

# Wareham in the First World War 1914-1918

## No 3 The Royal Naval Cordite Factory



View over the factory from the reservoir, with Poole Harbour in the distance, 1917. (photo: Royal Naval Cordite Factory Association)

In addition to Wareham Camp, there was another big development in the Wareham area during the war. In 1915 Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty, ordered the construction of a factory for making cordite at Holton Heath between Wareham and Poole. Cordite was an explosive material (propellant) used in guns, and the Royal Navy needed to make high-quality cordite for guns on warships.



Building the reservoir on the top of Black Hill. The water was pumped from Corfe Mullen, 5 miles (8km) away. (photo: RNCFA)

Cordite was produced in the form of rods, or cords, like spaghetti. One of its ingredients was nitroglycerine, also used in dynamite. Acetone, a solvent, was also needed and in the early years this was made from conkers and acorns. Schoolchildren helped collect the vast quantities required.

The factory was the first Royal Naval cordite factory in the country. The site was heathland, mostly level but with some gentle slopes which were useful for the manufacture of nitroglycerine, as the liquid could flow from one processing stage to another. There were very few people living in the area, but a workforce was readily available in nearby towns and villages.

The site had good road and rail links, and the cordite could be exported by sea, via a pier on Poole Harbour served by a railway from the factory. The factory units were spaced out so that damage from accidental explosions would be limited, and they were connected by 14 miles (22km) of narrow gauge railway.

Thousands of workers from a wide surrounding area, particularly from Poole, were employed at the factory. Many of them were women, because most men were in the army. For many women this was their first experience of paid work. There were also social clubs. Some of the workers arrived by train from Poole and Wareham, at a new Holton Heath station, others arrived by bicycle or on foot.



Part of a model of the cordite factory, made in 1942, showing the main railway line on the left. (photo: Ben Buxton)



Women workers at a social club.

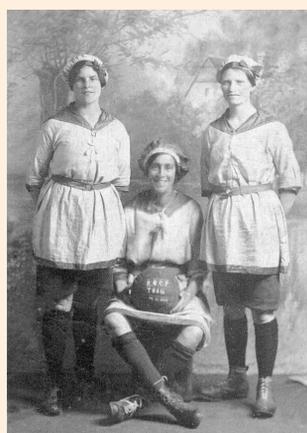


An electric railcar. Steam engines were not used, because sparks could have started fires and explosions. (photo: RNCFA)

The cordite factory closed in 1957 and The Admiralty continued to use the site as a research laboratory until 1997. Today some of the buildings are rented out commercially, industrial units have been built, and part of the site is a nature reserve.



A group of women workers in the guncotton plant with their foremen. (photo: RNCFA)



Members of the women's football club (photo: RNCFA)



The main administrative building today. (photo:RNCFA)