

The River Crane and Gunpowder Mills

'The Fishbourne', 'The Old River', 'The Powder Mill River' - all these names have, at various times been given to the Middlesex river which is now called The Crane. The source of the River Crane is in the higher levels of land situated between Pinner and Harrow where a series of small brooks unite to form a larger stream called Yeading Brook. At Cranford Park the stream becomes a river, and from this point onwards, is generally called the River Crane. The river describes a complete semi-circle until it joins the Thames at Twickenham.



The Shot Tower, Crane Park

Gunpowder manufacture was the most important of the Crane industries, one which was carried on for at least 400 years up to the present century when Messrs. Curtis and Harvey closed their mills in 1927.

Until the reign of Henry VIII, because of the lack of saltpetre in this country, most of the gunpowder was imported. However by the middle of the 16th century, gunpowder mills had been established on Hounslow Heath and were considerably extended during the reign of Elizabeth, when the great expansion of naval enterprise beyond Europe meant that the country was no longer solely dependent on continental powers for supplies of saltpetre. The status of the mills was further increased in the reign of James I, who granted a Royal Charter to the manufacturers on the Heath.

The powder mill in what is now Crane Park, was established between 1766 and 1768. This first mill started life as a corn mill and was converted to the manufacture of gunpowder.

The original mill passed through various hands including Edmund Hill, John Butts and Harvey and Grueber until 1820 when it was bought by the firm of Curtis's and Harvey.

They began a programme of expansion to increase the number and capacity of the mills and improved the water supply which was essential for gunpowder manufacture. This group of mills were called the Hounslow Powder Mills although they were actually closer to Twickenham and Hanworth. They were sometimes referred to as the Hanworth Mills. After development the site covered more than 100 acres. The buildings were sited far apart, screened by trees or mounds of earth and the potentially dangerous parts of the site were built of lightweight materials to reduce the resistance to shock if they blew up. The mills chiefly produced high class small arms powders for military and sporting purposes.

The gunpowder industry in this area was a major employer but it was dangerous work. Curtis's and Harvey issued a fairly comprehensive set of safety rules for their employees which they were required to carry with them at all times and produce on demand. In spite of these precautions explosions frequently occurred, many involving considerable loss of life. Hounslow Powder Mills experienced at least 55 explosions during their working life. In January 1772, when three mills blew up at Hounslow the effects were felt like an

earthquake in London and damaged Walpole's Strawberry Hill property. On the 7th January he wrote to the Hon. Seymour Conway...

"As Lieutenant-General of the Ordnance, I must beseech you to give strict orders that no more powder mills may blow up... Now, I hold it much easier for you to do a body this service, and would recommend to your consideration, whether it would not be prudent to have all the magazines of powder kept under water till they are wanted for service. In the meantime, I expect a pensions to make me amends for what I have suffered under the Government. Adieu!"

Recording of accidents was not a statutory requirement until the passing of the Explosives Act of 1875 so many more smaller explosions may have occurred which were not recorded by the local newspapers.

In 1898 Curtis's and Harvey became a limited company and was incorporated with other important gunpowder manufacturers creating a near monopoly in the industry. In 1918 the firm merged with the few remaining others to form Explosive Trades Ltd. In 1920 the group came under the control of Nobel Industries Ltd. and were finally taken over by ICI in 1926.

In 1927 the licence to manufacture gunpowder was cancelled. The site was bought by a Twickenham Councillor, Frank Yates who tried to sell the mills as a going concern. However the coming of the railway had led to a growth of population in the area which made it a most unsuitable site for gunpowder production. Eventually he sold part of the site for housing and part to Twickenham Council who turned it into a park. In 1990 Crane Park was made a Statutory Local Nature Reserve with the name Crane Park Island Local Nature Reserve.

Some evidence of the mills remain - blast mounds, scattered grinding wheels, sluice gates, engine beds and the 'shot tower', now a listed building.

More information on Crane Park, the River Crane and the Gunpowder Mills is available from the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames' Local Studies Collection.