

Spring 2021

TOUCHPAPER

The Newsletter of the Royal Gunpowder Mills Friends Association
Registered Charity No. 1115237

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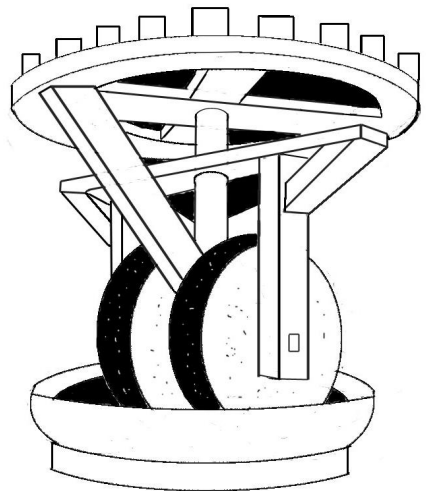
Letters:

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Julie's Nature Column



Spring 2021

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Deadline for the next issue is 28th May 2021

Dave Sims – A Tribute



We are all much saddened by the passing away of Dave Sims on 22nd January 2021. His funeral was at GreenAcres at North Weald on Thursday 18th February 2021, attended by his children, grandchildren and great grand-children. Dave was born on 6th December 1937. He graduated and gained his PhD in 1958 and 1961 respectively. He joined the Explosives Research and Development Establishment in that year. Over the next thirty-five years he worked for the Ministry of Defence at Waltham Abbey and then, when the divide of Waltham Abbey took place in the early nineties, he became part of Royal Ordnance plc, first at the Abbey and then at Summerfield. During all that time he became an acknowledged expert, both nationally and internationally, in the subject of non-metallic materials. When, as was often the case, there were problems to be resolved with a particular component in a weapon system, the cry went out “Call for Simbo” and the problem was invariably solved. On the other hand he was not averse to winding up Brian Hollingsworth, for a long time the Superintendent of Materials.

Dave was a long-standing stalwart of the Friends Association. He joined the Committee when the Association was established back in 2001 and he took over the Chair from John Wright on 5th September 2018. He served the Association very well. In addition he was appointed to the Board of the Royal Gunpowder Mills Operating Company on 6th October 2018 and became Chairman on 20th August 2020. In that role he steered the Company through some stormy waters with his characteristic skill and good humour.

Dave was one of the best. He was highly intelligent, compassionate and a great friend to all of us. He made a huge contribution to the work of the Royal Gunpowder Mills throughout the twenty years that it has been open as a heritage site. Two of his major projects were building a full scale replica gunpowder mill and the restoration of a canal barge. There were many others, smaller but equally important, such as restoration of a railway carriage and maintenance of the Green Hut. He was also a great advocate for the site, giving lectures around the country on its history and what the present “visitor attraction” has to offer.

Testament to the high regard in which Dave is held is witnessed by the over thirty testimonials to him, which have all been passed on to his daughter Caroline. These have come from former work colleagues, staff and volunteers who have worked with him at the Royal Gunpowder Mills and colleagues from the Royal Ordnance Factories with whom there has been an annual reunion at the Civil Service Club for many years.

Geoff Hooper



Group C Gunpowder Mills

This full size replica mill is similar to the one working in this bay c.1890. The mill incorporated about 50 pounds of gunpowder every 4 hours.

The mill was designed and constructed by Dr. David Sims, using reference material from the Royal Gunpowder Mills archives, with assistance from other members of The Friends Association.





Editorial

Those of you who have given an email address should have had the sad news of Dave Sims. In this issue the Chairman's Chat has been replaced by Dave's obituary.

I had the great pleasure of working with Dave, "Simbo", for about 20 years as a volunteer at the Mills. I once asked him how he came by the name Simbo, his reply was that his staff had told him he was to be called Simbo as there were too many Daves.

He was always willing to tackle any job and in addition to the practical work of repairs and improvements he gave many talks on behalf of the company to interested groups, attended stands at exhibitions and acted as steward on site.

In addition to the obituary the letters section includes a select few of over 30 responses we had to the news; my apologies to those we omitted.

At a recent Zoom Committee meeting, the first attempt at any sort of Friends meeting since January 2020, Len Stuart agreed to take on the role of Chairman in addition to that of Secretary until an AGM can be organised.

