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Contribution to
BBC website
'WW2 Peoples
War'
'Mollys Years'
Part 1
Gunpowder Mills
Waltham Abbey
Essex



Molly's years part 1 Gun Powder Mills Waltham Abbey Essex by cornwallcsv

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People in story: Molly A Radley Eva Tinsley

Location of story: Hoddesden Herts.

Background to story: Civilian

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GUN POWDER MILLS, WALTHAM ABBEY, ESSEX

I was conscripted into war time munitions in Hertfordshire called Waltham Abbey Power Mills at Waltham Cross, Essex, a bus ride out from Waltham Cross. I was sent there with other girls in 1939/40. The 'Powder Mills' was in business during the First World War and because my mother said she went there in 1914, she wanted me to earn enough wages to buy a sewing machine.

We had never worked so hard as we had to do a 63 hour week. To get there it meant a walk of about 20 minutes across a common to the local railway station; get a 7.5d return train ticket, then a bus ride out from Waltham Abbey to the 'Gun Cotton' gate. The bus was crammed full of women powder mill workers as men were very thin on the ground. We all had to pass through a room to be searched for any metal which could have been on or in the clothes we were wearing.

When we arrived at our cloakrooms we all had to change into their suitable uniforms which consisted of slacks and tops looped together with tapes, no fasteners also a hat.

There were various large rooms where this gun cotton was made into 'brick' looking things for exporting to troops. I can remember having a large truck on wheels to take some place, load the cotton in it, then push a very weighty truck back to a vat shaped like a boat and with a paddle, activate the load from the truck, stir it with so much liquid until it was blended. How it went away or where it went I know not but it was called 'a wet diers'.

I was told that during night work I fell asleep whilst activating the paddle as it was very tiring standing doing that for 8 hours or so. I was moved to the 'big room' which was filled with a lot of the same machinery. The job I had was filling a six-sided container, split into about 16 sorted empty cans, with dried gunpowder into each one, punching it down making it firm then push the container to the end or front where it was mechanically pushed again. They were all then put together to be worked on elsewhere. The job was hard as we all suffered with bleeding knuckles from punching the gunpowder down, two hands worked together always.

At the end of the day time was of no consequence, no watches were worn, so it was back to change into our own clothes and return home the same way as we came.

We had a 23 hour break during the 7 day working week. It was a Sunday to do with trains or buses; we had to do a 3 shift every 3 weeks. Eventually I became ill with

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meningitis and had to leave there.

There were numerous buildings on the grounds of Waltham Abbey and one was shaped like a chapel. When I was put to work at another building there were only six women and girls, some women must have been grandmas. They had come to Waltham Abbey from East London and they were hard workers. In this particular shop we had to pack 'Gun Cotton bricks' into a special tin, packed by weight. There was a special water tank used on that job by two granddads. The younger girls used to tease them by adding an extra brick on for extra weight. On night work the older women went behind a pile of the required tins for a nap. I crept up on them, when they were sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall and tied them all together using the tapes which fastened our uniforms. We also had to go to a building that looked like a chapel with lots of alcoves with coloured glass where full tins of 'sealed bricks' were stacked.

The train trip at night to and from Rye House Station to Waltham Cross was often a nightmare. There were no lights anywhere. On the land alongside the railway line were acres of glasshouses which grew tomatoes when in season. The German planes mistook them for lakes. The trains would often stand idle after hearing the siren warnings until the 'all clear'.

In 1942 I married a Sapper of the Royal Engineers. He did not go out to France until late June 1942. He was wounded in Caen, France and sent back to Morrison Hospital, Swansea, South Wales. He had been attacked by a French grenade which was embedded in his right hip but it was too high to operate. My sister came and went in answer to a telegram from a Swansea Hospital which was way up in the hills and a bus ride from Swansea Railway station.

After a few days my parents came down to support me but unfortunately he died in the hospital 10 days later. My father saw to the immediate funeral plans and my husband was buried at Hoddesden, Herts. Cemetery, He had an army headstone. He was 28 years old.

I also lost a cousin at Belgium who was in the Army. A brother also lost, a brother to the boy of 20 in Belgium who was a rear gunner in the RAF. He was ready for take-off in Alexandria. All the crew in that plane were shot. He was buried out there. But luck fell in as my brother, who was in the Royal Engineers, was posted near a cemetery there and he was lucky enough to find the RAF's grave. He took pictures of it for Eric's mother who lived in Surrey.

So I am a war widow.

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