

WASC 2267

Letter from Francis
Lee to Privy
Council

"To the Lords and others of the Queen's most honourable Privy Council, Francis Lee, gunpowder maker, wisheth all health and felicity.

"1 Samuel. Chap. 13. Verse 19. "There was no Smith found throughout the land of Israel lest the Hebrews should make them swords and spears".

"So now no powder made for her Highness in England, but provision made out of foreign parts as of late from Barbary, Hamburg and Antwerp which provisions in the time of the Duke D'Alva were cut off.

"In which extremity your petitioner did make 100 lasts * of powder from saltpetre gathered in this realm to the profit of her Highness for he delivered Serpentine at 8d a pound and corn powder at 9d which was £40 a last cheaper than the foreign provision - Yet it is now thought by Her Highness and Council better to pay £10 more a last for foreign provisions than to have her subjects houses digged - Whereupon groweth this further inconvenience that they send over powder made of unrefined saltpetre which at first appears very good but soon appears moist and filthy to the loss of the money laid forth and disappointment of her Majesty's affairs.

"This may be avoided by the provision of saltpetre from overseas which can be stored and turned into gunpowder when necessary, in this way avoiding the risks of fire, lightning and other mishaps (which God forbid), for a fire of saltpetre may be put out, whereas a spark in Gunpowder overwhelmeth all.

"Whereas it is alleged that Her Majesty might suffer great loss by the running out or wasting of saltpetre if it were stored, the truth is that losses of this kind which have happened have only been by want of skill in him that made choice thereof - One skilful man can preserve the petre and deliver powder weight for weight and as cheap as the saltpetre is bought and then Her Majesty shall be furnished with good stuff and shortage, danger and digging avoided.

From:
British Explosives Industry

P. 16

Francis Lee described as gunpowder
maker to the Queen in lease of 1578.

Son of Thomas Lee who owned
gunpowder mill at Rotherhithe,
probably the one erected by Henry
Reve in 1555.

was ordered to buy saltpetre, sulphur, and charcoal to be sent to the Castle of Brest, and in 1414 Henry V decreed that no gunpowder should be taken out of the Kingdom without special licence. Henry VI in 1457 appointed as Master of the Ordnance for life John Judde, merchant of London, who was skilled in the devising of warlike instruments, and had made at his own expense sixty guns called serpentines, and twenty tons of "stuff for gunpowder of saltpetre and sulphur."

We find in 1512 a Th. Hart making gunpowder in Rochester Castle, and in 1514 a house let by the new Hospital of our Lady Bishopsgate Without for the making of gunpowder; further, the appointment of Hans Wolf, a foreigner, to be one of the King's gunpowder makers in the Tower of London and elsewhere, and in 1531 Thomas A Lee, one of the King's gunners, to be principal searcher and maker of saltpetre. In 1555 Henry Reve erects a gunpowder mill on a parcel of pasture ground called "The Creng," in Rotherhithe, and in 1559 there are already tenders by the powder makers for the supply of gunpowder. In 1562 John Thomworth of Waltham is in treaty, on behalf of Queen Elizabeth, for the purchase of saltpetre, sulphur and bow staves for barrels, and presumably a powder-mill existed there at that time. In 1562 three gunpowder makers, Bryan Hogge, Robert Thomas and Francis A Lee tendered for the supply of gunpowder, the same Lee being described in the particulars of leases of Elizabeth in 1578 as gunpowder maker to the Queen, and having a gunpowder mill and pond "in the tenure of Thomas Lee, deceased and now of Francis Lee, his son, in Rotherhithe, near the Thames." This was probably the mill erected by Reve in 1555. It is to be noted, however, that in a petition in 1575 Lee calls himself "Francis Leigh, gunpowder maker to the Council," and says that he and his father and brother have been for fifty years "The greatest dealers therein, and he has all the implements." The gunpowder mill at Leigh Place, near Godstone, in Surrey, which existed about 1560, and was later on the property of the Evelyngs, may well have also been erected by the Lees or Leighs. In 1576 one John Bovyat seems to