

ROYAL GUNPOWDER MILLS WALTHAM ABBEY

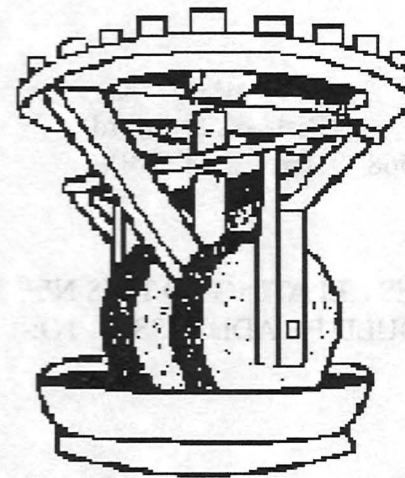
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Touchpaper

The Newsletter of the
**ROYAL GUNPOWDER MILLS WALTHAM ABBEY
FRIENDS ASSOCIATION**



**SEPTEMBER
2005**

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PLEASE NOTE: Deadline date for submissions to
the next issue is 15th November 2005



Editorial

Summer is nearly over and it hasn't been too bad. At least most of the weekend special events were blessed with reasonable weather which does help with visitor numbers which do seem to be slowly improving year on year.

On the site staff side we are sorry to report that Samantha has left and that and Sue who manned the office and shop is currently in hospital leaving the site very short handed. One of the volunteers, Michelle, is helping out as much as possible to fill the gap and if anyone is able to add their help it would be most appreciated (see page 4).

Although the season is drawing to a close there are still some very exciting events to come and, dare I say it, there is always a need for volunteers.

Our next issue in December is the Christmas one so any topical articles, jokes, competitions or cartoons would be much appreciated.

Norman Paul

Touchpaper Editor



SPECIAL WEEKEND EVENTS

JUNE, JULY and AUGUST 2005

There have a number of successful, well attended events since the last issue.

In **June** there was the Military Vehicles Show and an Essex Militia weekend.



Military vehicles



Essex Militia - pikemen

In **July** there was a Martial Arts Display, and a re-enactment by the English Civil War Society.

At the latter the members of the Society had an evening party on the Saturday to which a number of volunteers and staff attended. During the evening there was the traditional 'night ride' on the land train with a very different version of the usual talk and a number of special effects in the woodland area.



Evening party



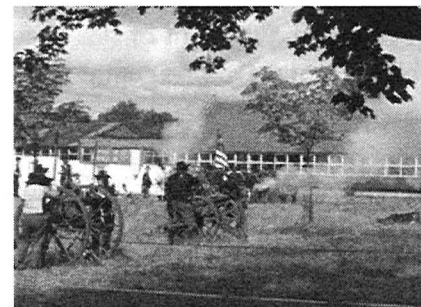
staff members 'relaxing'

A special National Archaeological weekend was held with talks and tours, in conjunction with the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society.

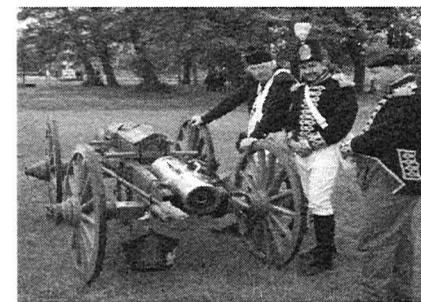


Les Tucker shown here pointing out an item of interest to members of GLIAS

August saw a visit by the American Civil War group



and on the Bank Holiday weekend another re-enactment by the Napoleonic Society.



In addition to the normal weekend opening there have been a number of group visits all of which helps to increase the overall attendance figures and bringing in much needed extra revenue.



GIVE A HAND



As I think you are all aware by now the Site can only keep running with volunteer help. The few employed staff work considerable hours both during the week and at weekends and are really stretched and that's just to keep the site going, let alone plan for future development.

We do have a band of willing volunteers who attend on a regular basis but even then they are stretched. The situation is highlighted when on the first weekend in September, due to a series of circumstances involving sickness and holidays we are down to one staff member and it's a call for 'all hands to the pumps' for volunteers.

