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Commentary on
History and
Insignia of
Board of Ordnance

Ordnance Insignia of the British Army

History & Arms of the Board of Ordnance (Ordnance Board)

This is the history of 'The Board of Ordnance' and today's 'Ordnance Board'. The Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers & Royal Army Ordnance Corps can all trace their history back to this same common starting point.

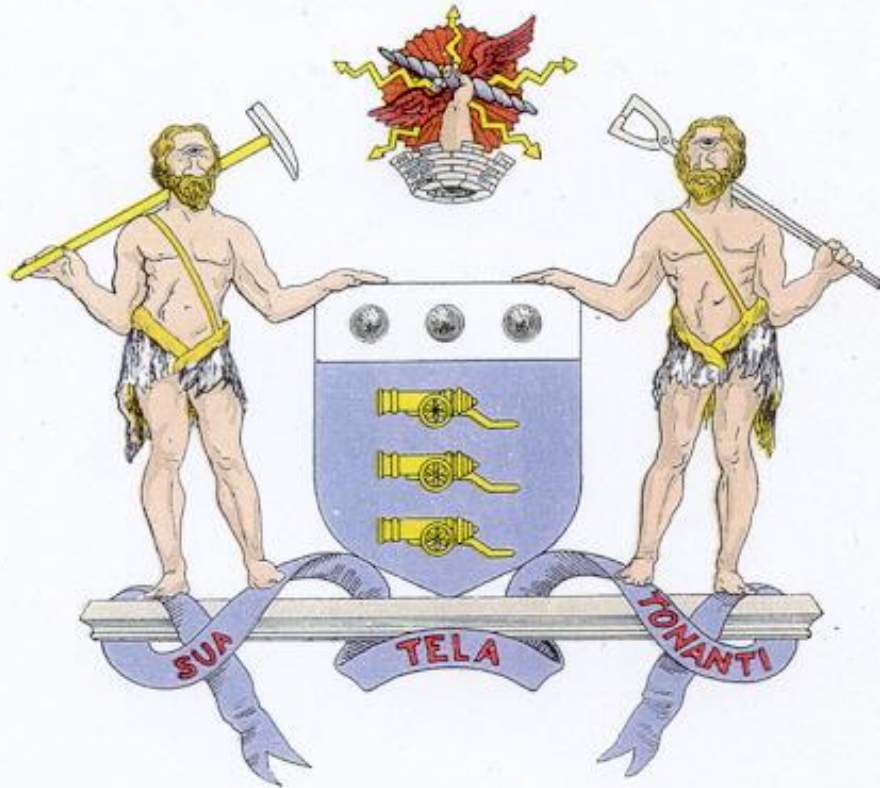
The Ordnance Board can trace its history back to 1414 when Henry V appointed Nicholas Merbury as the Master of Ordnance and John Louth as his Clerk of Works. The former was present at the Battle of Agincourt to provide expert advice on the engines of war used in that conflict. In 1518 the "Board of Ordnance" was constituted, with the addition of a Lieutenant as second-in-command, a Surveyor and a Storekeeper. It is evident that the traditional functions exercised by the Board until the middle of the 19th Century, that is, assessment of design, procurement, inspection to maintain standards, storage, stock-taking and accounting, were already being carried out. The offices of the Board were in the Tower of London, where they remained for many years. The Select Committee, part of the Board of Ordnance and progenitor of the present day Ordnance Board, was formed in the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich in 1805. The title of "Master General of the Ordnance" appears to have been first used in 1603 and is used to this day, the present holder of the office still being responsible for the administration of the Board.

In 1683 the Board, having been an Army institution, were reconstituted as a Civil Department and were given responsibility for warlike stores for both the Navy and the Army. From this date the power of the Board increased greatly. Barracks, Land Survey (Ordnance Survey), Fortifications, Contracts and the control of Armament Factories came under their purview, and furthermore the Artillery (from 1682) Engineers and 'Ordnance' Field Train (1792) were all commanded and controlled by the Master General of the Ordnance who even commissioned their officers; only the chief Officers of the Board were appointed by the King or the Commander-in-Chief. By the beginning of the 19th Century, The Board of Ordnance was the second largest Department of State, next only to the Treasury, and the Master General had a seat in the Cabinet. Famous Masters General's included the Duke of Marlborough and Duke of Wellington: Lord Raglan was the last Master General of the Board when he was also Commander-in-Chief in the Crimea.

