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Press cuttings re
incidents at
RAADE

EXPLOSION AT FACTORY

Mercury
6/1/89

AN EXPLOSION at the Royal Ordnance Factory in Sewardstone Road, Waltham Abbey, destroyed a factory building and sent a cloud of irritant gas vapour into the air.

Early warnings from the Metropolitan Police said anyone who came into contact with the gas vapour — orange coloured, according to eye-witnesses — should go to hospital as soon as possible.

The "non-suspicious" explosion happened in a bunker at the Royal Ordnance factory at just after 9.30 am yesterday and was caused by over-heating.

A cloud of nitric acid and trioxylene was released into the atmosphere but, said police, dispersed "almost immediately."

No one was seriously

injured in the accident. Two police officers who attended the area were slightly affected, but not sufficiently to have to attend hospital.

The factory building, measuring 6 metres by 18 metres, was destroyed by the explosion. Five fire appliances attended the scene, as well as a rescue tender, and chemical suits and breathing apparatus were donned by firemen who carried out decontamination procedures.

Hoses were used to damp down the fumes given off.

A Royal Ordnance spokesman said that the police warning regarding seeking medical treatment at hospital was probably a precautionary measure.

"Local people were in no danger," he said.

Scientists flee chemical blast

TOP SECRET scientists fled a building minutes before it blew up at the Royal Ordnance site in Waltham Abbey last Thursday.

The explosion happened shortly before 10am at a chemical treatment building on the site.

Three employees were processing chemicals when their equipment gave out warnings of the oncoming blast.

Seconds later they watched as the roof of the mounded building blew off.

Clouds of chemical gas filled the air and debris was thrown across the site, narrowly missing the M25 motorway just 100 yards away.

Waltham Abbey firemen, who had heard the blast from their station, were on the scene within minutes, backed up by men from Epping, Loughton and Cheshunt, and a rescue tender from Harlow.

They battled to dilute and contain chemicals that had escaped, and at the height of the incident, more than 40 firemen were involved.

Meanwhile, ambulance crews rushed casualties to St Margaret's Hospital, Epping.

About 10 employees were sent, some suffering shock and slight burns, others were advised to go by a doctor on site as a precautionary measure. All were discharged by 4pm that afternoon, said a Royal Ordnance spokesman.

"At no time was there any danger to the surrounding community," he said. "The fumes were too far away."

But at least one Waltham Abbey resident had first hand experience of the thick yellow smoke that was emitted, from his home in Beechfield Walk.

Retired publican George Mitchell (65), of Beechfield Walk, Waltham Abbey, rushed out to help when he heard the explosion, but turned back when his eyes started burning in the fumes.

A joint investigation into the cause of the explosion will be conducted by the Health and Safety Executive and the Ministry of Defence, who hope to reach some conclusions shortly.

● Pictures and report on page 10.

West Essex Gazette 13.1.89



Procurement Executive, Ministry of Defence

ROYAL ARMAMENT RESEARCH AND
DEVELOPMENT ESTABLISHMENT

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Mac

A few press-cuttings for the archives!

With Compliments

Ken B
19/9/90

INQUIRY STARTS INTO EXPLOSION AT FACTORY

AN INQUIRY has begun into the explosion last week at the Royal Ordnance factory in Waltham Abbey that destroyed a building and sent a cloud of irritant gas

vapour into the air.

Ten people were taken to hospital after the explosion, which happened at just after 9.30 am last Thursday at the premises in Sewardstone Road.

Overheating caused

the explosion in a bunker at the factory, and a cloud of nitric acid was sent into the air.

Police said the cloud dispersed "almost immediately", but also said that anyone who had come into contact with

the vapour — orange coloured, according to eye-witnesses — should go to hospital as soon as possible.

A spokesman for Royal Ordnance said that no-one had been seriously injured, and the ten people who were taken to hospital were examined and released later the same day. They had been in the immediate vicinity of the explosion.

No danger

He said that an inquiry into what happened had already been launched, and would be carried out by Royal Ordnance and the Health and Safety Executive. He assured local people that they had been in no danger.