Brian Clements

Jim Burgess Chapter 14: The Saga of Sid and Perce

The Site at Waltham Abbey was known amongst many of the local population as The University of Waltham Abbey because of the comparatively large numbers of highly qualified scientists and engineers who worked there.

Occasionally, the Establishment was approached by the Courts or what was to become the Health and Safety Executive to offer 'expert' opinion and/or experimental evidence in cases of chemical or explosive accidents or incidents.

Some such incidents were quite bizarre as was, indeed, the one related below.

In the 1970s, there was a certain abattoir in South London in which two gentlemen were employed as cleaners. We'll call them Sid and Perce. Both were well educated in the need for hygiene in such an environment. The story goes that Sid was entrusted with maintaining the cleanliness of the stainless steel floor, tables and gutters whilst Perce was responsible for brass taps and other brass fittings and fixtures. Being adventurous fellows and full of initiative, Sid said to Perce, "If yer mix some of me floor cleaner wiv your brass stuff it don't 'alf bring it up nice!" - and indeed it did! It was subsequently discovered that a mixture of both cleaning materials seemed to work exceptionally well on both types of metal surface.

All went well for a few weeks until, on one occasion when Sid was emptying his mop bucket into a drainage trough, its contents detonated, injuring Sid and landing him in hospital.

One of the original cleaning materials contained sodium hypochlorite (bleach) and the other an ammonium salt which was also a powerful oxidising agent, ammonium persulphate. On mixing

these two, chlorine is generated which can react with the ammonia to yield nitrogen trichloride. Nitrogen trichloride is a dense, yellowish liquid which is immiscible with water and it settled to the bottom of the mop bucket. It's a very sensitive liquid explosive which can be made to detonate with the slightest stimulus.

Waltham Abbey became involved in this episode because the Court wanted an idea of the explosive output from the detonating mop bucket in terms of TNT-equivalent. It was never clear to me why such a figure was required as it hadn't a great deal of significance in that context and lent little to the understanding of the 'science' behind the case. However, explosive output in terms of TNT-equivalent had become known to the general public over the years because the output from nuclear weapons was and still is expressed in those terms, e. g. the Hiroshima atomic bomb was said to have an output of 12 kilotons TNT-equivalent.

Notwithstanding, the task of determining a TNT-equivalent figure was requested and it fell to my physicist friend (who'd helped me out with the 'stuff' from Shoeburyness!) to provide an answer.

Like so many of those questions posed by the 'innocent' and which sound straightforward on the face of it, this problem was, in reality, not simple at all. In the end, after much thought and discussion with his peers, he decided that the customer be presented with an answer that could be simply understood in real and practical terms relating to the incident itself.

Sid's mop bucket was of a standard type and there was a stock of them in the Waltham Abbey Establishment stores. All but two were commandeered - the Store Keeper insisted on retaining a couple until more could be ordered in. I think about six were taken.

My friend had acquired photographs of the twisted and buckled specimen which had formerly been the pride and joy of Sid and learned from that injured party roughly how much liquid it had contained when it 'detonated'. The mop buckets were loaded with the appropriate quantity of water and a different weight of explosive

loaded into each one. The weights of explosive were chosen to cover a considerable range. When the explosive in each of the buckets was fired, the resulting state of the bucket was carefully examined and compared with the final state of Perce's.

The perceivable damage to the buckets was quite sensitive to the quantity of explosive used and it became clear that further buckets would have to be sacrificed if a reasonably 'accurate' figure was to be obtained.

As time was running short, my friend found it necessary to conduct a series of mop bucket raids throughout the site..... In conducting these raids, he gained a reputation akin to that of Black Beard, the pirate!

My lasting vision of this episode is of a cleaner in one of the more remote buildings in the north of the Establishment struggling to retain the vital 'tool of his trade' in a tug- of-war with my illustrious colleague.

All's well that ends well, and a TNT-equivalent figure for a mop bucket containing a quantity of nitrogen trichloride was provided to the customer. Not surprisingly, there was no 'come-back'.

Jim Burgess

Membership Renewal

Renewal forms are enclosed/attached with this issue for those who have not yet renewed.

The membership year runs from 1st January to 31st December. Please do renew as soon as possible, returning forms and payment to the Treasurer at the address on the form. Any queries about membership should be addressed to the Treasurer.

