

~~WASC 428~~

WASC 821

# On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 821  
WAI 175

ERDE - Propellant  
press and drenching  
apparatus

# Sssh! THIS IS TOP SECRET

WASC  
821



Visitors inspect a machine that makes propellant—and is housed inside concrete walls six feet thick.

THE Explosives Research and Development Establishment at Waltham Abbey has an accident record that many large industrial firms must envy.

Last year they had just 11 reportable accidents on their premises. These were accidents at work which result in the injured person needing more than three days' sick leave.

Of these 11 accidents two were employees who fell off their bicycles, a further two were men tripping over their own feet, and another was one of the Ministry of Defence police officers who slipped over on wet grass while on patrol and dislocated a shoulder.

For a "top secret" Ministry of Defence establishment dealing with explosives and propellants this is not bad going. They have not had an accident with explosives there "for years."

Questions were raised recently in the House of Commons by John Biggs-Davison, as MP for Epping, about the safety of the establishment following the Flixborough disaster and the possibility of it being repeated in Waltham Abbey.

This week the establishment "threw open its doors" to a delegation from the town council to prove just how safe they were—and dispel any lingering fears that Flixborough could happen in Waltham Abbey.

And a very slick and professional job they did of it. It included lunch after an introductory talk, another talk on safety aspects with a film, a tour of inspection, then tea and questions.

The only point was I was none the wiser about what they did at the establishment. What I was sure of was that Flixborough could not

happen there. How do I know that—well, because they told me so.

The establishment, in all seriousness, does appear to take more than adequate safety precautions for the operations which are carried out there. But the tour of inspection of some of the buildings meant nothing to me.

Every building has a safety limit on the amount of explosive or propellant and the number of men that can operate in them.

But everything at the establishment—at least what we were allowed to see—appears to be innocuous enough. It was certainly difficult to relate it to any potential danger.

In fact the establishment with its trees, grass banks and verges resembles more a nature reserve than a "top secret" research centre.

The ERDE say they are a research establishment and not an explosives factory . . . "everything possible is done to eliminate any chance of accidental explosion. All equipment and processes are continuously monitored by a full-time safety team, and no material is handled in more than tiny laboratory amounts until its properties are fully known and all potential hazards assessed."

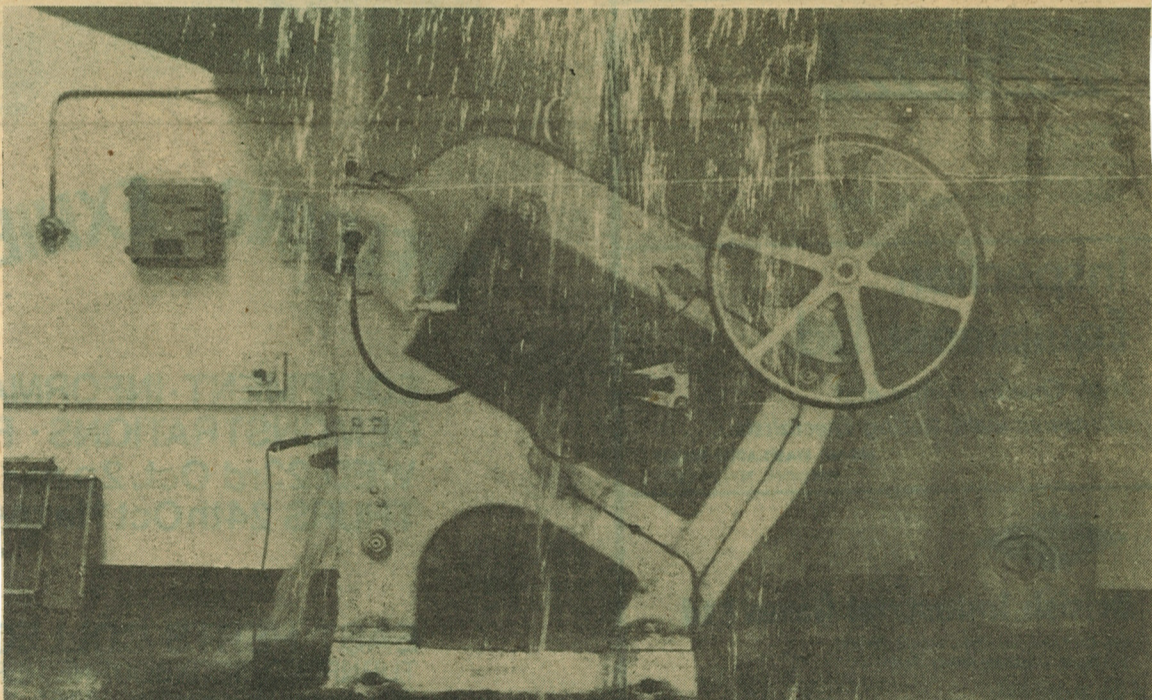
Mr Vernon Griffiths, the ERDE's chief safety officer, summed up the matter. He said: "The scale of operations at Flixborough were such that in total there were 18,000 tons of materials there. These materials were not explosives, and it is only under certain conditions that you can get an explosion.

"If we could guarantee getting those results we would not have to work on research into high explosives."

Lea Valley  
Mercury

18.10.74

(page 8)



An example of safety measures at the factory—if there was a fire this machine would be drenched in water in a matter of seconds.

Lea Valley Mercury 18.10.74 p.8

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