

THE
HISTORY
OF
OARE,
KENT.

Written by SIDNEY WILSON Esquire,

Presented to the late Lt. Col. Arnott A. Johnson.



OARE

This is more than the story of the ancient parish of Oare for other parishes in fact are included in the area commonly called Oare. On the opposite side of the road at the Three Mariners is Mount Pleasant which from earliest times formed part of the parish of Davington. In the area west of Harty Ferry are detached parts of Faversham and Luddenham, whilst to the East of the village is yet another detached part of Luddenham wherein stands Oare Windmill. References to activities in these parts must be made if a coherent story of the community known as Oare is to be told.

The name 'Oare' is of Saxon origin and signifies a ferry or marshy district. There was a settlement at Oare in early times is evidenced by the funerary remains unearthed there. In 1838 a Roman cemetery was found in Churchfield. Urns were discovered arranged in groups of three, four and five. Skeletons were also found and amongst the pottery numerous cups of Samian ware. Excavation of gravel on this site was then suspended and not resumed until January 1884 when the finds were five urns, two bronze armillæ (armlets) and a Samian patena in one grave, all the vessels in the other graves were destroyed by the workmen but a fibula and a pair of bronze tweezers were rescued. Another cemetery was discovered in 1844 at Moore Field to the North West of Churchfield. The situation of these cemeteries indicate that the Romans used the road leading to the ferry to reach the Isle of Harty. The route which they would have taken from the camp at Syndale would have traversed part of the ancient British trackway from Upnor Ferry to the camp at Julliberrie Down known as Bigberry Camp. This trackway now discontinuous and its parts known in most localities as the Lower Road, is far older than the Roman Watling Street. Hereabouts its course is preserved.

It ran from Barrow Green Teynham, past Four Oaks through Bysing Wood on through what is now the town of Faversham to Staple Street and the foot of Boughton Hill. Thence over Horse Lees to Byberry Camp at Chartham Hatch. The Roman traveller from Syndale to Harty joined the trackway at Four Oaks and left it in the middle of Bysing Wood where it turns Eastwards to Faversham.

The presence of the cemeteries and afterwards the church at a point on the road to the Ferry is evidence of a settlement here certainly in Roman times, all else grew from this point. There is little record of happenings after the departure of the Romans. That the Roman settlement continued and possibly grew in the Anglo Saxon period is evidenced by the fact that after the conquest the manor of Oare was given to Odo the Bishop of Bayeux half brother to William the Conqueror. William was a man of stern and relentless character and did not hesitate to inflict summary punishment and deprivation of possessions on all who acted against his will. In this he did not spare his half brother Odo who offending the King lost all of his English possessions including the manor of Oare. The manor was subsequently held in capite by Adam de Port whose heirs subsequently transferred it to Arnulf Kade (or Cade). Kade was a great benefactor of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem. Sometime before 1190 Kade gave the manors of Stalisfield and Oare to the Knights Hospitallers who administered them from their preceptory at Swingfield near Dover. About another hundred years later another Arnulf Cade was living in Ospringe at Cades now Lovenden.

The manor continued in the possessions of the Knights until the general dissolution under Henry VIII. It remained in the hands of the crown until Edward VI granted it to Lord Clinton and Say. At about the same time the King granted to that nobleman the Monor of Folkestone. After about a year Lord Clinton reconveyed the Manor to the King. Ultimately the Manor came into the possession of the Monins family who sold it to Samuel Short. Short died in 1722. It then became, by marriage, vested in Humphrey Munn. The Munns of Blackheath came to Sheldwich and lived at one time in Throwley House.

Humphrey Munn sold the manor to Bonnick Lypeatt who died in 1789 leaving as co-heirs two daughters. One married Charles Brooke of London and the other Mr Gosselin. The husbands became successively entitled to the manor. The Gosselins lived at the Mount and the short rise from Ospringe Street to the entrance to the Mount was known as Gosselins Hill. Christian Gosselin died in 1824 and a monument to him in Faversham church is the work of Robert Ashton the younger of St James' London, a noted sculptor.

The church at Oare is dedicated to St Peter. It was anciently accounted only as a chapel to that of Stalisfield and belonged to the Priory of St Gregory in Canterbury. At the dissolution Henry VIII exchanged it with the Archbishop of Canterbury for the site of St Radigunds Abbey at Dover. There is little history attached to the church. The earliest register is dated 1714 but the transcripts in the Diocesan Registry begin in 1563. The churchwardens Accounts begin in 1781 and the Vestry Minute Book in 1840.

The church plate consists of two items, (1) a chalice of silver of 1562. It is 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches in height and the diameter of the mouth is 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. It weighs 7oz. 15 dwts. (2) a paten cover of silver. Weight loz. 12 dwts. It is well ornamented with characteristic Elizabethan foliage.

