

On Her Majesty's Service

WASC

WASC 44

Short History
of RGPF

1947

WASC 44-A

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ROYAL GUNPOWDER FACTORY

WASC/44

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ROYAL GUNPOWDER FACTORY.

Mills seem to have flourished at Waltham for a considerable period for we see that at the Survey made in the Conqueror's reign in a comparison between the state of Waltham then and in Edward the Confessor's reign "then one mill, now three, and five fisheries."

The earliest known record relating to the Waltham Abbey Powder Mills is dated 1560. It is of interest as showing that, even thus early, the factory was of considerable extent and was engaged in producing gunpowder for the English Government. On the date named, one Marco Antonio Erizzo, an Italian, writes to John Thomworth at Waltham Abbey, in reference to a tender he had made to supply the Government with materials for making powder. Thomworth was the executor of the widow of the Anthony Denny who had died in 1549, and was probably the owner or manager of the Powder Mill. From that day at any rate and doubtless earlier the manufacture of gunpowder on a large scale has been carried on continuously at Waltham Abbey.

Farmer in his "History of Waltham" gives a view of the factory as it was in 1735. From this view, it appears that there were then some twenty buildings. Of the factory Farmer says

"Near the Town, on one of these Rivers (i.e. on one of the branches of the Lea), are curious Gunpowder Mills, which supply the nation with great quantities of gunpowder, being esteemed the largest and completest Works in Great Britain, and are now the Property of Mr. John Walton, a gentleman of known honour and integrity".

This John Walton was a relative of Isaac Walton the angler.

In 1787 the factory was acquired by the Government from another member of the family, a later John Walton. From that time to the present it has always been known as the Royal Gunpowder Factory. The surrounding lands were purchased in 1795. Upon becoming Crown property the factory was enlarged by the Board of Ordnance under whose management it fell.

At various times between 1803 and 1853 the Board of Ordnance purchased land and buildings adjacent to the factory both in the town of Waltham Abbey and along the banks of the Lea to the north of the Factory, acquiring altogether about 140 acres. They purchased also the whole right of water of the River Lea and all its branches, from King's Weir in Nazeing, to the Black Ditch in Sewardstone, a length of five miles.

In 1853 the factory was capable of producing 10,000 barrels of gunpowder and of storing 5,000 tons of saltpetre and sulphur.

In 1872 the production of guncotton was commenced on a manufacturing scale at Waltham Abbey. The original guncotton Factory consisted mainly of old buildings which had formed a part of the saltpetre refinery and which abutted on the principal street of the town. It was capable of turning out about 250 tons of guncotton a year. In 1885, 100 acres of land, known as Quinton Hill were purchased by the Government and a new Guncotton Factory was erected there which started work in 1890.

In 1890, Sir Frederick Abel's Explosives Committee recommended a smokeless powder for the British Service to which the name of "Cordite" was given. The details of its manufacture were worked out in the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, and its production was commenced at Waltham Abbey in 1891. A Nitroglycerine Factory was put up on Quinton Hill where the necessary buildings for making cordite were also erected. Later, to meet the increased demands for cordite, owing to its having taken the place of gunpowder for propulsive purposes, a second Nitroglycerine Factory was built in the old portion of the factory and this started work in 1898. At the same time, the majority of the houses formerly used for the manufacture of gunpowder were converted into houses for the manufacture of cordite, the original cordite buildings being no longer suitable for the larger output required.

In 1914-15 a considerable expansion of the factory took place to meet the needs of the Great War for Cannon Cordite. Between the years 1914 to 1939 several pilot plants for the manufacture of High Explosives were erected and used as the basis for design of factories in other parts of the Country. The manufacture of explosives containing charcoal ceased in 1943.