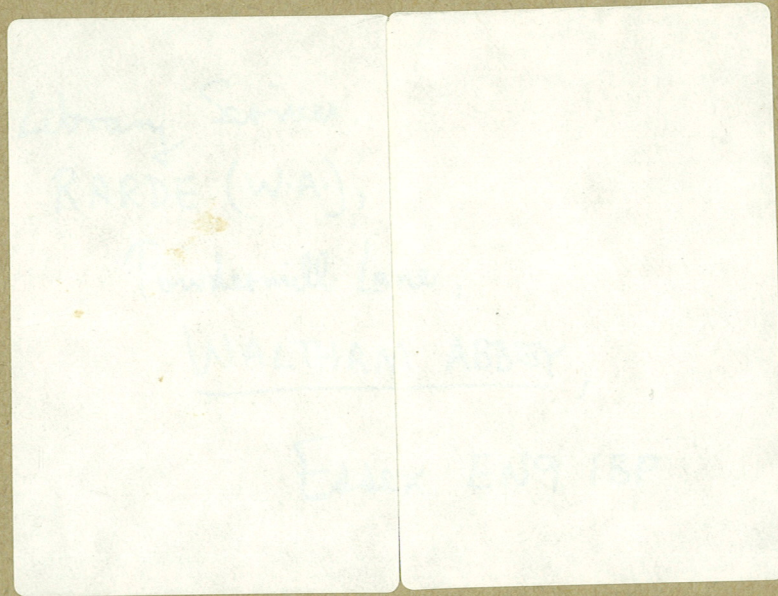


On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 1656

Police



R.A.R.D.E.
13 MAY 1987
WALTHAM ABBEY
ESSEX

The Royal Gunpowder Factory

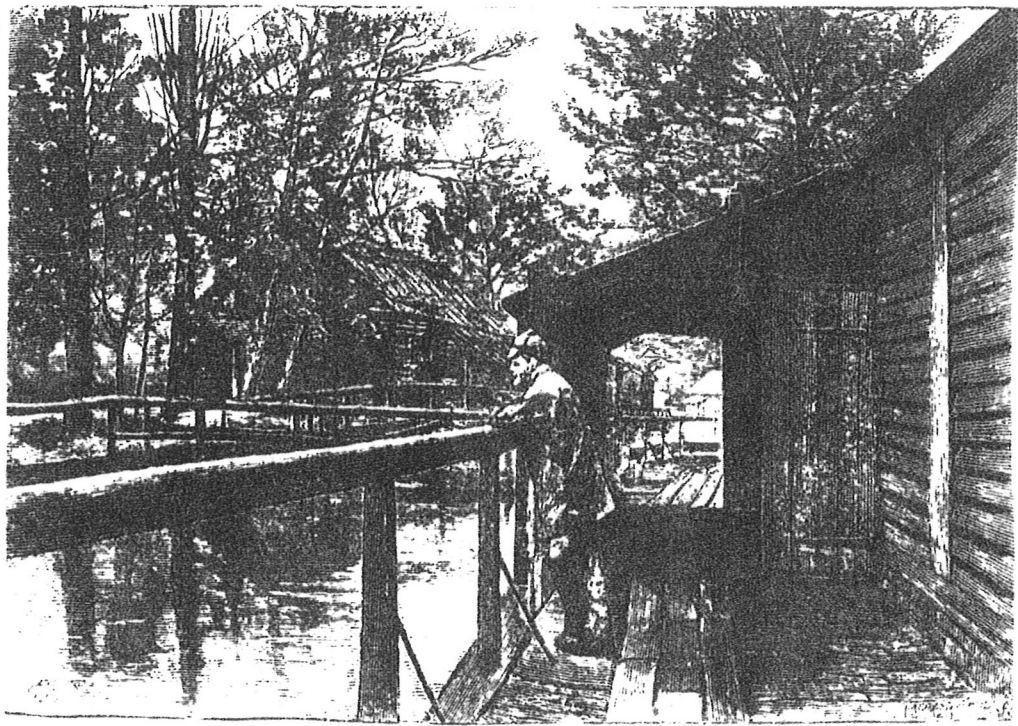
Bryan Elliott
Waltham Abbey Police Station
1986

The powdermill factory has been an integral part of Waltham from the early wide scale useage of firearms, and until the latter stages of the second world war, was one of the major production centres of powder and its derivatives.

