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Article

'Walton Abbey -
Another Aspect'

By E. L. Blee

in 'Essex Countryside'

June/July 1959

including photos of
Millhead Steam/
Incorporating Mills &
Powder boat

WASC 116#1

The **ESSEX** Countryside



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A peaceful summer afternoon at Roxwell. Photograph by G. W. Martin.

THE ESSEX COUNTRYSIDE

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1959

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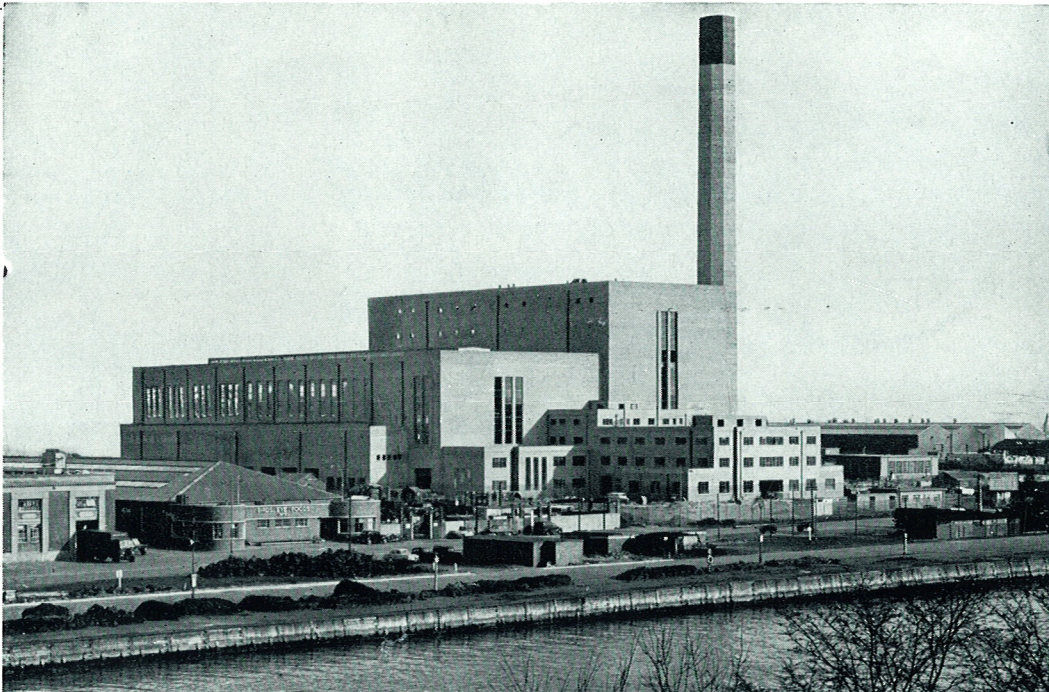
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Waltham Abbey

—another aspect

by Elliott L. Blee



Mill Head stream—gunpowder mills numbers one, two, three and four.

Waltham Abbey will always be famous for its great abbey, to which many flock each year. But there is "another place" less known, less prominent, but still worthy of note for the great part it has played in the history of our country

THE visitor to Waltham Abbey may well be excused for concentrating most of his attention on the abbey church, one of the finest examples of Norman architecture in the country.

Few people know, however, that in Waltham there is another place with just as long a history as the abbey, and in some ways an even more important one; a history which, curiously enough, began just about when that of the abbey ended, and one which also covered a period of about 400 years.

This "other place" is the Royal Gunpowder Factory.

Ever since firearms played an important part in warfare, say about the middle of the sixteenth century, the Royal Gunpowder Factory has been primarily responsible for manufacturing the necessary explosives.

Until nearly the end of the nineteenth century gunpowder was of course the only explosive known, and for this reason the factory got its name—which it has since retained, although among the newer and more deadly explosives recently manufactured there the gunpowder section has for a long while played only a minor part.

Such modern explosives were not all invented at Waltham, but were each in turn first produced there on a manufacturing scale. Guncotton, followed by cordite, tetryl, T.N.T., picric powder and R.D.X., though not all conceived at Waltham, were all born there.

Other factories have come and gone

while the Royal Gunpowder Factory has continued with a completely unbroken record. It is certainly the oldest explosives factory in this country, and possibly the oldest factory of any sort in the world.

The factory is known to have played its part in providing the means to combat the threatened Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century, and it is no exaggeration to say it was primarily responsible for providing such means to ward off the threatened invasions by France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by Germany twice in the twentieth century. All this was in addition to providing the requirements of the Army and, later, the Air Force in all their comparatively minor undertakings during this long period.