It would appear that no great care was taken of the church records and the limited quantity of church plate would seem to indicate a poor illiterate population. The presentments at Archbishop Parker's Visitation in 1573 gives some idea of life in the village at that time. It was found that the communion was administered in common bread instead of wafer bread. That John Grave and -- Grave his brother and one Wyly seldom come to church. That Wilies wife is vehemently suspected of adultery. That Thomas Hodges' wife is a very contentious woman and a sower of discord and a fighter namely with Wyles wife being her husband's daughter. That Thomas Hodges wife admits resort to her house in time of common prayer. There was scandal in the small community but similar conditions existed in other parishes.

It is not surprising that there is no record of life in Oare in the years up to 1561. The main occupation must have been agriculture although the northern boundary of the parish of Oare is the shore of the River Swale it is improbable that fishing formed any part of the life of the inhabitants because in the waters of the Swale were the oyster layings of the Company or Fraternity of Free Fishermen of Faversham and they would have zealously protected their rights in the fishery.

In 1561 the Oare Powder Mills were established and if these mills are not the oldest in the country they can certainly claim the second place. About the same time George Evelyn ancestor of the diarist set up mills at Long Ditton and Godstone. It is impossible to say which was first. The industry expanded and because of the dangerous nature of the material manufactured the additions were well spaced and in the main, buildings were erected at various points on the western fringe of the Town of Faversham whence the bulk of the labour force was drawn.

In 1719 the Oare works were in the occupation of a Mr Gruebarr and are said to have been capable of producing 800 barrels per week. Edward Jacob in his History of Faversham describes the mills existing in 1774. He says they were driven either by water or horses. The horses were harnessed to the arms of a huge capstan and because of the frequency of explosions of green charges the horses were incased in leather armour to save them from injury.

The whole of the works at Faversham including the Oare works continued in private ownership until 1760. In that year the owner Thomas Pearse sold the Home works, that is all the powder mills excepting Oare Mills to the Master General of the Ordnance for the use of the public. The Oare mills continued to be operated by Messrs Andrews and Pigon the lessees. The greater part of the powder produced was taken by the East India Company.

This is interesting, for it would appear that Clive won the Battle of Plassey in 1757 using powder produced at Oare.

In the early days of manufacture in factories the gunpowder was dried by means of 'gloom stoves' and these stoves had a tendency to become red hot with disastrous results. The owners of Oare Powder Mills introduced the modern method of stoving. Jacob describes the system as a constant stream of hot water conveyed under a copper frame whereon the powder is placed to dry. This new contrivance answered its purpose exceedingly well and was soon universally adopted. In 1781 a disastrous explosion occurred at the Royal Factory situated almost within the town of Faversham and this led to the removal of the more dangerous processes to a new factory known as the marsh works in the detached part of Luddenham on the eastern boundary of the parish of Oare.

In 1812 Mr John Hall of Dartford purchased from Stephen Gillow of Cooksditch, Faversham the freehold of the Oare Works. In 1815 following the defeat of Napoleon the Government decided to close down the Royal Works at Faversham and to concentrate manufacture at Waltham Abbey. John Hall of Oare Works then took a lease of the Royal Factory and in 1825 purchased them outright. The Marsh works were not included in the sale to Hall but were used for years for the breaking up of unserviceable munitions.

In 1854 however, the Marsh Works were bought by W. & P. B. Hall, John Hall's sons. In 1896 the firm of John Hall and sons was converted into a limited company and in 1898 was merged with Curtis's & Harvey Ltd. The presence in the area of a labour force accustomed to working in an atmosphere of danger inevitably associated with the manufacture of explosives made it attractive to other companies interested in explosives.

In 1872 a company was formed, called the Cotton Powder Co. Ltd., and it established works at Oare on the banks of the Swale. The intention was to make Punshon's Patent Controllable Gun-cotton. This explosive proved a complete failure and had to be abandoned. The manager of the new works, George Trench, who lived at 49 Abbey Street, Faversham, was a man of an inventive turn of mind and conducted a great number of experiments and on occasion ran foul of the law for infringements of the explosives acts and the factory's licence. He eventually invented an explosive which he called Tonite and was immediately taken up principally for submarine work. Trench also invented a Socket Distress Signal and it was produced on a large scale.

Specialities produced at Oare:

Tonite used for submarine blasting and also as a detonating charge in Sound and Distress Signals and the bursting charge in grenades.

Socket Distress Signals

Sound Signals and Flash Sound Signals for lighthouse purposes

Faversham Powder, Rexite and Normanite

Grenades including Marten Halls Patent Hand and Rifle Grenades

The factory comprised about 400 acres of land, there were 227 buildings of various sorts occupying 250 acres. On the water frontage there was excellent wharf accommodation. The buildings and wharf were connected by a 3' 3" gauge tramway. There was in all about 4½ miles of tramway in the factory area.

