

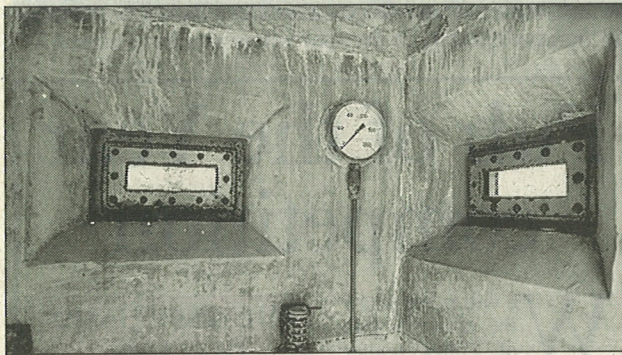
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Times article

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'Quiet blast from
a noisy past'

Deep in Waltham Forest lies a hidden treasure. **Derwent May** reports



Strollers can see strange buildings rusting and crumbling

Quiet blast from a noisy past

Fifteen miles north of London, in the Lea Valley near Waltham Abbey, lies a mysterious forest. Strollers along the towpath of the Lea look across the river for almost a mile to a dark veil of alders. Further north dragonfly-seekers in the Cornmill Meadow, looking across another of the Lea streams, can see strange buildings rusting and crumbling among overgrown willows. Few people are ever seen, and no notices say what it contains.

In fact it is an old gunpowder factory. In the Middle Ages the monks of Waltham Abbey set up a corn mill and a fulling mill here, tapping the waters of the Lea. At some time in the 17th century an enterprising local man turned the monks' mill into a gunpowder mill. As early as 1665 an entry appears in the parish register recording a man being killed by the powder mill.

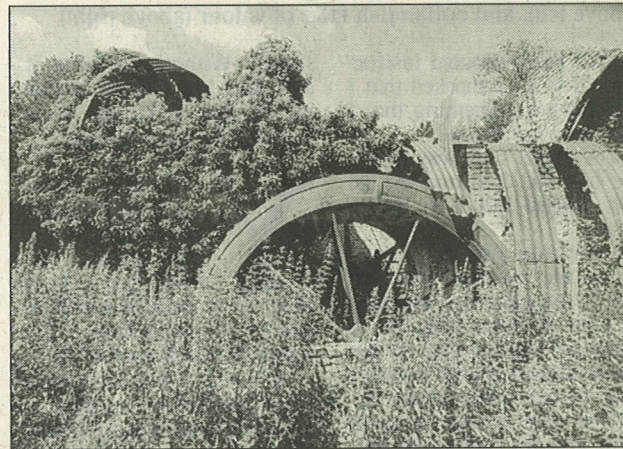
In the 1780s the Government took it over. British gunpow-

der had not performed well in the war with America, and the Waltham Abbey mill now became a centre for improvement and mass production. The gunpowder was taken down the Lea and the Thames to Woolwich in barges and kept the cannons well provided in the Napoleonic wars.

Gunpowder is made of sulphur, saltpetre and charcoal, and alder and willow make the best charcoal for it. So great new groves of them were now planted. In due course gunpowder manufacture at the factory gave way to the production of nitroglycerine and cordite. During the Second World War 3,000 people, mostly women from Essex and Hertfordshire, were working there among the trees. They made the bombs for the Dambusters — and some of them died in explosions. After the war, however, production ceased and the mill became a research establishment. In 1991 it finally closed down.



Steve Chaddock, the gunpowder factory's consultant archaeologist, wants to keep the site as wild and natural as possible



The waterwheel introduced to replace the plodding horse

So what to do with this great, secret place? Mighty constructions, some of them from its early days, were scattered about, all far from the others for the sake of safety if any of them blew up. The alders had grown tall and dense and hid the buildings; dank canals with crumbling

banks threaded their way through the undergrowth; sycamores had grown up and entangled their crowns in the delicate cast-iron bridges.

Birds and animals were flourishing in this exceptionally protected woodland. There was a heronry with 30 nests in the treetops, its occu-

pants going out and fishing up and down the Lea valley, and fallow and muntjac deer lived in the shadows.

