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and retention of
Gretna
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Gretna plant and
machinery Auction
17-20th October 1922
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WALTHAM ABBEY AND GRETNA

DISCHARGES FROM GOVERNMENT WORKS.

17 MAR 1919
Mr. F. HOPE, Financial Secretary to the Ministry of Munitions (Sheffield, Central, C.U.), replying to questions by Mr. BILLING (Hertford, Ind.) and other members, said:—I am aware that concern is felt among the workpeople employed at the Royal Gunpowder Factory, Waltham Abbey, and at the Royal Small Arms Factory, Enfield, on account of the large number of discharges which have inevitably taken place since the signature of the armistice. As regards Waltham Abbey, I can only say that the future of the factory is receiving very serious consideration, and that an announcement on the subject will be made as soon as possible. With regard to Enfield, it is proposed to reduce the number of workpeople to approximately the pre-war establishment.

FIGHT TO SAVE ROYAL FACTORY

A crowded meeting of Government workers took place at Waltham Abbey yesterday to receive the report of the deputation who interviewed Mr. Kellaway, Deputy Minister of Munitions, on Monday to urge reasons against the proposal to close the Royal Gunpowder Factory. The view was expressed that the only way to save the factory was to strengthen the agitation and broaden its scope. It was accordingly resolved to organise a mass demonstration at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon-street. The London Trades and Labour Council and workers in Government factories are to be invited to take part.

21 MAR 1919 DN

WALTHAM OR GRETNA?

15 MAR 1919

WORKERS' PROTEST AGAINST CLOSING OLDER FACTORY.

At a demonstration yesterday at Waltham Abbey against the proposal to close the Royal Gunpowder Factory, Mr. A. BASS (President of the Workers' Union) said the Government reached the conclusion to close the factory last February, but were deterred from doing so by the strong opposition of the workers and of influential local authorities. The issue now lay between Gretna and Waltham, and the Select Parliamentary Committee had reported in favour of maintaining Gretna.

It was most unfair, he said, that the terms of reference, which originally were confined to the consideration of the future of Gretna, had been altered to include Waltham Abbey without any alteration of the constitution of the Committee. Waltham could not hope in such circumstances to obtain a "square deal." Sir Edward Pearson, the Chairman, had unfairly compared the war-time output of Gretna with the peace-time output of Waltham.

A demonstration of Government workers to support the agitation against the closing of the Waltham Factory is to be held in Trafalgar-square next Saturday.

WASC 2067 / 1

FUTURE OF WALTHAM ABBEY.

Mr. Kellaway, writing in reply to Mr. John Davison, says that a portion of the Royal Gunpowder Factory, Waltham Abbey, will be retained as an annexe to the Enfield establishment, and the remainder will, in due course, be announced for disposal.

14 FEB 1920 T

ROYAL GUNPOWDER FACTORY.

9 MAR 1920 T

WORKERS' PROTEST AGAINST CLOSING DOWN.

A vigorous campaign is being organized by the local branch of the Workers' Union with the object of inducing the Government to reconsider the decision to close the Royal Gunpowder Factory at Waltham Abbey. About 1,000 hands are now employed, and every man has pledged himself to send a post-card to Mr. Lloyd George asking him to intervene to save the factory. A demonstration of protest, preceded by a procession, is being arranged to take place in Trafalgar-square. At a meeting at Waltham Abbey, yesterday, it was decided to ask the Prime Minister to receive a deputation of operatives employed at the factory.

GRETNA AS SOLE EXPLOSIVES

16 MAR 1920 T

PROTEST BY WALTHAM ABBEY MEN

The Prime Minister has announced that he cannot interfere with the recommendation of the Parliamentary Committee advising the closing of the Royal Gunpowder Factory, Waltham Abbey. Replying to the representations of the Workers' Union, he says that no useful purpose would be served by receiving a deputation. The Government proposal is to close the Waltham factory and confine the manufacture of explosives to Gretna.

Through their union the men have pointed out that Gretna is unsuited for the requirements of a permanent peace-time factory, as it is composed of temporary buildings erected to meet the war-time emergency. Necessary reconstruction and equipment, they assert, would cost £2,000,000.

The Government have resolved to transfer the Waltham machinery to Gretna, and have offered the men the choice of going to Gretna or taking a bonus based on length of service.

WALTHAM ABBEY AND GRETNA.

23 MAR 1920 T

Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Alfred Warren has asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Munitions, having regard to the intention of the Government to transfer the Royal Gunpowder Factory from Waltham Abbey to Gretna Green, if he would state on what certified basis the relative merits of Waltham and Gretna Green were considered, and what influenced the decision to transfer an industry of 300 years' standing (135 years under Government control) to an absolutely new site, thereby incurring expense.

Mr. Kellaway replies:—The recommendations of the Committee that considered the future of H.M. Factories Gretna and Waltham Abbey will shortly be laid on the table of the House. The Ministry of Munitions, in carrying out the recommendations of the Committee, are acting on the instructions of the Cabinet.

22 MAY 1920

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FILE

WASC 508

COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY
INTO THE FUTURE OF HIS MAJESTY'S FACTORIES

AT

GRETNA

AND

WALTHAM ABBEY.