The finest description of pre-Metropolitan policing is contained in a small 1887 book produced by a local 19th Century historian W. Winter, in which he covers the history of the R.G.P.F. (Centenary Memorial of the Royal Gunpowder Factory, Waltham Abbey). In this book the arrangements for the period 1835-6 are set out.

The early factory patrols were carried out by process workers on an overtime basis up until the 1st April 1860. The men were paid one shilling for each nights work, consisting of four hours duty, but apparently twelve hours presence within the factory. There were three watches, with an extra two on Waltham Fair nights. The men paraded at the Grand Watch House, near the storekeepers office, and were told their beats by the "Rounders" who were paid two shillings a night, they were set up in groups of three, two to sleep, one to patrol for four hours. The times were, from the close of the factory until 10pm, from then until 2am, then the final patrol up to the factory re-opened. A "Charlie" was still to be found in his box in those days, half way along Powdermill Lane, invariably asleep. The boxes were equipped with two half doors, usually the upper one being opened, the lower closed. The duty patrol had a duty to meet the "Rounder" and to ring the bell on the hour, he was supplied with an overcoat and a large rattle. The extra patrols set up on the 'Fair' days were mounted, one on the corner of Powdermill Lane with Highbridge Street, the other outside the Cock Inn, near the flour mill, and incidently opposite the later police station site. These extra patrols presumably were not mounted from 1840.

