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The Faversham Gunpowder Industry
Part 2

Editorial Note

This is the concluding part of a revised version of an article originally published by the Faversham Society as No 4 of its *Faversham Papers*, 1967. We published the first part in our last issue, Vol 5, No 1, which included the plates referred to here. This first extract aroused considerable interest and further inquiries should be addressed to the Hon Secretary, 42 Newton Road, Faversham, Kent, as should any donations towards the high costs of preserving these important industrial remains.

The Old Factories Close—and a New One Opens

While manufacturers were hard put to keep pace with the growing demand for explosives during the war, they realised well before the Armistice that a period of retrenchment was inevitable afterwards. After negotiations between the various firms, a holding company, Explosives Trades Ltd, was formed in November 1918 with an authorised capital of £18,000,000. Thus most of the major businesses in the industry amalgamated, the Faversham firms involved being Curtis's & Harvey Ltd, Eley Brothers Ltd, the Cotton Powder Company Ltd, and the Explosives Loading Company Ltd. The merger was carried through by Sir Harry (later Lord) McGowan, managing director of the largest firm involved, Nobel's Explosives Company Ltd, who became the first chairman and managing director of the new holding company. In two of the Faversham firms Nobel's had already obtained holdings—the Cotton Powder Company (in 1911) and the Explosives Loading Company (at its formation in 1912). Not long after the 1918 merger, in 1920, Explosives Trades Ltd was renamed Nobel

Industries Ltd, but all this time it was only a holding company; the individual concerns retained their own names.

Following the merger there was a rapid process of rationalisation. All the factories in the Uplees/Harty Ferry area were closed within a few years, the cordite factories ceasing production about 1919 and Eley Brothers' fulminate of mercury works closing in the same year. The oldest group of factories, still trading under the name of Curtis's & Harvey Ltd, were retained, and indeed in 1926 they were modernised (Plate p 34). Two years earlier, however, the plant at the Home Works had been sold and broken up for scrap, though one important item was deliberately left undisturbed—one of the group of four mills known as Chart Mills. The year 1926 brought another merger in the chemical industry, Nobel Industries Ltd being amalgamated with other interests controlled by Sir Alfred Mond (later Lord Melchett) to form Imperial Chemical Industries Limited. Eight years later, in June 1934, ICI closed the two remaining factories, the Oare and Marsh Works, and transferred production to Ardeer.

The town's proximity to the Continent, once an advantage for explosives manufacturers, was now a critical handicap, as it rendered it so vulnerable in the event of bombing or invasion. But till the end Faversham's particular natural advantages still stood it in good stead; two of the three basic raw materials—sulphur and saltpetre—were still being brought in by the creek, and much of the third—charcoal—was being made from wood grown, charred and ground within the factory areas.

However, one factory in the town remains as a link with the explosives industry. This is owned by Heaters Ltd, and was established in 1931 in premises opened in 1924 by the Mexco Mining Explosives Company Ltd. Known as the Abbey Works, the buildings stand on the east bank of the creek, north of the railway sidings. The firm makes the heater, or chemical energiser, used in a carbon-dioxide blasting cartridge which is employed in the mining industry.

What is Left

What survives today of an industry that was for so long such an intimate feature of the town's economy? Of the more recent factories in the Uplees area there is now little trace, and the casual visitor might suppose they had never even existed. Most of the marshland in this isolated and attractive spot is now given over to grazing, and has resumed the pastoral appearance it always had before the first factory was built in 1873.

Rather more survives of the older-established factories. The latest of the three, the Marsh Works, established in 1786, has been largely given over to gravel working, and many of the factory structures were demolished in the spring of 1958. Ironically, they were so solidly constructed that they had to be blown up with gelignite. A few of the buildings still remain; near the grading plant are workshops, offices and stores (Plate p 39), still used as such by the present occupiers, the Ace Sand & Gravel Company Ltd. From here a path can be followed along an old tram track beside a miniature canal to a spot where an artesian well still feebly bubbles in the shadow of immense concrete screen walls. Though so close to Faversham, it is a secluded place, and the remains still impress.

