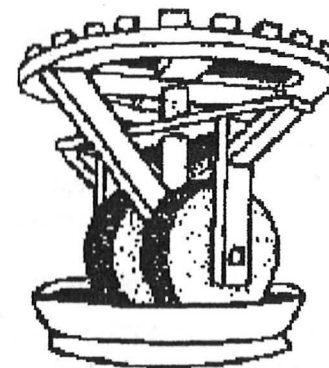


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Published by WARGM Friends Association  
Printed by PRONTAPRINT Bishop's Stortford

# Touchpaper

The Newsletter of the  
WALTHAM ABBEY ROYAL GUNPOWDER MILLS  
FRIENDS ASSOCIATION



September  
1998

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NOTE: Deadline date for submissions for  
the next issue is 6th November



## EDITORIAL



Welcome to the first official Friends Association Newsletter. For those of you new to the readership I should explain its origins and past history. The original research establishment at Waltham Abbey comprised two sites, one north and one south of the town. Under a government rationalisation scheme in the early 1980's the south site was privatised and became a Royal Ordnance company site with the north site being retained by the MoD. At that time the staff retained membership of the thriving Social and Sports Club which was run as a joint venture. With the subsequent closure of both sites and dispersal of staff to the far corners of the UK a newsletter was set up to keep past colleagues in touch -hence Touchpaper, (with its additional connotation and connection with energetic materials !) That newsletter has been very successful over the past 6 years retaining a membership of some 350 people.

With the setting up of the Operating Company to develop and run the North Site as a museum it was recognised that here was a body of interested people, with vast experience and knowledge of the site, who could assist in the development. Accordingly the Friends Association was set up with representation on the Operating Company Board and opened to all members of the public with an interest in the museum project and the site. I am pleased to report that the great majority of the existing readership has joined the Association and very pleased that we have also attracted a significant number of additional members.

To you all I must declare that "this is your newsletter" and would encourage you to provide articles, snippets of information, your views on the project and on this newsletter. In return I promise to provide you with information on the development and news of any special events that we are able to run.

Norman Paul Editor

## FRIENDS ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP

We are very pleased to report that response to the membership launch in June has been exceptional. Most of the existing readership has joined and we are especially pleased to welcome the 'new blood' of people with specific interest in the site and its development. Our treasurer is also very happy that, even with the current level of membership, the annual registration fees collected so far mean that we are now on a good and sound financial footing. If membership continues to grow it is most likely that we can actually reduce next year's membership fee!

### Our current membership is:

**121 Adult members**

**76 Family memberships**

**312 total members**

In addition we have 5 'members' living abroad (Australia and USA) who receive complimentary copies of Touchpaper because the logistics of transferring funds is just too difficult.

Complimentary copies are also sent to the members of the board and other relevant organisations. One of the organisations we are in touch with may be of interest to some of you. This is the **Royal Small Arms Factory Enfield Apprentices Association** and it is quite likely that we will 'share' some of our members. We will be exchanging Newsletters and, possibly 'borrow' articles from each other. They have already given us a mention in their most recent issue. If any of our readers are interested in the RSAF organisation the person to contact is:

Ray Tuthill, 21 Weardale Gardens, Enfield, EN2 0BA.

## PROFILE: The WARGM Operating Company Chairman



Don Spinks is the current chairman of the company and has been involved with the project since its inception. Shortly after the closure of the site by the MOD a trust steering committee was set up of which Don was the chairman and he has worked tirelessly for the project, seeing through the application for the Heritage Lottery grant and the setting up of the charitable operating company.

He is a local man who, at the time of the North Site closure in 1991, was the leader of the Waltham Abbey Town Council. At this time his driving interests was to "put Waltham Abbey back on the map" and it was his initiative, backed by a few like minded councillors that resulted in the establishment of a Tourist Information Centre for the Town. Tourism and exploitation of the Town's heritage seemed to Don to be the way to attract people to Waltham Abbey and the success of the Tourist Information Centre bore out his belief that people wanted access to such information.