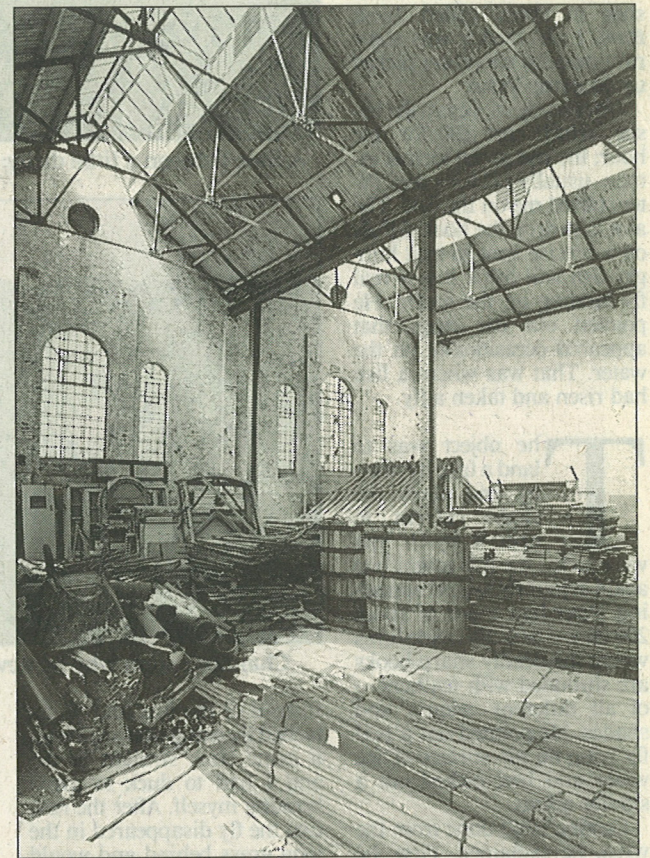
The Ministry of Defence said it would decontaminate the whole property — there was a great deal of asbestos about — and that has now been done at a cost of £18 million. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments surveyed the whole site and identified the functions of all of the buildings and ruins. There are now 21 listed buildings, two-thirds of the area has become a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and about half of it has been declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills has been set up as a charitable foundation with an operating company and has received an initial fund from the MoD, and £6.5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

I walked round this fascinating place last week with Steve Chaddock, its young consult-

ant archaeologist. In most places the alders are still dense. We could hear the strange grunts of the herons in the treetops and the weird squeakings of young great spotted woodpeckers in a hole in a dead tree, while blackcaps and garden warblers were singing powerfully around us.

He took me to a clearing where a derelict workshop was surrounded by a semi-circular blast wall of almost Aztec or Egyptian grandeur. Red campion was growing by the wall; mosses and liverwort had climbed all over it. We went on through nettles to see another enormous blast wall built to protect a horse on one side which operated a mill for separating gunpowder grains on the other. The horse had in due course been replaced by a giant water-wheel, and the remains of that were also still there.

Over the grass around this



The Dambusters' bombs were manufactured at the site

industrial monument hundreds of lacy-winged dragonflies were flitting. Further along Steve showed me a small fenced-off clump of rare adder's-tongue fern.

Some work has begun in the forest. Several areas have been felled to bring air and light in, and new, coppiced alder shoots are rising from the tree-stumps. A man and a woman were removing banded snails from inside the tree-tubes that protect some new willows. A copse of little alder buckthorn trees has been planted; they are the food-plant of the yellow brimstone butterfly. On the instructions of English Nature, all new seeds and shoots planted must come from the site.

Some of the handsome buildings at the entrance, including a cathedral-like powerhouse, are already earmarked for future use. Robert Saunders, chief executive of the new Gunpowder Mills company, plans to open the whole place to the public, both as a showplace of

industrial history and a wonderful wildlife centre. He wants to illustrate the history of explosives manufacture through exhibitions in the "cathedral" and especially through the spectacle of the ruined buildings themselves. At the same time he wants to keep the natural surroundings as wild and haunting as they are now.

He has a good sum to start with, but he will need sponsors if the mills are to achieve the new importance they deserve. Here, he says, the past can have a splendid and lasting future, and he hopes that sponsors will seize on that prospect.

The intention is to open to the public in spring 2001. Then the secret forest of Waltham Abbey will be revealed to the world — with a bang.

● *The Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills, Powdermill Lane, Waltham Abbey, Essex EN9 1BN (01992 767022)*

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