Since I do the distribution of Touchpaper it would be helpful if you would notify me directly of any changes to postal and/or email addresses.

There have been issues with paying cheques into our account; please accept our apologies for any delays if this is causing you problems.

Last year we did not send out reminders and some members did not renew but we treated them as still members. If you do not want to remain a member please tell us.

Due to Covid restrictions we were unable to hold an AGM/Reunion in 2020, we hope to do better in 2021 but at present we cannot make plans and no booking forms are being sent out yet.

Brian Clements

Otto Skorzeny - A Near Miss

Afflicted by a combination of post Christmas torpor / weather / uncertainties etc. etc. , I was lacking material for a regular Touchpaper article when a white knight came to the rescue in the unlikely shape of the formidable Otto Skorzeny.

Übersturmbannführer (Lt. Colonel) Skorzeny, in earlier life a civil engineer, was Operations Commander of SS Special Forces in WW2 and was especially remembered for the daring raid which rescued Mussolini from mountain top captivity.



Otto Skorzeny

After the War he escaped conviction in a war crimes trial. One story has it that a British agent was a defence witness?

Skorzeny was involved in SS escapes via the organization he ran – Die Spinne, The Spider.

In retirement he lived peacefully in Spain, his last occupation being reputedly and unbelievably, working for Mossad, it's a strange world.

I had been vaguely aware of his story when I recently saw a snippet which caused me to sit up and take much more notice, to the effect that had an operation led by Skorzeny succeeded. It would have had a catastrophic effect on the Allies and how ironic that a major element in the operation was British. What on earth could they mean.

All records of the operation were destroyed and the various snippets in the story cannot be relied on, sometimes conflicting. Nevertheless it's a nice story.

Enemy spy masters must have been delighted when in 1943 they learned from a Nazi spy that the three Allied leaders, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, were planning a conference in Tehran in what was then Persia. Persia occupied a vital position on rail supply routes to Russia and had been occupied by the Allies.



The three Leaders in Tehran 1943

An assassination operation was concocted, headed by Skorzeny, in which two teams of anti communist Russian soldiers fighting for the Germans would be parachuted into the desert near Teheran and led by Bedouin, who had been bribed (their leader received a solid gold pistol), into Tehran safe houses and from there attack the Allied leaders' hotel where they would hold off Russian security troops while a small team who had infiltrated the Allied leaders hotel via water tunnels which ran from the mountains to the hotel would destroy the room in which the leaders were meeting.

(In a snippet which would have done credit to an episode of 'Allo 'Allo the SS major who was to lead the assassination squad is claimed to have been an aristocrat who wore a monocle and was named Rudolf von Holten-Pflug) .

It seems inconceivable that the security forces would have missed the tunnels; nevertheless they're in the story.

The two teams were parachuted in and after some difficulties reached the safe houses.

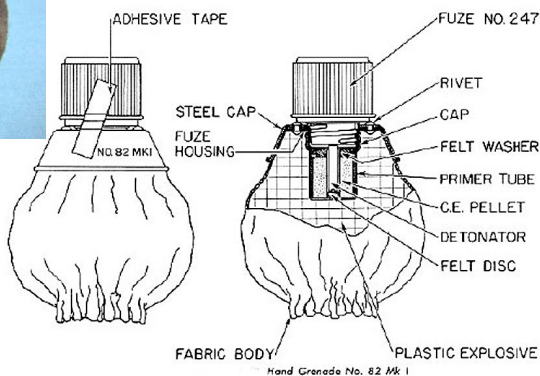
At the same time Russian trainee NKVD agent Gevork Vartanyan set off on his daily security task on what unwittingly was to be the most important day of his life. These trainees were little more than teenagers and the mode of transport allotted to them was the bicycle on which they would cycle round Teheran and report any suspicious activity. This transport and their duties apparently attracted a certain amount of derision from their older more senior colleagues who named them the Light Cavalry.

Vartanyan's suspicions were aroused by the lorry which was transporting one team who were wearing Bedouin clothes and he managed to trail them to their safe house where they were captured by the NKVD and never heard of again. The other team was betrayed in their safe house and chose to blow up the house and themselves. In the meantime Vartanyan was whisked back to Moscow and later awarded the Soviet Union's highest honour.

