

# Petrel Rocket Launcher

Before the era of many satellites orbiting the earth, sounding rockets were extensively used for weather forecasting and other scientific purposes. Petrel was one such British sounding rocket. The first version of the rocket was 3.3 m long, had a diameter of 19cm and reached a maximum altitude of 140 kilometres. It was fired from a long barrel. Petrel was first flown on 8 June 1967 from the Guided Weapon Range in South Uist; one of the islands comprising the Outer Hebrides. Since 1968, several hundred Petrels were launched; about two-thirds of which were from South Uist, with others from Kiruna, the northernmost town in Sweden, Andoya, an island off the Norwegian coast, Thumba in India not far from the equator, Sonmiani in Pakistan and also from Greenland. Later variants were used as target drones, including from Woomera, Australia and from on board Royal Navy Auxiliary vessels. The programme of Petrel launches came to an end in August 1982 and the system was pensioned off.

A Petrel Launcher now has pride of place on the roundabout as you come on to the Royal Gunpowder Mills site. That was not where it started its sojourn at the Mills; it arrived in 2007 and was off-loaded alongside our Grade One Listed Building – L157. By 2008 it was in place on a concrete slab behind this former incorporating mill.



It was subsequently moved to the roundabout. Time and the elements, however, took their toll, at least on the physical appearance of the Petrel Launcher. Brian Clements has devoted many Wednesday morning volunteer sessions to painstakingly re-painting it, and whilst that work needs a few more detailed applications of his paint brush; it has now been visibly rejuvenated and provides an impressive centrepiece for the entrance to the site.



**Geoff Hooper**