

Gunpowder production at Balham House

by Keith Fairclough

William Walton, whose family was associated with the well known gunpowder factory at Waltham Abbey for over 80 years, manufactured powder at Balham House, Tooting Bec, for about 10 years at the beginning of the 18th century. Not much is known about the site but there is sufficient evidence to show that a small factory existed to meet the increased demand for gunpowder during the War of the Spanish Succession, which saw the Duke of Marlborough's victories at Blenheim, Malplaquet and Ramillies. When war ended production at Balham House ceased and was concentrated at Waltham Abbey.

The sketch map (Fig.1) shows a property known as Balham House as it appeared on a map of the manor of Tooting Bec, made in 1729 [1]. An accompanying field book notes that Balham House and the three fields were let to a Richard Barney for £60 a year, and that 'there is Seven Powder Houses Standing in these Fields'[2]. Comparisons with later maps show that this property stood in the vicinity of the present day Ramsden Road and Balham High Road.

In 1701 Balham House was let to Robert Lancashire, citizen and merchant, for 21 years at £20 a year. The lease mentions a capital messuage, a barn, stables, coach-houses, cowhouses, greenhouses, a summer house, and three arable or pasture fields. No mention is made of any gunpowder producing facilities [3].

Yet, when a new lease was issued in 1723, to the existing tenant, Richard Barney of Southwark, a brewer, derelict gunpowder buildings were noted in the three fields. The lease specifically mentioned the following brick buildings:- a refining house 135ft long by 24ft wide, a watch-house 24ft x 22ft, a corning house next to the refining house 42ft x 19ft, a stable 25ft x 24ft with a granary 12ft x 8ft adjoining, and another stable with three rooms 41ft x 15ft.

Barney promised to repair these buildings when he took out the lease, but notes on the back of the lease suggest that he did not. Part of the watchhouse was blown down in a gale in November 1723, but was not repaired, because the Duchess of Bedford, owner of Balham House, removed the bricks for her own use, and did not insist that Barney repair the damage. By May 1739 most of the gunpowder buildings were no longer standing, and Barney obtained permission to remove the rest [4].

It is difficult to equate precisely the buildings described in the 1723 lease with those shown on the map of 1729. However, the large adjoining buildings at the top of the Nearer Field are most probably the refining house, where either the saltpetre or sulphur was prepared for mixing, and the corning house, where the mixed gunpowder was granulated to make it explode more consistently.

It is possible that some of the smaller isolated buildings were the incorporating houses, where the raw materials were mixed by means of edge runner stones. The obvious absence of water and ample stabling facilities at the site show that the gunpowder mills were driven by horses. The lease does not specify such mills, but the description in the 1729 field book does suggest that such mills were on site, though they must have been somewhat decayed through disuse.

The evidence is not precise, but there is sufficient to suggest a small and short-lived gunpowder factory on the site, set up initially to meet the increased demands of The War of Spanish Succession in which Britain was involved from 1701-1713, and falling into disuse when that war ended. The producer at the site was most probably William Walton.

Neither Lancashire nor Barney ever supplied gunpowder to the Board of Ordnance so it is unlikely that they ever produced powder themselves. However, William Walton was producing gunpowder at Balham by July 1706, and in the absence of evidence of any other site locally, it would seem sensible to assume that he had leased Balham House, or the adjoining fields.

William Walton was the first of his family, more normally associated with Waltham Abbey, to enter the industry. He signed his first contract with the Board of Ordnance in February 1702 and within a few years was one of the major suppliers. Waltham Abbey must have been his most important factory, but the amounts delivered by him do suggest he was using more than one site. It can be noted that his father came from Surrey, and that William was living at Balham when he died intestate during the first months of 1711 [5].

That he was producing powder in Surrey in 1704 and definitely at Balham by July 1706 emerges from complaints about accidents that happened to his carts as they delivered

gunpowder to the Ordnance storage depot at the Tower of London.

Sometime during the winter of 1704-05 a coach collided with one of his carts as it crossed London Bridge. A barrel of gunpowder broke open, spilling its contents along the Bridge. Such were the fears of an explosion, set off by the striking action of horseshoes, that the Bridge was immediately closed down, and

Ordnance instructed their powder suppliers that they should deliver to the magazine at Greenwich rather than the Tower, an important policy switch [7].