This left the small team in a supposed safe house who were to attack the hotel. But they too were betrayed and surrounded by Russian security troops. Without the support of the other teams their position was hopeless and they too blew themselves up.

So an interesting story, but what of the mysterious mention that Britain would have made a material contribution to the demise of the Allied leaders.

The answer lies in the explosives chosen by Skorzeny. In the grisly technology of assassination an explosive was required hand thrown but capable of destroying an entire room. The British had such a device – the 'Gammon Bomb'. This had been devised by a Captain Gammon of the 1st Parachute Regiment for the requirements of parachute troops, special forces and Resistance for a hand thrown grenade type device capable of destruction of parked aircraft, vehicles etc. It was even said to be able to stop a tank.



Gammon Bomb grenade

Unfortunately a consignment of fifty destined for the Belgian Resistance had fallen into the hands of the enemy and Skorzeny had realized they were perfect for Tehran and his plan to simultaneously eliminate all three leaders. So the ultimate irony – British explosives bringing about a political crisis of massive consequence.

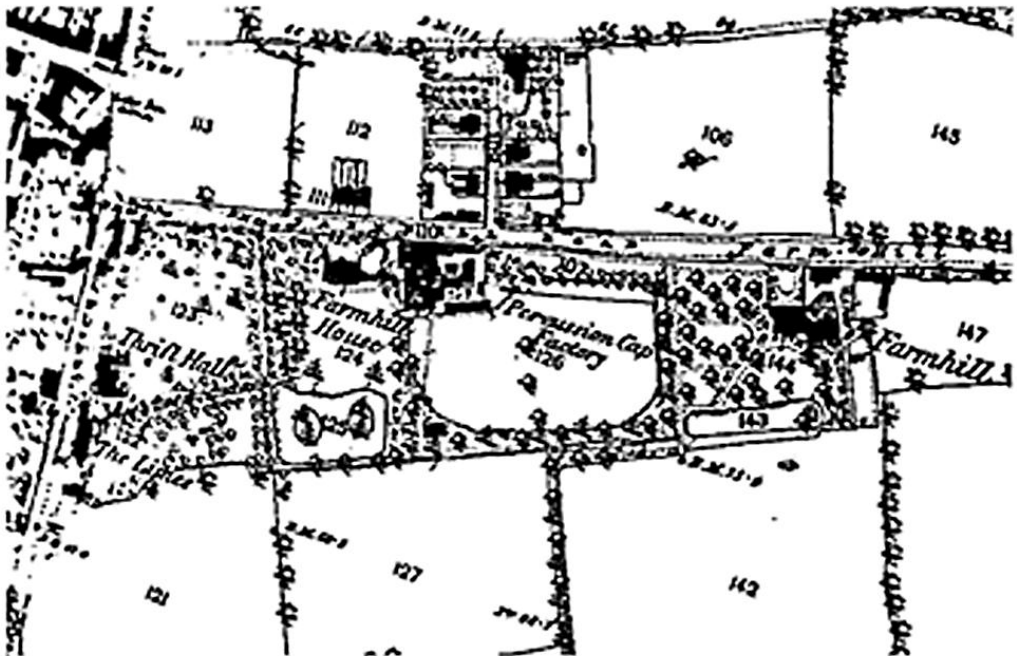
A connection even to Waltham Abbey can be made, albeit in a general sense. The Bomb was packed with RDX, by this time produced in main ROF, but with Waltham Abbey responsible for vital pre full scale production development and for the first two years of the War sole producer.

Les Tucker

Nobel's and ICI at Waltham Abbey

This article is more to seek information than to impart it, concerning as it does the presence of Nobel's and ICI at Waltham Abbey during WWI and WWII respectively.

First of all Nobel's; many of you will recall the Catalin factory on Farm Hill Road going out of the Waltham Abbey Town Centre towards Loughton. It stood on the south side opposite Manor Road. The site has a long history, going back two hundred years. It had originally been the Percussion Cap Company, owned by Frederick Joyce from 1820; the map shows its location.



