Weedon Bec and Stroudwater Scarlet

By Stephen Mills August 2024

My grand 'look for things manufactured in Gloucestershire' tour has continued! I recently visited the former Royal Ordnance Depot at Weedon Bec in Northamptonshire. This impressive site comprises several ranges of large brick and stone-faced buildings of two storeys that once housed a barracks, a military prison, hospital, chapel, and substantial magazines for weapons and gunpowder. At one time, each of the individual gunpowder stores housed no less than 1000 tons. The depot was originally developed at the beginning of the 19th century largely in response to the threat of invasion by Napoleon. Having decided that the storage of military supplies near to the coast was no longer prudent, Weedon Bec was selected as a base for the storage of arms and ammunition near to the centre of the country. It was well served by transport links and was soon connected to the Grand Junction Canal that had reached the area in 1796. This was later augmented by rail and road links. For more than two centuries, the depot played a major role in supplying the British army in conflicts in South Africa for example, as well as both World Wars.

The Depot in its heyday. An arm of the Grand Junction Canal runs through the centre.

Alongside its role as provider of ordinance, ammunition and explosives, the depot also became a central repository for army uniforms, which brings us our connection with Gloucestershire, and particularly, the textile industry of the Stroud valleys. As we all know, the Stroudwater area was especially famous for the red woollen cloth it produced for army uniforms. Starting as far back as the 16th century, red cloth was used widely especially by infantry units active in numerous overseas conflicts. This distinctive look would eventually give rise to the nickname of 'redcoats.' 'Stroud Scarlets' continued to be used for uniforms during much of the 18th and 19th centuries, seeing service in many parts of the world. The provision of army uniforms was eventually mainly centralised at Weedon Bec, with uniforms being stockpiled in a new large building added to the sprawling site. By 1856, Weedon had become the nominated centre for all clothing stores, with uniforms being assembled and despatched to different corps around the country and beyond.

The Royal Army Ordnance Corps eventually vacated Weedon in 1965, and the site now comprises an assortment of small businesses housed in some of the Grade II listed warehouses and other buildings.

There is also an interesting visitors centre that looks back over the Depot's illustrious history, and contains various displays, one of which includes a model of a typical British soldier sporting a red tunic – a nod back to the days when Stroud-made cloth saw many conflicts.

Apart from largely ceremonial duties, Stroud Scarlets were eventually replaced with more practical khaki that came to prominence in the First World War.

Postscript

At the start of the outbreak of the Second World War, the Depot began using Lister Auto Trucks built in their Dursley factory to tow light loads around the site. The Auto Truck was a small monowheel tractor that used a single leading wheel for both drive and steering. Originally based on a design by Auto Mowers Ltd, Listers later took over production. Ironically, early Auto Trucks used J.A.P. (J. A. Prestwich) petrol engines, not Listers.

A Lister Auto Truck at work in a textile factory

Yet another successful product from Gloucestershire!