The factory building measuring six metres by 18 metres was destroyed by the explosion. Five fire appliances attended the scene, as well as a rescue tender, and chemical suits and breathing apparatus were donned by firemen who carried out decontamination procedures.

Lea Valley Star
11/1/1989

Epping Forest Yellow Advertiser

FACTORY BLAST —

'NO RISK' CLAIM

BOSSSES at a Royal Ordnance plant have denied that an explosion last Thursday put the people of Waltham Abbey at risk from deadly gas fumes, as was widely reported in the national press.

The emphatic statement was made by a

Report:
VALERIE GREEN
Picture:
TONY FURBY

into the air, dispersed within a minute and there was no danger to anyone living in Waltham Abbey or neighbouring areas."

He added that there had only been three people in the building shortly before the explosion, and they had been warned that it was due by their sophisticated instruments. This gave them plenty of time to leave the plant.

spokesman for the Government research establishment in Centre Way, where the explosion in an explosives division building, sent crews from four fire stations racing to the scene.

The spokesman said: "The explosion took place in a purpose-built building surrounded by an earth bank, and with a specially designed flimsy roof which would easily be blown off following trouble.

"And this, indeed, is what happened when the explosion, involving nitric acid, took place.

DISPERSED

"But the cloud of fumes which soared

HOSPITAL

As a precautionary measure, 10 employees who had been in the vicinity when the explosion took place were checked out at St Margaret's Hospital, Epping, for any possible affects of fume inhalation. They were all found to be alright and allowed home.

It took firemen from Loughton, Cheshunt, Epping and Harlow just

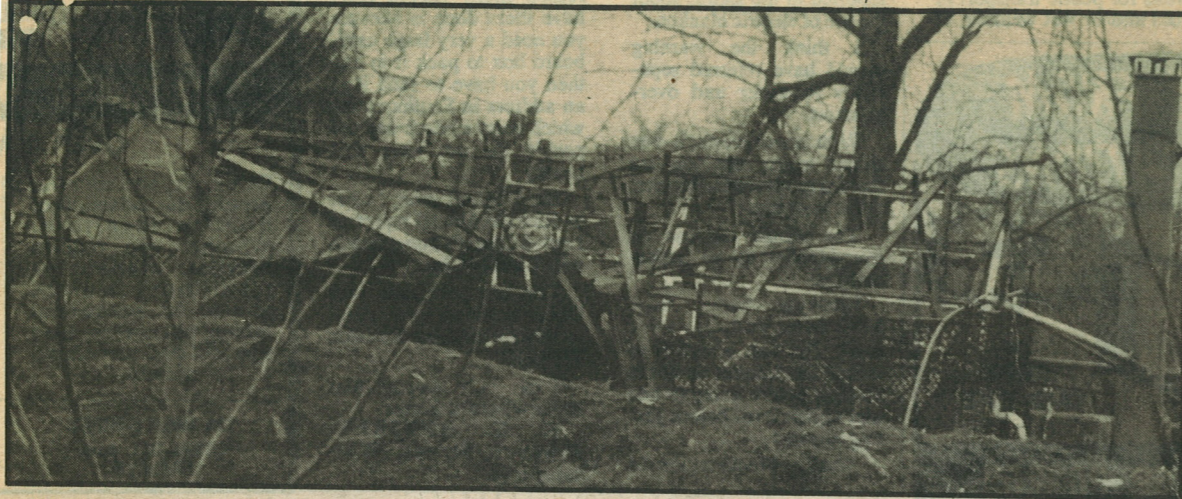


FIREMEN leave the explosives factory after dealing with the emergency.

under one-and-a-half hours to get the nitric acid — which didn't start a fire in the rest of the building — under control.

The spokesman said it was not yet known what had caused the explosion but an investigation was under way.

Although the building was out of action, production wasn't affected because of alternative plants.



TANGLED wreckage of the roof after the explosion at the Royal Ordnance site.

(E423/5A)

Explosion shock

EIGHT people needed hospital treatment after a chemical explosion blew the roof off a building at Waltham Abbey's Royal Ordnance site on Thursday.