APPOINTED BY

THE

MINISTER OF MUNITIONS.

JUNE, 1919.

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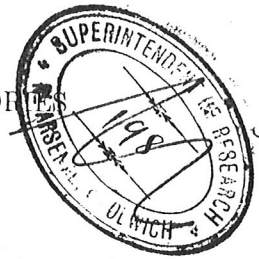
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Dr. H. E. WATTS, *Secretary*.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS.

The Committee (with the exception of one member) reached the following conclusions in June, 1919:—

(1) There was no valid reason why *both* Gretna and Waltham Abbey should be kept as Explosives Factories.

(2) Waltham Abbey alone had not the capacity to deal with the possible war requirements, and the Committee felt strongly, in view of the demands during the late war, that it was wiser to over-estimate than to under-estimate when considering the question of Cordite Factories. They also felt that the National Factories should, as far as possible, be self-contained.

(3) Gretna, being a modern and up-to-date factory, should, therefore, be kept in preference to the older factory, viz., Waltham Abbey.

(4) Gretna, in the opinion of the Committee, was in a position to manufacture cordite cheaper than it could be made at Waltham Abbey. It also had its own Oleum Plant—Glycerine Distillery—Ether Plant and Solvent Recovery Plant.

(5) The Committee recommended that the Presses for Rifle Cordite now at Waltham Abbey should be transferred to Gretna, where they could be readily installed. The cost of this transfer should not be heavy, and it was very desirable to concentrate at one factory.

(6) The Committee also recommended that the Plant at Waltham Abbey for Black Powder, and Picric Powder, should be transferred to either Gretna or some other Government Factory, so that Waltham Abbey could be entirely shut down as an explosives manufacturing centre.

(7) The Committee recommended if possible that a part of Gretna Ether Plant should be used for other purposes than the Factory requirements; e.g., the conversion of Alcohol to Ether and the treatment of the Ether Alcohol recovered.

In the opinion of the Committee it was well worth while the Government considering, in view of the many industries in the country requiring solvents, the production of a supply of cheap duty-free alcohol and ether, which would give a great incentive to all industries of this nature. Being centralised it could be worked economically, and, furthermore, would be under close Government control.

The Committee were advised that Methyl-alcohol of a high grade suitable for the dye industry could be manufactured with slight modifications to the existing plant. It was recommended, therefore, that a small grant should be at once made for the necessary alteration, so that experiments on a commercial scale could be undertaken immediately with the large stock of Methyl Alcohol in this country to Government account.

The above recommendations, if carried out, would not compete with any existing trade, but would be of the greatest assistance in helping existing industries.

(8) The Committee recommended that certain of the Government lands outside the Gretna Factory fences, which could not be utilised conveniently for industrial purposes,

should be handed over for small holdings. It was desirable, however, that a small area of land suitable for buildings in proximity to the townships should be retained for possible future extensions.

(9) The Committee considered that the Gretna and Eastriggs Townships, which at present are Government Townships, and are controlled by the factory, should, at an early date, be completely severed from the factory, and be run by some local authority. The schools, for instance, should be handed over to the Scottish Education Authority on some agreed terms. The cost of the Townships would, in these circumstances, cease to be a direct charge against the cost of production.

(10) Except as a Government Cordite Factory the Committee saw no useful purpose to which Gretna could be put, and, considering that it was a modern up-to-date Cordite Factory, which has cost a large sum to erect and is in excellent state of maintenance, it would be criminal to scrap it.

The Committee considered, however, that every encouragement should be given to induce industries to start up in the neighbourhood. This could be done by the Government offering cheap power and water, and also facilities over the factory railways. These facilities would not, in the opinion of the Committee, in any way be detrimental to the factory work; in fact, the reverse should be the case as they should help the factory overhead costs.

(11) As some of the warehouses and stores at Gretna would not be required to the full capacity, it would be possible for certain Government stocks to be stored here, and, in view of the railway facilities and means of handling the stores, the costs should be moderate.

(12) *Waltham Abbey*.—The Committee very much regretted that they had to recommend that this factory should be shut down as an Explosives Factory. They especially regretted having to make this recommendation in view of the great service the factory had been to the Nation in the past. On the other hand, having regard to the possible future requirements, and also to the fact that Gretna was a more suitable and economic factory, they could not do otherwise. They recommended that, as far as possible, the workmen who had served for a long time at Waltham Abbey should, if they desired, be transferred to Gretna at the expense of the Government, and that the Government should be prepared to buy, at a fair valuation, the houses that the Waltham-Abbey men who leave the district may own.

Generally they saw no useful purpose to which the factory could be put. Its general lay-out is inconvenient, the land at the northern end, cut up as it is by waterways, is of little or no value either as factory sites or for agricultural purposes. The land at the southern end should have some value, and it was suggested that part of it, or some of the buildings, might be of use to Enfield Small Arms Factory for storage purposes.

MINORITY REPORT.

In a Minority Report, Sir William Pearce regretted his inability to sign the main Report, because in his opinion recent circumstances had made obsolete the terms of reference upon which it was based.