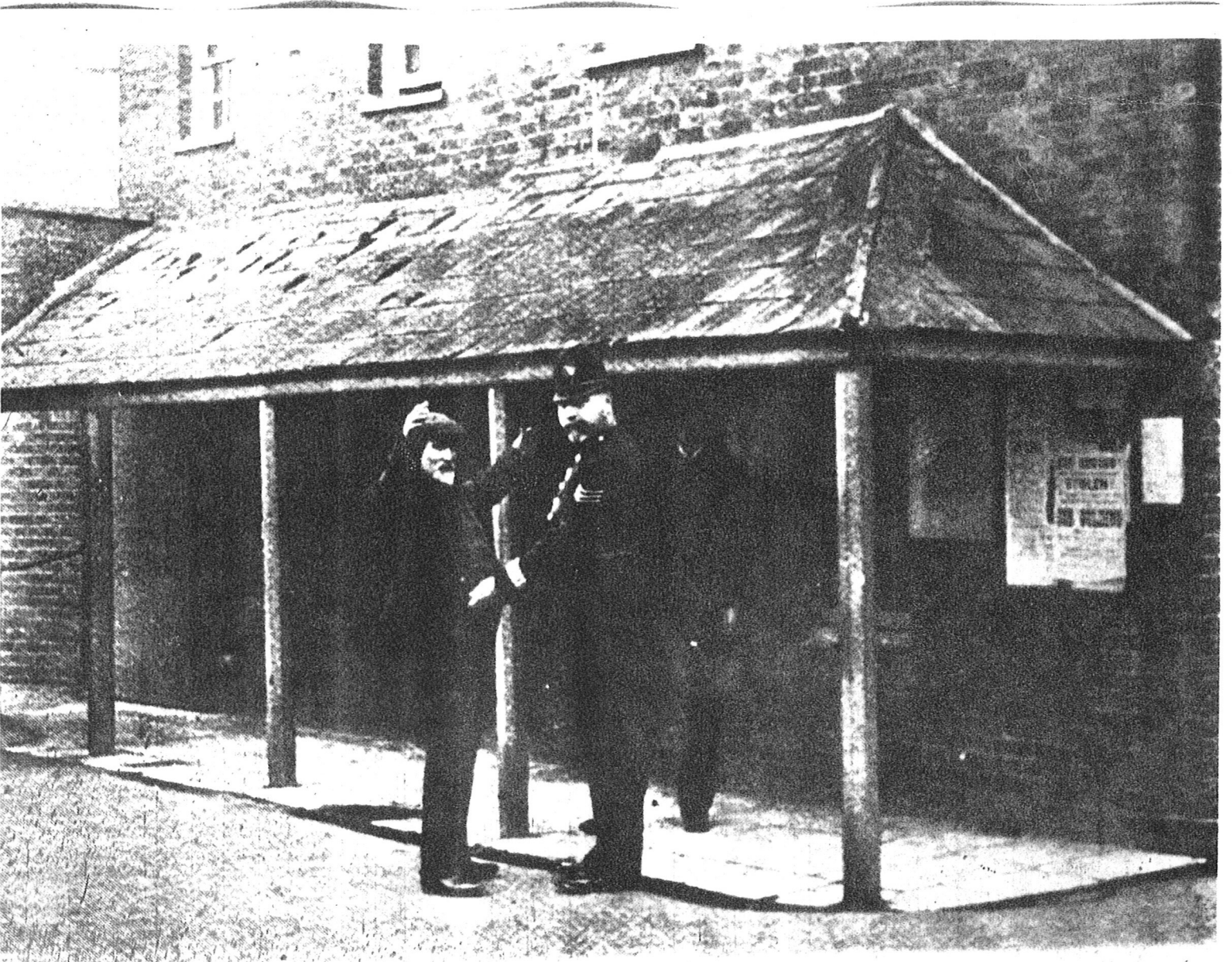
Policing of the 'mills, situated, in those days, wholly to the North of the main town, was one of the duties taken on by the Metropolitan Police on 1.4.1860. The mills duties entailed mainly interior security, stopping workers and visitors entering in the possession of contraband smoking materials, considered a very serious breach in parts of the complex even today. Even these precautions failed to stem grave mishaps within the factory. Accidents were major, when they occurred, and that was quite often. In the period from 1840 to 1914 a number of serious accidents were recorded. The first such major incident to occur under the auspices of the earlier security, occurred in 1843, this was on the 13th of April, when ten men died. On the 16th June 1870 a second major incident took the lives of five men from the town and Upshire. In the 1890's two more explosions ripped through the factory, the first in August 1890 took two mens lives, a 57 year old from Cheshunt and a 43 year old from Waltham. The second incident at 2.30 am. on the 13th December 1893, took nine lives with a number injured in a major explosion. At



THE POWDER MILLS, WALTHAM.

Above: From an 1883 publication book covering the history of the Powder Mills and the town.