Most of them were suffering from shock. They were working near the

building at the time of the blast.

Eyewitness George Mitchell (65), of Beechfield Walk, said he saw what looked like a satellite dish fly through the air and a cloud of yellow gas rising up.

The retired publican added: "I heard a big bang and tried to get over to the

factory to see if I could help but my eyes started stinging from the gas and I came back inside."

Widower Mr Mitchell, who used to run the Wheat-sheaf pub in the Crooked Mile, said he lived in fear of an explosion throughout the four years he has been in that part of Waltham Abbey.

"I've always had a feeling that something was going to happen. These places should be out in the country miles from everyone."

The explosion happened shortly after 9.30 am and local firemen suspected the worst.

"They usually sound a warning hooter before a controlled explosion there, so we thought something could have happened," said one officer.

The crew were on the scene in three minutes and were soon joined by teams from Loughton, Epping, Harlow and Cheshunt.

Men wearing breathing apparatus and gas-tight suits made the building safe. It was an hour-and-a-half before the last of the 41 fire-fighters left the scene, although there was no blaze.

The explosion was caused when nitric acid and trioxylene overheated. Investigations into why it happened are continuing.

Waltham Abbey Station Officer Dave Blackett, in charge of the decontamination at the scene, explained how the explosion was contained.

"The building was detached and surrounded by earth works. It is designed to contain an explosion and it was only the roof that came off."

"The remaining chemicals were washed away and considerably diluted," he added.

A Royal Ordnance spokesman said the public was in no danger.

Epping Forest Extra
10/1/84

Waltham Abbey

WEST ESSEX Gazette

Week ending Friday, March 18, 1988



Vol. CX 6156 18p

FIRE! at explosives factory

Cordite 'was just burning quietly'

RARDE to shut down next year

RARDE, Waltham Abbey, is to close — official.

The Ministry of Defence announced on Wednesday that the research establishment in Powdermill Lane — mentioned in involved, informing them of the decision to shut down the 195-acre site next year.

The Government has written to MPs and the unions involved, informing them of the decision to shut down the 195-acre site next year.

The move comes as part of a rationalisation programme for military back-up establishments, and will see work transferred to Fort Halstead, Kent.

THE Ministry of Defence is conducting an inquiry following Friday's blaze at the Royal Ordnance Factory at Waltham Abbey, involving 2,000 kilos of explosive.

Up to 20 firemen from four stations battled for over three hours to put out the fire near a perimeter fence on the 280-acre site in Sewardstone Road.

Teams used water on the cordite — a class three explosive used as a gun and shell propellant.

No-one was injured in the fire, which started at 2.30pm, but a brick building was left gutted.



A spokesman for the factory, formerly part of the nearby defence establishment — and which is still patrolled by MoD police — told the Gazette there was no explosion.

"It was just burning quietly; there was no detonation and the fire was contained in the magazine, which was based in protective mounds."

But the spokesman, Charles Carr, confirmed that there was a hole in the fence nearby, and confirmed that a Metropolitan Police forensic team had been called in.

"We don't know the reasons for the fire as yet, but cordite can ignite itself," he said.

"Waltham Abbey has a good safety record; we've only had the odd thing before."

Cheshunt & Waltham

TELEGRAPH

No.4818
2
PRICE 20p

New fears after poison cloud horror



Fire crews hose down the wreckage of the chemical explosion at Waltham Abbey's Sewardstone Road Royal Ordnance factory.

SO NEAR TO A DISASTER

THREE men fled for their lives only seconds before a massive chemical explosion at the Royal Ordnance factory in Waltham Abbey.

Nitric acid and trioxylene fumes burst from a small production building in the mighty blast on Thursday morning and sent a mushroom of thick orange smoke billowing over the factory, nearby houses and the M25.

Debris was thrown hundreds of yards by the explosion, some large pieces of metal landing outside the gates of the chemical research centre in Centrevale.

