

THE SLIMBRIDGE MUNITIONS DEPOT

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Historical Background

During the First World War the storage and distribution of high explosives and propellants for munitions by the military authorities became a huge undertaking. At first the available storage accommodation attached to Woolwich Arsenal was sufficient for War Office requirements. However, in 1915 the need to substantially increase production of gun ammunition required a corresponding increase in the storage capacity for explosives and propellants in magazines. [1] One of the several new shell filling factories set up by the Ministry of Munitions was at Quedgeley in Gloucestershire. [2]

At first, a number of quarries, mines, caves and disused forts were utilised as additional magazines, but this measure proved inadequate especially with the introduction of imported propellants from the USA. This was alleviated in October 1915 by the decision to build two large propellant magazines at Earby near Skipton, Yorkshire and Slimbridge, Gloucestershire. In addition, steps were taken to obtain other isolated premises for use as magazines throughout the country, typically inactive brickworks affected by war conditions. [3]

Although the author has not uncovered any evidence which points to the Slimbridge magazine supplying any named factory, undoubtedly its prime function was to furnish the Gloucester National Shell Filling Factory at Quedgeley.

Beginnings

The location chosen for the Slimbridge magazine (Figure 1) was situated just west of the Moors, between Slimbridge and Halmore, on land mostly comprising part of the Berkeley Estate. The exception being 17 acres of glebe and canal land rented by George Tudor, proprietor of the Tudor Arms, Shepherd's Patch. The area fulfilled the general requirements to be considered, for example isolation, cost of adaptation, beyond reach of air raids and ease of distribution to shell filling factories.

Notice was served on the nine estate tenants, Lord Fitzhardinge Earl of Berkeley and George Tudor under the Defence of the Realm Act on 14 December 1915. Much financial hardship was endured by the tenants until 1918 through loss of access to their land. [3,4]