The Oare Works has had longer to mature, and is more typical of a disused gunpowder factory, with its main stream following an erratic course beneath old trees. The only word for the surroundings, as for parts of the Home Works, is bosky. Here, too, gravel working nearby has resulted in the gradual disappearance of the buildings, though some survive. The old Foreman's House, literally embowered in trees, is now known as Davington Mill. The Victorian single-storey offices and foreman's stores still exist, while not far away, but jealously guarded by tall trees, are the sunken remains of Magazine No 1 (Plate p 39).

Following the track towards Oare, one comes upon the handsome White House. This was occupied by a foreman, too, and beside it was a watermill, the outline of whose wheel can still be seen. A little farther on, rising above Oare Pond and Meadow, is another attractive

Georgian house, with its front of well-hung mathematical tiles looking for all the world like the real bricks that most people probably believe them to be. This also was part of the Oare Works, and it is good to see that it has recently been restored.

But, appropriately enough, most of all survives of the first works to open, the Home Works, now being developed as a private housing estate by Messrs F. Parham Ltd of 173 Pier Road, Gillingham. Most people will know the stone-built entrance lodge, looking rather like a level-crossing keeper's house, in South Road, not to mention the terrace of three red-brick Georgian houses in Tanners Street (Nos 50, 51 and 52) that face the site of King's Mills on the other side of the stream.

And everyone knows Stonebridge Pond, with its various streams and miniature inlets, though perhaps not everyone realises that it was once part of a gunpowder works, and that it owes its form to this fact. Some people, it is fair to say, know Stonebridge Pond better than others, and if you are ever lucky enough to be allowed on to it you will see a great deal of Faversham that you have never seen before. There are few better places to be on a sunny day, and somehow the pond seems much bigger than it really is. The cottages on Brents Hill, with their gardens running down to the pond, not to mention The Lawn, the attractive Georgian house opposite, were all part of the Home Works. Down Lower Road, a good half-mile away, pause and look at the White House, an even older dwelling, which also belonged to the works.

Between here and Davington was the heart of the old Royal Factory, and here are the most important survivals. Tightly girt with trees so that they are quite invisible from South Road and Lower Road, both only 50 yd away, are the remains of Chart Mills (Plate p 40). This group of incorporating mills is the only one of its kind to have survived in Faversham—or anywhere else in the United Kingdom, so far as is known. Of three of the mills there survive the stone beds and other remains, and the fourth is happily virtually complete, looking much as it did two centuries ago, though it has not been used for very many years. With its big waterwheel and massive machinery, it is an im-

pressive, irreplaceable link with the past. It has a place of note in the history not only of the explosives industry but also of mechanical engineering, for the castings themselves are of interest. According to an expert writing in the *Foundry Trade Journal*, 'the iron castings which form the machinery complex were probably installed at various times in the 19th century, as the earlier components wore out. It is obvious that many of the original gear-wheels and axles were composite components made from wood and cast iron, but in later times were replaced by one-piece iron castings. An example of this can be seen at the centre of the large vertical gear-wheel attached to the water-wheel shaft. At one time the components were connected by a large multi-sided wooden axle, which was later replaced by a cast-iron component, hence the rather unusual configuration of the gear-wheel hub'.

The mill is history brought to life. The setting, too, is superb, with its clear rippling stream flashing back sparks of sunlight through the trees. Always in the background is the companionable cool murmuring of the water, with its reassuring hint of repose and permanence amid the changing scene around it.

There is to be a streamside walk from Stonebridge Pond, and what better climax to a stroll through an old gunpowder factory than a visit to some of the actual mills? The Faversham Society plans to restore the whole group, and part of the site has already been generously promised to the Borough Council by F. Parham Ltd so that the work can be carried out. The Government, Kent County Council and the Faversham Borough Council have promised contributions of £1,000, £250 and £250 respectively if the Society can raise the other £2,250 needed. The aim is to recreate the mills authentically in their setting, giving the impression not of a lifeless museum-piece, but of active machinery which has just been stopped for an inspection. And if funds permit, seating will be provided for visitors who wish to enjoy the peace of this place.

*William Bunting's Memories of the Mills*³

'I have many memories of the powder mills, being born in Flood

Lane and living there for over fifty years before moving to Brent Hill Cottage, overlooking Stonebridge Pond. My father worked at the gun-cotton factory at Uplees, as did my uncle, my four sisters and brother. When I was a boy powder-milling was a big thing in Faversham and there were many different mills in the area.

