

WASC 2205

Letter from
E. Bowell
22-9-2003
re South
Site V2
7-2-1945

WASC 2205

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22 September 2003

Dear Sir

My sister law, a Mrs Diana Payne, now living in Cambridge, met a one-time ROF worker and made me aware of the Waltham Abbey Friends Association. Copies of the June 2003 booklet "Touchpaper" and "The Listed Buildings" have now reached me together with some relevant photographs.

My interest stems from my time there in the period 1941 to 1944 not as a member of the ROF staff but as one of the team of "resident inspectors" based at Woolwich. What I joined in 1937 was then "The War Department Chemist Department" which later became "Chemical Inspectorate, Ministry of Supply". My first contacts with the ROF Waltham were to collect samples of cordite and take them for analysis at Woolwich, but following the outbreak of war and the "phoney" period, air raids destroyed the house I had moved to in Plumstead and some of the buildings in Woolwich Arsenal. I was sent to the ICI works in Scotland (1940) but after a few difficult but relatively peaceful months there while my relatives in the south were suffering the air raids I was moved, by request, South again first to Bridgend but finally to Waltham Abbey. In the early days at Woolwich I had cycled from Ilford, my birthplace, the ten miles daily to Woolwich, crossing the Thames on the free ferry or walking under it through the foot tunnel.

Back again at Barkingside, Ilford, in 1941 I again cycled the ten miles or so to work at Waltham Abbey ROF in northerly direction rather than the previous southerly direction to Woolwich and through more open country rather than the docklands of North Woolwich.

There was a little chemical laboratory up in the water tower in the ROF area south of the road through Waltham Abbey. I was working in it at a balance when an explosion blew in the windows and I received minor glass cuts. At first I thought the RDX / Beeswax had exploded, but it happened that no one was working in it – it was a V2 rocket on it. I went down to the surgery for attention to my cuts and a clean up and to report another casualty I saw on the way needing attention. Oddly enough, my wife heard the explosion (from 10 miles away!) and was convinced it was at the ROF. It happened that our neighbor was a police constable, so she asked him to use his influence (wartime!) to contact the ROF. He did so, but got the answer that the incident was in the ROF but no one of the name Bowell was on the employee list! Well, it wasn't, because I was an outsider, an employee based on Woolwich Arsenal – a resident inspector!

However, after being patched up I was deemed fit enough to make the cycle ride of ten miles back to my home in Barkingside. Arrived there, my wife was not surprised to see my bandages and bloodstained shirt! – despite the (false!) reassurances she had received!

A second V2 fell just outside South of the South ROF area. It made the typical steep sided enormous crater but no problem except the labour of filling it in! – a local authority task!!

After the war, the same laboratory at Woolwich Arsenal I had worked in on explosives and propellants was taken over for the then completely new type of work for the development of atomic energy - 1945 onwards. Analytical work on materials destined for that purpose proved to be very interesting, far more so than had been the work on explosives, involving as it did all the 92 elements of the then known elements – plus a few more man-made ones beyond uranium! This work expanded to such an extent that more laboratory space was needed – which led to a takeover of ex-army facilities in Chatham and a move of a number of staff there. In my case, it involved removal from my abode in Barkingside (Ilford) to a house at Wigmore, just outside Chatham to which the family moved in 1950. In the meantime, specialised facilities had been built at places such as Aldermaston and Harwell, and later at Winfrith. In 1960 I was transferred to Winfrith and worked there until my retirement in April 1976, which is how we came to live at Brianspuddle, Dorset in 1960 and continued so to do to the present day.

Yours faithfully
Ernest Bowell

PS
Dear Sir

The enclosed letter explains my interest in Waltham Abbey ROF and I enclose a cheque for £10.00 made out WARGM Friends Association. This can be taken as a donation or as a request for “family membership” but as I am now nearly 88 and have a health condition which suggests I am not likely to last beyond another six months at most “membership” may be over optimistic. I’m not bothered!

Yours truly
Ernest Bowell