However, this very power and size, plus the anomalous split in command of the armed forces between the Master General and the Secretary of State for War, were to lead to the Board's demise. In 1855, in the absence of Lord Raglan, the Board, and the office of the Master General were abolished and the responsibilities were passed to the Secretary of State. Until 1881 the Ordnance Board, in a form close to that of today, was reconstituted, and since then there has been an unbroken succession of Boards and Committees.

The Board of Ordnance's service to the Nation, and the esteem in which they were held by successive Governments, was recognised by the grant of Armorial Bearing in 1806; the grant was confirmed in 1823.

The Arms
 granted to
 The Right Honourable and Honourable
 The Board of His Majesty's Ordnance
 on
 16 May, 1825.



The Blazon.

- Arms.** Azure—3 Field Pieces in pale, or; on a chief, argent, 3 canon balls, proper.
- Crest.** Out of a mural crown, argent, a dexter cubit arm, the hand grasping a thunderbolt, winged and inflamed, proper.
- Supporters.** On either side a Cyclops, in the exterior hand of the dexter a Hammer, and in that of the sinister a pair of Forceps, resting on the shoulder of each respectively, all proper.
- Motto.** Sua tela tonanti.

When the Ordnance Board was re-formed in 1881 they took into use the same Arms. But it was not until 1980 that it was realised that they in fact had no right to do so, as the privilege had lapsed with the abolition of the Board of Ordnance in 1855.

In July 1896, Queen Victoria approved the War Office recommendation that the arms of the former Board of Ordnance, the shield of arms, but not the crest nor supporters of the motto, be used by the Army Ordnance Department (AOD) and Army Ordnance Corps (AOC) It was considered that granting the privilege of the use of the arms of their ancestors as the main motif of their emblem was very fitting. In 1918 when the Ordnance Services were granted the prefix ROYAL the Ordnance Arms were incorporated into the new badge of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) .At the same time the motto 'Sua Tela Tonanti' was approved and taken into use, but was not incorporated into the corps badge till 1947.

Note – by Les Tucker

In some panic the Board applied to the College of Arms for a re-grant. After much learned debate the Queen approved the transfer of the Arms of the Board of Ordnance to the Ordnance Board.

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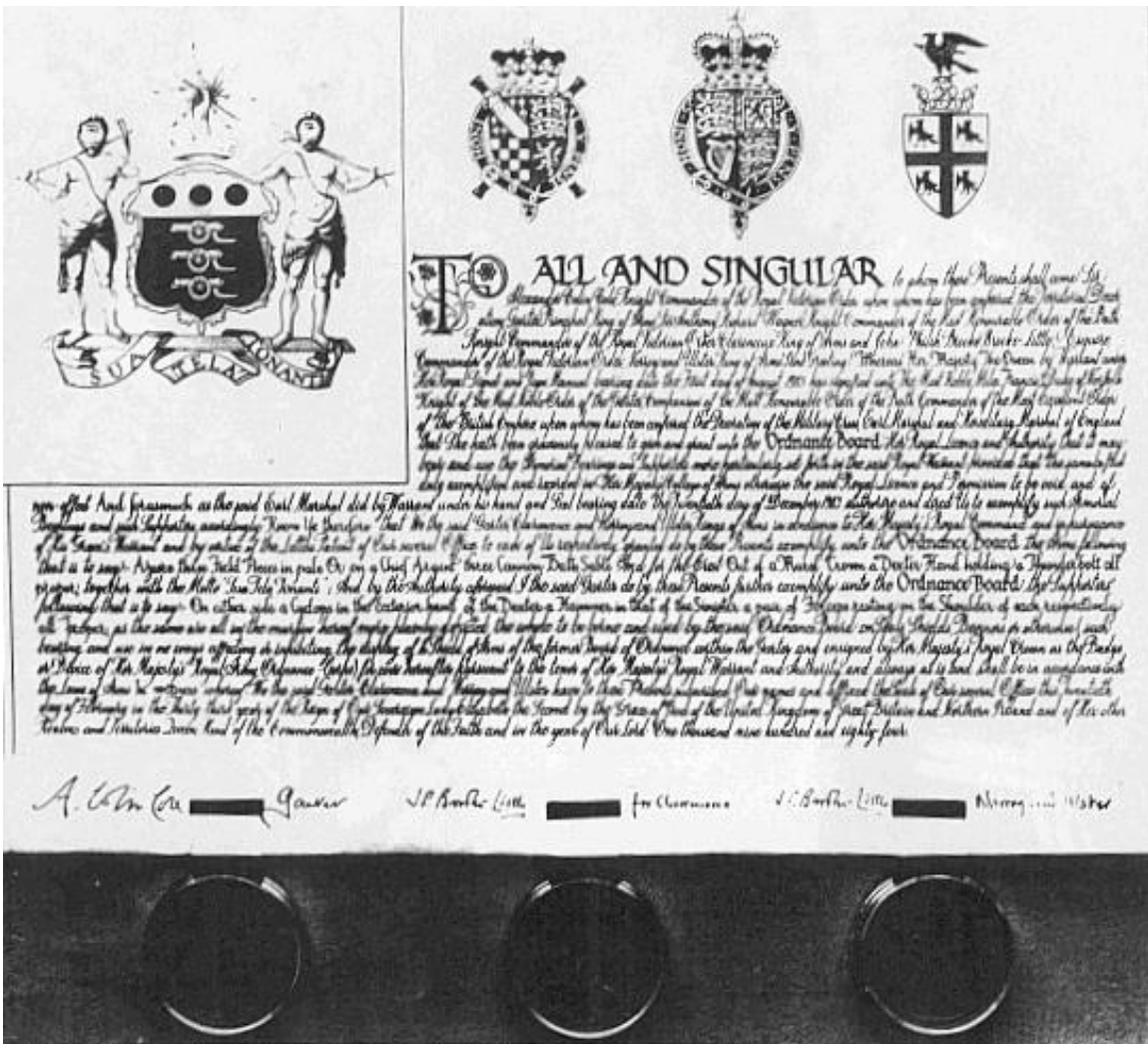


