

S.A.L.H.S

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Stanstead Abbotts Local History Society

Issue 17

Editor—Terry Collins

The Royal Gunpowder Mills

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There must be many of you who are not aware of the Gunpowder Mills in Waltham Abbey, for many years after World War 2 it was a top secret rocket research establishment which finally closed in 1991.

As most of you know gunpowder was invented in China in the 9th Century and spread to Europe in the middle of the 13th as guns began to be used from about 1237. Then early factories began to produce gunpowder from the middle of the 14th Century. The monks of Waltham Ab-



Women at work at the Gunpowder Mills in 1917

bey had built a mill there producing cloth which had been converted into a mill for making vegetable oils in the early 1600's. During the Second Dutch War of 1665-1667 a shortage of gunpowder led to the oil mills being converted to producing gunpowder. In 1665 the mill was acquired by Ralph Hudson who used locally sourced saltpetre as part of the manufacturing process.

The Hudson family sold out to William Walton at the end of the 17th Century and the family owned the mills for the next one hundred years. During this time the mills expanded along the Millstream with new production facilities be-

ing built. By 1735 they were being described as 'the largest and completest works in the whole country.'

In the 1780's there was further concern over the quality and security of supply and the mills were taken into government ownership in October 1787. The owner at the time, John Walton was paid the sum of £10,000 for the premises, which then had as its new manager Lt. General Sir William Congreve and under his regime the manufacturing process improved with the introduction of, for its day, advanced technology. Reflecting this the mills was able to respond to the vast increase in demand at the outbreak of the Napoleonic wars.

In the years following Waterloo the mills entered a period of quiet with a decline in production levels and staffing. This quiet period did not last long as the Crimean War began in 1854 and this was followed by the Indian Mutiny and a succession of smaller campaigns culminating in the Boer War 1899-1902. In 1865 the Gunpowder Mills, under the leadership of Sir Frederick Abel, patented and then produced guncotton and then in 1889 the propellant cordite.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 led to an upsurge in demand for explosives and staff numbers were increased to 6230, and in 1917 2500

of them were women. After WW1 there was again a period of quiet until the lead up to the Second World War began, when it was decided to move production facilities to the West country where it would be safer from enemy bombing. This was done over a number of years until in 1943 all explosives production had been moved. During this period the bouncing bomb, designed by Barnes Wallis and used in the Dam busters attack was partially developed and tested here.

From 1945 onwards the site became a research establishment for military propellants and high explosives. Many top secret rockets were tested and partially developed at Waltham Abbey. After much government reorganisation the Mills finally closed in 1991 bringing to an end over 300 years of production and research.

After much work the site reopened to the public with the help of the MOD and the lottery Heritage Fund.



The Armoury

A FEW MEMORIES OF STANSTEAD ABBOTTS FROM MR. MEAD OF CAPPELL LANE IN 1975 By Stuart Moye

In 1975 Mr Mead was living at 126 Cappell Lane when he related some of his memories of Stanstead Abbots. Mr Mead was born in 1893 and attended the village school between the age of 5 and 14. The following has been written from notes made at the time and reflect things as he remembered them. Various pictures of Stanstead Abbots were used to prompt his memory of events that in some cases had occurred 75 years previously.

Mr Mead was shown the well known picture postcard of the top end of the High Street with the man with a basket on his head. He had this to say about the scene depicted;



“Now that man there with the basket could be the Muffin Man; he came from Hertford. It might be Mike Jennings; I met him when I was in France; he sold fish, winkles, Haddock, Kippers and all that sort of thing. He carried it all around in a little clothes basket on his head. You never see that sort of thing today even at the market.”

[Various people have made suggestions regarding the identity of this man with the basket on his head.

They include the muffin man from Hertford who was Walter Taylor who ventured on foot as far as Bishops Stortford to sell his wares. He was well known in the area around the year 1900. His son

would ride a bike with fresh supplies from Hertford usually as far as Much Hadham where Walter would stay overnight at the forge. Another suggestion made is that it is Bob Springham from the family shop in the village]

Asked about his school days he didn't think there was much of interest to say but he did describe a little game that was often played after school, which seemed to be a fond memory.

“When they let us out of school at the end of the day it was always a big relief. Schools were quite strict in those days much more than now. We used to get together outside the gates on the footpath in Roydon Road. Then four or five of us friends would race from the school to the Pied Bull corner. The first one that got there would sit down and put their feet up to declare they were the winner. We did that on most days it was all good fun after having had to be so still in school.”

“We used to drink water from that stone drinking fountain outside the school. They told us the water came from up above the school, in Chapelfields.”