'I remember going through the mills on the way to school with other boys and girls living in the lower part of Flood Lane. The millmen used to come out of the gates over to the head of the Creek to have a smoke wearing their black "fuskins" and powder shoes. Mr Underdown, one of the millmen, used to give me his basket, about the size of a peck basket with a lid and a handle, and a note which I would take to the back way of the Castle Inn. There Mrs Saunders, the landlady, would put in cheese sandwiches and two bottles of beer, and when I got back to the mill gate I would find Mr Underdown waiting with a bag of pears or any other fruit in season and sometimes a mug of hot tea. The mills were very close to our home and at nights I would lie awake listening to the old waterwheel as it turned, giving out a grinding and screeching sound. I also heard the rumbling sound of the "runners", sixteen great round stones rolling round. The stream was only sixteen feet from our front door and I would often sit down beside it and watch the millmen taking off the milled powder and loading with green charge, and hear the bell ring when stopping and starting was required.

'All that remains of the Home Mills are the blast walls, the piers, three sets of stone runners, six feet high, sixteen inches thick, and weighing each about three tons, and the well of the waterwheel. One or two buildings also remain. Stonebridge Lodge was once a firing range where the powder was tested by firing shots against a large iron plate on one wall, and what is now a tool shed on the gardens under Davington Hill was once a powder workers' lobby. Even Davington Manor was once used by the mills to store saltpetre.

'A bit further away were two more mills, the King's Mills and the Little Chart Mills, both standing in St Ann's Park. The King's Mills stood just inside the park, a few feet off the River Nailbourne, almost

in line with Tanners Street with the entrance by the ford. The three large houses on the west side when coming out of the ford once belonged to the millowners. Mr Wood, the sweep, lived in the first and he and his father and brothers swept the shafts at these four mills and at the Oare and Marsh Works. Horses and carts would go through the ford from West Street and Tanners Street, and sometimes on Sunday mornings horse drivers would fetch down their horses and let them stand in the water. I even remember the circus coming to the town and fetching down all the animals in relays to wash and drink at the ford. Water from the Nailbourne was also used by the tanners (from whom the street takes its name) to soak the skins in the pens which lay alongside it.

'The King's Mills had no mill pond nearby, but the ponds up at Ospringe and the springs in the willow beds kept the stream above the mills always full. This stream also fed the Little Chart Mills which lay further upstream. When entering St Ann's Park by the drive from South Road these mills stood on the left about a hundred yards off the drive surrounded by very large elm trees. The waterwheel there measured about fourteen feet high, vanes included. Nearby was another wheel, though only the well in which it worked is still there. Each wheel drove a set or pair of mills on each side of it, so that the two wheels drove four sets. Later a steam engine was installed and two more sets of mills were added, making six sets in all. The waterwheel and some of the working parts of one mill still survive. A wooden cog wheel about ten feet across on a timber drive-shaft or "mandrel" spun the two runners which ground the powder in a pan or bath which was fastened on to a brick or stone "bed". An "off-gear" cog was lowered out of the wooden cog to stop and start the mill without affecting the other mill. On one side was a blast wall, like those at the Home Works only smaller, but the rest of the building was timber.

'Further off still were the Ospringe Mills with their entrance beside the White House in Lower Road. The carts for the Ospringe Mills used an entrance just below the black bridge, under which the river flowed at Lower Road. They then passed along a track through a

meadow and up to the charge-house which stood beside the river. The track then continued round to the mills. A set of runners remains nearby and I remember another buried alongside the road leading down to the mills, though these may now have been built on. The White House and some other houses in this area once belonged to the millowners.

'Powder was also made at the Oare Works or, as it was known in earlier times, the Davington Works. The proofing site was on the crest of Tinshop Hill. We lads used to watch through the fence and see the men testing the powder. A muzzle loading gun, about eighteen inches long and a foot thick, was used. After the firing there would be a loud thump and we would see a man wheeling back the ball or shot to be fired again and again. The site lay between a lovely avenue of conifers along a drive or green road down which the gun fired its shots. The distance to where the shot fell was measured and this showed the strength of the powder. The hill was named after the tinshops below it where powder flasks and canisters were at one time made and painted.

