

WASC 2121

Recollections of
Mrs. Sis Ward

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ORAL HISTORY

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MRS. SIS WARD

Ron: I'm here with Mrs. Sis Ward, who started work at the powder mills in the early forties. She now lives at Hoddesdon and she will continue the story in her own words.

My first job after leaving school was working for Brentons at High Beach in service. Worked for Lord Ashton at Brentwood. My last job before starting at the Powder Mills was at High Beach.

I joined RGPF in 1940 processing cordite and then transferred over to the South Side packing cordite.

Packing cordite, what did that involve?

Walking round and taking a handful of cordite out of each box and blending. There was about fourteen boxes round on a stand and we all walked round taking a handful out of each and putting it into a box at the end, weighing it on the scales, and screwing it down and thrown out about seven high, about seventy pounds of the cordite in each box.

And did you have to lift all this stuff, seventy pounds seems quite a weight.

We all took it in turns. There were two of us on the scales, one man and a woman, a woman that was strong enough to do all this work. I was one of those

Did you suffer from headaches and things?

Oh yes, terrible headaches. Really terrible.

Was any sympathy shown?

Oh yes, they had a proper hospital there that you could go and rest in for a while if you got too bad, but you really did get very bad headaches.

What sort of hours did you do?

6 till 2 in the morning and 2 till 10 at night, and 10 till 6 in the morning.

So you did shift work?

Yes, three shifts.

The same duties in each shift?

Yes, blending, yes that was our job, and unloading the trays off the trolleys. Because there again, they had to be stacked up very high, you carried three trays at a time, and you got lots of splinters in your hands.

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Did you get around the factory, did you see much what was going on?

No, we just worked in number 5 blending house. We just saw the stoves where the cordite was baked. Never went in those. See the barges that come up the water like, with it all on.

Towed by horses, the barges?

No, the men punted them along. They were punted along to the stages, and then put on to the trucks and brought to the blending houses.

They would be the old bell topped barges?

That's right, yes.

Where would that be near?

We could see the Sewardstone Road and also see the Royal Gunpowder Mill.

Wasn't that called the ICI section once? Why was that?

I don't know. Well there was an ICI section there because my sister worked there. I don't know what the difference in the job was, They used to come round making sure there was no air bubbles in the cordite. See that it was all first class stuff you know.

There were other industries connected, like Nobels, that was in the Abbey itself.

The foreman was Charlie Bailey and Len Heath and they used to come round and see that everything was in order. We used to rush and get our work done, and when we come back from our tea break we always had a sleep on the trays, which was much against the regulations. Most people did. We always kept a lookout on the outside in a cubbyhole where we used to change our shoes. This particular night the lookout went to sleep and the safety building officer came round and found us all asleep on the trays, which was a crime in those days. Any rate it ended up in a court martial, cause it was treated on an Army basis. Our poor charge hand, Ernie Nousley, of course it meant trouble for him if we let him down, so we all stuck together and told him we weren't asleep, we were just looking at the trays. Of course, the poor Danger Building man got in severe trouble over it for false accusations, which was terrible of us really, but we didn't think so at the time because we wanted to stand by our charge hand.

What happened during an air raid?

We used to have to down tools and go into the dugout. A real siren warning there was inside there. We all used to rush into to take off our clean shoes and get into our dirty shoes, we wasn't allowed outside in the same shoes as we worked in and rush to the shelters as luck would have it nothing really happened.

Could I just, on the subject of clean shoes on a dirty surface. I worked in the lab, my name is Ron Treadgold, I worked in the lab during this period, and I remember one occasion that one of our chaps, who was a little bit out of touch with the regulations, went into a CE building, which is full of dust, and was seen coming down the long walk still wearing danger building shoes, which have felt bottoms, impregnated with CE, and leaving great white footprints all the way down the long walk. This incident was hurriedly covered up by our own foreman, and nothing more was said about it.

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Did you have any actual bombs dropped?

No. We had some incendiary bombs which burnt some of the guncotton that was at the gate edge, but there was no real bombs inside. I was up at High Beach at this particular time and all these incendiary bombs were all the way down to Waltham Abbey, and it was just like fairyland. All burning on the ground, everywhere, people's houses and in their rooms. It was really a bad night. This was the time some of them landed in the Factory, but there was no explosions through it, so we were lucky really. I worked at the Factory for three years, and from there I was transferred to a tracer bullet factory in Hayes in Middlesex.