The Arms of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps - 1918

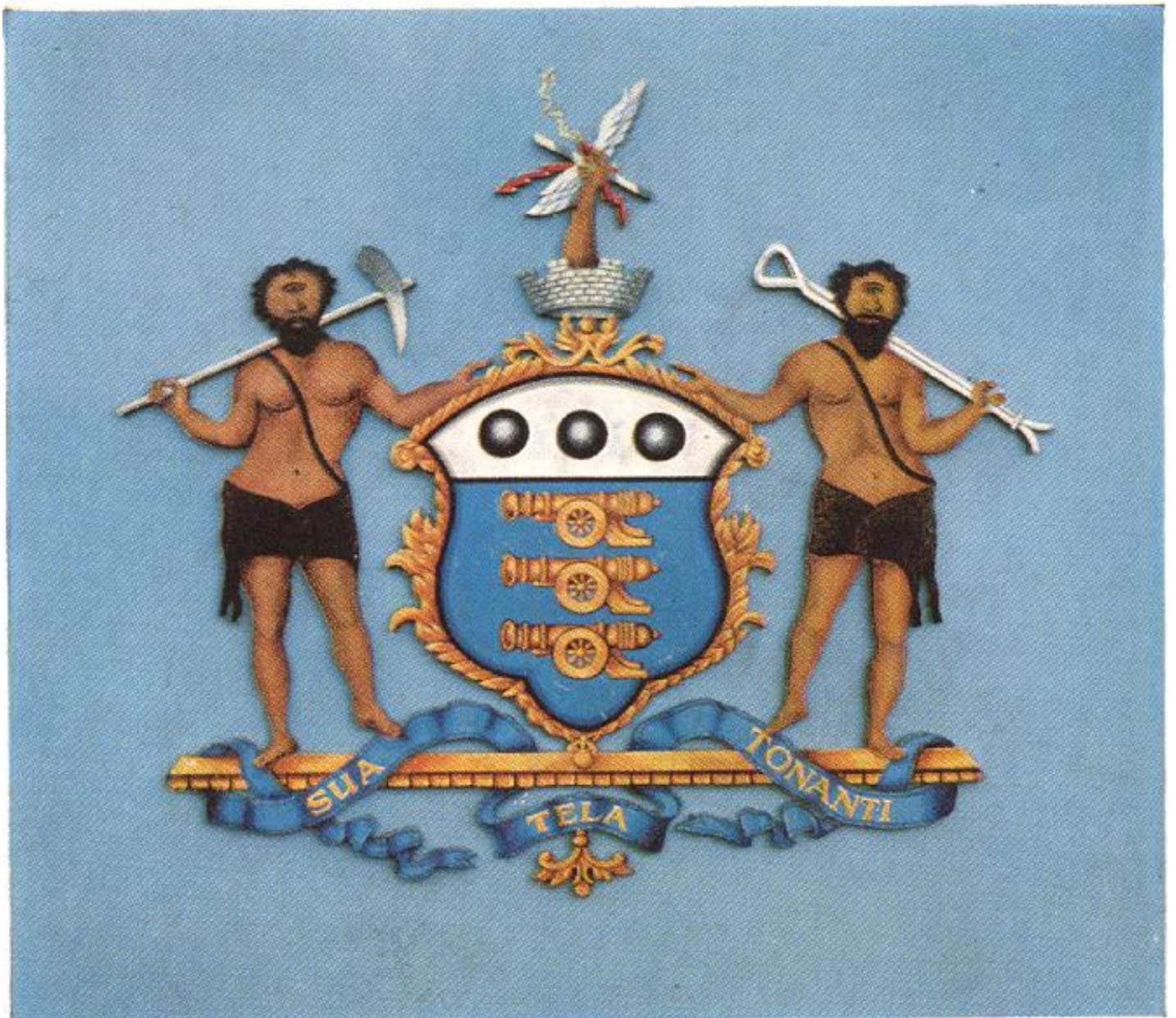
When the Ordnance Board realised that their entitlement to Armorial Bearings had lapsed, they decided to apply to the College of Arms for a re-grant. After some discussion as to whether the Arms were properly those of the present day Ordnance Board or of the Master General of Ordnance, which was resolved in the Board's favour. Her Majesty the Queen graciously approved the belated transfer of the Arms of the Board of Ordnance to the Ordnance Board.

