

WASC 2020

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'The Gunpowder
Mills Waltham
Abbey'

from

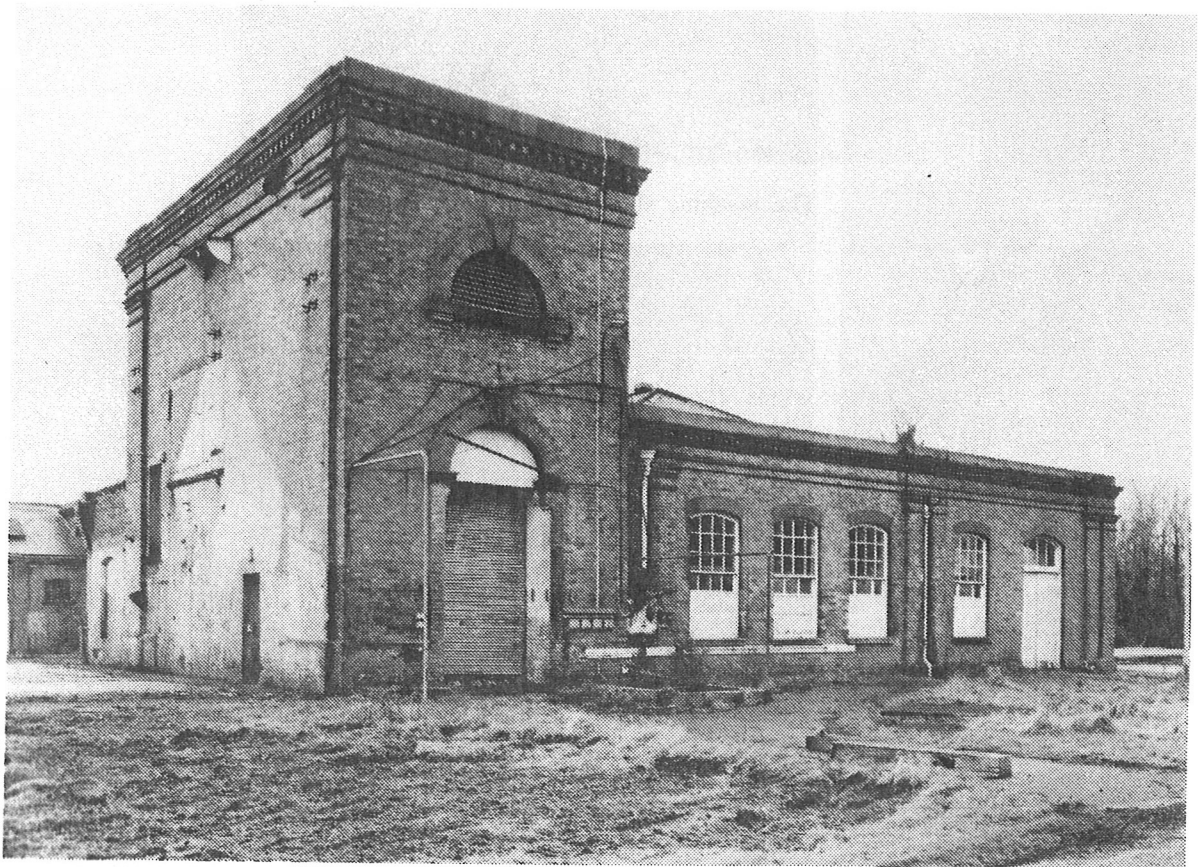
'Deserted Bastions'

Save Britain's
Heritage 1993

Extract from 'Deserted Battleground,' SANE Britain's
Heritage, 1993
THE GUNPOWDER MILLS, WALTHAM ABBEY

The manufacture of gunpowder at Waltham Abbey is known to date from at least the seventeenth century and there may well have been an industry in the area in late medieval times. The site was acquired for the crown in 1787 and since that time it has grown rapidly, ever changing with the developments in the manufacture of gunpowder. During the Napoleonic Wars the factory supplied the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich with 25,000 barrels of explosives a year and in the latter years of the First World War it employed a workforce of 5,000, over half of whom were women.

The Gunpowder Mills, which have been used since the Second World War for research and development, were closed down in 1991. The MOD have commissioned a number of studies to assess the importance of the site and the possibilities for its future use including tourism. One problem is the site's contamination with chemicals, explosive materials and asbestos. A recent study for the MOD ominously suggested, "Decontamination....may require the virtual demolition and burning of the buildings....yet it is these man made artefacts that could best tell the story of gunpowder."

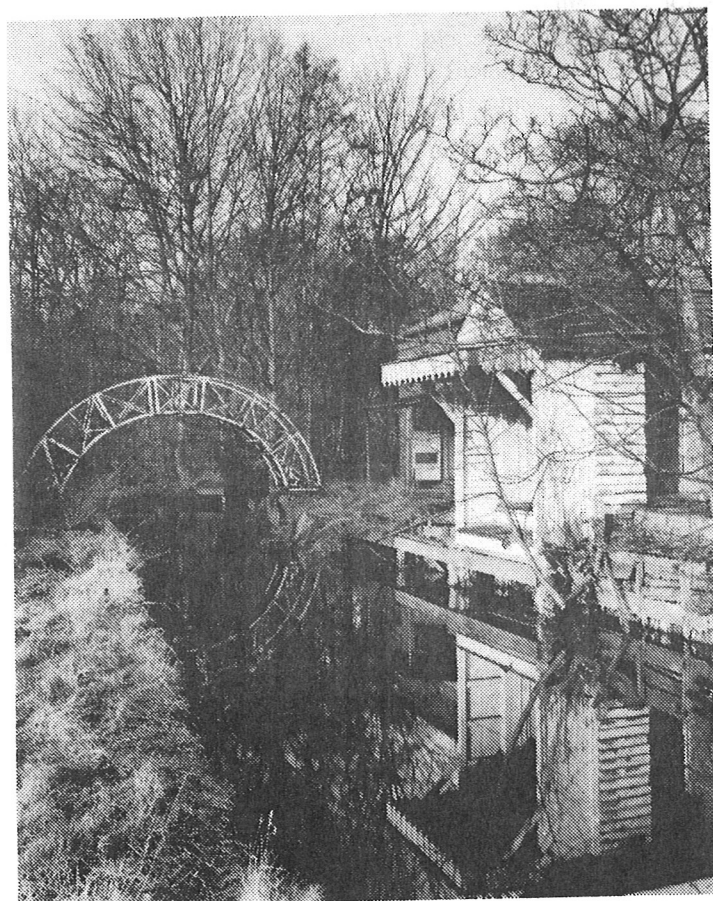


Besides its historic importance as a production site of black powder, the Waltham Abbey mills chart the transition from the manufacture of old explosive types to latterday forms of high explosives such as nitro-glycerine.

The RCHME have recently completed an archaeological survey of the Mills. Their forthcoming report on the site, which will reveal the full extent of the sites historic importance, should help to ensure that those making decisions over the future of the site are better informed. The MOD have yet to lodge a planning application, though although it would appear that provisional planning approval has been given to the idea of developing the site as a tourist attraction.



The Mills



Staging Post and Bridge