

# Digging Up Bricks

*By Barrie Woods*

Anecdotally, locals sometimes dig up stray bricks in their yards that are marked with the letters "R S". Similar bricks are found in local buildings and structures from the early days of the Heathcote area, so we decided to find out about their origins.



The story of the 'R S' bricks begins with a fellow by the name of William ('Brickie') Holmes and the Banks Brothers (Alfred, Edward and Henry) who set up a brick making enterprise to supply bricks for the Heathcote portal of the new railway tunnel in 1861. To meet the demand for bricks (1.5 million of them) they installed the first brickmaking machine in Canterbury.

Alfred Lee Smith owned a substantial block of land in Heathcote Valley and in 1871 he purchased the brickyard, naming it the Wincolmlee Brick Kilns. He also established the Wincolmlee Malt Kilns on the same site. The Wilcomlee kilns were located in the area that would eventually become the malt works.

In 1874, Alfred Lee Smith decided to sell much of his land by establishing a new township in Heathcote Valley to be called St Kilda. The sections were in the area of Station Road, Flavell, Marsden and Rollin Streets. A year later he sold the brick and malt kilns to Royse, Stead & Co, and moved to Dunedin.

As part of the sale agreement Smith took up a stake in Royse, Stead & Co. He also had an ongoing business relationship with William Royse and together they purchased Donaghy's Rope and Twine, a company that continues to this day.

Royse, Stead & Co. was established by William Royse and George C Stead who originally set up as grain merchants, with premises on Cashel Street. George Stead arrived at Lyttelton in August 1866 and took up

work with the Union Bank of Australia. William Royse arrived in Dunedin in 1861 and was involved in shipping and trading, but by 1868 was bankrupted. He moved to Australia for a short time then came back to New Zealand to reside in Christchurch.

Royse, Stead & Co took advantage of a boom period in the 1870s, largely brought about by public borrowing for investment in immigration, land development, and transport links, such as railways and roads. The company built up extensive interests as grain traders, shipping agents, brick makers, maltsters, and property developers, among other activities.

Under the ownership of Royse & Stead, the brickworks at Heathcote Valley expanded and became a major producer of bricks. With the growth of Christchurch City nearby, there was a ready market for bricks. A number of brickmakers also set up in business during this time.

Brick makers have a long history of stamping their bricks with their 'mark'. Such marks are useful to archaeologists in determining where and when bricks were made and where they were transported to, sometimes across the world.

The Wincolmlee brick works, under the new ownership of Royse, Stead & Co began marking their bricks with the letters 'R S'. These are commonly found in the Heathcote and Ferrymead areas, but also in other parts of Christchurch. Royse & Stead bricks are found much further afield too. Shipping records show they were shipped to the West Coast for a period of at least eight years, and they have turned up in Hokitika, Greymouth and the Buller districts.

The brickworks was sold to Wigram Brothers brick makers in 1886, and from that time the mark was changed to a 'W'. Bricks were made at the Heathcote site until 1903 when Wigram Brothers merged with T. N. Horsley to form the Christchurch Brick and Tile Company. The Canterbury Seed Co bought the malt-houses in 1906 and at one time supplied all the malt for New Zealand's brewing requirements.