

The Archives of the Royal Gunpowder Mills – A Historical Account

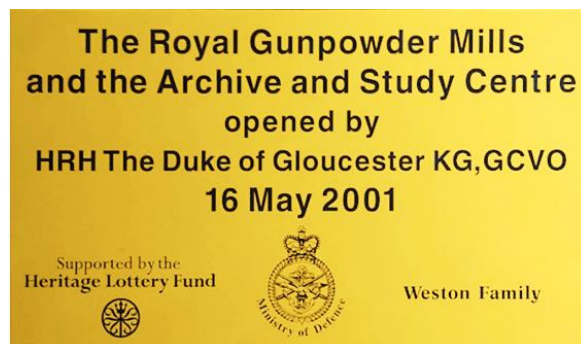


Les Tucker

When the Operating Company was set up in 1997, one of the key objectives was to “*advance the education and knowledge of the public relating to the history and development of gunpowder explosives, propellants and ballistic and other missiles, and the preservation history, archaeological and industrial heritage and natural history of the Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills the establishment of an interpretative and education Centre for training, dissemination of information and to conduct research into such mattersand to publish or otherwise disseminate the useful results thereof*”. This rather legalistic statement was enacted by setting up an Archive and Study Centre. A very substantial body of information has been acquired and catalogued over the years. This article gives a brief insight into how this has been achieved, and the plans for the future.

The origins of the Royal Gunpowder Mills Archive go back to the Government purchase of the Mills in 1787, from which time copies were kept of all documentation relating to the Mills. This considerable body of material was kept in what were termed Letter Books. At some point in the 19th century these records were deposited with the Public Records Office (PRO). It appears that by 1950 it was decided that consideration should be given to the longer term preservation and utilisation of the records and a comprehensive Catalogue and Commentary on the Letter Book situation, dated 19th March 1951, was produced. The Letter Books were subsequently transferred from the PRO to The National Archive (TNA) at Kew.

During the latter years of the site as a Research Establishment, Malcolm McLaren, Head of Information Services, created the Waltham Abbey Special Collection (WASC) which comprised a collection of material relevant to the history of the Establishment and military gunpowder and explosives. It is much to his credit that the present information repository exists. After the closure of the site in 1991, plans were underway for re-opening as a Visitor Attraction and a Heritage Centre. As we all know, this happened in 2001.



In the intervening years a decision was taken in to put all the historical information on to a sound basis. During the period between site closure and re-opening, Lynne Lennard was the de facto Chief Officer. She supported the project and gave carte blanche to do whatever was necessary to set up a Mills historical information system, which would be given the overall title “The Archive”, with TNA material remaining as a separate element. In 1995, volunteers Les Tucker and Richard Thomas started the daunting task of cataloguing the material. They, and Lynne, were based in the former Directors’ house; the Lodge (A221 – Grade 2 listed) – now part of the Hills estate.



Les would deal with industrial archaeology, history and heritage. Richard would attend to all matters relating to waterways and to ‘accidents, incidents and fires’, and create an Accident documentation section (WAAC). In 2004 Ian MacFarlane joined the staff as Mills IT Co-ordinator and undertook the design of the Archive IT system, digitization, and oversees it to this day. Additionally Michael Seymour, along with his other Mills interests, undertook scanning of Archive documents, images, etc. Bryan Howard added to Archive information by identifying personnel in group photographs. Finally the Archive Team was completed by recruitment via Liz Went (who joined the Company in 2005) of three volunteer researchers; Derek Armes, Sandra Taylor and Peter Blake. At that time it was decided that the main elements of the Archive should be:

WASC	Documents / Images within Documents
WAI	Images incl. Images within Documents
WAMP	Maps and Plans
WAAC	Accidents
WABD	Building Drawings
WANBD	Non Building Drawings
WAROC	Rocketry

Later added were :-

WASI	Waltham Abbey Staff Index
WAPP	Waltham Abbey Personnel Project
WAOH	Waltham Abbey Oral History
WASU	Waltham Abbey Superintendents
WAC	Waltham Abbey Chronology

Ian MacFarlane subsequently added a substantial range of subsidiary sections such as WAVID – the Mills Video Collection. The scope of the Archive has been substantially expanded since then.



As part of the information source role, the Archive Group has written a number of books on aspects of the Mills, sold at the Mills and from Amazon:

Les Tucker - The Listed Buildings and Other Principal Structures at the Royal Gunpowder Mills Waltham Abbey

Richard Thomas - The Waterways of the Royal Gunpowder Mills and The Explosions at the Royal Gunpowder Mills

Derek Armes and Sandra Taylor - The Workforce of the Royal Gunpowder Mills: 1787 – 1841 and Workforce Worthies of the Royal Gunpowder Mills

Peter Blake - Military Superintendents of the Royal Gunpowder Mills (Second Edition)

Also available for sale are Historic Reprints of key texts from the Archive on gunpowder manufacture.

So what are the plans for the future? COVID–19 and all its effects have added yet another dimension of uncertainty regarding the site, and work on the Archives has not been exempt from that uncertainty. One of the immediate effects has been that work on images from the Image Archive which would have formed the core of a Women at War Exhibition have had to be put into abeyance. In the meantime the volunteers will continue to answer historical enquiries and generally maintain the Archive, including the addition of new material. In the context of the latter, Les Tucker will continue writing a general history of South Site to 1944 for entry into the Archive, this being to complement the technically based account of the post WW2 Research Centre activity on the both sites written by Bryan Howard. Both include a wide range of images from the Archive and it is hoped that assistance will be available from volunteers for setting up of these exercises for printing and some form of binding once lock-down is over. Additionally it is planned to set up a process for answering Archive based enquiries through on-line Zoom events.

In the meantime, do go to the Archive section of the Royal Gunpowder Mills web-site at <https://www.royalgunpowdermills.com/archive> It contains a lot of fascinating material.

LES TUCKER
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