Some of you may be put off by the thought of heavy manual labour but actually most help is needed in other, more gentle areas and not only at weekends.

The following is not a full list of opportunities but should give some idea of the areas where help would be most welcome;

Administration - office work

Literature Distribution

Stewarding

Working in the Site Shop

Tour Guide

Land Train Driving

Specialist Help - fund raising, photography, archiving.

A leaflet has been produced and is available from Liz Went, the Volunteer Development Manager, detailing all the areas where assistance is needed. You can contact her on 01992 707340.

It doesn't have to be a regular commitment, even the occasional day or half-day will be most appreciated.



Please give this serious consideration - we need you!



ON TRACK

My request for a grand tour of the "Royal Gunpowder Mills Railway Project" had been granted to me by Brian Harvey and John Wilson. This expedition took place on Sunday morning 26th June 2005.

I was escorted to that site by John Wilson and my first stop was to view the brightly coloured wagons at the observation platform where a bench is supplied for the benefit of the public. From then onwards the remainder of this specific area remained private for security and safety reasons so I considered it a privilege to be allowed there on this occasion.

Imagination took hold of me and I could visualise myself hiding in one of the wagons, rising up and down the track, hooting with joyous pleasure to every bird song. "Hark, Hark - do I hear a Lark?"

The workshop at 83B where project management and administration takes place aroused my interest. I now had full run of what appeared to me to be endless rows of hardware placed in meticulous order in compact compartments. Big screws, small nails, spanners, screwdrivers with fascinating handles and a whole lot more! I was anticipating drilling a few holes in various places but, alas, three pairs of watchful eyes of volunteers reproached my ambition and further action was thwarted. The 'windows' on the outside walls of 83B weren't real windows at all but cleverly designed to give the illusion. Hanging baskets decorated the exterior lending a colourful array in abundance. Yet these were flowers never needed watering!! Gardeners eat your hearts out. I was presented with a buttonhole for remembrance.

A regular guest invites himself for lunch breaks and dinner hour - always arrives on the trot so must be psychic I guess. Adopted and christened Rudolph (without shiny nose), always anticipating a share of whatever food is available. This deer has it all and has become a member of a family group. It was a privilege for me to share with them, even if only for a short moment.

You will always be given a warm and genuine welcome should you decide that you would like to become involved in this onward going and exciting project.

Interested? Why not give Liz Went a ring on 01992 707340 and have a chat about joining in.

Minnie Fenton

Volunteer Steward

So, Why Did We



In 1997 I received a cutting from The Daily Telegraph stating that the factory site at Waltham Abbey was possibly going to be made into a Museum & Wild Life Sanctuary. I heard nothing more until my son saw a little information on the Internet in 2002. As my father, P G Knapman (in fact Superintendent of the factory pre-war and during the early war years) had worked there from 1912 until 1943 when the factory closed, I was naturally very interested.

We got in touch with the Friends Association, introduced ourselves, and a visit was arranged for us and we were so impressed with what been achieved so far, that we asked many questions and decided to join The Friends of WARGM there and then. We would be able to learn and it would be a practical and enjoyable way of supporting the effort. Since then I have visited again, enjoy "Touchpaper" and remain very interested in the Friends Association.

It might be of interest to know that my father never talked about the Mills or his work there, but often talked about the wildlife he came across as he went about his work, and took many photos of the animals and birds. So it seems appropriate to me that the site is dual-purpose so to speak - the Gunpowder and the Wildlife!

Mrs M.J.Cox

(Daughter of Percy George Knapman,

The reasons for my joining The Friends were the product of chance and design.

The chance arose from a chain of circumstances. Having witnessed the sad decline of the Central Line from a dependable fast service with guaranteed seat, at least from my station, affording very useful reading time, to one afflicted by delays, signal failure, train failure and so on, I took the opportunity to retire two years before 65. I had become interested in industrial and scientific history and archaeology and took the opportunity to pursue a four year part time course in Industrial Archaeology at London University, after which I looked forward to a life of leisure, family activity, outdoor activity, mainly walking, general industrial archaeology and canal restoration and history.

