Friends Association
1999 onwards

Beginnings

A former staff member, Norman Paul, voluntarily endeavoured to preserve links with other former staff members as they moved around the various government explosives facilities, mainly by writing a newsletter which he composed at home.

In 1991 the old Waltham Abbey Gunpowder Mills, which from 1945 had been a government explosives research centre, closed and a process began initially renting out the South Site buildings as workshops, later selling, and retaining the original North Site to create a Heritage centre.

Under the leadership of Norman over 1991 to 2007 a group of interested mainly previous staff members formed and were able to hold meetings on the premises of the Mills.

It was agreed to formalise the group as Friends of the Royal Gunpowder Mills, within an Association, with the aim of contributing labour to assist the Heritage centre. This commenced at the end of the 1990s.

The original Newsletter was recreated for the Association with the title Touchpaper.

Overview

Initially the labour largely took the form of assistance with the many routine physical tasks associated with site maintenance but it was open to the Friends to make suggestions for future activity, beginning the significant volume of work contributed by the Friends over the following years from late 1999 to 2025.

The work could be defined in four broad classifications -

Physical
Major project based
Documentary
Discussion, Advice, Liaison

Bryan Howard and others who had been part of Royal Ordnance on South Site, which closed before North Site, secured artefacts from that site to be moved to what became the Royal Gunpowder Mills attraction. When that was beginning to be developed he organised working parties to remove shelving form the old secure report room in A203 that was to become the Armoury, clean artefacts for display and catalogue plans and other activities. Bryan personaly helped with initial archive work identifying images etc. His book on rocket propellant research is a key reference text on the subject.

In the early 2000s many of the Friends' tasks were physical, concerned with site housekeeping. Denis Ashby established himself as the site gardener, saving areas from unsightly dereliction damaging to the Mills image. In the Advice category as the ex-GPO resident site engineer Denis had previously been an invaluable source of information on the site and this continued.

In parallel, extensive discussion of possible future work both physical and documentary began to take place.

The whole exercise involved a constant exchange by the Friends of views, data, advice and so on within all categories and this is automatically assumed in the examples. In the discussions several significant projects were agreed including replica incorporating mill which ultimately became a key element in The Mill on The Mead. The Friends were responsible for a considerable volume of physical labour.

Further projects were the Water Wheel and Green hut. Both have been fully described in the Association's Winter 2004 and Spring 2005 editions.

The compiling of Touchpaper by the Editor Brian Clements was an important ongoing documentary function. The importance of membership administration was reflected in the appointment of Daphne Clements as Membership Secretary.

Dave Sims ongoing contribution was an important element in the Friends activity in all sectors. This is particularly exemplified by the Mill project where his supervision, advice and liaison with woodworking sources were fundamental to its success over the years from initial Friends formation to completion at the end of the 1990's. The full span of Dave's activities can be seen in his obituary published in Touchpaper.

A significant amount of Friends time fell within the documentary liaison category and has been devoted to writing books on Mills subjects for sale in the shop or through Amazon and involved a considerable amount of IT work from Ian MacFarlane. A list of the titles produced and the Friends authors was published in the Spring 2026 Touchpaper. Amongst these Derick Armes and Sandra Taylor produced a magisterial study of the Mills workforce, Richard Thomas produced a study of the waterway system of the Mills and another on the explosions at the Mills. Richard also started and continues to maintain an index to Touchpaper which is part of the online archive. Les Tucker wrote a work of reference on the Listed Buildings and other Principal Structures.

Brian Clements contributed a significant amount of continuing documentary work in his role as Editor of Touchpaper – including liaison with contributors of articles, compilation of computer input.

Daphne Clements was appointed Membership Secretary and has organised the AGM and renuions for the Friends since her appointment.

Sarah Deanes considerable photographic skills were applied, particularly with the scanning of large documents.

Len Stuart led vital input to exhibitions publicising the Mills as a visitor attraction. His efforts were recognised in an award from the Essex tourist authority.

Considerable Friends labour involved computer input for the digitisation necessary for Ian McFarlane . The process started with sorting and cataloguing by Les Tucker then work by Richard Thomas with scanning by Michael Seymour, passed finally to Ian MacFarlane to achieve the ultimate goal – creation of the online Archive.

Ian's IT work was fundamental to the whole spectrum of archive activity.

Summary

The online Archive made Mills information readily available to the general public, greatly increasing the publicity resources of the Mills.

This overview gives an idea of the massive amount of labour contributed by the Friends volunteers to the Mills over the years.

A representative overview cannot cover all of the Friends who contributed. The opportunity is taken to gratefully acknowledge the endeavours of those omitted.

Les Tucker

Friends officers

Date	Chair	Secretary	Treasurer	Membership	Ed.
June 98					NP
Sep 98	NP	RP	JB		NP
Dec 2001	JW	RP	JB		NP
Dec 2002	JW	RP	FB		NP
June 2004	JW	RP	NP		NP
Dec 2007	JW	RP	NP		MB
Mar 2008	JW	RP	DC		MB
Oct 2010	JW	RP	DC		MM
Autumn 11	JW	LS	JC		BC
Winter 11	JW	LS	JC		BC
Summer 17	JW	LS	RM		BC
Summer 18	JW	LS	Ron	DC	BC
Autumn 18	DS	LS	Ron	DC	BC
Spring 21	LS	LS	Ron	DC	BC
Summer 22	LS	LS	MC	MC	BC
Winter 22	LS	LS	JC	DC	BC
Winter 23	JC	GH	JC	DC	BC
Summer 24	JC	.....	JC	DC	BC
Autumn 24	JC	MG	JC	DC	BC

NP	Norman Paul	BC	Brian Clements
RP	Richard Penfold	LS	Len Stuart
JB	Jim Burgess	RM	Richard Morrell
FB	Frances Burgess	DS	Dave Sims
JW	John Wright	Ron	Ron McEvoy
DC	Daphne Clements	JC	John Cook
MB	Malcolm Bergh	GH	Geoff Hooper
MM	Michelle Moore	MG	Martin Gough

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