'Burny's Pond, at the east end of the works, overlooked by the White House at Oare, held back water for a milling house with two sets of mills. Four stone runners still lie nearby and on the south side of the White House the millmen's watch-hut still stands. Later the water-wheel was replaced by an electric motor and sulphur was milled there. Now the mill shed only remains and is used as a garage.

'Out towards Hollow Shore, was the Cylinder House and nearby the Charcoal House, and beyond them a dock. The Marsh Works at Uplees specialised in guncotton. Some guncotton buried in 1847 after an explosion was dug up sixteen years later and on testing was found to have undergone very little deterioration. When the works closed down in the early thirties I saw men still digging guncotton up and burning it to make the land safe.

'The last powder factory to be built in Faversham was constructed on the south side of the Creek below Chambers' Wharf in the mid-twenties. The layout was very similar to the old guncotton factory at Uplees, but not so large, and the first foreman, Mr Jones, actually came

from the Uplees factory. Soon after this the powder industry in Faversham was closed down.

'The traditional ingredients for gunpowder making are charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre, but many processes were involved before the powder was complete. All three raw materials had to be milled to the right fineness before mixing and after this the powder was milled again. It was then sent to the press house where it was pressed down to hard cake form and from here it passed to the corning house where it was broken up for the size of grain required. Next it was taken to the glazing house where the grains were put into revolving barrels with black lead to give them a glossy surface. From here the grains passed through the dusting house where they were sifted and the "fine returns" sent back to the mills for processing all over again, or taken away for use in fireworks. Finally the powder was dried out in the stoving house and put into barrels.

'Barrels were made by local coopers who also served the oyster and cement industries. I remember Mr Stratford's hooping sheds not far from the blast wall at the lower end of Flood Lane. In the summer the coopers would soak their wood in the pond, battening it down underwater in pens.

'The boxes and barrels of powder were mainly shipped away in barges. I remember one barge, the *Uplees*, built by Mr Dan at Uplees which loaded powder and guncotton at Uplees. The works had their own powder barges, some appropriately named; there were the *Friar Bacon*, *Guy Fawkes*, *Black Boy*, *Frank*, *Return*, *United*, *Baden-Powell*, *Economy* and *Grace*, mostly working from the Marsh Works at Oare Creek.

'Sulphur and saltpetre were brought in from outside the town but much charcoal was made locally. I remember the men cutting down alder poles, which they made into three foot lengths and stripped of bark with tools called "spudals". The wood was then carried on biers by two men to the meadow where it was loaded on to carts. The willow beds being wet and boggy this was the best way of bringing the wood out. Women also worked along the willow beds taking the rind off the

spring-willow to be used in basket making by Mr Packer at his shop in the Market Square.

'The millmen wore regulation suits for working known as "fuskins". They were of a black material and consisted of a small cap, a jumper and pants. They also wore "powder shoes", all hand sewn with no nails in them. But this didn't prevent explosions completely. I remember mills blowing up on three occasions and each time the fire was put out by the millmen. I never saw any firemen arrive and if they had I don't think they would have been let into the works. The only time they entered was after the "big blow" at the ELC at Uplees. My uncle, Mr A. Smith, said that this explosion, on 2 April 1916, was heard by him while serving in France. On this occasion the three works fire brigades were all lost when the first explosion took place. Some two or three years before the 1914-18 war one of my sisters who worked at Uplees was in a shop during a "blow", and was picked up off the marsh with her clothes and hair entirely burnt off. She was fetched home in the firm's horse-van.

'Many of the mills had very lovely surroundings. The King's and Chart Mills were in St Ann's Park. There was a well-kept drive, then an avenue of lime trees which started at Stonebridge entrance and led almost up to St Ann's House. At each entrance there were ornamental gates, with two muzzle-loading guns standing there as outer posts. Fruit of all kinds and large walnut trees grew in the park. It was just the same at Stonebridge Pond, around the Home Mills, with garden paths and bridges joining all the island gardens, and at the Oare Works there were many fine old horse-chestnuts planted by the owners, their lower branches sweeping out over the pond—a really beautiful sight in bloom.'

Chronology

As this is the first study of the Faversham explosives industry, it may be helpful to sum up the developments in chronological form.

1558-1601 First Faversham gunpowder mills began work during this period or earlier.