☆ ☆ ☆

Glorious as the abbey may be, Waltham's claim to fame rests just as much on the Royal Gunpowder Factory—but for which this country might well have been overrun by Spain, France or Germany.

The sleepy town of Waltham hid its secret well. Anyone passing through could hardly have any idea that the factory existed, though it employed nearly 1,000 workers in peace-time, and in war-time nearly 6,000.

It is true that traffic was occasionally held up for no apparent reason on the road from Waltham Cross to Waltham Abbey, where a War Department constable would emerge from a gateway (rather like

the entrance to a builder's yard), and would delay passing vehicles for a few moments before waving them on again; but few people would suspect that while the traffic was held up one of the factory barges, loaded with explosives, was passing underneath. Few would realize that the hump in the road was a bridge at all.

Incidentally, there is a curious thing about this bridge. In March 1789 it was feared that the sides might be damaged by passing vehicles, and it was requested that four guns should be provided to act as protection. These guns can still be seen in place today.

Quite by accident the factory is almost invisible. Viewed from a distance it merely looks like one of the many stretches of Epping Forest, and even when passing right across it, along the High Street, nothing is evident except the houses on either side which were built as quarters for the principal officers. Unfortunately some of the most attractive were destroyed by a V2.

The place was never intentionally concealed. The trees which play such an important part in sheltering it were first planted for an even more practical reason—to provide wood for making charcoal, one of the chief ingredients of gunpowder. For this reason all the grounds of the factory are still known to the workers as the "plantations," though it is probably over 100 years since locally grown timber has been used for charcoal burning. However, the trees remain, and still serve

another good purpose in that they form a most effective screen between buildings, so that an explosion in one building is not easily communicated to others.

☆ ☆ ☆

Waltham could never claim any recognition for the way in which it served the guns of this country throughout the centuries, for it was an important part of its usefulness that its work should be unadvertised. It was only during the latter part of the last war that its burden of responsibility was lifted, and the headquarters of service explosives manufacture removed from the vicinity of London.

Such records as still survive are to be found in the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, that great storehouse of historical documents, which acquired them only just recently and now has them in safe keeping.

Unfortunately, as with so many of our old institutions, early records are scanty, and there is little remaining which deals with the place when it was privately owned. After being bought by the government in 1787 however, the records are very complete—the letter books in particular, in which both the incoming and outgoing letters were all hand copied in the extravagant and often beautiful script of the eighteenth century.

When one handles these great volumes, leather bound, and stamped in gold with the coat of arms of the Board of Ordnance, and when one examines their contents, it is possible to obtain a very vivid picture of gunpowder making in those days.

Among all the details dealing with the manufacture, it is interesting, and sometimes amusing, to find many references to all sorts of intimate and personal matters which were brought to the individual attention of Sir William Congreve, then Master of the Board of Ordnance.

☆ ☆ ☆

Going back to the still earlier days of the factory, there is a legend that Guy Fawkes bought his powder there.

It has to be remembered that the conspirators, Catesby, Fawkes, Father Garnet and others, had their headquarters at White Webbs, only a mile or two away; also that while the large quantity of powder they acquired could easily be carried "from door to door" by water—down the Lea and up the Thames—transport by road in those days would have presented very great difficulties.

Gunpowder boat. The blending house may be seen on the left. The building on the right of the photograph is a magazine.

There is no proof of course, but the combination of all the circumstances points to the conclusion that the factory probably made this historic sale.

Survivals of the older factory buildings are now scarce, but as recently as 1920 the whole of the gunpowder section was still working. The saltpetre refinery and the brimstone refinery were still operated by the most primitive methods in eighteenth-century or early-nineteenth-century buildings; and one of the mills, then still in use, was built in 1814. Even the other mills, built later in the same century, the breaking down houses, press houses, granulating houses and reeling houses were all worked by water wheels, and all transport of gunpowder was by small barges of eighteenth-century design—some of unrecorded dates.

The charcoal burning house had to be seen to be believed.

With such archaic plant the Royal Gunpowder Factory produced the most accurate fuse powders—then greatly in demand by the services—and always received orders for anything of a specially exact nature which could not be produced by the modern factories. Gunpowder making is an art, not a science.

