

Still Nothing New Under The Sun

Those familiar with the batch manufacture of nitroglycerine will recognise what I mean when I mention the “NG Stool.” Batch nitration consisted of spraying glycerol into a large vat of nitrating acid while stirring and cooling. The temperature had to be closely monitored and if it rose above a predetermined level the batch was ‘drowned’ by dumping into a large tank of water underneath.

Watching the thermometer for 8 hours a day was rather soporific and in the early days there was a tendency to ‘nod off’. Since this could lead to a dangerous event the operator was provided with a one-legged stool. If he ‘nodded-off’ he ‘fell-off’.

When Alfred Nobel started his factory at Ardeer in Scotland in the 1880s the “NG stool” was installed and ever since then it has tacitly implied that it was their idea. However, in my researches into gunpowder for a paper, given at the centenary commemoration of Nobel’s death, I discovered that the concept is 2-3 hundred years older. Before charcoal burning was mechanised the burner would make a wigwam of wood, cover it with clods of turf and set light to it. If fire broke through the wood



would burn rather than char. To keep an eye on the process the burner would set a log vertically in the ground to sit on. If he ‘nodded-off’ he ‘fell-off’. So much for new ideas!

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