

1861

My name is John Cullis I am 84 years old and live in Cook Street Chippenham¹. I was the owner of a brick company for over 40 years. My brickyard was over at Pewsham, what they call Forest Brickyard, but people called it Cullis's yard². It was a good business and made me quite wealthy³.

Ten years ago or more I passed the business on to my sons. I decided I was getting too old and I didn't have the strength to be out at the yard in all weathers, I had saved enough money to live on⁴.

I had invested quite well, Mr Gaby⁵, gave me some good advice a few years ago.

When Mr Whitworth⁶ was building the waterway he said there was good brick clay in the area so he opened brick making yards next to the canal, for building locks and bridges. Forest brickyard was one of those yards, did you know that most of the bricks for Stanley aqueduct came from "Forest"?

When the canal was built, they kept "Forest" going, maybe because it was good clay and it was easy to dig.

A few years later I made an agreement with the Canal Company that I could make bricks at Forest. The Canal Company came to me and we made a contract that I would make bricks for them. They needed thousands of bricks⁷, they were regularly repairing locks and bridges, I could hardly keep up. The Canal Company was my main contract.

My sons came to work with me and when they were old enough their sons came to learn the brickmaking trade, it was a real family business, and was doing very well.

When I handed the business on to my sons we all thought it would go on for ever. We never thought the Canal Company would get into such difficulties.

It was the railway that did it for them; they took all the work from the canal so the Canal Company didn't have the money to maintain the canal. They say there are some bridges that haven't been repaired for so long they are dangerous to use.

With no orders for bricks from the Canal Company I saw the business failing. I am glad I wasn't concerned with the brickyard, I would have lost all my money. I do feel responsible though, my sons have really suffered, they have lost everything they worked for.

My son William was taken to the County Court as an insolvent debtor⁸. The business is gone. Some of the family have moved away, to London to make bricks there. Others have gone down to Cornwall to work in the china clay pits.

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¹ Today part of St Mary's Street.

² The Canal toll registers refer to boats collecting bricks from Cullis's yard.

³ Devizes and Wilts Gazette 2 September 1837 reported on a break in at John Cullis's house, where there was a considerable amount of cash and plate.

⁴ 1861 Census shows John Cullis, Widower, Retired Brickmaker.

⁵ Ralph Hale Gaby, solicitor, banker, and shareholder in the W&B. Pure speculation that they knew each other but Gaby was involved in many money making schemes looking for investors.

⁶ William Whitworth the canal engineer.

⁷ Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre 2424/33 Wilts and Berks Disbursements Ledger

⁸ London Gazette 13 May 1853