Owing to explosions and fires at different times all these buildings were of course rather like the "very old spade" which turned out to have been fitted with two new blades and six new handles during its lifetime; but these old gunpowder buildings were obviously constructed in

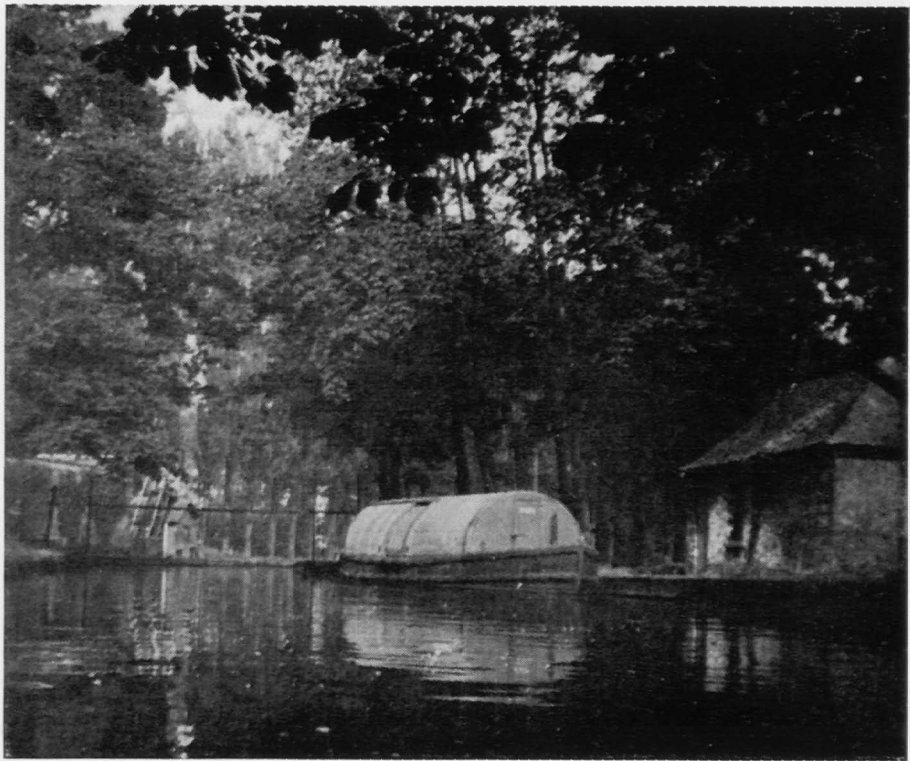
the nineteenth or even eighteenth century style, and when restored, or even replaced, the style remained the same. Buildings used for any gunpowder process get to look like genuine antiques in a very short time, but whether genuine or not it is a pity so many were allowed to disappear one by one, and that there are so few relics left.