Mr Mead then mentioned a few things about the buildings near the top of the High street and some of the people he could remember.

“The Old Clock House used to be a school a long time ago, and then it was a library. I was about 12 years old [1905] when it was turned into a house. It used to look very run down between the wars but looks really posh now. Springham's old shop never changed as long as I can remember. Springham's mum was called Old Gurt". Lots of shops used to be like that once." Blackabys were at the post office opposite the one we have today. Later it was sweet shop and a bakers as well, odd that I always thought, not the sort of things that go together but that was how it was" The milkmen in the village were Frank Andrews, Frank Hurford and Charlie Harwood.”

“At the Pied Bull you could hire a cart and Bob Cundall, he lived in Glenmire Terrace, and he would hire you a wagon for carrying heavy things or going on trips. They used to put benches in the wagons for when you wanted to take people. You had to drive it yourself and some of those horses weren't very helpful. Sometimes we used to get taken on trips when we were kids; it wasn't very fast so we never went far. That Mr Cundall I mentioned he always wore a black trilby, it meant he was the boss. The Pied Bull had boats you could hire, you could only row down the river you couldn't go up under Roydon Road”

“Sid Brown had Bell's, its Sweeney's now and then he moved all the way down to the garage near the railway station”.

“Cedar View at Cats Hill was built by Ben Parker, well he had it built. That was in the early 1920's I think”.

“The planked building in Cappell lane was lived in by Mr and Mrs Saunders. He was one of those staunch Liberals.

Continued on Page 3

A FEW MEMORIES OF STANSTEAD ABBOTTS FROM MR MEAD OF CAPPELL LANE IN 1975. Continued from Page 2

staunch Liberals. He operated a paper round and sold sweets”.

“At the mill the watermill was in a small lean to next to the river. When Fred Burton was a small lad he fell off the bridge and just missed landing on the spikes. It could have been really bad for him. The Mill workers fished him out though and then he had to go home. He got into a lot of trouble when he got home when his mum saw him. They took that big grain platform away at the mill during the first war.”

“Talking of water I remember being told about roasting an ox on the river when I was very young.[Other sources say a sheep was roasted on the river]. It was ever so cold that year. I think it was Jubilee year 1897 perhaps. [The year that was very cold and the river froze over was 1895 when Mr Mead was 2 years old]. People went skating on the river all the way to Ware. It was all frozen for ages. The weather was warm before Christmas and then all of a sudden it got very cold.”

“During the second war the Homeguard was camping in the field on this side by the lock. The Hertingfordbury boys attacked from the railway side. It was an exercise to practice stopping the Germans. Mind you I don't think we would have had much of a chance if the Germans had come here. One of the Hertingfordbury boys came up to the Lock and it was all covered in cut weeds that had drifted down. He thought it was grass and tried to go across. He fell straight in and completely disappeared under all the greenery. He looked a real sight when they pulled him out. At that time Chris Burton was the signalman at the station”

“Just opposite here [126 Cappell Lane] there used to be a farm a few houses and a pub then Buxton came and built Wiberforce Cottages. They say he didn't like drink I wonder if that's why the pub had to go.”

“Mr and Mrs Leigh live at Manor Cottages now [26 Cappell lane] next door used to be where the policeman lived. The cottages used be thatched

and have a strong wooden frame that holds it all up. When they put the new tiled roof on they did it so the thatch was taken away in small patches so the rain couldn't get in. When they were taking the thatch out they found some very old paper deeds in the rafters. Mr Ted Hilton told me all about them being found. The deeds were very old he said. I was told those two houses [24 and 26 Cappell lane] used to be a farm house once upon a time”

Mr Mead's Aunty, Mrs Frost used to live at what is now 26 Cappell Lane and it was in her back room that Mr Mead got given his lifelong nickname of “Dunnit” Mead. The story is that as a very young child he was sat at the table by the window playing a little game and every time he succeeded he excitedly shouted out “DUNNIT DUNNIT”. His Aunt and Mother being much amused by this started calling him “Dunnit”, little knowing that 80 odd years later he would still be known by this name.

Hertfordshire's Landscape History

A welcome return saw Anne Rowe back to tell us more about our county's history

Hertfordshire has a variety of geographical features which have shaped its landscape over many thousands of years. From the chalk hills in the North to the Chiltern hills in the West, including now rare Heathland, the woodlands of the South East and the many river valleys of the East. The chalky soil was easy for prehistoric farmers to work whereas the boulder clay in the south and west made it difficult..

North Herts has a number of prehistoric remains such as the barrows on Therfield heath. The Domesday

book in 1086 showed that the greater population in the county was in the north with fewer people in the west and the south which was heavily wooded. The parish maps of the period confirmed this there being more parishes in those areas with more inhabitants.

