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# THE FAVERSHAM MAGAZINE



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1969

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Hon. Secretary : 42 NEWTON ROAD, FAVERSHAM

Editor — PETER HUTLEY - BULL

Asst. Editor — ANGELA HUTLEY - BULL

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# CHART GUNPOWDER MILLS:

## - Restoration commences

*Arthur Percival*

ONE of the most exciting projects of its kind is now beginning to take shape in Faversham. This is the restoration of the Chart Gunpowder Mills, nearly two hundred years old and the only ones of their period to survive in Britain.

When the Faversham Society launched a public appeal for the scheme two years ago, it was with more conviction than confidence. No-one had tackled a venture of this kind before, and £2,500 seemed a lot to try to raise in a small town. But as so often in Faversham, the response was magnificent. There was standing room only at the special meeting called to launch the appeal; a steady flow of donations came in; and a short history of the local explosives industry sold so rapidly that a reprint was necessary within a year.

All this demanded a lot of work from Society volunteers, but all along help has been given readily and cheerfully. There is a certain amount of good-humoured rivalry between the Society's various committees, and it has always been the claim of the Gunpowder Mills Working Party, which meets most frequently of all, that it also gets through the most work. This is perhaps not strictly true, but it certainly gets through its lengthy agendas with the minimum of fuss and maximum of fun.

This Spring, with the appeal only £750 short of its target, the Society decided that the time had come to commence restoration. It judged (correctly, it is to be hoped) that once work began the remainder of the money needed would be subscribed in record time. As the superstructure of the one mill which survives complete was in the worst condition, it was decided to make a start by repairing this. Plans were made, a specification drawn up, and the contract placed with a local firm of builders, Messrs. E. Fuller and Son Ltd.

All this sounds quite simple, but in fact nothing could have been less straightforward. To qualify for the additional grant of £1,000 from the Ministry of Public Building and Works — and to satisfy its own high standards — the Society had to see that the restoration was as authentic as humanly possible. This was no easy task, with a building for which no plans existed and which had never been photographed while still at work. It was rather like trying to complete a jigsaw when some of the key pieces are missing.

It could have been infuriating, but it turned out to be thoroughly enjoyable — if a bit exacting at times. Some deductions could be made from the existing remains. Someone in Southend who had seen the mills on television drew attention to a plan of 1830 in the Public Record Office in

London. Though not drawn to a very large scale, this gave a good idea of the general construction of some similar mills at Waltham Abbey in Essex. A group of Favershamians exiled to Ardeer in Scotland when the local explosives factory finally closed in 1934 clubbed together to present the Society with a magnificent album of photographs showing many of the buildings as they were 40 or 50 years ago. There was no photograph of Chart Mills, but plenty of evidence that could be pieced together to help. Contact was established with the Government Explosives Research and Development Establishment at Waltham Abbey. There gunpowder-making had ceased in 1914, and the last mills had been destroyed within the last twenty years. But interest in the history of the old works had been re-awakened by a group of scientists on the staff, and they had set about collecting documentary evidence. This was freely placed at the disposal of the Society.

Other links were established with enthusiasts in other former centres of the industry. Information came from places such as Dartford, Tonbridge, London, Chilworth (in Surrey), Lowwood (in Furness) and Wilmington (in Delaware). Friends in Lowwood (one of the many factories started with Faversham know-how) even offered to let the Society have a pair of edge-runners if these could not be found locally. Last but not least, Bill Bunting, brought up at the "Castle" at Oare and one of the keenest members of the Working Party, cast round for clues both in his retentive memory and in the equally retentive waters of Stonebridge Pond, where he has the good fortune to live and which once formed part of the Home Works. Bill's memory yielded much inside information that was never in any book or manuscript, while the Pond for its part threw up secrets that had sunk to the bottom many years ago.

After all this the Ministry were satisfied, and work began. Before building work could start two edge-runners had to be moved in. 'Edge-runners, what are they?' Well, above all they are heavy. Each one weighs three tons. They are large wheels of solid stone; they were mounted in pairs on an axle fitted to a central shaft, and (not surprisingly) they turned the 'green charge' of powder into such a compact mass that it was known as 'mill cake'. They would cost a fortune to make to-day; but fortunately Bill Bunting knew of a source of spares at the old Oare Works, only about a mile from the Chart Mills.

The only problem was how to move them. Here, for once, the Working Party was sharply divided. One school of thought — nicknamed 'Stone-



hengers' by the other — maintained that if the runners had been moved into position by hand two hundred years ago, the operation could be repeated in 1969. The Progressives, on the other hand, felt this approach was a bit dated. In the end they won the day, and under the capable supervision of Alderman Alec King a large crane and lorry managed the manoeuvre. This alone cost the Society nearly £75.

Before the runners were placed in position a new 'pan' had been fitted to the circular stone 'bed' of the mill. Pans are sometimes thin, tinny things, but this is not one of them. It was specially made of heavy-gauge steel at the local shipyard, and cost nearly £150.