The 1984 Exemplification of the Armorial Bearings of the Ordnance Board contains the following passage:

(such bearings and use in no ways affecting or inhibiting the display of a Shield of Arms of the former Board of Ordnance within the Garter and unsigned by her Majesty's Royal Crown as the Badge or Device of Her Majesty's Royal Army Ordnance Corps)



The 1984 Letters Patent of the Ordnance Board



Arms of the Ordnance Board at the Ministry of Defence

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M Comerford – April 2011 - HTML Revision 2 (revised)

Ordnance Insignia of the British Army

The meaning of 'Sua Tela Tonanti'

One aspect of the Ordnance Corps badge that has puzzled wearers over the years is the meaning of 'Sua Tela Tonanti'

The official recorded meaning for at least the last twenty years of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps is:

'To the Warrior his Arms'

In the 1956 edition of 'The Ordnance Badge' published by the RAOC School the following is written:

It is not uncommon to find a motto, which has no literal translation, being in the form of an incomplete phrase. Examples of this are

'NIL SINE LABORE' 'INTUS SI RECTE NE LABORS and the Corps motto 'SUA TELA TONANTI'

In the latter case, the translation of 'SUA TELA' – his weapons – is clear enough, but 'TONANTI', a dative without any governing verb leaves much to the imagination.

According to the investigations made by the late Major Asser RAOC, assisted by the late Mr A.E. Housman, a professor of Latin Poetry. It is possible that the motto is a free adoption of a line in Manilius.

'ERIPVITQUE JOVI FULMEN TONATI'

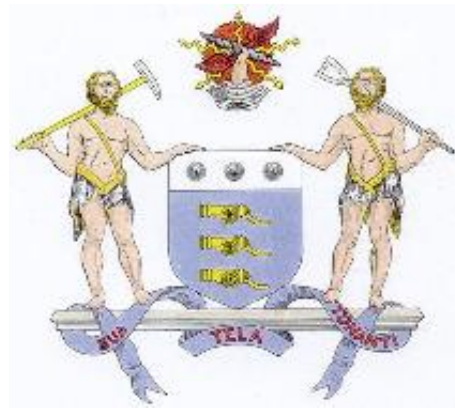
(Reason or Science has wrested from thundering Jove his lightning and strength)

'SUA TELA' (his, i.e. JOVE'S weapons) are the exact equivalent in sense of 'FULMEN VIRESQUE' (lightning or strength and power)

From this the translation becomes:

'Science has wrested from thundering Jove his weapons'

This is a very probable explanation and when one considers that the motto was often given in allusion to the achievements (*The Ordnance Arms*) surely no further translation is necessary, for in the achievement, the crest denotes an arm (strength) out of the mural crown (defence) grasping a Thunderbolt (Jove's weapon), the arms modern weapons (16th century) in the form of cannons and shot and the supporters Cyclops, mythological artificers supporting (or making possible) the manufacture of these modern weapons.



