

Memories of Doulton Insulators

I worked at Doulton's from 1963 for around ten years as a fork-lift truck driver in the warehouse. Doulton's made insulators which were used all over the country, for such as those in power stations and for telegraph poles. They also made the insulators for the London Underground, the ones that supported the middle live rail and those used for the west coast mainline overhead powerlines.

Click on the pictures below for more about insulators.



Doulton's third rail insulator pot



West coast mainline overhead line to gantry interface

As the insulators required special properties, they could not be made from local clay. Some of the raw materials used included china clay from Cornwall, blue clay from Dorset and feldspar from Scandinavia. Once the insulators were formed, they were placed on carts and moved through a kiln on trolleys which were powered by a hydraulic ram. The insulators used to take two to three days to fire. If any of the insulators fell during firing, this sometimes led to jams in the carts and it was difficult to get them out. The first carts could be winched out but those deeper in were a problem, due to limited access and the heat. I was told that once there was a particularly bad jam and they had to get someone from the army, based at the local barracks, to shoot at the insulators to free the blockage.

I remember a building known as the “HV lab” (High Voltage Laboratory). This was around five stories high and was where they tested the properties of the insulators using high voltage. When tests were being conducted, it was like lightening striking and used to shake the building. The electricity passed between two steel balls. The insulators were also tested for pressure and strength.

If any of the insulators broke during assembly, they splintered creating sharp shards like glass. One of the hazards of working there was cuts to the hands and arms. A full time nurse was employed on site to deal with these injuries.

Although they mainly made insulators, there were one or two sidelines including decorative lamp bases which were made on mass. I can also remember that when I first started working there in the early 1960s, they made some large storage type vessels but I’m not sure what they were used for.



Doulton's lamp base

To transport the goods away from the works, there was a railway siding which came right into the site and in those days, they were still using steam trains.