The field was now clear for the builders. An attractive new housing estate is creeping up round the Mills and the Society felt its first duty was to repair the tall brick blast-wall, which had become rather ragged and unsightly at the top. Once this was done, work began on the mill-house itself. Timber-framed, this could be prefabricated at the builders' workshops. Numbered in the traditional

way in scribed roman numerals, the main members were then erected. By Easter the main framework was in position and the Society decided to invite the public to view progress. The response, once more, was heartwarming. There were more than 1,200 visitors, some of them people who had lived in Faversham all their lives but never set eyes on the Mills before. Everyone seemed to linger as long as they possibly could, studying the machinery, admiring the crystal-clear water of the mill races, and strolling through the trees. Though a lot still remained to be done, it was clear that the Mills had established themselves as the latest addition to the many attractive sights of Faversham.

What now lies ahead? First, the superstructure and roof have to be completed. Then there is some expensive engineering work to be done. Some new bearings have to be made; some of the wooden teeth of the massive crown wheel have to be replaced; a spindle and naves have to be provided for the edge-runners; new vanes 6 feet long (64 of them) have to be made for the water



Chart Mills : surviving mill in course of restoration, April 1969

Arthur Percival

wheel ; and two new sluices have to be built. All this is craftsman's work, and it will not be cheap. Finally, the site has to be laid out. Already a firm of tree-surgeons has been called in, and has carried out a scheme to see that the trees on the site have as long a life as possible, felling one or two which have 'bolted' and trimming diseased boughs off others. New paving will have to be laid where the original brick paths have been robbed, seats will be provided, and some grass may be sown. There will be nothing unauthentic about this, for powder factories were always beautiful places, with streams to provide a power supply, trees to give protection in the event of a 'blow', and even orchards planted on the land between the widely-spaced buildings.

Words of thanks are usually left to a final report, but the moment has probably come to say how grateful the Faversham Society is for the handsome co-operation it has had from so many sources. Some of this has been in cash, some has been in kind, and without it the project would never have been possible.

*Editor's Note.* The Appeal Fund remains open, and the Society itself is planning a number of money-raising ventures in aid of it. We hope that any readers who have not yet subscribed will do so. *Any* contribution, however small, is welcome. Your donation should be sent to the Hon. Treasurer, Faversham Society (Chart Mills Fund), c/o National Provincial Bank Ltd., Faversham.



# The Last Twenty Years of the Faversham Gunpowder Industry – some personal recollections

**W. J. Reynolds**

*The writer joined Curtis and Harvey, Ltd., at Faversham, during the 1914-1918 War, when the late Mr. C. L. Watson-Smith (deceased 1916) of St. Ann's, was the Managing Director and the late Mr. H. Minter (deceased 1918) of The Lawn, Davington, was the Works Manager. He served under five Works Managers during that time, namely, Mr. H. Minter, Mr. W. C. Sealy, Mr. J. S. Nichol, Mr. T. Halbert and Mr. A. P. Cattle.*

THE complete factory consisted of the Home Works (incorporating mills at Ospringe, Chart, Kings and Middle Works), Marsh Works, Oare Works and the Fuse Factory. The latter was situated between the road to Oare Village (just beyond the old windmill) and the Marsh Works. It was engaged in the manufacture of powder fuses and also the conversion of plain detonators to electric detonators. The foreman was Mr. C. E. Elliot (whose father was the foreman at the Oare Small Packing House) who had the house built on the south side of Ethelbert Road and named "Via Gellia". The Fuse Factory ceased production in about 1923 when the Westquarter Factory took over the manufacture etc. The Oare Works had no electricity at this time, all lighting was by means of oil. "Danger" buildings had no artificial lighting in them.

The Marsh Works was a little more fortunate and had electric lighting in the newer buildings, i.e., in the compressed cartridge shops and in other buildings, the plant that had been installed in aid of the war effort. Nos. 1 and 2 Mills (16 pairs of edge-runners) were diverted for the war period from the incorporation of Blackpowder to the incorporation of Amatol (i.e., T.N.T. and Ammonium Nitrate) and a number of Cam Presses at both the No. 1 and No. 2 Compressed Cartridge Shops (No. 1 Shops lost by explosion in 1916 and not recommissioned) went over to the pressing of both T.N.T. and Amatol pellets or cartridges, components for 18 pounder "burster" charges. The No. 3 Cartridge Shops were erected and went into production in 1917. After waxing, the pellets were despatched to various filling factories. Another group of new shops produced Tetryl pellets; bulk

Amatol, the product after milling, was packed into metal drums and despatched to the various munition factories. Much male and female labour was utilized in this effort.