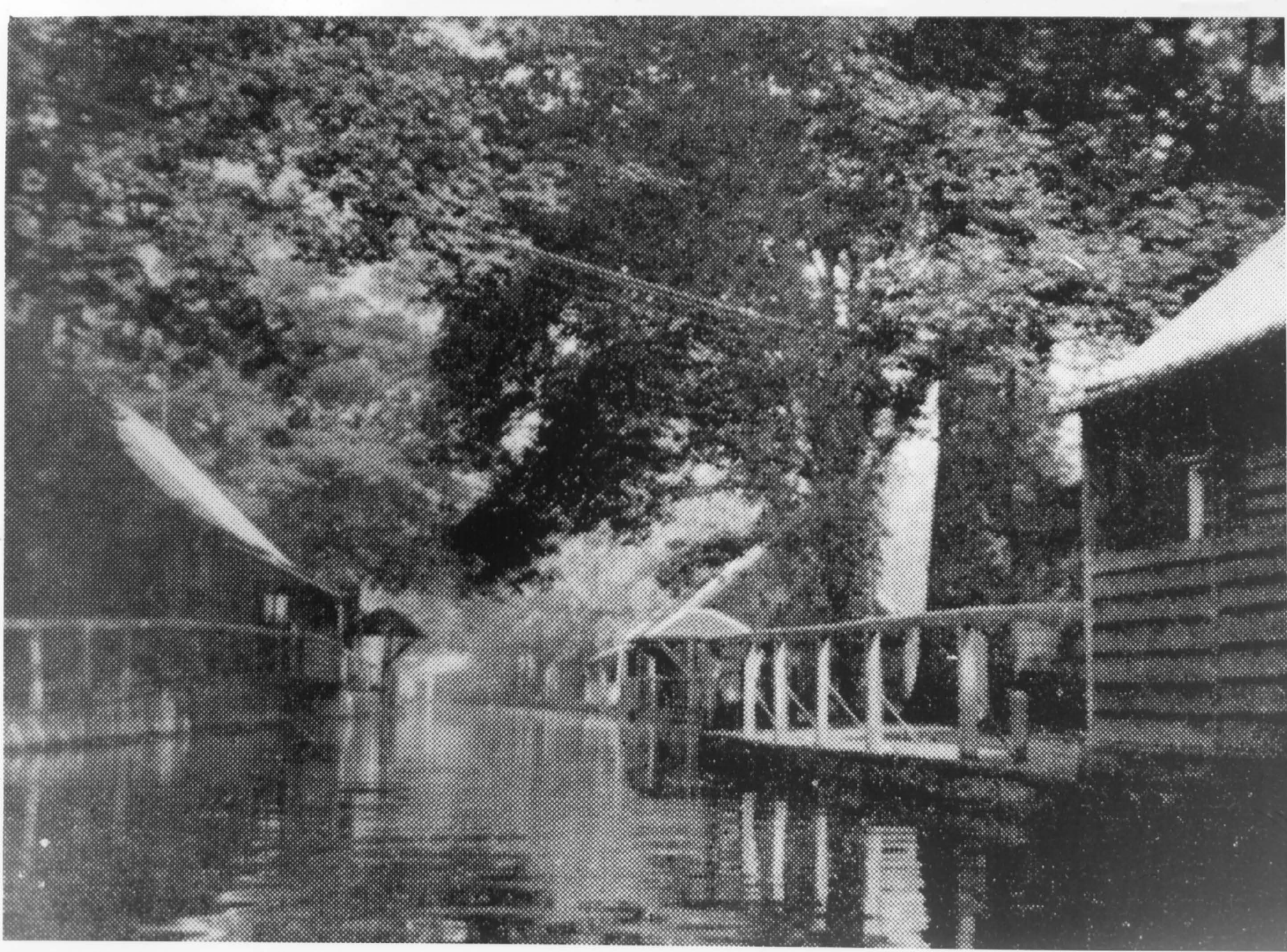
The difficulty about preserving them is that such things cannot be moved, and to preserve them *in situ*, besides costing money, appears rather useless seeing that public access is impossible while the place remains government property.

Apart from the Public Record Office, the attention of the Science Museum in Kensington has also been drawn to the Royal Gunpowder Factory, but it has so far been found impossible to rescue much from oblivion. The museum has indeed acquired some old mill stones—possibly seventeenth-century or even earlier—and a photostat copy of a volume of notes compiled by the writer, which deal mostly with the factory during the first few years of government ownership. That is all for the moment, though the matter is still being considered.

Passing through Waltham Abbey today, the visitor sees little evidence of this part of its history. The factory has always been, and still is, a secret, unobtrusive place; but we should at least gratefully recognize its long record of service to the country—though, as good citizens, perhaps we should exclude the sale to Guy Fawkes!







Librarian
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

WAL/J

10th

August, 1959.

Dear Mr. Blee,

Thank you for your letter to Mr. Monro of 28th. July, and the June/July issue of "Essex Countryside". Your article will be of considerable interest to many people here, and I shall see that the persons you mention in your letter see it.

Mr. Monro and Mrs. Williams have now retired. Dr. Green and Mr. Gravener are still about and so is Mr. Lester, who asks to be remembered to you.

Yours sincerely,

(J.R. SEYMOUR)
Librarian.

Elliott L. Blee, Esq.,
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28th July 1959.

E. A. Munro Esq.,
R.G.P.F., Waltham Abbey.

Dear Mr. Munro,

Referring to my letter of 12/3/57, and your reply of the 20th., I was too lazy to do anything about the matter till just recently, when the Editor of the "Essex Countryside" asked me to let him have something on the subject of the Royal Gunpowder Factory.

I don't know if you see this publication, but in case you do not I am sending you the current number which contains my article. I am particularly pleased with the way in which the two photographs have been reproduced as they were merely snapshots which I took from my canoe some time in 1919 with an ordinary 'box Brownie' - yet the reproductions have turned out almost better than the originals!

It occurred to me that perhaps you and one or two of my other friends at Waltham might be interested. Is Sister Durant (now Mrs Williams I believe) still at the Surgery - and are Dr. Green and Mr. Graveror still about? There are not many I am likely to know nowadays, and probably none who knew the Mill Head Stream as shown in the pictures.

I hope you are keeping well,

Yours sincerely,

(Elliott L. Blee.)

P.S. The article was duly submitted to and approved by the Ministry's Chief Information Officer of course.

To

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Mr. Brewin

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