

SEDLESCOMBE'S INDUSTRIAL PAST PART 3

GUNPOWDER

**PRODUCED AT THE GUNPOWDER MILL IN THE CENTRE OF THE
VILLAGE FROM 1750 TO THE 1870S, PRECEDED BY A CORNMILL**



THE UNEXPECTED CHANGE FROM FLOUR TO GUNPOWDER

By 1238, monks of Battle Abbey had built a water mill by the River Brede in Sedlescombe in order to grind corn into flour. This work continued quietly for more than 500 years.

In 1750, at a time when England had a great need to defend itself from the French, the water mill changed from the peaceful practice of grinding corn to producing the scary warlike product..... GUNPOWDER!!



DESCRIPTION OF SEDLESCOMBE'S POWDERMILL WORKS

The Sedlescombe site in the heart of the Village by the River was part of the Battle Powdermill group. Altogether, there were 34 stone runners each weighing a couple of tons with a capacity to make 3,000 pounds of gunpowder every 24 hours. That means that:

WELL OVER A TON OF GUNPOWDER WAS MADE IN THE BATTLE GUNPOWDER WORKS EVERY DAY!!

The production of gunpowder involved mixing 75% saltpetre, 10% sulphur and 15% charcoal – the latter product from one of Sedlescombe's most long-lasting industries.



SEDLESCOMBE GUNPOWDER PROBABLY “THE BEST IN EUROPE”

Locally-made gunpowder was often described as “The Best in Europe”. After transport by road to a large magazine at Erith on the River Thames, it was sent off by sea to accompany famous war leaders throughout the 18th and 19th centuries including:



