

Charles Hodgson's Briquette Factory

Derrylea 1860-'67

By: T.A. Barry

The flood-plain of the Rivers Cushina and Figile, tributaries of the Barrow and only three to four miles from Monasterevin as the crow flies, is a remote and lonely countryside, even to-day.

In the spring of 1975, only a few scattered stones and a suggestion of long wall bases hidden beneath the grass, bushes and briars were the only remnants of a busy factory built one hundred years ago. Its raw material source was the great bog of Derrylea close by, where three counties meet. It was Charles Hodgson's peat briquetting "manufactory" of 1860 — one of the first in the world. Perhaps the first in respect of certain mechanical refinements of its briquetting presses.

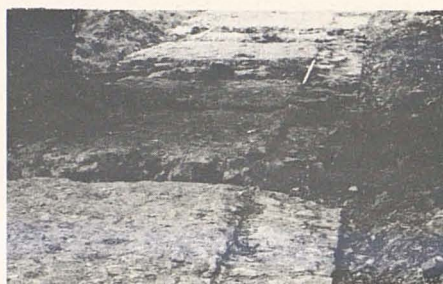
Hodgson's briquettes, discs 4 inches across and 1 1/8 inches thick precisely, were extruded from a press much as to-day and conveyed by water and rail via Monasterevin to Dublin and elsewhere.

His method of milling peat on the bog was similar to ours. The "mull" as he called it, was scarified by harrowing on the surface and re-harrowing until it reached about 60% moisture content. Then it was brought to the factory and dried further down to about 12% moisture, in drying kilns 250 feet long or more, being raked continuously as it passed along two floors at different levels, in an atmosphere heated by steam, hot gases and smoke from the factory boiler and furnaces — a good example of what is referred to to-day as Optimal Energy Usage.

Hodgson had his own works foundry where replacements for all factory and bog-machine parts were made, the iron smelted from bog iron ore in a furnace fired by charcoal from peat briquettes; his own gas lighting from a mixture of

1/3 coal and 2/3 peat; and his own housing scheme for supervisory staff and workers. It is on record that there were 200 men and boys at work in 1864.

He was a good employer, popular with his workers. He provided for them shops, including a shebeen, at their villate in the wilderness. He arranged a special train to take them to Mass at Monasterevin on Sundays.



Engine-room floor, possibly including press floors, brought to light in 1975.

There were local ballads about all this and here is a verse from one of them:

"The first man I met was the Head Engineer and he said 'my bold fellow, now never you fear. Work hard night and day, Both jovial and free, And we'll get up the peat works in sweet Derrylea.' "



Remnant of one of the brick walls of the drying Kilns.

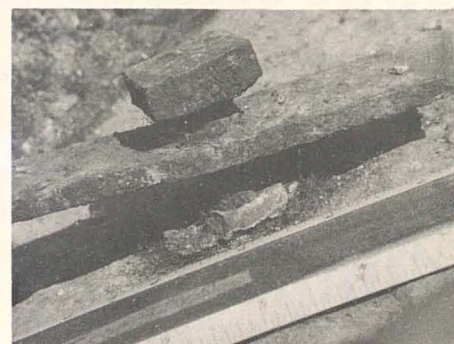
Like so many other pioneers proceeding without State support or subsidy, Charles Hodgson's grand plans and early mastery of peat technology came to nothing in the long run. His business collapsed when the price of his peat briquettes, delivered in Dublin, rose a few pence per ton above that of British coal.

Those are the bare bones of the Derrylea chapter of the Charles Hodgson story. How much remains unwritten, how much unknown. Of his personal grief at the collapse of his industry; of the distress of his Offaly-Laois-Kildare work force; of the lamentations of their dependents —

there is no record. For them it was the substitution, once more, of despair for hope, of the emigrant ship for work and security at home.

Very little is known regarding the method of disposal of his plant and machinery. On the ground, the picture is one of demolition and devastation. To-day, Bord na Mona staff dig (in more than one sense) for further detailed evidence of Charles Hodgson's brilliant engineering.

Whatever remains deserves to be preserved as part of the national heritage.

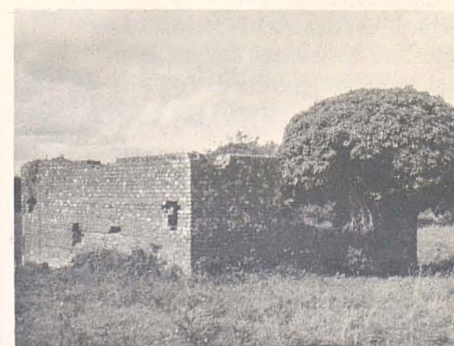


Attachment for drying Kiln rake.

Sources and Acknowledgements

1. On the Manufacture of Compressed Peat Fuel, by Chas. Hodgson, 1865, Proc.Inst.Mech.Eng. 1st Dublin Summer Meeting.
2. Bog Reclamation and Peat Development in the County Kildare, by John Cooke, 1970, JnrI.Co. Kild. Archaeol. Soc. XIV No. 5.

Thanks also to the County Kildare Archaeological Society for permission to reprint a verse of the ballad "Sweet Derrylea" from John Cooke's paper which is a detailed history of early efforts at bog and peat development, both agricultural and industrial.



Walls of the Works Foundry.



Hodgson's Briquette Factory. The site before excavation.