When war broke out in 1914 the demands on the factory for explosives of all sorts vastly increased. The peace time labour force of about 400 was augmented and reinforced by some hundreds of girls brought from the Lancashire Cotton Mills. The girls were billeted in the Town of Faversham where also two hostels were established namely at the Congregational Hall in Partridge Lane and at College House in Ospringe Street. A billeting office in charge of a welfare worker was also opened in the town. The factory, unlike its neighbour the Explosives Loading Company's

Factory of which more later, had uneventful war years excepting that girls working with the Tri Nitro Toluine contracted T.N.T. poisoning and several died. It was found that the antidote was copious draughts of milk but it was difficult to get the workers to drink sufficient.

At the end of the war the factory was virtually closed down its magazines being for storage purposes for a number of years until in 1935 it was completely closed and the site disposed of.

In 1912 another factory was erected by the Explosives Loading Company Ltd. between the western boundary of the Cotton Powder Co.'s Factory and Luddenham Gut. Its function as the name implies was to load shells which were then transported by water to Woolwich to be fused. A large number of workers were transported daily from East Kent towns.

Strangely enough it was thought that T.N.T. like cordite would only explode when den onated and no special care was taken to prevent fire. On the 2nd April 1916 a spark from the engine house chimney set a number of sacks on fire. This did not cause anxiety but when the fire appeared to be getting out of control the Town Fire Brigade were called for. At that time the town council maintained a volunteer fire brigade with horse drawn petrol pump for use in the town and two insurance companies maintained horse drawn manual engines for general use. All three brigades received the call but before they could get away from their respective stations there was a terrific explosion. It was later stated that 350 tons of T.N.T. had exploded. The town of Faversham was protected from the blast by the high ground between the town and Oare and little or no damage was sustained but the full force was felt in Sherness and Whitstable and as far away as Maidstone. Further explosions occurred one large one as the Volunteer Fire Brigade were approaching the factory. Finally a nitro-glycerine plant on higher ground away from the main factory blew up with a terrific report.

The factory, locally known as the E.L.C. was utterly destroyed 106 men were killed and scores injured in great or less degree. Fire brigades, doctors, nurses and ambulances came to assist from towns between Chatham and Ramsgate. The authorities imposed a strict censorship and nothing was published about the explosion in the national or local press. Sixty nine of the victims were buried in one grave in Faversham Cemetery. The service was conducted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Randall Davidson, assisted by the local clergy, Ministers and Salvation Army Officers. A week later a body was found in a ditch near to the scene of the explosion and it was buried in the same grave. So the large grave at the cemetery contains the bodies of 70 of the victims.

Work was at once started to re-build the factory and it was soon once again in full production and continued until the end of the war when it was discontinued.

Yet another factory was established between the eastern boundary of the Cotton Powder Company's Works and the road leading to Harty Ferry. This was the responsibility of the Admiralty and was designed to produce munitions for the Navy. It fulfilled this function until the end of the war in 1918 when it was dismantled.

The manager of this factory was a naval officer Lieutenant Ormiston Chant. A bachelor he occupied one of the houses at Uplees where his mother the famous Mrs Ormiston Chant kept house for him. Mrs Chant took up the work of Josephine Butler and for years campaigned against prostitution in London and conducted the successful fight to secure the closure of the promenade in London's music halls in particular the Westminster Aquarium.

The presence of these three factories to the West of Oare caused a tremendous traffic in materials between them and the Faversham goods station and also many hundreds of workers travelling to and from work. To ease the situation a light railway

was constructed from the West side of Dark Hill through the works. This did not reduce the volume of traffic through the Town of Faversham but effected an enormous saving in road transport.

One other small factory must be mentioned. In 1903 Helcké Brothers from the Channel Islands set up a small factory on the East side of the road at Harty Ferry and there produced fulminate of mercury. This highly dangerous material was removed from the factory in water jackets. Mr Helcké jr. told the writer that in 1917 their small establishment could produce sufficient fulminate of mercury to supply the whole of the belligerent armies !

In post war years i.e. post 1918 the explosives industry was the subject of mergers. The local companies still operating were first merged with Nobels Industries which in turn was taken over by Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd. In 1935 Imperial Chemicals decided to close down completely at Faversham and to concentrate manufacture at Ardeer in Scotland.

And so ended Oare's 400 years connection with the explosives industry. The extinction of the explosives industry was a big blow to the area and caused much unemployment. Now 30 years after there is every sign of new life. In the area there have sprung up light engineering, fruit juice production and canned meats undertakings. Quarrying on the site of the marsh works is a "consuming assets" undertaking similar to the brick making industry which once flourished. It can have no permanence. Other small industries have started and the prosperity of the Oare area seems assured.