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The Shipwright  
who built the  
Gunpowder Point

This mill 'bigger and better and more commodious' replaced another which, in the '20<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Henry VIII' was let by Robert, Abbot of Waltham Holy Cross to John Blount, miller, for £26 13s 4d a year.

It is recorded that there were 'two mills under one roof standing and being next unto the aforesaid Abbey'. It is believed that the mill bequeathed to the Abbey in 1108 by Maud, or Matilda, the first wife of Henry I also stood on this site. It was the hope of the Society's diggers to throw some light on the earlier mills when they excavated in 1953.

A mass of foundations was soon laid bare and indications of two buildings, where the later cut through the brickwork of earlier walls. The brick floors of a furnace were uncovered leading into the pit of a chimney. A thick layer of sooty ash encrusted the bricks and the pit was full of the same black sludge. An old inhabitant remembered a grain drier at this site in the mill. The water level of the river must during the building of the mill in 1735 have been considerably raised as some of the brick floors were actually below the bed of the river. A layer of fine silt and sand covered the floors which indicated serious flooding.

The stable site was found, and in a cavity in the wall were the remains of a cage-type rat trap. Thick heavy studded old boot soles were also found, together with ironwork from a cart, a rusted curry-comb and a brass harness ring.

Although no traces of the ancient mills were found, our first dig was exciting and interesting. It was the half of the mill site to the north of these foundations that proved most rewarding, producing a wealth of medieval finds.

*(The next part of this article will appear in the September issue.)*

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## THE SHIPWRIGHT WHO BUILT THE GUNPOWDER PUNTS

Tricia Gurnett

I've just been reading a new book, published in autumn 2011, called 'A Shipwright's Boy' by Donald Sattin. My interest was through Thames sailing barges, as Don had been connected with them all his life, but I was surprised to learn from the book that he had helped build the dumb barges used by the Lee Conservancy, and the Gunpowder punts for the Royal Gunpowder Factory.

Don was born in 1922 at Teynham, Kent, of farming stock. As a third child he would not inherit the tenancy, so at 14 years and 3 months was looking for work. His father paid £25 to have him apprenticed to the manager of White's Shipyard at Conyer. When his apprenticeship ended, he remained at the yard for a further seven years, becoming foreman shipwright, and later took a degree in engineering.

When he started in 1936 the building of sailing barges had ceased, and the yard was building 70 ft dumb barges for the Lee Conservancy. Four of these barges were built a year, two at a time, side by side. They were given local names, such as 'Enfield' and 'Leyton', and were built in the same fashion that a sailing barge would have been.

In his first week Don was sent to look after the 'hot stuff' copper. This 'hot stuff' was tar, used for stuffing a plank, which was stood on edge on trestles between two pegs. A mop was put into the copper and taken to the shipwright who would run it along the plank edge, being sure to put plenty on. Don would assist the shipwright to put a layer of elk hair into the 'hot stuff', pressing it down firmly. After the plank edge was well covered the mop was once again run over the elk hair, soaking it with boiling 'hot stuff'. Then the plank would be spiked, later to be bored for the tree nails, which were always pronounced 'trunnels'. Barges were never caulked as were other sailing vessels, but tar and 'hair network' was used. Don graduated to the Boiler House, which served the 'Kale' or steam chest. This was 65 feet long by 3 feet by 2 feet, into which planks were placed to be steamed ready to be bent round the frame of a vessel. He had to steam the planks for four to six hours. When they were ready he had to undo the 'Kale' door, stick his head into the steam and hook a large pair of pincher tongs on to the planks. The men then pulled on a rope, drew out the plank, lifted it onto their shoulders and bent it round the vessels.

Although the yard was building non-sailing craft, barges were always coming in for repairs, which often meant Don had to work on his back in the mud under the barge's bottom. For a while he was 'lent' as relief mate on the barges taking bricks from the Conyer brickfields up to London, and returning with either 'rough stuff' going back to the brickyards or a load of coal from a ship in the London Docks. The largest of these sailing barges could carry 40,000 bricks.

When war broke out in 1939, there was less barge work, but it had hardly started when Conyer's Yard got the job of building a series of swim-headed gunpowder punts for the Royal Gunpowder Factory at Waltham Abbey. The punts were rectangular, constructed with swims at both ends, slightly flair-sided, each 18 feet in length by about 6 feet in the beam. They were built in the same way as a sailing barge, with a keelson and side, bottom and swim planking of two inch rebated oak, with tar and hair set-work, not caulked. The hair was elk, and the oak was of fine quality requisitioned from a furniture factory at Maidstone. Floors and frames were of three inch oak, and decking over the swims in inch-and-a-half Swedish pine. The hold was left open. All fastenings were in galvanised steel, driven in from the outside with nothing showing on the inside. The punts were designed to be poled or towed, with brass ring bolts for'ard and aft above the swims. Instead of being tarred, they were black varnished through which the grain of the oak could be seen. Don reckoned that each punt weighed around 4 tons, and that they were designed to carry around half a ton of gunpowder to minimise damage in the event of an explosion.

When completed, each punt was taken up to Waltham Abbey on the back of a charabanc cut down as a lorry. On arrival the punts were completely clad inside with elephant hide tacked into place with copper tacks. The Conyer yard also built some smaller punts which were about 5 feet in beam, and two larger punts of around 26 ft. used for carrying stores, materials and empty barrels.

Some years ago when the punts were retrieved from the Waltham Abbey canals, where they had been sunk, Don was asked to go to identify them. The punts were still in perfect order as was the elephant hide. Among the excavated craft which Don identified was an ice breaker.

After the building of the gunpowder punts, there was no more repair work for wooden boats of any sort. Thereafter the yard turned to engineering and Don became an engineer, and at the age of 29 completed his degree in engineering. In his retirement Don put his shipwright's skills to work again helping with the restoration of sailing barges. He often sailed on restored barges, including on the last of the gunpowder sailing barges, the Lady of the Lea, on an historic trip back up the River Lea.

Sadly, Don died just after publication of the book, but not before starring in the new film about Thames Barges, 'Red Sails' which premiered, sadly after his death in December 2011.

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## **MORE FIRES AT WALTHAM.**

**Minnie Fenton**

In the Weekly Telegraph of November 21<sup>st</sup> 1874 the headlines read 'More Fires at Waltham'. It was stated that last Saturday fire destroyed a large quantity of hay belonging to Mr Thomas Chapman of the Abbey Farm. Three separate stacks of wheat and hay were all burning simultaneously.

During that week a field belonging to Mr Bott, a farmer, of Dallance Farm experienced activity of a similar nature. Also Mr Stout of Broomstickhall Farm Waltham Abbey discovered a fire in his field at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Coming to the rescue as the alarm was raised was the town fire engine manned by the Superintendent and volunteer firemen. The larger of the fire engines at the RGPF also hastened to help extinguish the fires. The water had to be pumped from 500 yards away.

Although the farmers were insured the experience caused widespread fear among the people of Waltham Abbey – a place normally free from events of this nature. A reward of £50 was offered for the apprehension of the offenders.

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Articles for inclusion in the August Newsletter should be sent to Jean Church, 26, Monkswood Avenue, Waltham Abbey, EN9 1LB by July 1<sup>st</sup>.