In his view, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's forecast of military expenditure in the near future left no possible place for a permanent factory like Gretna with its huge lay-out. As a result of the war, the Admiralty now possessed their own factory, sufficient for all Naval requirements. A large stock of Cordite also remained, and there was a large over-production in the United Kingdom of both Oleum and Glycerine. If, therefore, any Government factory would be required by the War Office, it was certainly only a case for a small output—Waltham Abbey rather than Gretna.

The main Report ignored the enormous capital cost of Gretna, approaching £150 for every ton of Cordite yet produced. He submitted, however, it was wiser to cut this loss once and for all than to continue a huge factory in a locality with inherent disadvantages, which factory only a world-war called into existence, and only the probability of a future world-war could justify its retention.

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I read with interest the article by Les Tucker on the Waltham Abbey and Gretna production plants. Les was quite right about the massive opposition to the planned closure of Waltham Abbey in 1919; given that it had employed about 5000 people at the height of WW1, this would have had an enormous impact on the town and the surrounding area. But I believe that there was more to it than just local and Trade Union opposition to the proposal. The Committee which was formed in February 1919 reported in June that year, stating that Waltham Abbey alone had not the capacity to deal with the possible war requirements and that it was wiser to over-estimate rather than under-estimate when considering the question of Cordite Factories, hence to keep Gretna rather than Waltham Abbey. There was, however, a minority report by one of the committee members, Sir Edward Pearce. He regretted that he was unable to sign up to the report on the grounds that the then Chancellor of the Exchequer's forecast of military expenditure left no possible place for a permanent factory like Gretna, also that the Navy now possessed their own factory (Holton Heath), sufficient for all Naval requirements. He submitted that it was better to cut the loss of Gretna once and for all, since only the possibility of a future World War could justify its retention. Well, twenty-twenty hindsight is a marvellous thing, for by 1039 the UK production capacity dwarfed the combined Waltham Abbey/Gretna production capability, and the rest, as they say, is history. I attach for interest the Summary of Conclusions of the Committee, which includes this minority report. I suspect that it was the filibuster by Sir Edward Pearce as much as anything which put the majority recommendation into the long grass.

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Touchpaper

The Newsletter of the Royal Gunpowder
Mills Friend's Association

April 2010

Letters to Touchpaper

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In a Minority Report, Sir William Pearce regretted his inability to sign the main Report, because in his opinion recent circumstances had made obsolete the terms of reference upon which it was based.

In his view, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's forecast of military expenditure in the near future left no possible place for a permanent factory like Gretna with its huge lay-out. As a result of the war, the Admiralty now possessed their own factory, sufficient for all Naval requirements. A large stock of Cordite also remained, and there was a large over-production in the United Kingdom of both Oleum and Glycerine. If, therefore, any Government factory would be required by the War Office, it was certainly only a case for a small output—Waltham Abbey rather than Gretna.

The main Report ignored the enormous capital cost of Gretna, approaching £150 for every ton of Cordite yet produced. He submitted, however, it was wiser to cut this loss once and for all than to continue a huge factory in a locality with inherent disadvantages, which factory only a world-war called into existence, and only the probability of a future world-war could justify its retention.

In the months preceding the 'privatisation' of the Royal Ordnance Factories (ROFs) in the early 1980s there was a good deal of local canvassing at Waltham Abbey with a view to establishing a useful role for the site in the New Regime. The Propellant and Explosives Branches at Waltham Abbey (WA) had provided research, development and general 'trouble-shooting' support for the ROFs for many years and, because of this, those parts of the Establishment had been assigned to become part of the new Royal Ordnance.

The Lunch by Jim Burgess

In pursuance of this objective, a get-together was arranged at WA to present the relevant Directors and other luminaries associated with the ROFs with a view of WA's capabilities and to insinuate the idea into their minds that it would be in their interests for WA to become the Centre for Research in propellants and explosives for Royal Ordnance.

Because of the distances some of the visitors had to travel, the meeting was scheduled for the afternoon. A sumptuous buffet had been set up in a 'demonstration room' prior to the meeting.

However, as the meeting was to be conducted 'on site' and in an 'explosives area' there were no alcoholic beverages to be had.

There's no criticism of the ROF contingent in recognising that they felt the need of a strong libation after their long journeys – I would have felt similarly – and so, upon their arrival, they arranged to be transported to a local hostelry. An hour or so later (nearer two, actually!) they arrived back to tuck into the spread that had been prepared for them.

During their absence, imbibing the products of grain and the grape, someone inserted a plate of dog biscuits (Bonios – of an unmistakable 'bone shape' and a variety of colours) into the fare laid out on the trestles.

I've always thought that it was my 2IC at the time, a fellow endowed with a very active and, on occasions, mischievous sense of humour, who was responsible but he has always strenuously denied it. On the occasions when the matter has been raised (socially) he's accused me (!) of all people of being the perpetrator. What a cheek – I didn't, honest!



The outcome was, however, most entertaining. Only one or two of the Bonios remained on the plate (my 2IC must have had some idea of how many biscuits there were on the plate to start with to remark on this....!). One has to conclude that the visitors had been so inebriated that they'd consumed the dog biscuits without noticing it.....