The RAOC adopted the Board of Ordnance motto in 1918 and a translation has been sought to express the work now done by the Corps.

'To the Army its Needs' is a suggested very free translation which fills this requirement for want of something better,

'To the Thunderer his Arms'
will be better known to older RAOC soldiers.

However:

To the Warrior his Arms

Is how I feel the RAOC motto will be best remembered

Sua Tela Tonanti



"The Crimean Mark of Disgrace"

Other than the obvious ~ If they were the same size of the Cannons, You would not see them!

Why are the Ordnance Cannon Balls larger than the Cannons?

Over the years a legend had grown up around the badge of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, usually told by the 'old & bold' of the Royal Army Service Corps (later on the Royal Corps of Transport) and Gunners of the Royal Artillery. Which I am told is still doing the rounds within the Royal Logistic Corps today!

It is said that to mark the failure of the Board of Ordnance in the Crimean War (1853 - 1856) to supply the correct ammunition to the Artillery, the cannon balls in the Ordnance Arms will in future be drawn out of proportion in size to the guns and that the RAOC inherited this "Mark of Disgrace" for ever.

Of course there are no grounds or historical basis for this legend, and indeed very little research soon puts paid to the rumour.

In the first place the Board of Ordnance, adopted the Arms (From which the Ordnance Shield derives) as early as the mid 17th Century, a good hundred years before the Crimean War started. At which time the shield was used by the Artillery as well! The Arms were approved by the King in 1806, and the grant of Arms by the College Arms particularly states that they be the same as those previously in use.

Secondly, in good heraldic design, not only to show the charges, which in this case are the guns and shot, symbolically and sometimes exaggerated, but that these charges should fill the shield in which they are placed without losing the balance of the design as a whole (*Try saying that in the NAAFI at closeing time!*)

The placing of the cannon balls in the chief and the guns in the lower two-thirds of the shield illustrate this aspect of recognized heraldic design.

A good example of this practice may also be seen in the fourth quarter of the Royal Arms, where the lower leopard is drawn so that its legs fill the bottom part of the shield.

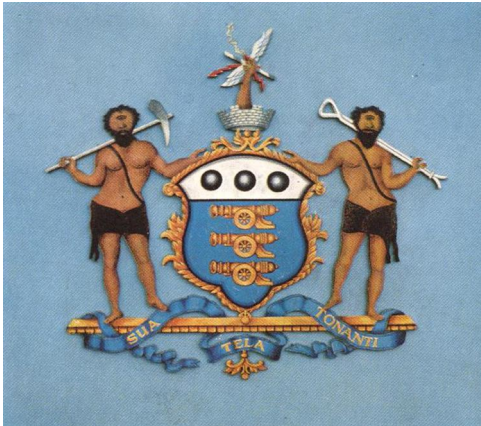
When Queen Victoria on the 17th July 1896 gave her Royal Approval to the use of the Ordnance Arms to the Army Ordnance Department & Corps as their 'Regimental Badge' it was as an honour to the Corps to accept them.



The earliest use of the 'Board of Ordnance' Arms on an Artillery Field Train Button c1792

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History of the Ordnance Board



This year the Ordnance Board celebrates its 600th anniversary as the tri-service and civilian government organisation responsible for ensuring that weapons, munitions and ordnance entering service for the UK military are “Safe and Suitable for Service”, meaning that they function correctly when intended so to do, but do not pose a

hazard to users when in storage or use throughout their service life.

Quite a number of ex-Waltham Abbey staff have served tours of duty in the Board, for instance myself and Ian Wallace as Vice Presidents, John Wright as a Member and Peter Hart, Tony Kosecki, Ted O’Day, Roy Stenson and others as Technical Staff Officers. It seems fitting, therefore, on this anniversary, to give a brief history of the organisation and to explain how it evolved and worked.

The first link to the Ordnance Board, albeit rather tenuous, is Nicholas Merbury. In September 1414 he was tasked with recruiting workmen for the Ordnance, after which he was appointed the first Master of the Ordnance for life by Henry V who was on the throne from 1413 –1422. He was then already engaged in preparations for Henry V’s invasion of Normandy; in October 1414, for instance, an assignment of £66 13s 4d was made to him from the Exchequer to cover part of his expenditure on ammunition. The office and main arsenal were located in the White Tower of the Tower of London, and it was the administrative centre of the new Board.

