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WAI 517

Dare Gunpowder  
works article

CONSERVATION GROUP REVEALS PLANS FOR FORMER

OARE GUNPOWDER WORKS AFTER £888,500 GRANT

# Blast from past to be given a new life

Report by  
**Catherine Dolan**

**IN THE** wake of the excitement of being granted £888,500 for an outdoor museum and nature reserve at Oare, project organisers have revealed what it will include.

The 10-acre site, just to the west of Faversham, where the former gunpowder works were, will focus on both the industry which was crucial to the town's economy and the current nature and wildlife living in the area, including a colony of more than 50 bats.

Entrance to the open air museum will be free and the site will be open all year round, although the opening hours of the visitor centre have not yet been decided.

Project landscape architect from Groundwork Medway Swale Nick Perrett has been working on the project since 1997. He said: "We are delighted to get the award and now be able to finally realise the vision of opening up the gunpowder works to be an outdoor museum and recreational resource for Faversham.

"With this bid we can achieve the all-singing, all-dancing outdoor museum.

"We can crack on and actually get the thing open. We are aiming to open towards the end of next year."

**Carved**

The gunpowder works were in a valley away from people and some buildings were carved out of the valley.

Nick said: "None of the structures has a roof. They were all made of combustible materials and there was a real risk of blasts happening. They had to be light, so they would blow outwards.

"We will be making the structure safer by closing them off from people with grilles and raising the temperature in the winter to make it more comfortable. We will also be building hibernation roosts in the structure.

"The buildings themselves are in varying states. We are not going to rebuild them in any way. We are just going to make them safe and presentable.

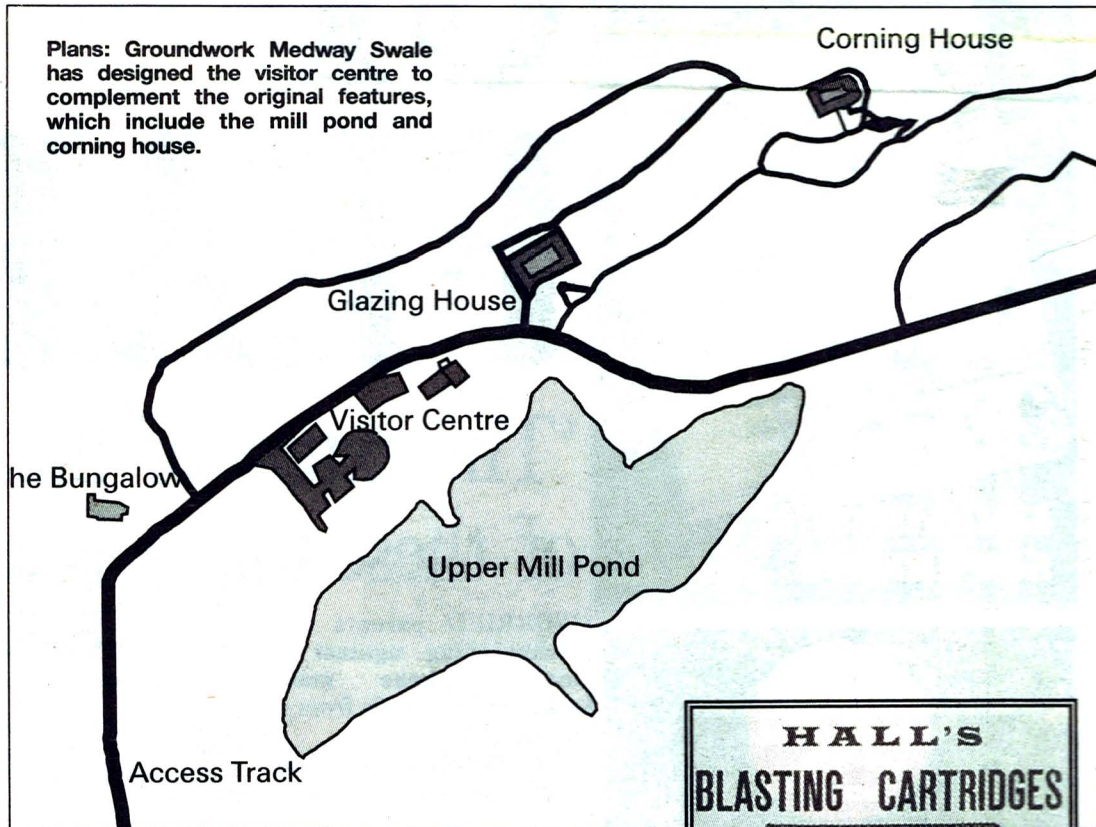
"There are three structures which are still standing and there will be viewing platforms.

"The cooperage, where the barrels were made, will be made into the information centre with displays and a classroom.

"The displays will be the



**Powder girls: Women pack cannisters in the Oare works in about 1925.** Faversham Society Postcard



usual interpretation boards explaining the process of gunpowder making.

"There will also be a small car park and a network of paths will run through the trees. A main path will be disabled-friendly.

"A secondary path will run round the wetland. An overgrown mill pond will be brought back to life and we hope to attract primary schools for pond-dipping and nature trail activities."

Nick continued: "There are between 50 and 60 bats which may not seem a lot, but for bats it's quite a few because they are an endangered species so we

have to work round them. They rest in trees during the summer and hibernate in the structure during the winter, so we can only work on the structure until September and on the trees in the winter.

"We are in the process of getting the licence we need to do the work."

He explained that areas of water which were used for transporting materials around the site in timber punts, were now silted up but would be dredged and the water level raised. Bridges will be built over them, which Nick said "will add to the bio-diversity of the site."