I made a speculative visit to Epping Forest Museum to see whether their work was connected in any way and they suggested I contact the Mills. And so chance decreed that I arrive at the Lodge, with a certain degree of trepidation.

As to design, at the time my reasons were a rather vague mix of ideas of doing some ground maintenance for the fresh air and exercise, participating in some way on the

Join The Friends?

historical side and since I had worked on canal restoration see whether there was any plan to develop the Mills canal system, also possibly to learn something of the history of research in the science of what was a very closed subject to most people.

Finally I joined the Friends as I thought that the Mills should be supported in offering the above kind of activity and being a member would be a logical social link to volunteering.

Although the question we are asked to answer is why I joined The Friends this could be extended to 'and were the reasons borne out by subsequent events', so with apologies for exceeding the brief :-

Firstly on canal development, the answer is No! Although development of the Canal system was included in the Mills development plan this now appears to have receded into the far distance.

On the question of the history of research, I have mentioned a certain degree of trepidation. I guessed that most of the Friends would be ex-employees and I wondered whether somebody not from that exalted body might be treated with some reserve. This was erroneous and I take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank them for unstinting information and welcome.

Fresh air and exercise and historical work remain. On fresh air and exercise suffice it to say that was achieved in nettle clearing, digging up alder saplings etc.etc. - scrub bashing in canal restoration parlance.

Chance decided that ultimately historical work has provided the greater ongoing activity. With the stock market crash and subsequent departure of full time staff the burden of work at the Mills fell on the remaining staff and volunteers, including The Friends. Consequently some of us including myself have been heavily involved in re-establishing the Mills Archive - sorting, cataloguing, indexing and a variety of special projects and other work such as answering historical queries, plus writing historical articles for Touchpaper and so on. This task is likely to be permanent, subject to the continuing availability of suitable accommodation.

Anything outstanding? From an industrial archaeological point of view the 20th century chemical north half of the site is of particular interest as an entire unique 'industrial landscape' of the type that is receiving increasing attention in the field of heritage preservation. It would be nice to think that there is a positive plan to save it and other unique artefacts, such as the Hydraulic Press, from total dereliction, failing which half of the potential of the site, of national if not international importance, will be lost.



Les Tucker

MEMORIES OF THE WOOLWICH ARSENAL

I was delighted to read the excellent article on the Royal Arsenal and its railway in the June issue.

I started my working life there in December 1949, as an Assistant Experimental Officer in the Chemical Inspectorate, which was housed in a cluster of buildings (numbers C36 to C40) about halfway between the Beresford and Plumstead entrances. I was in a section devoted to applying the new technology of electronics to chemical research and instrumentation, and I worked there until moving to ERDE (as it was then) in 1959.

The RAR tracks (standard gauge - I don't remember seeing any surviving 18" track) ran everywhere. All locomotives and rolling stock carried the 'R A R' branding. There was no distinction between railway areas, roads and footpaths - and no such things as level crossings, barriers or warning lights. Everyone just used their eyes! Track maintenance seemed to be limited to fixing anything which had caused a derailment. These were common, and it was fascinating watching the 'Heavy Gang' arrive to do a re-railing. This was invariably achieved with nothing more sophisticated than a few six-foot long crowbars and a couple of screw jacks.

The railway's function was primarily moving the heavier items such as army tanks and naval guns around, but had passenger coaches as well for taking groups of workers to and from distant sites. We had a long walk to the staff canteen in the lunch hours, and this involved crossing many railway lines. By then of course work in the Arsenal was winding down, but we still had to keep an eye open for the occasional train - or the odd Churchill tank on one of the roads.

Shortly after I started work there, it was decided that the big naval guns (up to 16" bore) would never again be required. There was a great stock of these and they were all cut up for scrap. The huge barrels with their enormous breech blocks were dumped on any convenient bit of spare ground between buildings or sidings, and cut up where they lay using oxygen lances (impossible to do this inside any building). The huge chunks of metal, glowing red hot after the initial cuts, were just left lying there to cool - no warning notices or barriers! The cooling took days, and in our daily treks to the canteen or to and from Beresford Gate on the way in to work or going home we could feel the heat radiating from them.