Transport was mainly by horse, and Curtis and Harvey possessed a fine lot of sturdy animals. These were a sight to be remembered when, after the arrival in the Dock on Oare Creek (which was close by, but outside the Marsh Works) of a Petre Barge, the special trucks or large bogies, after loading, were drawn by three or four trace-horses through the Blackmarsh to the Saltpetre Refinery at Marsh Works. Horse drawn wagons or vans were used for the loading of powder barges, conveying the powder from the factory magazines to the barge at the Dock (see illustration). Barges had many names and some that readily come to mind are the "Guy Fawkes", "E.P.B.", "Grace", "Baden Powell", "Black Boy", etc., etc. The wagons or vans were also a very familiar sight as they made their way on regular journeys through the streets of Faversham, from the factory to the Goods Station, with gunpowder for the home market to be loaded on to special rail vans for transit. Here again, trace-horses were used for these heavy loads and if the vans were out after lighting-up time, it was necessary for lights to be carried both in front and behind, but not attached to the van. During the 1914-1918 war period, a large covered motor lorry (driver J. Pettinger) was transferred from the Cliffe factory and a steam wagon was also made available. These two vehicles were not used for the transit of gunpowder, but for coal and the various raw materials for the war effort.

No amenities as we know them to-day existed at this time, but a number of wash-houses and changing rooms were available. These were scattered about the works wherever there was a group of working buildings. Faversham Factory, or at least the Marsh Works, had quite a lucrative by-product which was not a part of the manufacture of gunpowder; this was fruit. The Marsh Works Orchard was a most popular place during the fruit season, many bushels of fruit being sent to market. They consisted of cherries, plums, gages, apples, pears and nuts, according to the season of the year. One cheque received from Covent Garden, in 1933, was for £465, a welcome contribution to the factory's overhead charges. Looking after the orchard took the full time of a man for a large part of the year. Additional help was also sent to help at various periods. The main road from the Ham Road Gate to the Marsh Office, and some other roads, were lined with walnut trees, reputed to have



**Marsh Works : Dock at Oare Creek**

On left vans discharging packed powder into sailing barge. On right trucks receiving crude saltpetre for refining

I.C.I.

been planted when the Marsh Works was a part of the Royal Gunpowder Mills and to have been intended for use as gun stocks.

Cordwood, i.e., Alder and Willow, grew in abundance and was cut down at the appropriate time of the year after the stocks had grown to a height of about fifteen to twenty feet and was stored after stacking in the woodyard for charcoal burning. Other woods, elm, chestnut, poplar, plane, etc., were known as "common" woods as they produced a different quality charcoal. Dogwood was imported from outside sources as were quite large quantities of both Alder and Willow. The Alder and Willow grown in the factory was cut down in the spring of the year, its side branches removed and the main stem or trunk cut into lengths of approximately three and a half feet, the bark peeled off and the wood stacked in "cords" of one hundred and twenty-eight cubic feet, the latter for payment as the fellers were paid by the cord. It was later collected by a horse-drawn cart and conveyed to the woodyard. The factory, which was very wooded, grew many kinds of trees such as elm, poplar, wellingtonia, larch,

fir, plane, chestnut and ash. Many wild flowers also grew, especially violets and irises. Bird life was also varied and Kingfishers, Nightingales, Blackbirds, Thrushes, Finches and many others could be seen. To have found a nest and to have been able to watch from the laying of the eggs until the young birds were able to fly was most interesting.

During 1925 and 1926 the factory was enlarged to take over the production of the Hounslow factory which was closing down. The Faversham factory was 'electrified' and accordingly most of the old steam boiler stations and engines (beam engines) at both the Marsh and the Oare Works were no longer required and were closed down. The enlargement of means of production during 1925 and 1926 included the erection of Suspended Runner Mills, Press House, Corning House and Magazines at either the Marsh Works or the Oare Works. The building and commissioning of the new Power Station meant the reduction of the small stations, approximately seven at either works. There were five tall chimneys at the Marsh Works but only one was left, that at the Charcoal Burn-





Oare Works : Packing "J. Hall & Son" Canisters and Blasting Pellets

I.C.I.

ing House. Oare Works suffered in the same manner.

The production of gunpowder was low at times owing to the decreased demand and in January 1934 a decision was announced to concentrate manufacture at a new factory being built at Ardeer, in Ayrshire. Much of the plant for the new factory was sent from Faversham and approximately twenty men were also transferred to Scotland as key workers for the new factory. The Faversham Powder Building, after the removal of the required plant for erection at Ardeer, was burned down and the site made free of explosives before it was handed back to the estate. In 1926 a Tower Clock with two faces and a bell had been transferred to Faversham from Hounslow Factory and erected at the top of a square shaft on the Cooperage at the Oare Works. On the closing of Faversham in 1934 the clock, faces and bell were taken down and sent to Ardeer. The bell has now been returned to

Faversham and may possibly be erected at the Chart Mills.

And so on 30th June 1934 the wheels of the Gunpowder Industry stopped turning and the manufacture which had been one of Faversham's major industries for over three hundred years came to an end. There is little, if any, doubt that the name of "Faversham" had, in the course of years, gone to practically every corner of the world. This was the end of the industry in Faversham, but it is still being carried on in Ardeer, and the restoration and preservation of the Chart Mills will be ample evidence to future generations of this old and important industry which commenced so long ago in Faversham and with which so many former citizens were associated. During the many years there were busy and less busy times, happy times and sad times, and doubtless many old and familiar local names will bear remembrance of this great industry.

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