This company supplied the Army with ammunition, percussion caps and wadding. It evolved as F & E Joyce (1842) to Frederick Joyce & Co. (1862) into the 20th century. As Frederick Joyce & Co. Ltd. (1906) the company expanded, rebuilding on the same site to meet a Nobel Explosives order of 1908 but then it appears to have overreached its financial capabilities and had to have Nobel's buy it out in 1909, so from 1910 the site was owned and operated by Nobel's Explosives Company. In the First World War it switched its normal Sporting Ammunition production to war weapons including military small arms, detonators, 2-inch trench howitzer cases, relay cases for H.E. bombs, instantaneous fuses, tubes for 1-inch primers and it also produced the 'Brock and Pomeroy' ammunition that went on to finally defeat the attacks by German airships (1916). The picture shows the factory in c1915.

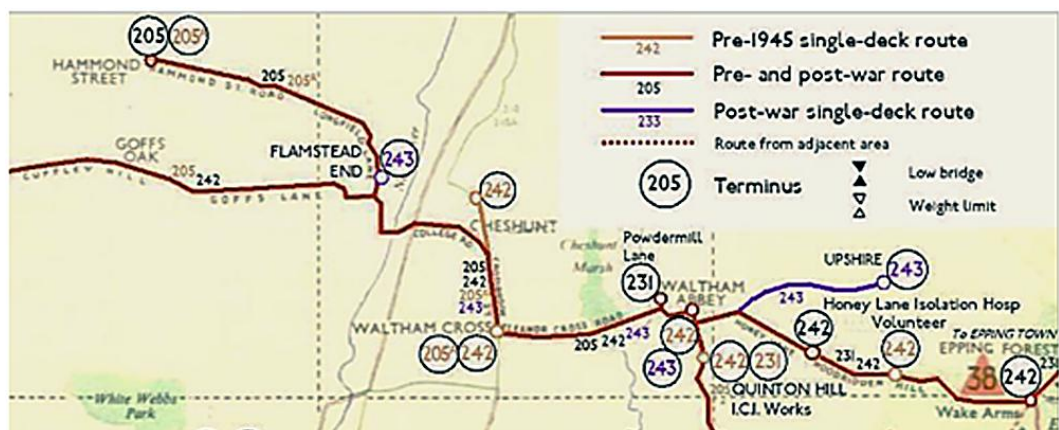


The workforce consisted of 854 men and 956 women. But was there any link, formal or informal, between Nobel's and the Royal Gunpowder Factory during WWI? It would seem probable that there was, but there appears to be a scarcity of documentary evidence on this point. By 1926 Nobel's Explosives Co Ltd had been absorbed into Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd, Nobel Division. The Farm Hill Road site became Catalins after a couple of changes of ownership. Catalin, incidentally, produced an expanded phenolic resin foam termed Catalex, used to protect the "Bouncing Bomb" used by the Dam Busters against denting. Les Tucker described this in more detail in his article in the Autumn 2013 edition of Touchpaper.

Moving on to WWII, an intriguing map of bus routes in our area covering the period from 1940 to 1946 has come to light. Two routes featured Quinton Hill ICI Works.

- Route 242 ran from either Potters Bar garage or from Cheshunt Pond to the Volunteer or the Wake Arms.
- Route 231 ran from Powdermill Lane to Epping Town.

The fact that both routes made a diversion to Quinton Hill must have meant that a considerable number of staff were going to the South Site during that time.



The associated bus timetable is rather more expansive on these arrangements, as shown below:

242	Cheshunt <i>Old Pond</i> (Sa pm), Waltham Cross and Waltham Abbey <i>Green Man</i> , journeys TuThSa to Epping Forest <i>Volunteer</i> , journeys M-FSu to Quinton Hill <i>ICI Works</i> from 20 Nov 40. Extended summer Su to Epping Forest <i>Wake Arms</i>	8 Jun 40 to 28 Oct 41
242	Potters Bar <i>LT Garage</i> and Waltham Abbey <i>Green Man</i> , journeys M-FSu to Quinton Hill <i>ICI Works</i> , journeys Sa to Epping Forest <i>Volunteer</i> .	29 Oct 41 to 30 Dec 41
242	Potters Bar <i>LT Garage</i> and Waltham Abbey <i>Green Man</i> , journeys to Waltham Abbey <i>Honey Lane Isolation Hospital</i> , journeys to Quinton Hill <i>ICI Works</i> to 24 Oct 44, journeys Sa to Epping Forest <i>Volunteer</i> to 4 Apr 42. Extended Su to Epping Forest <i>Wake Arms</i> 29 Mar and 7 Apr 42 only	31 Dec 41 to 21 May 46
231	Waltham Abbey <i>Powdermill Lane</i> and Epping Town. Journeys Waltham Abbey and Epping Town to Quinton Hill (until 25 Oct 44)	New route 29 Jun 42 to 21 May 46 Replaced to <i>Wake Arms</i> by 242

