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Article by

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'James Cole

Labourer of Waltham

Abbey, Essex'

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Chapter Fourteen

JAMES COLE

Labourer of Waltham Abbey, Essex



James Cole was born about the year 1785, when Pitt the Younger was Primate, but we know nothing of his early life. On Christmas Day 1804 he married Ann Beadle of Waltham Abbey in Waltham Abbey church¹. James was a labourer at the Royal Gunpowder Mills at Waltham Abbey.

The first reference to the manufacture of gunpowder at Waltham Abbey appears in Fuller's "*Worthies of England*" published in 1662 in which he states that the mills were "*lately erected*". He goes on to say that the mills had blown up five times in seven years. At this time, the mills were privately owned but in 1787 the government purchased the mills and a rapid expansion programme began, prompted by the need for gunpowder to continue the war with France. By the year 1813 there were some 260 men employed at the mills. From 1808 the government bought several properties in High Bridge Street to let to the workmen and it was probably in one of these properties that James and Ann rented a room. Their address is High Bridge Street in most entries in the records from their marriage onwards.

James and Ann had four daughters all baptised at Waltham Abbey church. Sarah was baptised on Sunday 17th November 1805; Elizabeth on Sunday 29th May 1808; Catherine, born on Wednesday 15th July 1812 was baptised on the 9th August and Ann was baptised on Sunday 29th October 1815. Catherine was to marry on the 7th February 1830 to William Andrews (see [Chapter 15](#)) and Ann married on the 4th June 1838 to William, son of George Cannon a tailor of High Bridge Street.



The Powder Mills



Waltham Abbey church



High Bridge Street

Gunpowder originally had been made by hand but mechanisation came to the industry very early on (by 1435 the first gunpowder mill driven by waterpower was working in Nuremberg, Germany). Mills commonly used wooden rollers, replaced by metal rollers in the early 1800's. The process of manufacturing gunpowder was, briefly, as follows².

Large rotating drums fitted with heavy steel balls mixed the charcoal and sulphur. This *ball mill* pulverised the charcoal and sulphur while the saltpetre was crushed separately by heavy rollers. The charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre were then put into large vats, several hundreds of pounds at a time, and then continually mixed and dampened with water. The resultant mixture then passed through wooden rollers to break up the large lumps and then, under immense pressure, formed into "cakes". Coarse-toothed rollers then cracked the cakes and passed them to the *coming mill*. Here, by passing through a series of different sized rollers, the pieces reduced to granules of a desired size (this part of the process being *granularisation*). Tumbling for several hours and adding graphite to the mixture *glazed* the mixture. This process rounded off the edges of the granules enabling the powder grains to flow more easily. Finally, sieving graded the grains.

James worked in the gunpowder mills for over thirty years^{2a} and eventually became one of four Foremen of Reeling Houses. He was paid 3s 10d per day (about half an agricultural labourer's weekly wage) plus and extra 1s 6d per night watch - which the four Foremen took in turns.

James worked in the Coming Mill - always a dangerous place at the best of times. Several large explosions had rocked Waltham Abbey over the years although there had been a relatively safe period of thirty years since the last fatal explosion. On Thursday 13th April 1843 James was working a night shift in the Coming Mill with six other men. At eight minutes past three in the morning a terrifying explosion tore the Coming House apart and destroyed another next to it. The

explosion woke the whole town but James and his workmates were all dead or dying. Six of them, including James, died more or less instantly and the seventh probably died later that day. Later that morning the Clerk wrote in the parish register the names of those killed and the note

"the above six unfortunate men were accidentally killed by the explosion of the Corning House No 2 situated in Edmonery (?) in this parish belonging to the Royal Gunpowder Department. The last explosion attended with loss of life was on Nov. 1811. This explosion happened 13th April 3hrs 8m am."

The Clerk of Edmonton wrote in his diary³

"At about five minutes after 3am an explosion took place at the Royal Powder Mills in Waltham Abbey, which destroyed two corning houses and killed seven persons."

James was buried two days later, on Saturday 15th April 1843 in the churchyard of Waltham Abbey church.



Notes

1. All dates in this chapter are from the parish registers of Waltham Holy Cross unless otherwise stated.
2. a) At the Inquest of Bodies in 1843, witness Will Adams said he had been 32 years in the mill and Cole was there before him. He also described him as "a very experienced man".
3. Encyclopaedia Britannica
4. MS Local History Dept., Palmers Green Library.

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