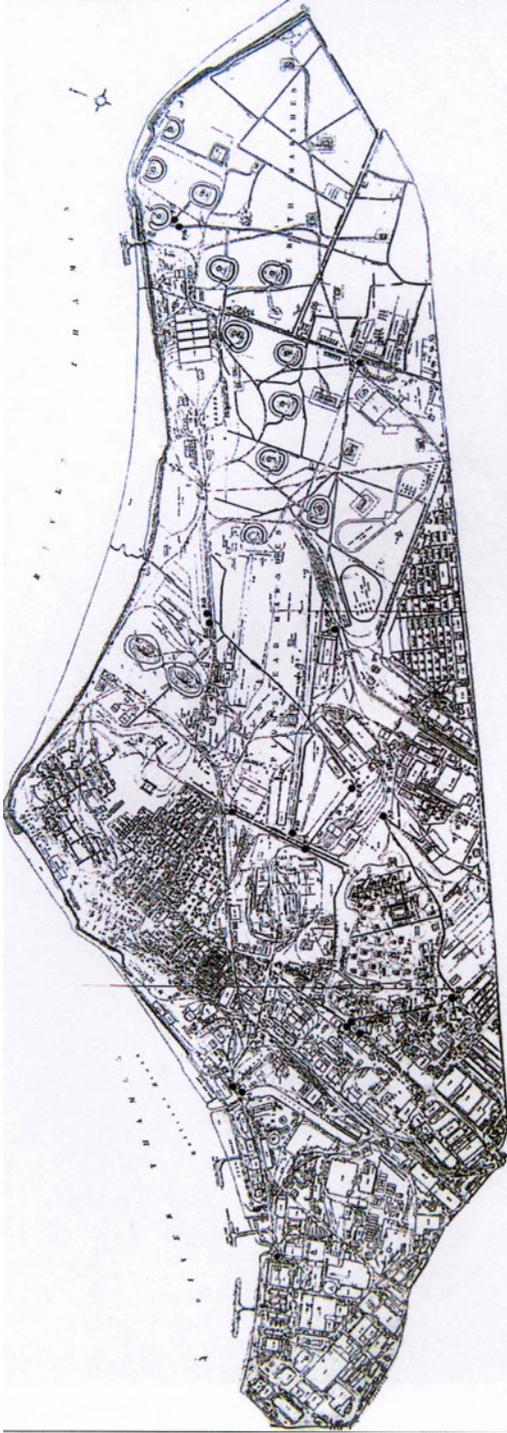




A  
Brief History  
Of the  
Royal Arsenal  
Woolwich  
Historical Society





The Royal Arsenal Woolwich site at its peak.  
It was 3 miles long, 1 mile wide covering some 1,300 acres.



## ROYAL ARSENAL WOOLWICH, HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### A Brief History.

#### **Early Years.**

In the mid 1980's there were a number of kindred spirits working in various departments in the Arsenal, principally the Ordnance Quality Assurance Directorate (QAD ORD), who were genuinely interested in the history of the great establishment. They were also concerned as to the possibility of the site being closed by the MoD when the imperative to cut costs intervened and what was to be done to preserve the history and artefacts of the site.

Thus with official approval, members of QAD(Ord) Headquarters Co-ord staff who already fielded enquiries on historical matters, sponsored regular meetings between staff who were anxious to share their interest in the Arsenal's history. As it happens the first leaders of the group were both military. First came Lt Col. Colin Heggie, Army, in 1984 and then Lt Cdr. Richard Jenkins RN in 1986 who became the first Chairman.

The group, during the mid 1980's, began to hold regular monthly meetings during the lunch-hour, usually on a Tuesday, a tradition that has been maintained ever since. Around 20 members were in attendance. In-house speakers gave presentations and lectures came from specialists in the museum field and military historians.

#### **First Venue.**

The meetings were held in the Cinema of the QAD(Ord) Training Centre that shared accommodation with Headquarter management staff in Building 41A, overlooking the River Thames (see photo over page).

Building/



### **Building 41A OAD(Ord) HQ Office and Training Centre**

### **Birthplace of the Royal Arsenal Woolwich Historical Society**

#### **Constitution**

Around this time steps were taken to get approval for the Society's Constitution. Simplified this states that it was: -

- (a) to promote research into the history of the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich, and its place in the military, industrial, social, economic and the political life of its environs and the nation.
- (b) to promote research into the history of Inspection and Quality Assurance in Defence.
- (c) to promote the education of the public on matters connected with the history of the Royal Arsenal.

#### **Salvage of Artefacts**

The Society's first formal Chairman Mr Alan Turner was elected in 1989 and he, along with the new Committee and volunteers, masterminded the operation to salvage what little of the Arsenal's historic artefacts that remained after the Ministry of Defence had mounted a savage operation to realise its assets in the shortest possible time before the Arsenal finally closed in 1997.