Certainly one gate on Sewardstone Road was colloquially known as “ICI Gate” for many years thereafter. What is not clear is exactly what part (or all?) of the South Site was operated by ICI, and what the relationship was between ICI and the Royal Gunpowder Factory. Can anyone throw any light on this one? Our own archives do not provide the answers.

Geoff Hooper

RARDE NEWS SPRING 1991

Launch Day 10th April 1991

Another fine mess!

In the Winter 2020 issue of Touchpaper I wrote about the Royal Visit by HRH Duke of Kent to Fort Halstead on Wednesday 2nd October 1991. That was after we had shut up shop at Waltham Abbey and moved the people and the work down to the Fort. For this issue the story is about the closing days at Waltham Abbey and the trials and tribulations that we faced. The trigger for me writing this article was looking back at a 1991 edition of “RARDE News. At the time “RARDE News” was very much a “management information conduit”, not the least bit like Touchpaper. As such it was full of “management-speak”, and in hindsight I am a bit embarrassed to have been part of that culture. The editorial of the Spring 1991 issue was all about one of the endless reorganisations of the Ministry of Defence, and I reproduce it below:



"As you know by now, Vesting Day was 1st April 1991 and we are now the Defence Research Agency (DRA).

The DRA is made up of four Divisions:

- *RARDE – the Military Division*
- *RAE – the Aerospace Division*
- *ARE – the Maritime Division*
- *RSRE – the Electronics Division*

This is an exciting time for us all when we will have the opportunity to earn income and prove ourselves as a viable concern. The whole purpose of our new organisation is to enable us to provide a better, more efficient service, principally to our Ministry of Defence customers.

We will be operating under New Management Strategy for a while – time which should be seen as an interim phase on the way to Trading Fund status.

Launch Day is 10th April when the Secretary of State, Tom King, will hand authority for DRA operations over to Nigel Hughes. A video link is to be established between Pyestock and some of the DRA sites and staff at these sites will be welcome to view the ceremony.

Elaine Morrison"

You will see reference to a video link; this was advanced thinking for its time, however things did not quite work out as planned. We set up a large TV set in the bar of the social club and the Ministry put quite a bit of money behind the bar. So far so good. Unfortunately the video link from the Defence Research Agency Headquarters to Waltham Abbey did not happen, but that to Fort Halstead did, so a chap on a motorcycle had to be despatched from the Fort to us with a video recording of the event. Even with a following wind it took about an hour for the biker to make his way round the M25 from Sevenoaks to Waltham Abbey. The Queen Elizabeth Bridge had not yet been completed so all traffic, north and southbound, still had to go through the tunnels and there were always hold-ups. By the time that the video eventually arrived, most of the Waltham Abbey folk were pretty well refreshed due to the largess of the Ministry of Defence. I was a bit nervous lest what was on the video might not strike the right chord with the well-oiled audience, so, as the actual event had already taken place, I was able to ring up a colleague who had seen the ceremony live to enquire if there had been any "hostages to fortune". "No" he said; "It all went very well indeed". So

we all charged our glasses and sat down to watch the film. Indeed it did start well; a very well-orchestrated event with a polished presentation by the Secretary of State, Tom King. He handed authority for the Defence Research Agency operations over to Nigel Hughes, who was the predecessor to John Chisholm as Chief Executive. Then a senior official from Fort Halstead (who I shall not name) got up to give a few of his thoughts about the future arrangements for the Defence Research Agency. His words still ring in my ears “Of course, we are closing down some of the smaller, less efficient establishments in order to have a leaner, more business-oriented organisation, fit for the future”. To say that this sort of management clap-trap did not go down too well with the Waltham Abbey audience was putting it mildly. Within less than three months most of them were either going to lose their jobs or be obliged to uproot and move to Kent or elsewhere, so they were pretty hostile to this sort of patronising nonsense. They certainly did not care to be called “inefficient”. I had foolishly positioned myself between an angry crowd and the television set and I feared that an ugly scene might develop. Happily we were by then well into the afternoon and it was obvious that no more work was going to be done that day, so thirsty throats were lubricated a bit more and good humour resumed.