BY RICHARD BALLS

Fire crews from four stations descended on the plant shortly after 9.30 am and fought for over an hour using breathing apparatus to extinguish the heated chemicals.

Nearby residents watched in horror as clouds of bright smoke poured from the factory towards the M25.

"It was a terrific bang," said Sylvia Youthed, of Beechfield Walk. "There was a very thick yellow smoke. As it came over it started dispersing."

Royal Ordnance have not confirmed how the explosion happened

and say that an inquiry by the Health and Safety Executive will help to establish the cause.

They admit however that three factory workers were still in the small building, where some experimentation is carried out, only moments before the blast.

A spokesman said: "There were three people in the building working. Their instrumentation told them something was going wrong. They left the building fast."

No injuries were sustained in the explosion but ten employees were taken to St Margaret's Hospital.

"We were concerned with shock and inhalation by people. We have a doctor on site and he suggested people go to hospital."

Although Royal Ordnance deny nearby residents were at risk police advised anyone in the area who may have inhaled the fumes to go to hospital.

In a statement made by Royal Ordnance it is claimed: "At no time has there been any danger in any way to any of the surrounding community."

The Royal Small Arms factory in Waltham Abbey used for research into rocket fuel is to close down at the end of the year.

During the '50s the research centre was the scene of James Bond-style plots to kill Egypt's former President Nasser.

Spycatcher author Peter Wright claims in his book that scientists there modified a cigarette packet to fire lethal poison-tipped darts. The sinister invention came at the end of the Suez crisis but was never put into action.

Blast rocked nearby homes

SHOCKED neighbours of the Royal Ordnance explosives plant in Waltham Abbey have spoken with horror of the explosion which shook their homes.

Living only a stone's-throw away from the chemical research centre, residents in Beechfield Walk were rocked by the blast and watched in amazement as clouds of poisonous gas swept over their houses.

George Mitchell, 65, who lives only 200 yards from the Royal Ordnance fac-

tory, said: "It was a terrific bang and there was very thick yellow gas in the sky."

"I ran out towards the factory but I felt something in my eyes and I rushed back in again."

Debris was scattered hundreds of yards from the bunker where the explosion happened, with large pieces of metal landing outside the factory gates.

And windows and foundations on the nearby housing estate shook as the small factory building blew up.

"I thought it was a big crash on the motorway," said a Lodge Lane resident.

"It shook the house — the whole lot vibrated."

"We've often thought we are right on top of the place. I don't know what it would be like if something bigger went off," she said.

The explosion was confined to the small production building surrounded by a large bunker, despite the impact on the nearby estate.

• Turn to page 2

Ordnance blast leaves an aftermath of fury

We want an open inquiry

THE "bomb" blast at Royal Ordnance has revealed a "don't care" attitude towards public safety, say Enfield Friends of the Earth.

"Royal Ordnance's reaction is if people don't like it they should go somewhere else," says spokesman Lawrence Reeve-Jones.

"If people want a public inquiry Friends of the Earth would give its full support."

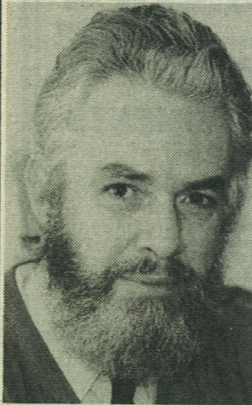
Royal Ordnance's explosive division in Centreway, Waltham Abbey, is just one example of very hazardous activity in a built-up area, say the group.

But they claim that due to the lack of funding safety standards at many plants and factories are not as high as they should be.

"The safety procedures and inspections seem to go by the board. Any hazardous activity should be stringently controlled by inspectors," says Mr Reeve-Jones. "There seems to be a general running down of concern for public safety in this country."

Friends of the Earth have backed calls from residents and councillors in Waltham Abbey for more access and information from Royal Ordnance.

They suggest that councillors and inspectors should be able to visit the centre, giving advance notice to Royal Ordnance. "There should be some kind of access to the place, without people causing distraction to the work going on there."



Lawrence Reeve-Jones worried about safety.



