

On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 157



12-4-1973

BUCHANAN, A - NEW SCIENTIST
p. 112 PHOTOCOPY "FAVERSHAM
GUNPOWDER WORKS"

ected second chamber must be to allow adequate time for reconsideration where it appears that a government is flouting public opinion and using the Whips to steamroller through a policy unacceptable on a free vote of the Commons. If the Lords does stand fast to the principle of a free service contrary to expectations, the Bill would not be jeopardised but simply delayed a few weeks, thus giving a chance for organisations like the progressive local authorities and the National Council of Women to mobilise pressure on the government.

Sir Keith Joseph says that not only financial considerations were in the mind of the government when it decided to retain charges; it also had to consider the anomaly that would be created if life-saving drugs were issued on a less favourable basis than contraceptives. Perhaps the Lords could take the hint and suggest the abolition of prescription charges altogether; it would be an appropriate recognition of past errors, since they were first introduced in our House some years ago. The great Aneurin Bevan might even give us an ironic smile from above.

Lord Avebury

Industrial heritage

Faversham gunpowder works

A bellicose national government in the age of guns had to look to its supplies of powder and shot. Thus the mercantilist policies of Tudor and Stuart rulers encouraged iron founders to cast cannon balls in the Wealden Forest and elsewhere, and they also took steps to ensure an adequate supply of gunpowder. The three ingredients of gunpowder are sulphur, saltpetre (potassium nitrate), and carbon. The latter was readily available from the charcoal burners of the forests, but the other two ingredients presented more difficult problems. Until mineral sources of nitrates became generally available in the 19th century, saltpetre was usually recovered by an unpleasant process of boiling organic waste collected from stables and latrines by officials, the "saltpetre men", specially empowered to do so. Sulphur was even more difficult to obtain, because the only available source in Western Europe was that from the volcanic deposits in Sicily and Naples, on which an extensive trade was based.

Once gathered together the ingredients had to be mixed and "incorporated" by grinding into an even powder, and this process required great care in order to prevent a premature explosion. Nevertheless, explosions were an occupational hazard of the gunpowder industry, so that steps were taken to minimise the danger by placing the factories as far as was conveniently possible from the main centre of population and by breaking down the process into a number of small units so that an accident in any one would not impede work at the others.



View of the incorporating mill at Chart Gunpowder Mills, Faversham, in course of reconstruction in 1970 (Photo: Kent Messenger)

Following this pattern, several gunpowder factories flourished in the Lake District and other isolated places. But other factors in the location of the industry were the need to be able to import essential raw materials, and the desirability of being well-placed for the market. As the main users were the navy and the army, accessibility to London was a great advantage, and hence the north coast of Kent, with easy access to the naval dockyards at Chatham and the arsenals further up the Thames, became a centre of the industry. In particular, Faversham, with its convenient tidal creek in which the occasional London sailing barge may still be seen, acquired a cluster of gunpowder factories in the fields and marshes around the town.

The gunpowder industry began to decline in the 19th century with the development of the heavy chemical industry and the manufacture of high explosives. Factories were established near Faversham to produce guncotton, "tonite", and other new explosives, but with amalgamation and rationalisation within the industry after World War I, and with the recognition that the accessibility of Faversham from the continent had become a strategic disadvantage, the industry was phased out and production of all explosives in the area came to an end in 1934.

Most of the gunpowder mills around Faversham disappeared, but in 1967 work began on clearing a thickly overgrown area on the edge of the town for a new housing estate, and the Faversham Society undertook an appeal for funds to restore a fragment of the oldest and largest gunpowder factory, the "Home Works". This fragment which had been preserved in the thicket was all that re-

mained of the Chart Mills dating from about 1760, and consisted of a very solidly built brick "blast wall" and the foundations of a series of four incorporating mills arranged in pairs with a water-wheel pit between each pair. With the support of the government and the local authorities it has been possible to preserve and partially restore the site as a monument to the Faversham gunpowder industry. The mill closest to the blast wall has been reconstructed as closely as possible to the original design, with a set of edge-runners turning in a circular pan which it is hoped will eventually be driven by the water wheel currently being restored. It is worth adding that the thicket of varied woodland in which the mill stands is itself a monument to the industry, as most of the trees were deliberately planted to give protection against possible explosions.

The site at Faversham was only just saved, and it is now almost surrounded by new housing, so the venture does credit both to the hard work of the volunteers who have worked on it and to the public bodies and other subscribers who have supported the restoration. The gunpowder mill is probably the oldest such mill surviving in the world. It has been recognised as an industrial monument of national significance which deserves protecting and which has become a valuable local amenity and, hopefully, a tourist attraction. The mill is easily reached on foot from the centre of Faversham, its entrance being on South Road (Grid Reference: TR 009 613). The surviving mill is normally kept locked, but it is open to visitors most summer weekends and holidays, and has a small shop for the sale of literature. Angus Buchanan