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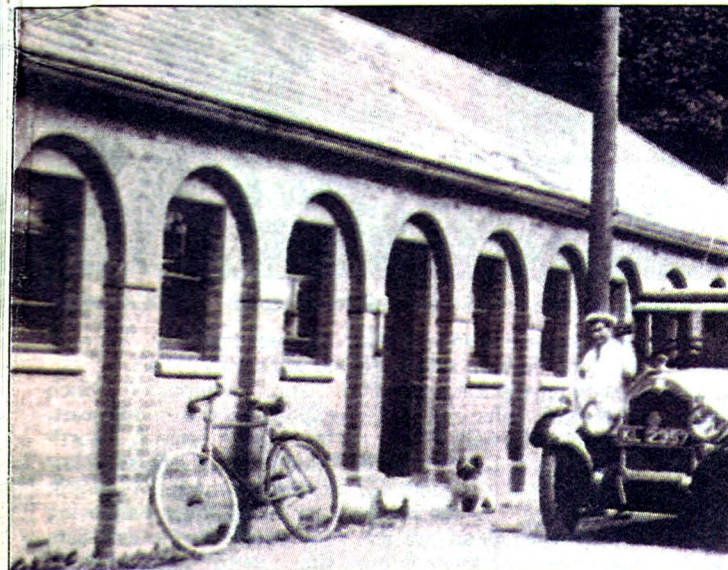
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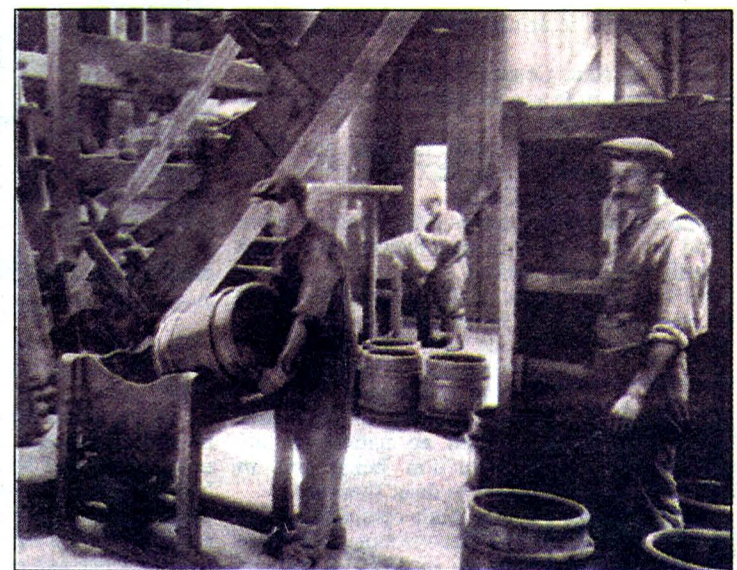
Advert: A poster for Hall's powders.



**Barrels: Lads hard at work making cannisters in the Oare Works, in about 1925.** Note the stone-flagged floor. Faversham Society postcard



**Your car awaits: A uniformed employee stands beside a fine motor outside the Oare works office.**



**Production line: Men operating the Oare Gunpowder Works machinery, with its home-made barrels.**

## HUGUENOT INFLUENCE ON EXPLOSIVES INDUSTRY

**SET UP** by French Huguenot refugees, Oare was one of three gunpowder works in Faversham, a town which has produced explosives since the 16th Century. Oare was chosen as a site because of the creek which provided access for boats bringing materials from overseas. Two of the ingredients for gunpowder — saltpetre and sulphur — had to be imported. The third, charcoal, did not. A reliable water supply was also needed for the mills. Faversham was an ideal site: A seaport,

with a manageable-sized stream feeding its creek, surrounded by woodland and well placed between London and the Channel ports. Faversham may well have been the birthplace of the national gunpowder industry. According to Edward Jacobs, whose *History of the Town and Port of Faversham* was published in 1774, the first gunpowder works in the town was established "in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, if not before her time."

Town historian Arthur Percival said: "The Huguenots brought with them a lot of skills that the native English lacked. "The Oare works provided powder for the East India Company which was much involved in the colonisation of India. "You could say that but for the Oare gunpowder, English wouldn't be the lingua franca it is today." The site, which once employed 200 people was closed in 1934, following fears of aerial bombardment and invasion.



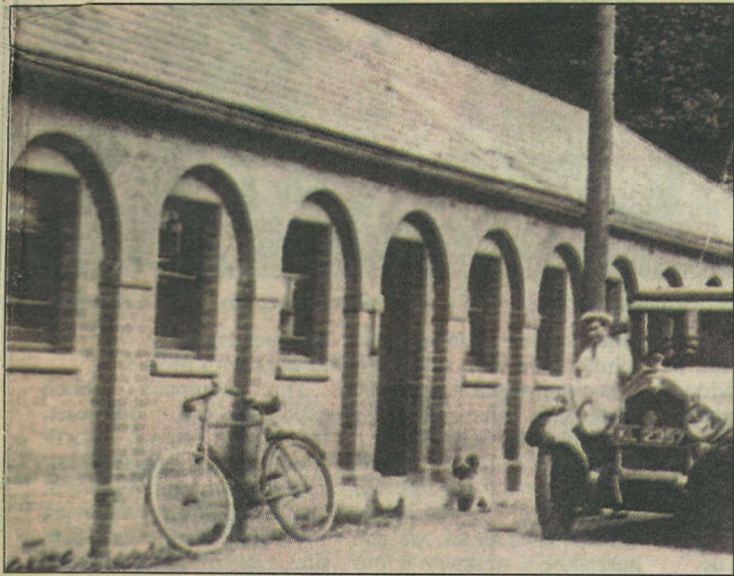
**Powder girls: Women pack cannisters in the Oare works in about 1925.**

Faversham Society Postcard



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