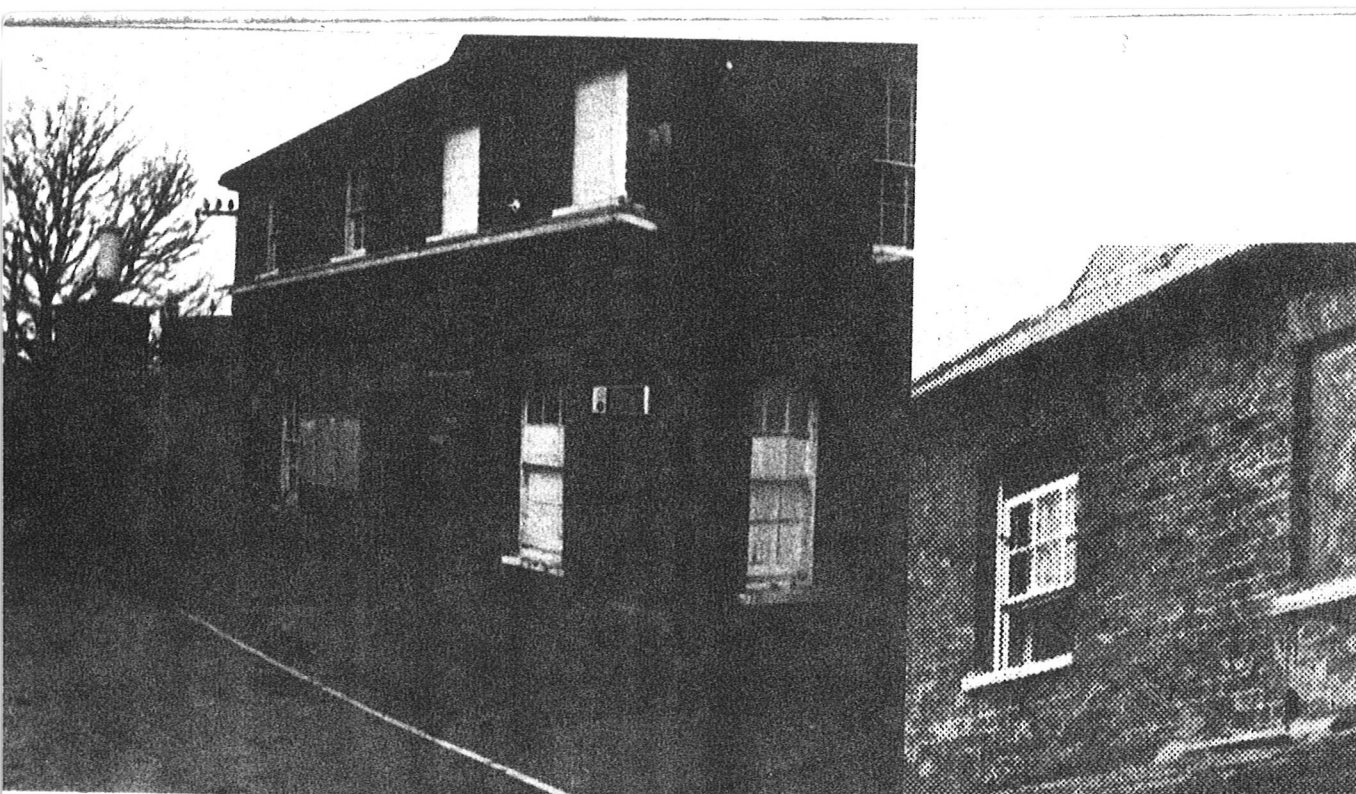
Below: From an article appearing in the October 14th, 1899 issue of "The Navy and Army Illustrated" A Metropolitan Police Sergeant searches a 'mill worker for contraband matches. (via K.A.R.D.E.)



noon on the 15th December 1902, nine years and two days later, three workmen, Eli Page, Walter Iron and William Henry Mecklenburgh lost their lives, and several others escaped. The following Saturday, the 20th, the men were buried in the cemetery. In addition to these major, lifetaking, explosions, further minor accidents occurred throughout the years, scarring many. Whilst the police officers were employed mainly on the entrances to the 'mill, accidents required them to assist and report. On the whole, they were divorced from normal police work much as the present Ministry force is today. Christmas of 1893 had been scarred by another explosion, this time in the town. Nine days after the 'mill explosion had brought grief to nine families, and two days before Christmas, noon was rent by the sound of an explosion from Farmhill Road. The factory of Messrs. Joyce and Co., the Percussion Cap factory had suffered an accident. Two local men, 51 year old Samuel Burton and 17 year old Charlie Bird were rushed to separate hospitals. Neither was saved, the older man died in Cheshunt Cottage Hospital and the other at Tottenham.

Officers transferring in Metropolitan Police in from other divisions, and stations, were liable to be given the option of town policing or 'mills policing, non transferable. The town sergeants were expected to provide assistance to the Powder Mills, when required, but there is little evidence to suggest that any reverse traffic took place. Sergeants going to the 'mills often meant that the post of station officer at the town station, normally a sergeants post at that time reverted to constables. The distinction of the two sections of the force was not generally appreciated by the townsfolk, then or later. It was many years before the public realised that the forces had split in 1923 and that the force within the fences, reticent before, now were unable to assist them outside that fence. The site had, over the years expanded in workforce, and area. In 1813 manpower had been around 250 men, but by 1888 it was to double, even before an extra site alongside the Sewardstone Road at Quinton Hill was built upon in 1890. This was principally for the manufacture of cordite explosive. This new site was enlarged in stages in 1901, 1904-5, 1915 and 1938. At the beginning of the first World War the twin complex was the only government explosives factory in the country, which accounts for the great pains taken by enemy aircraft in raiding the area. In 1919 it was nearly closed but survived to manufacture until 1943, then becoming a research centre.