The Brookfield Estate — only a stone's-throw away from the chemical testing centre.

SECRECY ANGERS ABBEY RESIDENTS

ROYAL Ordnance's closed-doors approach to the chemical explosion, which wrecked a building at its Waltham Abbey centre has outraged residents and councillors.

Still shell-shocked by the blast, which sent poisonous gas billowing over nearby houses and the M25, they are demanding an immediate explanation from the Government research centre. "I was dumbfounded by Royal Ordnance's reaction to it," said Councillor Don Spinks.

"It was an explosion which tore the roof off the building, and they want to play it down. It frightened a lot of people and they need to be reassured."

The top-secret Ministry of Defence research laboratory in Centreway is used to test highly explosive nitric acids and rocket fuel.

And although the buildings at the plant are separated and each surrounded by bunkers to avoid chain-reactions, the explosion last Thursday threw debris over roads and sent clouds of chemicals pouring towards a housing estate.

People living on the Brookfield Estate, whose windows were shaken by the blast, feel unsure about the work being carried out on their doorstep.

Local councillors are calling for Royal Ordnance to come clean about the dangers of their explosives division and give their neighbours more assurances about the plant.

"Royal Ordnance don't give enough information about their own security. We saw the building but most people don't know the

By RICHARD BALLS

situation over there," said Cr Spinks.

"They should not hesitate to tell the police and fire services about accidents, so they can reassure the public."

The statement from Royal Ordnance saying that at no time during the accident were the community at risk, also angered Cr Cyril Hewins.

He believes that safety levels and inspections at centres like the Royal Ordnance factory are "going by the board".

"All disasters seem to bring the same explanation from officials. Safety standards are being neglected

because of cuts in local authorities.

"I feel there should be a ministry statement about what is happening on the explosives work down there."

Royal Ordnance have said that the research centre in Waltham Abbey will be closed before the end of the year, with work transferred to other sites.

In the meantime they maintain that their safety standards are as high as ever and that at the time of the explosion their safety procedures "worked".

An inquiry into the explosion is being carried out by the Health and Safety Executive and Royal Ordnance.



This heavy chunk of metal was hurled by the blast from the wrecked building in the background.

● Right: The isolated building on the Royal Ordnance site which was damaged in the explosion. (E423/18A)

Yellow smoke billowed and debris was strewn in a nearby field - writes reporter Christina Kent



ROYAL ORDNANCE

Explosives Division
Waltham Abbey

Town rocked by acid explosion



● The Royal Ordnance site at Waltham Abbey. (E423/10A)

WHEN a massive nitric acid explosion rocked the town of Waltham Abbey on Thursday morning, residents immediately feared the worst.

The sound of controlled explosions has become a way of life for many residents living in the shadow of the Royal Ordnance site where chemicals and rocket fuel are regularly tested. But this time there was no warning hooter.

Retired publican George Mitchell (65) had just returned from the garage to his home in Beechfield Walk when he heard the bang shortly after 9.30am.

"I rushed out into clouds of thick yellow smoke and flying debris to see if I could help," he said. "I got as far as the bridge, but my eyes began to sting and I thought it would be safer to get back inside."

And most of his neighbours must have felt the same — not one of them ventured forth until the danger was well over.

Within five minutes the yellow smoke had disappeared.

Debris, including a satellite dish, was strewn across a nearby field. And alarms were ringing across the site. TV crews, photographers and reporters were gathering at the scene.

But they were beaten by Waltham Abbey firemen who took just three minutes to respond to the call for help at an isolated outbuilding on the site.

They battled to make safe chemicals that had escaped into the atmosphere.

"Prompt action prevented a major spillage," said Dave Blackett, the first senior officer to arrive on the scene.

Chemical vapours were diluted and contained after two self-supporting nozzles were placed in position.

Meanwhile firemen in gas-tight suits and breathing apparatus removed some undamaged chemicals.

As soon as the acid was completely diluted, station officer Blackett turned his attention to the elaborate task of decontaminating men and equipment.

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● An ambulance arrives on the scene after the explosion. (E423/14A)