Little

Little had failed to be disposed of and the remaining artefacts, both hardware and documentation items that were of interest were roughly the equivalent of two shipping containers and these under Alan Turner's stewardship found their way into temporary storage facilities made available by courtesy of the National Army Museum out at Hounslow. The London Borough of Greenwich eventually made decanting arrangements available. Some of the artefacts are displayed in the Royal Arsenal Gallery, which is in the Borough of Greenwich Heritage Centre located in the Arsenal; the remainder are in the Society's Archive at one end of Building 19. This facility was made available to the Society by the good offices of Berkeley Homes who are the main property developers on site responsible for building a range of new houses, apartments together with a number of affordable homes for the less well off.

## **Second Venue**

Thus in 1997 when the Arsenal finally closed, the Society found itself without a home, fortunately, through the influence of its military contacts the Society managed to secure permission to hold its meetings in the Grand Ballroom of the Royal Artillery Barracks and to lunch in the Junior NCO's Mess.

## **Presidential Succession**

It was traditional for the senior manager on the Arsenal site to take on the role of President. Thus in order they were:-

**1984 to 1986** Mr David Brighton - Director General, Defence Quality Assurance (DGDQA).

**1986 to 1992** Mr Barry Miller - DGDQA.

**1992 to 1995** Mr Robin Horsfall - Director Royal Arsenal Transition Team.

**1996 to 2004** Sir Sidney Bacon CB FR Eng., - Senior Superintendent of the Royal Ordnance Factory, Woolwich, when it closed in 1967.

**2004 to date** Mr David Brighton previously DGDQA.

## **Logo**

The Society's Logo is loosely based on Mallett's Mortar of which two were made and delivered to the Arsenal in 1857. The first was given proof firings on Plumstead Marshes and found unsatisfactory mainly for metallurgical reasons. They stood for many years by the Grand Store Buildings on the Arsenal riverside. Their final resting places have become:-

- (a) Repository Road, Woolwich, as a Borough of Greenwich Monument.
- (b) The Royal Armouries, Fort Nelson, Fareham, Hants.

## **Alan Turner**

Sadly, Alan Turner died in 2002 after 13 years successful stewardship of the Society's affairs and John Usmar, then Deputy Chairman, was elected Chairman.

## **Third Venue**

The arrangements at the RA Barracks went on, gratefully, until history repeated itself in 2007 when the Royal Regiment left Woolwich in favour of Larkhill, the Brigade of Guards would eventually move in and the Society was again homeless.

Fortunately, it was then found possible to secure at reasonable rates, lecture room, plus lunching facilities within the Greenwich Heritage Centre, coincidentally a mere stone's throw away from the Society's birthplace in Building 41A!

Normal business resumed and at the same time the work of digitising many hundreds of glass negatives and films, the work of Charles Ellis the official photographer of the Royal Ordnance Factory Woolwich in the 1950's continued, as has the task of marshalling the Society's archives. Whilst the Society's meeting venue has moved about, its archives have also been subject to changes in location. Following the Arsenal's closure in 1997 the remnants of the Society's artefacts (documentation and hardware) remained in two rooms in Building 18 until the work commenced on the then new Firepower Museum.

At this point the artefacts were hurriedly transferred to a cellar in the Royal Military Academy (RMA) near Shooters Hill. By now the shipping containers previously stored under the sponsorship of the National Army Museum had also been moved to the RMA. This arrangement lasted for about 5 years before the Academy was closed and vacated ready for marketing and eventual disposal. All our archives were then transferred back to the Arsenal and housed in Building 19.

## **Records**

The Society does not maintain personal records of staff previously employed in the Arsenal. Enquiries of this nature should be directed to the Ministry of Defence Records or the National Archive.

## **The Future**

As far as the general business of the Society is concerned with its regular meetings, lectures, research and committee work, the present venue provided by the Greenwich Borough Heritage centre is ideal. Slightly more worrying is the future for its archives presently in Building 19, a famous facility built in 1887 for the assembly of guns to carriages and subsequently, in the 1900's, the principal inspection facility for the Chief Inspector of Armaments (CIA). One of its Annexes, once used for the testing of respirators, now houses the Society's archives. However, Building 19 is scheduled for redevelopment so a further accommodation challenge awaits the Society.

## **Membership.**

Membership of the Society up to 2008 was around 100. Guests and visitors are always welcome by invitation of the current members at the regular monthly meetings and new members are welcome.

## **Footnote**

Finally, it can be said that the Society, because of its location and its ongoing links with the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich, is therefore unique worldwide.

## **Enquiries**

These should be addressed initially by email to: -

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