NELSON AT TRAFALGAR IN 1805

&

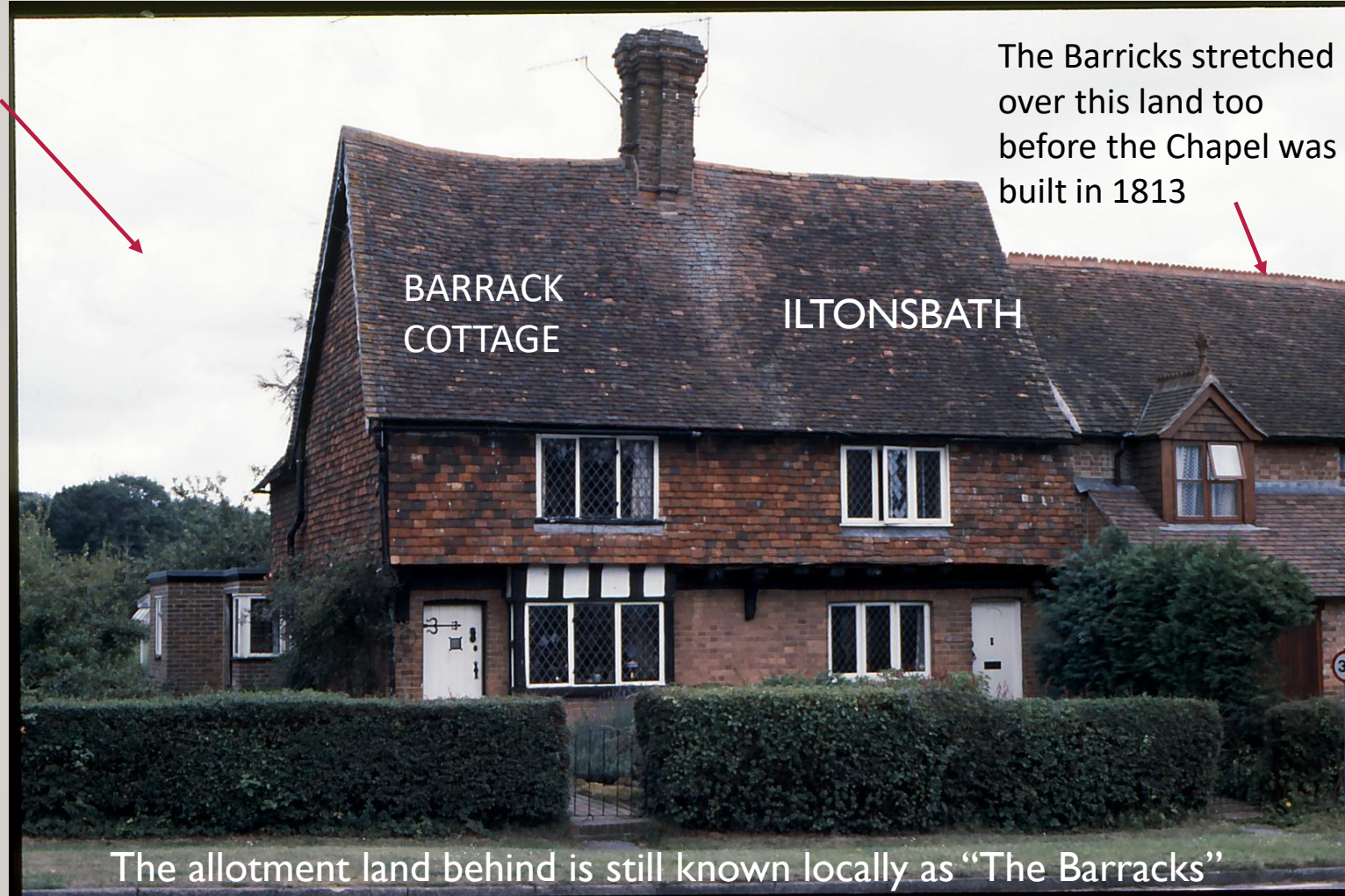
WELLINGTON AT WATERLOO IN 1815



CALLED "THE BARRICKS" IN THE 19TH CENTURY, THIS OLD 15TH CENTURY BUILDING IS WHERE TROOPS WERE BARRACKED WHILST PROVIDING PROTECTION FOR THE GUNPOWDER BEING MADE IN LARGE QUANTITIES ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROAD

"Barrack Cottage" and its neighbour "Iltonsbath", named after the area, was part of a much larger barrack building which covered the area on the left of this picture and went further back.

The 1851 census shows 34 people in 6 cottages living in "The Barricks", 14 of them under 16. Only 2 cottages remain.



SUSSEX MILITIA. The worries that Napoleon might invade at any time brought about the setting up of *The Sussex Militia* to defend our shores if the French ever managed to mount an invasion. Surprisingly Napoleon even produced plans showing a tunnel between France and England in the early 1800s.

ACCIDENTS AT THE POWDER MILLS, SEDLESCOMBE

In 1764, a major explosion occurred at Sedlescombe when a ton of powder blew up killing 4 men. Two of them, James and Thomas Gilmore were the sons of the owner, William Gilmore. The other fatalities were John Watson and James Coldgate. The last two were buried in Sedlescombe Churchyard.

In 1807, part of the Powdermill Mill at Sedlescombe was blown up during the progress of ordinary work. One man named King was seriously hurt and the building greatly damaged.



THOMAS SARGENT, THE SEDLESCOMBE POWDERMAKER

- Thomas Sargent worked for Messrs Laurence & Son as a powder maker for 58 years from 1808 to 1867.
- In 1833, two of Thomas Sargent's children, a boy of two and his sister aged about eight were sadly drowned in the mill pond at Powdermills. It was supposed at the time that the little boy fell into the water and tragically his sister, in trying to help him, fell in to.
- In 1838 Thomas Sargent was cleaning the trough of a gunpowder mill at Sedlescombe when it ignited, and a small explosion occurred badly burning his hands and face and setting alight his clothes. Despite his injuries, Sargent managed to grab a wheelbarrow and take away a cask containing a charge and, by so doing, almost certainly saved the building from damage.



Maybe, this was the clump of trees mentioned in the smuggling report below



SMUGGLING

Up to early Victorian times, gunpowder kegs were transported to the port of Rye to be shipped to British forces overseas. Sometimes, the returning wagons would be loaded with contraband such as baccy and brandy in place of the expected fodder

During Mr Sargent's time as Powder Maker, he was suspected of keeping smuggled goods under the floor in one of the Powder Works' buildings in the Brooks under a clump of trees. On one occasion, he frightened off the Excise Offices who came searching by saying "Look here, if you are going a-blundering about like this, we shall have an explosion, I'm off". The men abandoned their search.

SO THE 1870s SAW THE END OF BOTH GUNPOWDER AND LEATHER MAKING IN THE ILTONSBATH AREA OF SEDLESCOMBE

THE END OF GUNPOWDER MAKING IN SEDLESCOMBE

- In 1873, an explosion at the Powdermills blew the roof off which, much later in 1934, John Morris of Sedlescombe remembered hearing. He was working at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon in Battle Wood and heard a loud bang. He climbed up a tree and saw smoke rising from the direction of Sedlescombe.
- Soon afterwards, the Powdermill closed down, ending an important Sedlescombe industry which had been in operation since 1750.
- Years later, in 1949, an advert for the Waterfall Tea Rooms at Powdermills referred to "grindstones and underground tunnels" as still being visible in the grounds.



WATERFALL TEA ROOMS in 1940s
At the OLD POWDERMILLS, SEDLESCOMBE

An Old-World Tea Rooms set in a romantic garden of historical interest.

The grindstones, underground tunnels and waterfall, used in the making of gunpowder about 200 years ago can be seen in the grounds.

Trout Fishing in the old mill pond at a small charge.

- Home-made Cakes and Scones
 - Bacon and Egg Suppers
 - Morning Coffee
 - Garden Produce

Buses 12 and 84 from Wellington Square, Hastings, pass the entrance.

Proprietress: GWENDOLYN CRANE, L.R.A.M. (Eloc), Teacher of Speech and Drama.

By 1970 the Proprietors were Mr and Mrs E.J.Pugh



THE END OF PART 3 OF SEDLESCOMBE'S INDUSTRIAL PAST

**PART OF THE 2020 SEDLESCOMBE LOCAL HISTORY VIRTUAL EXHIBITION
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