Geoff Hooper

Letters

A small selection of the responses we have had to the news of Dave Sims' passing; many others say what a great character he was and how much he will be missed. Our apologies to all the many responders who have been omitted.

They show the very high regard in which he was held. They come from three principal sources:

- People with whom he worked during his long Ministry of Defence career,
- Volunteers and staff who worked with him at the Royal Gunpowder Mills after his retirement,
- Colleagues from the Royal Ordnance Factories with whom we had an annual reunion.

I was so sorry to hear the very sad news of Dave Sims. Although my involvement with Waltham Abbey was very short, I knew and had many dealings with Dave when I was at SCRDE¹, Colchester and of course I know how much work he has put into the site since retirement. I know he will be greatly missed. Please pass my condolences to his family.

Richard Shephard

What very sad news!

I have very fond memories of visits to IMI, Kidderminster, and Bristol Aerojet and a good number of beers being drunk during our overnight stays.

And Dave and I 'winding-up' Brian Hollingsworth the 'headmaster-like' Superintendent of the Materials Group on South Site, opposite the canal from L148 where I worked.

Tony Kinloch

Dave was one of the very best of us: bright, kind, good humoured and a very good friend to all!

Jim Burgess

Sad news indeed.

Only a few weeks ago I saw Dave on the TV during a documentary on Waltham Abbey.

Please pass on my condolences.

Terry Lord

Please pass on to David's family my condolences for their loss. I was sad to read your news regarding David, I liked him a lot. I suppose we first met over thirty years ago. He had a dry sense of humour and I recall that he always referred to his wife as Mrs Sims.

Roger Shirley

I was also very sad indeed to learn of the passing of David Sims. He was a very good friend of long standing, I first met him in 1984 as I went to Enfield. The relationship became stronger when I rented his flat in Kidderminster. I had left RO by then and joined Biwater. I rented the flat for about 9 months. It was all very nice and convenient.

I like you all will remember “SIMBO” with great affection. Perhaps we can arrange to meet in Spring/Summer to remember David and others who have passed at a celebration in the CS Club. We can do this instead of the Christmas Lunch.

David Morris

This sad news is a stark reality check when it's this close to home. Dave was, of course, one of the experts that worked at the Mills. He was also a character and one of the pioneer Friends. Having such a person on the board must have been invaluable in the Chair – short lived though it proved to be.

Whatever happens, this Pandemic will be a game changer for the Mills when we can eventually emerge from it. I am acutely aware of that. I only hope it will herald a positive new era. Being a volunteer at the Mills during the good times is so stimulating – we all share a common passion and work as a team. We all miss it and the Mills will miss Dave enormously for sure.

Phil Smart

Many thanks for providing us with Dave's background: I will always remember his stalwart support of the Mills and very helpful attitude towards volunteers. He will be sadly missed and difficult to replace. Our sincere condolences to his family and friends.

Ray and Gladys Rowe

So very sad, especially like this.

Will anyone write an obit for Dave. I am sure he had a most interesting career.

I could add some tales about 'Simbo' or indeed Dr Phlogiston as we sometimes called him - always brought a laugh.

Although I knew of Dave earlier when I used to call in at Waltham sometimes, I really got to know Dave better when, like me, he was 'volunteered' to become a TQM² facilitator. We had great fun during those times.

I had left Dave with a load of rolling questions regarding Waltham activities that he did his best to reply to. Now alas I guess they may never be answered. Bless him.

John Harlow

I was very sorry to learn the news of Dave Sims and I can understand what a loss he will be. He was such an advocate for the site after it opened to the public and over the years has given so many volunteers hours. Sending my deepest sympathy.

Cathy Morton Lloyd

Like everyone else I was much saddened by the death of Dave Sims, a great loss to WARGM.

Nigel Thomas

- | | | |
|---|-------|---|
| 1 | SCRDE | <i>Stores and Clothing Research and Development
Establishment</i> |
| 2 | TQM | <i>Total Quality Management</i> |

I have just Saturday down and read Touchpaper from Cover to Cover.