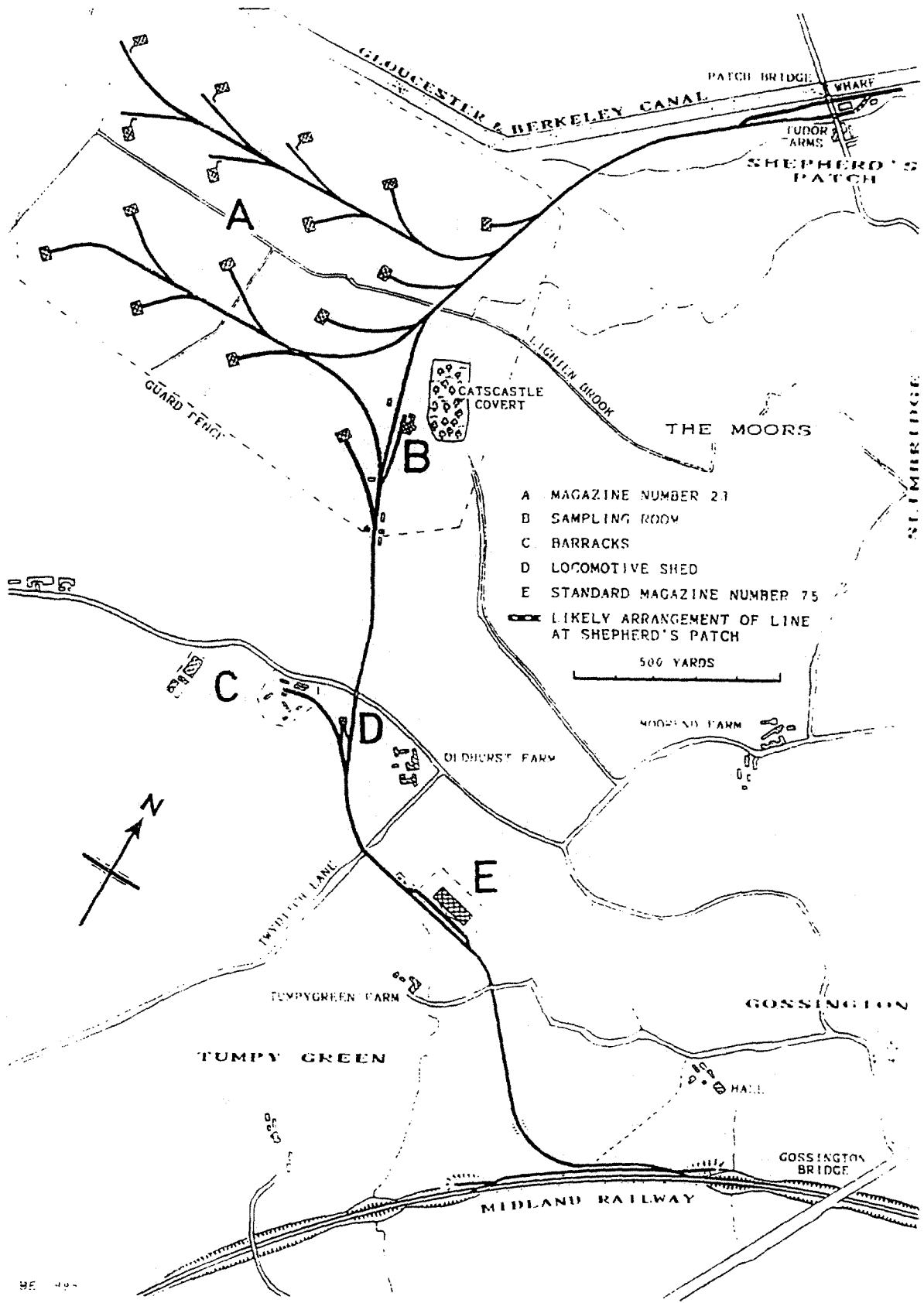


Figure 1 The Location of the Slimbridge Magazine

Construction

Officially known as His Majesty's Magazine No 23, Gloucester, the construction was carried out during 1916 by at least three contractors: W F Hobrough of Gloucester, Messrs Humphries and Hugh Sandys. [5]

Sixteen wooden magazine buildings each measuring 80 feet by 100 feet and spaced 200 yards apart were built in four parallel rows running east to west either side of the Lighten Brook. A saw and planing mill was erected on the field south-west of Patch Bridge.

Each magazine, designed to hold 200 tons of cordite propellant, stood on concrete foundations with their floors raised above ground level to permit unloading straight from railway wagons onto sack trucks. A sampling room was provided near Catscastle covert for the regular inspection of stored cordite. [4,6]

The magazine complex was enclosed by a 10 feet high barbed wire fence on concrete posts and illuminated at night by electric light supplied from a generator made by J.B. Marr and Son, Grantham. This equipment was maintained by Herbert Turner whose father ran an electrical business in Barton Street, Gloucester.

West of Oldhurst Farm was a wooden two-road locomotive shed which survived into the 1950s and a barracks. A water pipeline was specially laid to this area from a windpump on Moorend Farm.

Railway Works

To gain access to the magazine the Midland Railway Company began preliminary work for exchange sidings and a branch line west of Gossington Bridge between the stations at Berkeley Road and Coaley Junction early in February 1916. Although the site for the sidings on the northern side of the main line was almost flat, the main line ran through a shallow cutting and the first task entailed the removal of earth to enable the connections to be made and a new signal box named 'Gossington' to be constructed.

From February to May the necessary earthworks and connections with the up and down main lines were made. Three parallel exchange sidings and the first 150 yards of the branch were also laid. The total cost of the Midland Railway work was £4,566 14s. 3d. [7,8]

The Branch Line

The contract for laying the 2½ mile long standard gauge branch line was awarded to Pauling and Company Limited of London. [9]

It was constructed with the minimum of earthworks, the line of flat-bottom rails being laid on a foundation of clinker and ashes.

On the approach to Shepherd's Patch the line ran alongside and below the level of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal. Just before crossing the road the single line became double, one line climbed up to the level of the canal and continued along the bank past a wharfage shed and the bridge keeper's house, the other ran parallel but south of the wharfage shed. It is likely the lines rejoined on the wharf, forming a loop.

Operations

Little is known about the receipt, storage and distribution work at Slimbridge which by July 1916 was one of 45 establishments located mainly in central and southern England. [3]

Cordite was first received on 5 September 1916. Later, the 10.50 am Bristol to Gloucester and 11.20 am Gloucester to Bristol stopping freight trains called regularly at Gossington Sidings with incoming and outgoing wagon loads. [10] These wagons were worked between the exchange sidings and the magazine by the branch engine during daylight hours keeping gangs of labourers busy unloading into store or re-loading existing stock for distribution.

In July 1917 the approved maximum storage capacity was nearly 3,000 tons of cordite, with a working capacity of almost 2,000 tons. In addition, three magazines were being used for gunpowder of which about 1,100 tons were stored.

In the six months April to September 1917 an average of 126 tons were handled in and out on 23 wagons daily.

Stocks held at the end of December 1917 amounted to 4,576 tons and the total tonnage handled from the first receipt of munitions was 21,906 in, and 17,329 out.

At the end of March 1918, 5,639 tons of cordite and 687 tons of gunpowder were stored and the working capacity was 3,800 tons. [11]

New Works

At about the end of August 1917 the Ministry of Munitions decided that the existing level of propellant production would be maintained during the coming winter resulting in a greatly increased tonnage requiring storage. This decision forced the Explosives Storage Section to undertake the most difficult task

of establishing yet more isolated accommodation suited for rail transit. [6]

A suitable site already existed on the route to the Slimbridge magazine 250 yards north of Tumpygreen Farm. From October 1917 a new 'standard' magazine of 2,000 tons capacity measuring 300 feet by 90 feet was constructed on a concrete base with steelwork roof trusses and stanchions forming eleven 27-foot bays. The breeze block walls were cement coated and two external connecting corridors were provided to an unloading platform served by a new loop line off the main branch. This magazine was numbered 75 and the first delivery of cordite took place on 4 February 1918. [4,11]