Gunpowder was stored in the White Tower and continued to be kept there until the mid-nineteenth century. Small arms, cannon, ammunition, armour and other equipment were stored elsewhere within the Tower precinct, a succession of Storehouses and Armouries having been built for such purposes.

In 1597 the Board of Ordnance was established with responsibility for the whole business of ordnance for land and sea. From 1603 until 1855 the Master-General of the Ordnance was the chief officer of the Board. The responsibilities of the Board spanned everything from design and production to storage and distribution.

The Board's primary manufacturing site, and a key location for several of its activities, was the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich. Guns had been stored and proved there from the mid-seventeenth century. It later expanded into a large-scale production facility, specializing in manufacture of shells, projectiles and propellants at the Royal Laboratory, established at Woolwich in 1695, having been previously based at Greenwich. The manufacture of cannons, mortars and other artillery pieces was undertaken at the Royal Brass Foundry and the manufacture of gun carriages and other ancillary items from the 1750s onwards was at the Royal Carriage Works. Small arms manufacture was begun by the Board on Tower Wharf in 1804, but was subsequently transferred to the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield, which opened in 1816.

Gunpowder manufacture was mostly kept separate from other operations and was generally in the hands of the private sector, but beginning in the eighteenth century, the Board began to purchase mills that had been established under private ownership. Faversham became the Royal Powder Mill in 1759 and Waltham Abbey became the Royal Gunpowder Factory in 1787. Faversham was returned to private ownership in the early nineteenth century but Waltham Abbey, as we know, remained in Government hands until 1991.

Storage facilities were also needed in the vicinity of the Royal Dockyards, to enable easy transfer of guns, ammunition, powder, etc on board ships for use by the Navy at sea or for delivery to the Army

in areas of conflict. The principal yards were at Chatham, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Sheerness and Woolwich.

The Board of Ordnance became the second largest Department of State, next only to the Treasury, and the Master General had a seat in the Cabinet. However, this very power and size, plus the anomalous split in command of the armed forces between the Master General and the Secretary of State for War, were to lead to the Board's temporary downfall. Issues of performance in the Crimean War, especially disastrous lack of proper provision for operations during the Russian winter of 1854 brought about the Board's demise in 1855, so the history of the Board was not to be a continuous one. In that year the Board, and the office of the Master General were abolished and the responsibilities were passed to the Secretary of State. With the Board's closure, the Artillery together with the Royal Engineers came directly under the Commander-in-Chief and the War Office like the rest of the Army. The former Board was incorporated into the War Office by an Act of Parliament as the Department of the Master-General of the Ordnance, which took over some of its activities. Its storage, research and manufacturing sites were for the most part allotted either to the Admiralty or to the War Office.

In 1881, following unease after the Second Boer War that the British Army had been ill-equipped, a new office called the Ordnance Board was created, and after that there was an unbroken succession. The Ordnance Board consisted of a group of munitions experts, whose purpose was to advise on the safety and suitability of weapons for service use. The role of the Board was subsequently extended to become a truly tri-service organisation, although the Royal Navy never really saw it that way, having its own Chief Inspector of Naval Ordnance (CINO) which it fiercely defended. In its recent history the Board featured a number of Divisions, headed by Members, covering Army, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, Nuclear, Ranges and Scientific Support work. The President of the Board was a Two Star appointment which rotated through the three services with, until 1993, two One Star military officers from the other two services acting as Vice Presidents. In that year the first civilian Vice President

was appointed, much to the chagrin of the military. The Members of the Board were predominantly serving military officers, with just the Scientific Support Division being headed by a civilian.

One of the Members was usually an Australian serving officer, and the Ordnance Board Officers Mess (the bar) was known as the Australian Members Room, this tradition survived moves of the Ordnance Board from Charles House near Kensington Olympia to Empress State Building by the Earls Court Exhibition Centre and finally to Abbey Wood at Filton near Bristol. For many years the Board had its own printing press which published the Proceedings of the Board. These formed the Board's definitive advice on the safety and suitability for service of weapons and ordnance. The Proceedings were subject to extensive peer review, then presented to the full Board at its regular meetings on Tuesday mornings. This rigorous process ensured that the advice given was clear, accurate and unequivocal. The Services did not have to follow that advice, but they ignored it at their peril. The Ordnance Board and its name survived within the Ministry of Defence (which itself was not created until 1964) until the late 1990s when it was renamed the Defence Ordnance Safety Group, finally ending the long-standing Ordnance Board/CINO dispute. That name continues to this day, but sadly the Australian Members Room does not.

Geoff Hooper