As somebody who didn't work at the site, I find all the abbreviations and acronyms incomprehensible.

I appreciate that they would NOT require explanation for any former employees but there are lots of members (I presume) who were not.

I also like the idea of a reduced subscription for senior citizens!

MC Black

Reply:

Dear MC,

Since you read Touchpaper completely I trust you found the exercise worthwhile.

I may miss one, if so complain again about any that still puzzle you:

TTCP	Technical Colaboration Program
P1	Propellants 1 - Double base
P2	Propellants 2 - Composite
NP	E nergetic and P olymeric Materials (This overed the whole site)
H67	A building to the west of Long Walk
RARDE	Royal Armaments Research and Development Establishment
ISRG	Inter Services Research Group (its name changed a few times, a secretive bunch)

ERDE	Explosives Research and Development Establishment
PERME	Propellants Explosives Rocket Motors Establishment
LSW	Last of the Summer Wine (a group of ex workers who met for lunch)

Sidney Alford 1935 - 2021

The Times on February 20th contained a two column obituary on Sidney Alford, explosives expert who died aged 86.

To some of our readers he will be remembered for appearing on television but I can recall one of his visits to South Site.

It was known that Sidney was a 'wild card' so we accompanied him with Roy France to make sure he was safe. All went well until Sidney spotted a bucket of neat nitroglycerine ready for pouring into a small scale mix.

Sidney promptly grabbed the rim of the bucket and proceeded to move it up and down, surprised at the viscosity. "So that is NG" and that prompted the rapid departure of Roy France from the building!

I don't know how often Sidney Alford visited us but Geoff Hooper may be able to add another gem if Sidney visited 'E' Branch.

B Howard

Julie's Nature Column

There is something to see every day at the Mills when it comes to wildlife. How lucky we are to have this amazing place full of so much wildlife that chooses to live here, visit or just pass through. Many of our visitors are of course birds, but knowing that they choose to nest here shows just how suitable the variety of habitat is for them. We have winter visitors, summer visitors, birds of prey and then what I like to call our residents. Every year without fail we have the beautiful Kingfishers up and down the waterways for most of the year. We have a pair of Swans that nest every year which are in the process of doing their patrols to keep intruding swans away, laying claim to their precious territory so to speak. The Barn owls use the nest box every year even just for a daytime snooze. The Common Buzzard has been breeding on or near our site for the last few years and just recently a pair of them have been seen often around the Press house area. Only just last week I saw five of them together soaring high in the sky.

Then we have the smaller birds like the Starling, often nesting in old woodpecker nests. The other day I saw a Starling inspecting a potential nest site inside our cordite press outside Walton house, here's a photo of it sitting on top of the press showing off its beautiful colours.



The deer have been a bit more obliging for photos just lately, but once one moves on the others tend to follow. They have been tucking in to the haylage that we provide for them, barely any waste left on the ground which is unusual as they do like to use it to lie on for some comfort. I think that the haylage this year must be extra tasty. As with most animals there is a pecking order when it comes to food, you can see in the photo that the two young males wait for their turn.



Muntjac deer often visit the site, they will squeeze through the smallest of gaps just to come and forage for some tasty nibbles. They can breed throughout the year and have become very successful in the wild. This young muntjac took me by surprise, I was putting peanuts out for the birds and it was so well camouflaged that I didn't see it until it got up, I have to say it really startled me.



The spring is a lovely time of year, snowdrops on show, birds singing and nest building, bumble bees emerging and woodpeckers drumming. You can feel the Mills coming to life. Great Spotted Woodpeckers started drumming early this year. I have spotted a few new holes in the Alder trees. Of all the tree species on site Alder seems to be the preferred tree for them to nest in. This female woodpecker found some dead wood on the tree and was probing it to find any insects or grubs.



I have seen quite a few visiting Herons fishing our canals. They often take to the air long before I get my camera ready, but every now and then a Heron will just stand there like a statue, hoping that if they don't move they can't be seen. It's great for photography as I get plenty of opportunity to take lots of photos. Looking at a Heron head-on you can see that their eyes look slightly turned downwards, I expect this helps them to catch their food in the water.



That's all for now, but I will be sharing more wildlife stories and photos with you all again soon.

Julie Matthews

Mills Nature Conservationist