Staff

The numbers employed at the magazine are not precisely known except that a "large number of hands" were engaged there. [12] The recommendation of the Explosives Storage Section in January 1916 stated:

The two large propellant stores [at Skipton and Slimbridge] where work will be concentrated will require a superintendent, one sampler and weigher (to act as assistant superintendent), one chief clerk (to act as assistant sampler), two junior clerks, one typist, one labour foreman, five [railway] fettlers, one loco driver, one loco fireman, from four to six tally men and forty to sixty labourers. [6]

The Slimbridge and Skipton superintendents each received £400 per annum compared to £120 for a superintendent at a mine used as a magazine. At least three superintendents are known to have officiated at Slimbridge: Frederick William Linck (1916), H.B. Corbin and J.T. Palmer (1917), a former travelling inspector of magazines. [3,6]

At the close of 1917 the average weekly wage of skilled and unskilled magazine labourers was £2. 1s. and that of clerks £2. 5s. [13]

Two known locomotive drivers were George William Holloway of Slimbridge and Ralph Crewe from Gossington, the latter having previously driven engines abroad in the war. Their locomotives were of the 0-6-0 saddle tank type.

Another local man, Albert Edward Viney was a clerk at the works. He married the daughter of George Tudor.

Accidents

Two accidents occurred on the branch line. On 3 May 1916 Glenville Charles Longney, 28, a labourer from Church Street,

Frampton-on-Severn, was crushed by the buffers of a railway wagon at the Patch during shunting operations. [14]

Children riding on the branch engine was quite a common occurrence, but on 30 August 1917 seven year old Harry Cobb of Tumpy Green fell off the engine onto some ashes and rolled against the wheels. [15] After admittance to the Gloucester Royal Infirmary his right leg was amputated, and in later years he could be seen riding his bicycle one-legged around Slimbridge.

Guarding

All explosive stores and factories were protected by military guards. Men of the Royal Defence Corps and the 3rd West Yorkshire Regiment among others performed their duties at Slimbridge until June 1919. [16]

Eleven civilian watchmen, ten of whom were ex-servicemen were appointed by the now, magazine manager, to relieve the military guards protecting the surplus stores.

As a consequence of anticipated industrial and civil unrest in the country, the Royal Defence Corps guard re-appeared in April 1921, [17] secretly prompted by Home Office fears of the possibility of Sinn Fein raids being made on munition stores in the wake of a miners' strike. Simultaneously, and in view of the early disbanding of the Defence Corps, the Chief Constable of Gloucestershire, F. Stanley Clark, requested the Superintendent of the Special Branch to interview the manager at Slimbridge with a view to arming and increasing the number of civilian watchmen. [18]

Post War Disposals

The Explosives Storage Section recognised that the retention of the Slimbridge magazine and 16 other sites after the war would be invaluable as concentration depots to enable the early clearance of many of the more temporary establishments. [3]

Both propellants and high explosives were concentrated at Slimbridge. Between 1919 and 1921 an average of 9,000 tons were on store, having been brought from far and wide. [19] From 1920 to 1921 the stock was destroyed by burning as its retention was costing more than its value was worth. Cordite was burnt three times a day in a field adjoining the magazine east of Catscastle covert, producing a red glow all over the district in the evening. [20,21]

The wooden buildings comprising the barracks near Oldhurst Farm were sold by auction by Messrs Bruton, Knowles and Company on behalf of the Disposal Board in September 1919. [22]

Following the Ministry of Munitions (Cessation) Order of 1921 a Treasury tenancy agreement with the Earl of Berkeley lasting until 10 October 1924 stipulated that the wire fencing surrounding the magazine be removed by 25 June 1924. In addition, all structures into which a fox could take refuge and from which it might be difficult to drive, be removed by 1 September 1924. (Members of the Berkeley Hunt had witnessed foxes running to the safety of the enclosure on numerous occasions). [21,23]

From July to September 1924 the buildings, and fittings and railways were dismantled and sold by auction by Folkestone auctioneer Hubert F. Finn-Kelcey. In November he turned his attentions to the Quedgeley filling factory, leaving Lord Berkeley with a lengthy claim for compensation in lieu of reinstatement against the Government. [21,24]

Gossington signal box remained open until 21 February 1926. [25]

The Present Day

Not surprisingly, agricultural activity has largely eliminated any evidence of the Slimbridge magazine's existence. After the buildings had been removed their foundations were broken up and removed for hardcore. An exception is at the site of the standard magazine, Tumpy Green, where the concrete floor still exists in agricultural use.

The low railway embankments and cuttings are the most enduring features to survive especially within the first half mile or so from the main line, the remainder having been virtually ploughed out. The embankment of the dead-end siding near Gossington Hall was levelled in August 1989 unearthing a 15 feet section of track, the standard Midland Railway support for a buffer stop.

During dry summers part of the line of the main branch is revealed by discoloration of the grassland. This provides another clue to the intense activity that was carried on here over 75 years ago and is now all but forgotten.

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