We used to have to walk about half a mile to the canteen, we had about twenty minutes to eat our meal. It was right down near the gate, and there was the canteen, the hospital, the rest room, the machine room where you had all your clothes made to fit, which is a joke. We used to wear mob caps and these great big thick woollen dresses, navy blue. We wasn't allowed any grips in our hair, any pins of any sort. All we was allowed to wear was our wedding ring. No smoking was allowed inside, not even in the canteen. If you was ever taken ill in the blending house, you was never allowed to walk up to the rest room or hospital on your own, there was always three of you had to go up, so two could come back. You was never allowed to walk in the grounds on your own.

That was so you didn't wander off into any contraband areas?

Yes, or have any affairs with men, which was a joke really, because most of them was getting on in years. Those that weren't called up were men that had a disability that they couldn't go in the Army. It was very good food in the canteen, the only thing is once somebody had a fruit pie and when they opened it up there was a mouse in it. Quite a few mouse dirts and things like that found their way into the food. On the whole it was OK. I never used to eat in the canteen to tell you the truth. I used to take sandwiches and just have a cup of tea. I had about half an hour for lunch, not long, it used to take you twenty minutes to walk from number 5 right through to the gate you know. That wasn't included in the break. You had to walk along all the railway tracks, which was all laid down for the trolleys.

Ron: Sometimes that was the only dry bit of ground as it used to get flooded. When I left Waltham Abbey as an Assistant I recall that my wages were about three pound a week, and working in the laboratory we might be a bit higher paid than you.

I can't remember what my wages were, we certainly didn't get as much as you. Must have been about two fifty I should think. That was for shift work, a forty hour week. You was very restricted to your own buildings, you weren't allowed to go into any other buildings.

Ron: Did you have any problems with the men? Did they resent you?

No. We made our own fun, there was always the charge hand and two other men in the building, there was always some funny little things going on.

Ron: Get any passes?

No. The majority of girls had got their boyfriends in the forces and you wasn't allowed to walk with men. When you went up to get your meal the charge hand walked in front with his three men behind him, and then there was the women and the lady overseer walked behind you. All in file. You didn't have a chance to have an affair with anybody. It was very restricted.

Ron: Did night work present any difficulties?

No. Only tiredness.

Ron: Did you do week about with the shifts?

Oh yes, you did from six in the morning till two o'clock one week, two to ten the next week, and then ten o'clock at night till six in the morning. It was very wearing. You just went on and on like that, never really got in a routine. And the smell from the cordite really affected you internally as well, very smelly.

Ron: Can you describe in a little more detail the actual work you did.

The cordite was baked in the ovens, the stoves, then it was brought along the river to a landing stage and put on trucks, then the trucks brought the cordite to the buildings. There we unloaded it and we stacked it to quite a height. Then it was taken off these trays and put into seventy pound boxes. Then on trestles there was seven boxes down one side and seven boxes down the other, then we all six of us walked round in a circle, all night long, one behind the other, blending cordite. Then packing it into the top box, they called that blending it, and then it was screwed down. It was very monotonous. Sometimes you loaded the empty trays on to the trucks when we finished with the cordite. The trucks were pushed by two men. Sometimes there were two or three at a time, but there was always two pushing. Nothing mechanical near the cordite.

When we was really down at our lowest on night shift, the man off the scales used to come up with a little song, there was six of us walking round, all young girls, he used to come up to us and say:-

"If any young lady here wants a baby, give us a cock of the north, (?) Whoo hoo."

It wasn't all bad in there, we did have some fun. It was a very cloistered society, very shut in. Only saw danger building men or military that came round. The ICI girls used to come round and take a test of the cordite.

Two girls from Finsbury Park that used to come all the way down for work, they were really funny because they were proper cockneys, and they used to keep us in fits of laughter. Cause their language left a lot to be desired. Being a country girl it was all new, but it was really laughable. There were the twins and another one that came from Theydon Bois, that was the six of us, and then there was the overseer.

I was transferred with one of the girls, but a lot of them went to His Masters Voice factory in Hayes, I don't know what they did there. We used to sing to try and break the monotony, but you weren't supposed to make any noise whatsoever.