to all Ulstermen who died in the Great War. This structure is an exact replica of the memorial to Helen, mother of the Marquis of Dufferin, in the family park at Clunboye, Co Down; where the division trained before moving to France.

*"Helen's Tower here I stand  
Dominant over sea and land  
Son's love built me I hold  
Ulster's love built in lettered gold"  
(Alfred Lord Tennyson.)*

In the grounds of the tower stands a plaque to honour the nine VC winners from the 36<sup>th</sup> division. Including of course Cecil Knox.

Incidentally news of other Knox brothers: Andrew Ronald Knox who served in the RE was killed by a sniper at La Boisselle on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1915. Thomas Kenneth Knox also served with the RE in the Ulster Division and was awarded the MC and bar.

Following action on the Somme, Messines and Cambrai early in 1918 the 36 division was situated in the front line centred on Aisne, opposite St Quentin, France. Cecil Knox then a 29 year old officer was tasked with the demolition of 12 bridges. On 22nd March 1918 at Tugny, near Aisne. He successfully carried out this task, but in the case of one steel girder bridge the time fuse failed to act. Without a moments hesitation he ran to the bridge under heavy enemy fire, and when the enemy were actually on it, he tore away the time fuse and lit the instantaneous fuse, to do which he had to clamber under the bridge. As a practical civil engineer 2Lt Knox undoubtedly fully realised the grave risk he took in doing this. In spite of his close proximity to the blast he suffered only minor injuries; it did however affect his hearing for the rest of his life. The VC was listed in the London Gazette on 4th June 1918, and was presented to him by King George V.

He was made a Freeman of the Borough of Nuneaton, and became a director of Haunchwood Brick & Tile Co Ltd.

Between the wars he joined the Royal Auxiliary Air Force and suffered from a rather serious parachute accident. In 1940 he joined the Home Guard and was appointed Major commanding the Nuneaton Company. He was sadly killed on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1943, aged 53. It was reported that he lost control of his motor cycle on ice at Tuttle Hill. He is buried at Gilroes cemetery, Leicester. The whereabouts of his VC are not known, the register states: "not in the public domain".

Situated in Nuneaton are *two crescents*: Cecil Leonard Knox Crescent, in Bramcote, off the Lutterworth Road, and also Knox Crescent, off the Higham Road, so maintaining the family name in perpetuity.

*Amongst the other sons were:*



**Edwin (Teddy) Charles Knox (1879-1977)**

The next son was Edwin Charles Knox born in May 1879. He went to Bedford Modern School where he gained his colours for cricket, rowing and rugby. He trained as a mining engineer at Cinderhill Colliery, near Nottingham. He was placed in charge of the sinking of Arley Colliery which commenced in 1901 and was completed by 1902. He then became manager of that colliery, which he successfully ran until it was nationalised. He was responsible for the construction of Arley Colliery village, pithead baths and welfare hall which were paid for out of the coal mine profits. Edwin Charles lived to the advanced age of 98 and died on 14th July 1977.

Alexander Knox was born on 3rd December 1880 and became a mariner. He trained at sea in "Maquarie", a sailing ship. He was first officer on Gulf Transport Ships, before becoming a Captain of a Lamport Holt Liner. On the outbreak of WW1, being in the R.N.V.R. he joined the Royal Navy. His ship hit a mine and was sunk off Gibraltar. He survived the sinking and later died on 29th July 1952.

Thomas Kenneth Knox was born 14th February 1884 and went to Bedford Modern School. He trained as a coal mining engineer at Cinderhill Colliery, Nottingham before he went to Canada as assistant manager to Crows Nest Colliery in the Rockies. He then went on to become a resident engineer on the construction of the Canadian Northern Railway through the Rockies. In 1914 he returned home to serve in the Royal Engineers, Ulster Division and was awarded the M.C. and bar. Later he became Managing Director of Haunchwood Brick & Tile Co. and G.W. Lewis Tileries, subsequently he was Chairman of both companies. He died on 29th August 1968.

John Douglas Knox was born on 6th August 1885. He travelled to Malaya where he was with the Bertram Rubber Co. becoming General Manager of this and other colonial companies locally. On return to England he became a director of several rubber companies and was last known to be living in retirement in Hampshire.

Archibald Septimus Knox F.Inst.C.E. M.I.E. (Ind.) Born 15th September 1887 and educated at Oundle, He began his training as a civil engineer in 1910. When WWI broke out was a consultant water engineer in charge of a water drilling department for the government. Was refused permission to join the army because of being considered being more useful to provide water for the very large expansion of the Indian Army, He subsequently joined a volunteer unit - the Cawnpore Artillery and was transferred to the United Provinces Light Horse Artillery. In all he spent 20 years in India, Burma and Assam; moving from the government public works department to Managing Directorships of two engineering contractors which designed and built mills, factories, water supply installations and the electricity generating station at Cawnpore. Mr. Knox was also responsible for much of the steel and concrete work for these contracts. Some other contracts undertaken by Archibald were water supply schemes for the Assam government, railway work in Burma, Madras Central Provinces and Northern India including the construction of large bridges. On return to England became rural district councillor for Meriden R.D.C., magistrate and during W.W.2 was put in charge of air raid precautions for 24 parishes between Birmingham and Coventry. He was a director of Haunchwood Brick & Tile and G.W.Lewis Tileries until 1960. He retired and was last known to be living at a house appropriately called 'Rosemary' in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire in 1978, in his 90th. year.

The Chase Hotel is a well known and much loved hostelry, restaurant and hotel in Higham Lane. It was originally built as a home for James Knox and his large family in the year 1899. The house had 25 acres of gardens. When James Knox first moved to Nuneaton he lived at Dugdale Villa, in Attleborough Road. By 1896 he was living at "Rosleigh" a house on Hinckley Road close to Higham Lane. He had the Chase built using his finest bricks and fittings and the building stands as a showcase for Haunchwood Brick & Tile company's products.

In 1936 the Chase was occupied by Florence Knox, James's widow.

After her death the Chase was sold to Ansell's Brewery (predecessors of Ind Coope) for £2500 in 1939. During the war years the Prudential Assurance Company rented it as an office so they could relocate their commercial activities away from cities likely to be bombed. After the war the building was altered into a hotel and restaurant. By January 1972 a new 28 bedroom block had been built at a cost of £120,000, together with a new restaurant, bar, and seating area. The restaurant could accommodate 110-120 people.

Acknowledgments for help with this article and for the supply of photographs and much research to: Geoff Edmands, Madge Edmands, Ernie Richardson, Beryl Kerby, Kenneth Knox (grandson) Reg. Rowley, Jim Gordon, Michael J Lee, and Ron Hartill