- 1653 Home Works being operated by Daniel Judd.
- 1673 Much gunpowder being smuggled out of Faversham.
- c 1685 Huguenot refugees found employment in gunpowder works.
- by 1719 Oare Works in operation.
- 1734 Watermills introduced for incorporating process.
- 1760 Home Works acquired by Government and became Royal Gunpowder Factory.
- 1764 St Ann's House built.
- 1767 Explosion at Home Works damaged part of Davington Priory.
- 1774 Annual capacity of Home Works 364 tons.
- 1781 Serious explosion at Home Works destroyed part of Davington Priory.
- 1786 Marsh Works opened by Government as extension to Royal Gunpowder Factory.
- 1794 Royal Powdermill Volunteers raised.
- by 1798 Oare Works in ownership of Miles Peter Andrews and Frederick Pigou.
- 1799 George Finlay born at St Ann's House.
- 1810 Royal Powdermills Volunteers disbanded.
- 1812 Oare Works acquired by John Hall of Dartford.
- c 1815 Home Works let to John Hall.
- 1825 Home Works sold to John Hall & Son.
- 1830 Davington Factory Friendly Society formed.
- 1832 Marsh Works let to John Hall & Son.
- 1846 First guncotton factory in the world opened at Marsh Works.
- 1847 Serious explosion closed Marsh Works guncotton factory.
- 1854 Marsh Works sold to John Hall & Son.
- 1854-6 Marsh Works extended.
- 1867 Marsh Works remodelled.
- 1872 Cotton Powder Company Ltd registered.
- 1873 Cotton Powder Company Ltd opened factory at Uplees.

- 1874 'Tonite' invented by George Trench, manager of Cotton Powder Company Ltd factory.
- c 1880 'Faversham Powder' introduced by Cotton Powder Company.
- 1892 Nitro-glycerine plant opened at Cotton Powder Company.
- 1896 Cotton Powder Company Ltd began to produce cordite. Fire at Cotton Powder Company offices. John Hall & Son became a private limited company.
- 1898 John Hall & Son Limited absorbed by Curtis's & Harvey Ltd.
- 1899 'Bobbinite' introduced by Curtis's & Harvey.
- 1904 Messrs Helcke opened fulminate of mercury factory at Harty Ferry.
- 1908 Eley Brothers Ltd took over factory of Messrs Helcke.
- 1911 Nobel's Explosives Ltd acquired interest in Cotton Powder Company Ltd.
- 1912 Nobel's Explosives Ltd acquired interest in Explosives Loading Company Ltd.
- 1913 Explosives Loading Company Ltd opened a factory at Uplees.
- 1914 Unsuccessful bid by Nobel's Explosives Ltd to build large factory at Harty.
- 1916 Disastrous explosion at Explosives Loading Company factory.
- 1918 Explosives Trades Ltd took over all Faversham explosives firms.
- 1919 (or shortly after) All factories in Uplees/Harty Ferry area closed.
- 1920 Explosives Trades Ltd renamed Nobel Industries Ltd.
- 1924 Mexco Mining Explosives Company Ltd opened Abbey Works.
- 1926 Oare Works, Marsh Works and Home Works remodelled. Nobel Industries Ltd merged with other concerns to form Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd.

- 1931 Abbey Works taken over by Heaters Ltd.
- 1934 Oare Works, Marsh Works and Home Works closed.
- 1963 St Ann's House demolished.
- 1967 Appeal for the restoration of Chart Mills (Home Works) launched.

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- 1 The heels and soles of ordinary shoes were of course secured, then as now, with iron nails, which could strike dangerous sparks off stones, etc.
- 2 It was in the stoves that the powder was dried.
- 3 Condensed from *Faversham Magazine*, Vol 1 No 3, pp 9-12.

Acknowledgements

For information, assistance and advice the author wishes to thank: Mr Elliott C. Blee, of Westcliff; Dr F. Hull (Kent County Archivist); Mr E. Brent-Jones, of Billingshurst; Miss M. Reeve, Miss J. Wood and Mr D. G. Justham, of Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd; Mr & Mrs S. Johnson, Messrs Peter Hutley-Bull, Geoffrey King, Jack Salmon and Andrew Osborne, of Faversham; and Mr W. J. Reynolds, of Stevenston.

Plates, see Vol 5 No 1, pages 33-40.