Although it was nothing to do with the railway, the huge forging shop (I think the only one then still working) used to intrigue me. The heat in there was so

intense that the men worked stripped to the waist, and were required to consume large quantities of liquid to make up that lost in sweat. It was said that they were allowed to take this in the form of a weak beer, the amounts required being so great that no one could manage to take it as water. They certainly all had the physique of sumo wrestlers, with waistlines that made the average beer belly look miniscule. Although the Chemical Inspectorate was not a part of the Royal Arsenal organization (it was a separate department of the Ministry of Supply) we were able to make use of many of the site facilities, under an arrangement known as 'Transfer Terms' that would horrify today's bean-counting accountants.

In those early days of electronics, we had to wind our own transformers and chokes, and cut and punch all the mechanical parts like chassis, mounting brackets and front panels. When we needed sets of BA counterbores and countersinks, we were able to get the Arsenal Tool Room' (precision engineers in the best tradition) to make them. They made us sets from 0BA down to 8BA. They were superb examples of precision grinding - and under Transfer Terms they cost us nothing.

When the huge sales of wartime military and other surplus equipment began, a large sales ground was established in the Arsenal. We were able to have any items of use to our department withdrawn from sale under the ubiquitous 'Transfer Terms', and I spent many happy hours searching among the most extensive and amazing piles of material laid out for inspection. I particularly remember one vast stack of ATS knickers, and also a stack of beautifully made hardwood bakery breadboards. They were each about 18" X 12" X 1", but the stack was five feet high, eight feet wide and about twenty feet long. Dozens of the amphibious DUKW vehicles featured in another sale.

An Arsenal engineer told me that one of the RAR locomotives had been included in one sale, and was bought by George Cohen's 600 Group, only to be bought back shortly afterwards - at a very inflated price - when it was decided it was, after all, needed!

But it was the many items of surplus electronic equipment that were so useful to us, and facilitated our work considerably. Woolwich was a tough place in those days. But there were some good pubs, I have fond memories of 'The Elephant' in Beresford Square just opposite the Arsenal main entrance. But that's another story!

Jim Hawkins

TOUCH

I was musing the other day on departed colleagues and I remembered a little story which might tickle your fancy for inclusion in some future edition of Touchpaper:

T of I Lesson

I was once asked to carry out an urgent Temperature of Ignition test using the old T of I apparatus in L149. I placed the glass tubes containing the weighed mixture into the heating block, put up the screen, set the Variac (remember them?) for the required heating rate and switched on. In due course, loud BANG! tinkle, tinkle (the latter the remains of the glass tube descending from above). Another BANG! tinkle, tinkle. Two heads then appeared around the door, one above the other, their attached bodies cowering in the corridor outside. The upper head (Randall Wyatt) spoke, "What are you testing?" "Barium Styphnate mixtures" I replied. BANG!, tinkle, tinkle. The lower head (Ken Bascombe) said, "What sample size?" "200 milligrams", I said. BANG! tinkle, tinkle. Both heads shouted in unison, "FIFTY milligrams! BANG! tinkle, tinkle.

Tony Whittaker

The Gunpowder and Explosives History Group is planning to hold its autumn meeting at Faversham in Kent on Saturday 5 November. The morning will comprise a self-guided tour of the Fleur de Lis Centre local history centre with its displays of local explosives related material and nearby is the restored early nineteenth century Chart powder mill. In the afternoon we will be exploring the newly opened Oare Gunpowder Works trail, which includes a restored 1920s incorporating mill recently acquired from Ardeer, Scotland.

If any members of the friends group are interested in participating in the visit they would be most welcome to join us. To book a place and for further details please contact me on:

wayne.cocroft@english-heritage.org.uk or 01223 582700.

Wayne Cocroft

BYTES

The original of the following letter appears to have gone astray and although it refers to an article in the June 2004 Touchpaper its content is still relevant ((I hope you all keep your back copies!)) Ed.

I found the recent Touchpaper extremely interesting but there is one point that I cannot agree with.

It is stated that, on the page with the photo of S21 that 'manufacture of Tetryl (or Composition C/E as I knew it) ceased at Waltham Abbey in 1943. However, I know that it was still being manufactured there at the beginning of June 1944, at least.

