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Commentary on  
Col. W. H. Ashwith  
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## **The Military Superintendent**

**Colonel, later General W.H. Askwith R.A.**

### **Superintendent 1855–1868**

From the commencement of Crown ownership in 1787 to 1832 the senior official in charge at the Factory, termed Storekeeper, was a civilian, commencing with James Wright, with overall military command resting with the Comptroller of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich, at that time the instigator of the Crown purchase Col. Later Lt. Gen. Sir William Congreve. From 1830 The establishment was termed the Royal Gunpowder Manufactory later Factory (RGPF). From 1832 the chief officer of the site was appointed from the Army. Initially this was from the Royal Engineers and from 1845 the Royal Artillery. The term Superintendent was adopted from 1855 and was first applied to Col. Later Gen. W. H. Askwith R.A. Each Superintendent brought with him his own style and outlook. Some presided over periods of quiet others saw great change. Amongst the latter was Col. Askwith.

Col. Askwith's career offers a fascinating glimpse into the varied and even exotic experience open to a successful and dedicated officer in the Victorian Army. After general regimental service he was posted to of all places Corfu. From there he travelled in Greece and Albania to investigate the military situation in these areas. This service must have marked him out as having the ability to deal independently with foreign military authorities as he was then posted as military attaché in the British Embassy in Spain. This was a critical time for Spain which was threatened by a Carlist rebellion. It was not uncommon then for British officers to serve in the armies of foreign allies and Askwith was appointed British Commissioner in one of the Spanish armies. In this capacity he participated in many actions over three years and was wounded. He received the highest Spanish military decoration and was made a member of a Spanish military order. On returning from Spain he resumed regimental duties in Britain, Malta and Jamaica.

In 1854 the Crimean War started. From the outset the war exposed major deficiencies in the Army supply and materiel systems and the need for a strong command in these areas would have been evident. Col. Askwith was initially appointed Acting Inspector of Gunpowder in 1854. A clue as to what was to come lay in his rank. The previous incumbent had been a Captain. Askwith far outranked him and it is probable that his designation with the new title of Superintendent in 1855 was part of the strengthening of command.

A massive programme of investment in new facilities at military establishments was launched and Waltham Abbey figured prominently. Over his long tenure from 1854 to 1868 Askwith energetically presided over and managed this activity. A whole series of developments took the Factory to an advanced state of technology. Major instances were – in 1856 hydraulic press houses utilising water power were built. These produced substantial improvement in pressed material quality and performance. A year later in 1857 a major transition from water in the motive power in the incorporating mills was implemented with the introduction of steam power in the new Group A mills. This was followed successively from 1863 by the impressive range of steam powered incorporating mills on the Queens Mead which form the centrepiece of the site today. These mills were architecturally and technically successful, attracting considerable international attention and became the template for gunpowder mill design in military and civil application in Britain and overseas. In parallel with these important manufacturing developments the transport system of the Factory underwent major improvement with canal extensions and a greatly extended tramway network. Another important innovation promoted by Askwith was the writing by his technical officers of influential treatises on manufacturing practice at Waltham Abbey. Those written by Major Baddeley in 1867 and Capt. Smith in 1870 remain to this day as important source material for historians of Victorian engineering practice in what has been a largely unknown branch of industry. Baddeley's paper was acknowledged as a vital guide by the designer of an advanced powder mill built for the Confederate States in the American Civil War, universally recognised as a major technical achievement.

Askwith's tenure also saw the beginning of the rise of chemical science which was ultimately to supplant gunpowder and he would have given close support to the chief Government scientist Frederick Abel in his

research and manufacturing development work in guncotton at Waltham Abbey. His appointment to the First Committee on Torpedoes reflected his grasp of technical matters.

Askwith was a man of equable temperament well regarded by his brother officers and in addition to his military abilities was an accomplished artist. He was a keen student of the regimental history of the Royal Artillery and single handedly compiled a catalogue of the service history of every officer of the regiment from earliest times, a considerable feat in the days before typing, computers etc. Ultimately he reached the rank of General and was made Colonel Commandant of the regiment, becoming known as the ' Father of the Royal Artillery '

Askwith retired in 1881 after 52 years of distinguished service.

**Les Tucker**