Policing in the Mills whilst a relatively mundane existence of security searches, saw the officers visiting the Sun Street station with occasional charges which were dealt with there. Major and minor cases of barring workers from the R.G.P.F. for breaches of the "No Smoking" rules, which included empty pipes, were dealt with within the factory precincts. Letters were sent to the employer of contract workers who were expected to sack the wrong doer, or at least never to seek to employ



This illustration first appeared in The Strand magazine at the turn of the century. Another variation on the contraband search.
(via R.A.R.D.E.)

him at the Mills again. Government employees were dispensed with directly.

Some thefts did occur. There was a case, prior to police control, of a worker managing to spirit away to Chelmsford a complete cartload of saltpetre, at the end of 1795, the load was returned to Waltham in January 1796. The culprit George Hicks was, of course, dismissed. ^{Thomas Judd.} ~~John Rowan~~, however, was somewhat luckier in his misdeeds. At 11.10 am. on the 20th April 1889 he was seen at the coal wharf at Hoppit Pool taking coal from the barge "Lizzie" and putting it on his own barge and arrested.

The coal, a single piece, but weighing a whole 67 lbs, was valued at 6d.

Surprisingly, John was not summarily sacked. When he was dealt with three days later he was fined five shillings (25p) or seven days imprisonment. He paid the fine and remained employed.

At lunchtime on the 1st October 1871 P.C. Stillwell hauled 11 year old Alfred Godfrey of Holyfield up to the Sun Street station before Inspector Clements charged with stealing from the Government Plantation of trees - 34 walnuts! He was not charged for his heinous crime, due to his age, but in those days he might easily have been so.

In July 1871 reports were submitted to the Superintendent of the Powder Mill (a civil post) in an attempt to improve the accommodation for police in the factory. It was stated that the men were having to wash in the kitchen area, and it is to be presumed that this included those men who actually lived on the site.

The R.G.P.F. police strength in 1881 was arranged so as to provide a cover of eight men each on noon to 8 pm. and 4 pm. to midnight with an extra two being 8 am. - 4 pm. The sergeants a minimum of three being required, remained at the main watch house in Powdermill Lane unless the Chief Inspector was present, in which case they patrolled. Whenever the fourth sergeant was available, he worked 10 am. to 6 pm. patrolling.

1887, the only year for which R.G.P.F. strengths have been quoted, give a strength of one Inspector, four sergeants and twenty constables.

The leadership of the Mills Police appears to have been held by an Inspector up until 1874 when Inspector Clements, who was much liked, was promoted in situ Chief Inspector. When Clements retired in 1879 he was replaced by Inspector Charles Goble in the July, which created a problem with the precedent of Inspector Clements. He was promoted very soon after arriving and stayed at the Mills until 1891, when he was replaced by Chief Inspector Henry Craggs. The post was lowered to the original Inspector rank in the new century when Walter James took over.

The officers themselves had their moments of inattention. One constable posted guarding the Refinery Gate, alongside Highbridge Street, at 6.30 pm. on the 9th of January 1905 was caught by Captain Hope of the Royal Artillery engrossed in a newspaper in his post box. The seconded army officer made a complaint of the matter and the, unidentified, hapless officer, was hauled before Supt. Robinson at Islington three days later. No record of his punishment was noted.

A number of instances of persons arrested for "suspected espionage" took place in the First World War years, such an alleged charge required the prisoners to be taken to the main Sun Street station for enquiries to be made, and any charges laid.

The R.G.P.F. holds the dubious honour of having to sack one of its men as a police striker in the second police strike of 1919. P.C. George Allerton later went off to work in the central London hotel trade.

In 1923 the Metropolitan Police ceased to be involved with the day to day policing of the factory.