During the night shift on the 12-13th June the C/E foreman and myself were making the rounds when we were astounded to see a fiery object pass over the factory from southeast to northwest and disappear in the direction of St.Albans. We were at a loss to explain it and our best guess was an aeroplane on fire. Then on June 17th the government announced that the nazis were deploying a new and deadly weapon. Thus, we had seen one, if not the very first, of the V-1 flying bomb and this fixes the date of the occurrence,

In the following weeks I became rather more acquainted with the flying bombs during my daily double journeys (by bike!) between Waltham Abbey and my home in Brixton, southwest London.

Brian Hazzard

Shift Chemist Cordite Section 1940-43, C/E Section 1943-44.

Just a note for our ex-colleagues - Rita and I are now both retired and enjoying plenty of sunshine abroad and golfing in Buxton - when its dry!

Thought I would like to let you all know that I have been awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. It came as a lovely surprise at the end of my career in explosives and fireworks. We are looking forward to visiting Buckingham Palace later in the year.

We really enjoy reading Touchpaper and being kept informed of progress on the Waltham Abbey site.

Ron Rapley MBE

DON'T FORGET
DEADLINE for the December 2005 ISSUE:
15th November 2005

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

SEPTEMBER

To mark the 400th anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot there is a special programme of events throughout the month.

10-11th REMEMBER REMEMBER....

Illustrated talk by Richard Thomas. A close look at the background of the 'Powder Treason' and the 13 conspirators who laid the plot. Follow the lives of Catesby, Percy, Fawkes and others through the years of planning. Time 12.00 and 2.30 pm (both days) Duration 1 hour.

'ROBERT CATESBY'S LAST STAND...'

A costumed re-enactment following the fleeing plotters after the arrest of Guy Fawkes. The group of plotters arrived at Holbeach House in Staffordshire on 7th November 1605. On November the 8th the Sheriff of Worcester arrived with a posse of part-time soldiers and called for their surrender. Failing this the soldiers attacked the house whereupon Robert Catesby led a charge out of the house but was mortally wounded.

24-25th GUY FAWKES EXPERIENCE

Visitors will discover the story of Gunpowder treason and Plot through 5 bases covering; Lights and Lamps, Stuart foods, Stuart dance and games, Secret Messages and to meet the 'Ghost of Guy Fawkes'.

OCTOBER

2nd THE FORGOTTEN MEN

Royal Gunpowder Factory explosions - 1940

Illustrated talk by Bryn Elliott on Sunday 2nd October at 2pm

Early in the war many untrained worker were drafted in to take up urgent and dangerous work. This is the story of how some paid the ultimate price, kept secret at the time and were remembered 58 years later.

OCTOBER contd

8-9th

BLAST 2!

A return performance by the 3rd year students of the E15 Contemporary Acting School.

The E15 Contemporary Theatre Practice Course Students will re-create and perform Scenes, Songs and Stories based on the history of the Royal Gunpowder Mills, bringing to life the past lives of the people who worked here with all their joys, disasters, challenges, moral issues, loves and hates.

This is expected to be a sell out and pre-booking is advisable.

For further information see the Mills web site:

(www.royalgunpowdermills.com) or ring 01992 70730

SEASON ENDS ON 9th OCTOBER

HOWEVER:

There will be a special Fireworks Party for Volunteers (+guest) on Saturday 5th November starting at 5.30. Hot traditional food will be on sale and drinks are available. Entry is on production of one LARGE firework which will be handed in and let off by experts. The caterer will need to know expected number so please contact the site if you will be attending.

The last event of the year is the now traditional

VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS

Sunday 18th December

Morning Session 11.00 - 1.00 Afternoon Session 1.00 - 3.00

£5-50 per ticket (1 child + 1 Adult) this includes Land Train ride to see Father Christmas, presents, arts& crafts, film/main exhibition and Victorian firearms.

Accompanying Guest Tickets

£1-50 per child (under 5s free) £2-50 per Adult (as above but without present)

PRE-BOOKING IS ESSENTIAL

(www.royalgunpowdermills.com or ring 01992 70730 for details)