The churches around the county reflect the geology with almost 90% of them having flint as part of their building materials. Thick stone walls, towers and buttresses together with the famous Hertfordshire spire are all also common throughout the county.

The main stone used is limestone which was originally brought from Barnack near Peterborough. Many of

these old churches also used Tottenhoe stone as it was relatively easy to cut and in many of them it is used on corners of towers, etc. Locally acquired Hertfordshire puddingstone is also a feature in many county churches, as it gives a solid base to buildings.

Lots of early houses were timber , filled with wattle and daub and with clay tiled roofs. Farm buildings both large and small were usually wooden with many of them having very large barns. Grander brick buildings such as Rye House, Hatfield Palace and others appeared from the 16th Century.

Continued on Page 4

Xmas 2015

The 2015 SALHS Xmas party was attended by almost 50 members who enjoyed a fun filled evening .

Everyone had bought along food to share and there were three tables full of goodies, mulled wine greeted everybody as they arrived and wine and beer was also provided.

Website manager Brian Johnson, had put out another of his photo quizzes which nobody managed to fully complete, they seem to get harder every year, or maybe it's just me. Glenis and I had made up another quiz, with a Christmas theme with 20 questions, some easy and some not so easy.

One of the highlights of the evening was the musical interval by the Giffords. Half an hour of excellent folk music, both instrumental and vocal, combining fiddle, accordion and 'beat box'.

This was followed by an hilarious presentation on Cappell Lane and its history, over thousands of years and some of the residents who had lived there.

Our Christmas raffle raised the goodly sum of £103 to help swell the coffers. And a good time was had by all. *Terry Collins*

Hertfordshire's Landscape History continued

Where the river valleys were used for arable crops settlements grew up on the valley bottoms, while the higher land was used for grazing and woodland. In addition some of the remaining land was used as common land, owned by the lord of the manor but available for some of the population to use for grazing. In a few areas as trees were lost to woodland small areas of heathland developed for example Hertford Heath and Bushey Heath.

A county map from 1598 shows the major roads plus the grand houses with their attached deer parks, such as Ware Park, Theobalds and Nyn Hall. Locally Stansteadbury was built in the 16th Century with its own park. Building this type of grand country house continued through the 17th and 18th Centuries when many of them had gardens designed by the likes of Capability Brown (300th anniversary of his birth in 2016) and Charles Bridgeman. Bridgeman designed gardens at Cassiobury, Gobions and Hamels, while Brown was responsible for those at Moor Park, Kimpton Hoo and Gilston Park.

During the 19th Century parts of

the county especially in the South became the outer suburbs of London, and the mid 20th Century saw the development of the Garden City at Letchworth then at Welwyn, both designed to bring the green of the country into city life. Following this came the development of the new towns like Hatfield and Stevenage.

Anne answered questions from the audience and was warmly thanked by the Chairman.

Can you help?

Between approx. 1901 and 1917 there was a photographic business in the High Street, run by Mr T. Robinson. His photographs had the words T.S Robinson, Camera House, Stanstead Abbots printed on the rear. If you have any of these pictures please let us know as we would like to include them on our website. *Terry Collins*

Data Protection Act

In accordance with the above act we have to advise that the Society holds information on computer in respect of each member. This information is used for routine membership

The SALHS Committee May 2014

Hon. President	Ron Dale
Chairman	Ian White
Secretary	Lynne Heraud
Treasurer	Glenis Collins
Archivist/Historian	Ray Dixon
Archivist/Facebook	Andrea Coppen
Public Relations	Bob Hunt
School Liaison/ Programme Organiser	Janet Dance
Newsletter	Terry Collins
Parish Council Rep	Julia Davies
Committee Members	Linda Gifford Gerald Coppen Rob Gifford
Website Manager	Brian Johnson
General enquiries email Admin@salhs.org.uk	

Forthcoming events

February 12th 2016	SALHS Antiques Roadshow
March 11th 2016	Archaeology by Kris Lockyer
April 8th 2016	The 18th Century Workhouse by Sheila White
May 13th 2016	AGM followed by 'A Mixed Bag' by Stephen Ruff
June 10th 2016	Dick Turpin-Local Villain by Stephen Poulter
June 22nd 2016	Visit to Scotts Grotto, Ware
July 8th 2016	The Hertfordshire Regiment on the Somme by Dan Hill

Unless stated otherwise all meetings are at the Parish Hall at 7.30pm
Members Free. Non Members £2 Tea, Coffee and biscuits included