

WASC 2131

Commentary on
Connection R&PF
and India

2010

India

The influence of RGPF factory design and manufacturing practice was of particular significance in what was then the Empire.

In the event of problems being encountered Waltham Abbey advice was sought and if necessary staff were sent out to advise on the spot. This transfer of technical expertise also involved the posting of staff to overseas factories for more extended periods to supervise and train local personnel. India had important governmental explosives factories and Factory staff were posted to two of these.

In 1904 a cordite factory was opened at Arunvankadu, Nilgiris, S. India. The Annual Report of the Factory for 1903-1904 stated that in 1904 seven men were transferred from Waltham Abbey to Arunvankadu. Members of succeeding generations of the Berry family worked at Waltham Abbey and included in the number posted was one, Edward. In the Berry family photograph Edward is fifth from the left back row. Also at the Factory was his brother Samuel, fourth from the left and their father, centre front had worked there before them.

As always war brought sudden urgent demand pressures and in 1939 supervisory staff were urgently sent from the Factory to the Government High Explosives Factory at Kirkee, Poona. Four have been identified in the photograph taken on the occasion of the departure of the Superintendent Mr. R. Huddart.

The ladies in the second photograph were staff wives who were engaged in welfare work for troops stationed locally and those resting from service on the Burma Front.

A crucial aspect of explosives was the ability to withstand potentially damaging conditions of transport and storage. It was this aspect which afforded a prime example of Waltham Abbey personnel travelling overseas to advise, again to India. A measure of the importance attached to this aspect was the sending to India in 1906 of two of the most senior personnel of the Factory – Col. Sir Frederick Nathan Superintendent and Dr. Robert Robertson Senior Scientist to investigate and advise on cordite storage problems following explosion incidents. An exhaustive study was made and the conclusions and recommendations on tests etc. became a fundamental reference point for explosives storage worldwide.

Col. Nathan, Superintendent of the Factory from 1900, was a pre eminent figure in the explosives industry. He was an excellent administrator and energetically drove forward the quest for the highest standards of manufacturing practice and research. In 1909 he left Government employ to become Works Manager at the great Nobels explosives factory at Ardeer. He made a significant contribution to the national explosives effort in WW1, designing and overseeing construction of a vital TNT and propellant plant at Pembrey and later performing a similar function for the Royal Naval Cordite Factory at Holton Heath. He was knighted for his services to the nation.

Dr. R. Robertson had a worldwide reputation as an explosives expert. After working in the laboratory of the City Analyst of Glasgow he joined the Factory and became Senior Scientist in charge of the main Laboratory, which was named after him. After his visit to India Robertson in 1907 was appointed Superintendent of the Government Chemical Research Department at Woolwich. WW1 brought a sudden major expansion of the work of the Department and Robertson worked tirelessly to ensure that it fulfilled all the demands placed on it. In 1921 he became Government Chemist. Having retired in 1936 he continued with private research. On the outbreak of war in 1939 he volunteered his services and performed valuable explosives committee work. Like Nathan Robertson was knighted for his services to the nation.