When he was told by CIVIX, the MOD's team briefed to dispose of the site, that they wanted to test the Town Council's response to a programme of disposal, he seized on the chance to persuade the MOD to involve the Essex County Council and the District Council, as well as the Town council, to become involved in a partnership, or a trust to open the site for the benefit of the public. The story between that time and where we are now is well known and the site is due to open to the public in the Spring of 2000. What was not fully appreciated in 1991, was just how important the industrial archaeology would prove to be, and the long history of the site and its importance to the country was just waiting to be explored by the public.

Don's local knowledge and his time as a councillor was the key to open the lock to his wider view of bringing prosperity and jobs to the Town. To this end, and now retired from business, he donates most of his spare time to ensure the success of the Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills as an interpretative and educational centre of excellence revealing the history and development of explosives and the role if the site in Britain's history.

## AGM and SITE VISIT

An inaugural AGM will be held at the Waltham Abbey Site on Friday 9th October at 10.00am. The purpose of this, the first AGM, is to adopt a model constitution for the association and to elect a committee and officeholders. (The agenda and copy of the constitution is enclosed with this newsletter.)

It is expected that the meeting will take about 30 minutes and will be followed by a tour where you will have an opportunity to see the site in its initial state before development.

Please note that there is currently no parking available at the site and you are advised to park in the town (behind the Town Hall) and make your way on foot.

After the tour why not join us for the .....

## ANNUAL REUNION

An annual reunion of Touchpaper readership will again be held in October. Although, in the past, it has been primarily for ex-employees of the research establishments, this year it is open to all current Association members.

The reunion is to be held on Friday 9th October in the Royal British Legion Hall, Sewardstone Street, Waltham Abbey. (see inside back cover for map).

Festivities commence at 12.00 and a buffet lunch will be served at 13.00. A full bar will be available throughout the afternoon.

Cost is £6 per head (not including bar drinks!) and bookings should be made, through the Touchpaper Editor, as soon as possible.

## WANTED - VOLUNTEERS

There is a growing need, and indeed opportunities, for members to assist in the site development. In particular, ex-employees advice is sought in identifying the large number of artefacts collected from both the North and South Sites. These are currently stored in Bldg L 168 adjacent to the roundabout at the south end of Long Walk. The company have recently employed an archaeological assistant, Andrew Passmore, who needs some assistance on identifying and cataloguing these items.



Andrew has suggested that some regular 'Identification Days' be set up when members could come in and assist with this mammoth task. He has suggested that these be monthly but we now need a response from you the members.

A number of members have already given sterling service in identifying suitable artefacts for transfer from the South Site which has now been drastically cleared for redevelopment. Without their help I am sure that many important items would have been lost. Most notable has been the efforts of Bryan Howard, Ron Treadgold, George Savill and Denis Mansell and we record our thanks to them. In addition a number of you have also agreed to act as guides for the forthcoming Heritage Open Days' in September.

### POINT OF CONTACT:

Bryan Howard has agreed to be the focal point for future working parties and all offers of help should be addressed to him:

Bryan Howard  
19 Lea View  
Waltham Abbey  
Essex  
EN9 1BJ

tel; 01992 760912

## READERS REMINISCENCES

### Gun Trials at Royal Arsenal

There was at one time a gun firing range at the southern (Plumstead) end of the Royal Arsenal site at Woolwich. It had long since passed into disuse when I started my career at the Chemical Inspectorate (also based in Royal Arsenal) in 1950. But it was brought vividly to life for me one day many years later while browsing in the PERME library. I had found a large volume entitled "History of the Royal Arsenal" and thumbing through it, I stumbled across an account of a most remarkable trial that took place there in the time of the British Raj.

It seems that the troops manning the north-west frontier in the Himalayan mountains were having great difficulty manhandling gun carriages up the mountain passes, and much thought had gone into ways of facilitating this. Someone had had the bright idea of dispensing with the carriages altogether, arguing that whilst the gun and carriage were together much too great a load for any beast of burden, the gun itself might possibly be mounted on the back of a mule and, moreover, loaded and fired whilst so deployed. The War Office were evidently sufficiently enamoured of the idea to decide on a trial to test its feasibility and a suitable harness was designed and made. Since a mule was not available, a donkey was acquired for the trial, and on the appointed day tethered at the end of the range whilst the harness and gun barrel were mounted. The animal proved to be quite placid, chewing contentedly on the grass whilst preparations were made and showing no concern at the load on its back. The plan was to have the animal on a short tether and to induce it to stand so that the gun, fitted with a short fuze, pointed down range. The animal stood obediently while the fuze was lit and the bombardier stepped back.

