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Aerial Photo

South Site

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Times Past

From bomb plant to tourist attraction

By Peter Sherlock

FOR more than 300 years the Royal Gunpowder Mills in Waltham Abbey were used for making explosives.

Today, the expansive site in Beaulieu Drive is open to the public. And, with 21 of its buildings listed by English Heritage, it has become a scheduled ancient

monument.

The Bouncing Bomb, used in the Dambusters raid in 1943, the material Kevlar, used in bulletproof vests, and the propellers used in ejector seat technology were all produced or researched at Waltham Abbey.

The plant's history dates back to 1660 when Samuel Hudson converted an oil mill, situated on the Millhead Stream, to gunpowder production.

From 1702, the Walton

family bought the plant and developed the mills into a major production centre operating on an industrial basis.

The gunpowder produced at Waltham Abbey was used extensively by the military, but also had many domestic functions in mining, tunnelling and road-making.

In the mid-19th century, a glaring deficiency in the UK's arms stocks, and fears of a French invasion led to a huge expansion of the site. To meet the added demand, the mill turned to steam power.

By the 1890s gunpowder had been supplanted by chemically-based materials, and the mills tuned to the production of nitrocellulose, known as guncotton.

During World War I, a labour force of more than 5,000 worked round-the-clock, with production of cordite soaring from 26 to 140 tons.

In the 1930s, the mill conducted hugely significant research into the development of the explosive, TNT, as well as becoming the only plant in the UK to produce vital war-time explosives, tetryl and RDX.

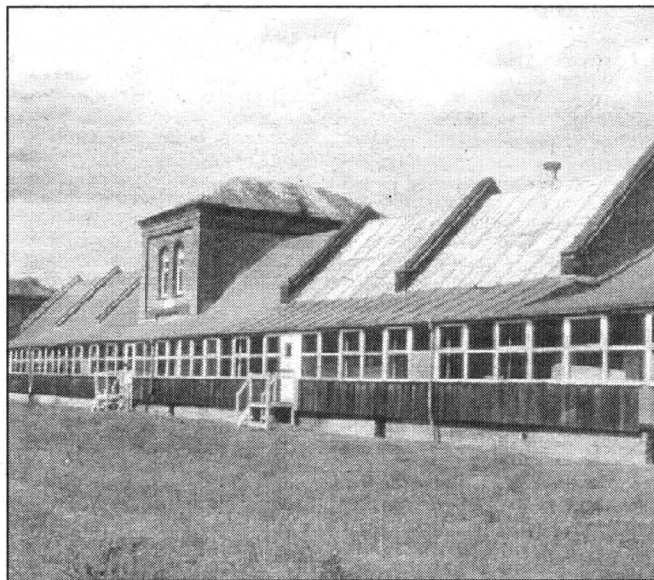
But when war broke out, the factory's close proximity to London made it vulnerable to air attack, and the Government decided to concentrate arms production in the north and west areas of the UK.

In 1940, a parachute mine



An aerial photograph of the south site, constructed during the 1880s. The buildings are widely spaced to prevent fire spreading in the event of an explosion

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The gunpowder mills where ingredients were carefully mixed together

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severely damaged one of the mills, and three years later, the Government ceased production of explosives at Waltham Abbey.

Following the war, the site was used for research into

liquid fuels for rockets and other aspects of rocket propulsion.

The site closed in 1991, but has since been reopened as a tourist attraction. In addition to the historic buildings, there

is a network of canals which transported the explosives around the site, and a number of historic exhibitions.

Visit www.royalgunpowdermills.com for more information.



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