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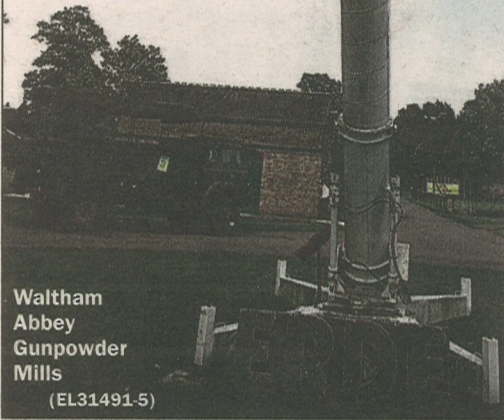
Interview with  
Epping Forest Guardian  
D. Kenyon  
5-7-2012



# Local History

## Explosive history of gunpowder factory

When Lawrence of Arabia blew up Turkish train tracks in the First World War he used explosives sent 1,500 miles from a Waltham Abbey factory. **JOE CURTIS** investigates.



Waltham Abbey Gunpowder Mills (EL31491-5)

THE Royal Gunpowder Mills shipped tonnes of gunpowder and munitions to war zones across the globe.

This included supporting Lawrence of Arabia's guerilla attacks in Turkey and inventing the explosives used in the Dambusters raids during the Second World War.

Military historian David Kenyon is based at the site. He said the facility produced explosives for the British effort during the American Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War and many others.

A total of 6,000 workers were employed there during the First World War. Many were women who had previously been housewives or had domestic jobs.

Dr Kenyon said: "It's an incredible story. "It has wit-



There were a series of explosions at the mills, some of them fatal. The crater in this photo was created by a blast in 1940.

nessed major social change in Britain and the changing nature of warfare as well.

"We'd love people to know more about it, it's a local piece of history."

Built in the 1600s, the factory began creating gunpowder using huge water-propelled millstones which would grind the ingredients into the powder.

But it was not a risk-free process.

"It was a dangerous place to be," Dr Kenyon said. "Right through the 19th century there were fatal explosions and accidents. People were risking their lives working there."

An entire set of mills blew up in the 1860s and the Abbey Church and greenhouses a mile away had their windows shattered by two blasts which killed 10 people.

Three surviving workers were awarded the Empire Gallantry Medal.

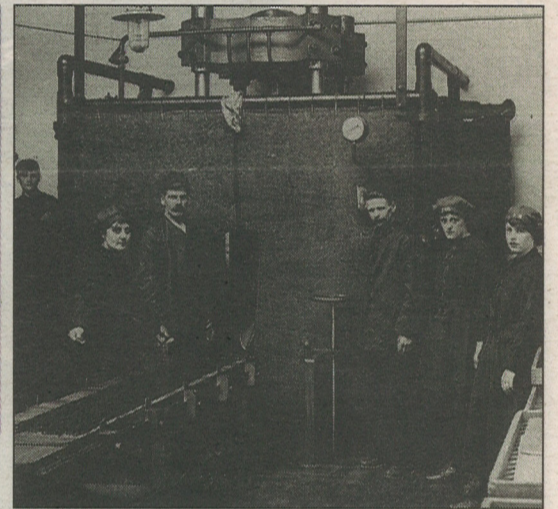
Dr Kenyon said: "The three men knew that if they left, the nitroglycerine could explode. They stayed at their posts, even though concrete was coming through the roof, to stabilise the mixture."

Because of the factory's proximity to London it played only a small role in the Second World War over fears of it being bombed.

However, its role was vital.



Beatrice Duck, left, and Hilda Kiddy both lived in Waltham Abbey and worked at the mills during the First World War.



Cordite workers at the mills in 1917.



Dr David Kenyon outside the Waltham Abbey Gunpowder Mills (EL31491-1)

The government found out about two explosives invented by a scientist at the mills while they looked for stable charges that would work in the Dambuster bombs.

Dr Kenyon said: "They found that the mills' inventions of Torpex and RDX, which were mainly used in torpedoes, worked well because they were

designed for underwater use." It became one of Britain's most successful bombing missions of the war.

The site ceased production in 1991 has is now a museum called Secret Island: Royal Gunpowder Mills.

● For more information on the mills go to [royalgunpowdermills.com](http://royalgunpowdermills.com)

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