A group of generals and other senior officers had come down to witness the event and were standing at a distance behind the gun. Unfortunately, no sooner had the soldier stepped back after lighting the fuze, when the animal, finding itself unrestrained, decided that life had suddenly become most enjoyable, and began bucking and frolicking and running round in celebration. As the muzzle waved around in a random pirouette the assembled brass threw themselves flat and awaited the inevitable. Unsurprisingly, when the gun fired, nobody was actually looking to see in which direction it was pointing. Nobody was hurt, and the donkey was also unharmed but, despite a widespread search, the shot was never found.

Jim Hawkins

[6]

## TOUCH BYTES

### READER'S NEWS

This section is devoted to Association member's comments and views so, at this time there is little to include but I hope this will be rectified in future issues.

On a personal note may I thank all those who expressed their best wishes to me on my recent retirement. So far I am enjoying it immensely although I do miss the photocopier!

Norman Paul

### IN MEMORIAM

One sad piece of news was the recent death of our Secretary's father, Jim Penfold, who many ex-colleagues will remember as the chief stores officer in the early days. Richard Penfold has written a short obituary:

"Jim Penfold passed away peacefully on July 2nd 1998 in the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Harlow at the age of 86 years and 364 days. He retired from the Establishment in 1976 where he held the position of Chief Stores Officer.

His colleagues may remember him as a man whose work ethic was 'everything by the book' and one such incident (among many) occurred on an hot summer lunch break when an harassed and misguided scientist, urgently needing to requisition apparatus from the stores to salvage an experiment, burst into J C Penfold's office demanding attention. He was taught a salutary lesson in stress management by the sight of Jim, trousers rolled up and feet in a bowl of water, studying the runners and riders in the 3 o'clock at Haydock Park. It is not recorded whether the scientist actually got the attention he thought he deserved.

Very little escaped Jim and we always suspected that he would instantly know if even one nut or bolt was unaccounted for in his stock. Ever a gentleman of the old school."

DON'T FORGET THE DEADLINE OF NOV 6th FOR  
INCLUSION OF ARTICLES IN THE NEXT ISSUE  
DUE FOR PUBLICATION EARLY DECEMBER

[7]



# WALTHAM ABBEY ROYAL GUNPOWDER MILLS ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

## WATEC Ltd - ( FOUNDATION TRUST COMPANY )

Dr B Buchanan  
Mr T Knapp  
Mr T Limna (Chair)  
Mr M J Lowe (sec)  
Mr S Norris  
Mr D Spinks  
Cllr. R Wallace

responsible for  
Trust management and  
preservation of the site as  
an historic monument

## WARGM OPERATING COMPANY

setting policy for  
the development and  
operation of the site  
as a National Explosives  
Interpretation Centre  
TARGET DATE:  
open Easter 2000

Mr I Abbey	Mr T Knapp
Mr Peter Adams	Mr T Limna
Mr J H Bowles	Mr M J Lowe (sec)
Prof. Alan Crocker	Mrs Ann Miller
Mr R Denham	Mr N C Paul
Mr J C R Earle	Mr P Pennell
Mr K L Eden	Mr Don Spinks (Chair)
Mrs Karen Eyre	Mr J W C Tear
Dr G Hooper	Mr R Wallace
Ms P Jones	Mr M Ward

## CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Robert Saunders BA(Hons) MIM  
  
and staff:  
to be appointed

responsible for strategy,  
delivering target plan and  
day to day running

*note: Bob Saunders took up the post of CEO at the end of June  
We intend to 'Profile' him in the next issue.*

Friday 9th October  
AGM/Site Visit & Reunion

## MAP

