

Historians' meeting 31 January 2025

The Armitage Potbank

At the meeting on 31 January, Historians welcomed Richard Ewing who came to talk about "The Armitage Potbank". He started by asking how many people remembered 'avocado' bathroom suites – most people did and one or two may still have examples in their house! Richard had grown up in Handsacre and Armitage and worked for a short time at the Armitage Ware factory.

Richard's presentation started with a photo of the bottle kilns in Armitage in 1947, but the site was in use many years before this with a brewery in 1809 and an earthenware pottery in 1819. Thomas Bond was one of the early owners, but he had mixed fortunes, spending time in a debtors' prison and being declared bankrupt two years later; however, he developed the Armitage pottery next to the brewery and built workers' cottages and 3 piggeries there, later building two brickworks.

In the mid-1850s (after the railway line was opened) two potteries were set up, specialising in sanitary ware. The potteries were later bought by the Rev. Edward Johns, a non-Conformist minister who at the age of 29 had married a wealthy widow aged 57. He obtained a loan from Josiah Spode to buy the works and ran the business for over 20 years.

The Rev. Johns' son sold the pottery to Alfred and Edmund Corn in 1900. They revitalised the business during the Edwardian era and Edmund continued to run the business for many decades, joined by three nephews, Geoff Corn and Ken and Alan Stott. The first coloured sanitary ware in the world was introduced (including Mottled Armitage Green) in the 1920s. After the 2nd World War, the company started to use tunnel rather than bottle kilns and vitreous rather than earthenware china was made. In 1960 the company name was changed from Edward Johns to Armitage Ware and by now the company was exporting all over the world with 1000 employees in 5 locations, including Australia. They joined with the Shanks company in 1969, then the Armitage Shanks company was taken over by Blue Circle in 1980 by which time there were 1000 employees on the Armitage site alone and over 2500 worldwide. There was a further take-over in 1998 by Ideal Standard, which was itself taken over in 2024 by a German company, Villeroy & Boch.

It was a fascinating talk by Richard, covering the people, businesses and life in Armitage.