Local inhabitants and the London aldermen wanted further measures. They were determined to prevent the carriage of gunpowder through the London streets, wanted greater precautions in the storage of gunpowder

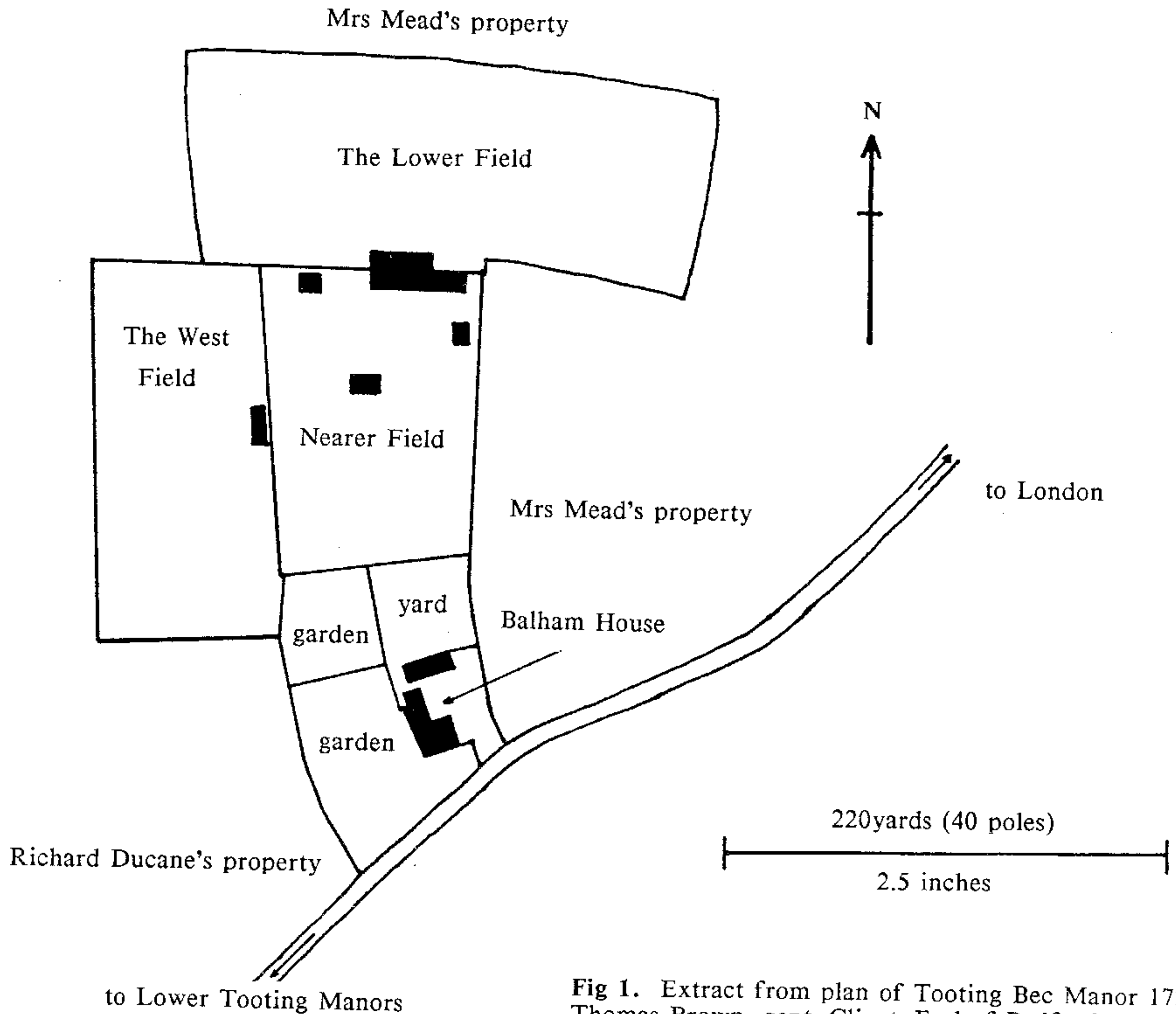


Fig 1. Extract from plan of Tooting Bec Manor 1729 Thomas Brown, gent. Client: Earl of Bedford

'Kennel Water, and Dirt' scattered to mask the gunpowder.

After this incident Walton modified his carts, adding boards at the back as high as the barrels to prevent them falling off. However, in July 1706 one of Walton's employees, realising that one of the powder wagons needed immediate repair, decided to despatch 25 barrels of powder to the Tower on a country cart. This cart overturned near the Monument in Fish Hill Street [6]. Fortunately, there was no explosion on this occasion either, but this time preventive measures for the future were implemented. In January 1707 the Board of

by the private merchants, and also expressed concern about the practice of unloading powder barges at night under the light provided by naked torches.

Bills were submitted to parliament in March and April 1707, but these failed when parliament was prorogued. William Walton was one of those who opposed these bills. Eventually a compromise was reached whereby the powdermakers promised not to ship off powder within half a mile of London Bridge, and to carry powder through London only in covered wagons with a maximum of 25 barrels [8].

No other reference to Walton's production at Balham has been found. The map shows that the 'factory' was only small, without room for expansion unless the adjoining properties were bought. It had all the hallmarks of a temporary site, a common feature within the industry.

Philippa Walton, William's widow, inherited the powder business, and it was she who guided it through the difficult years after 1713 when the end of the War meant that there was too much capacity in the industry. Many powder producers ceased production, and invested elsewhere. Philippa had obvious entrepreneurial talents, but being a woman meant that she would have found it difficult to make a switch. To survive she had to exploit opportunities within the powder industry. She did so, successfully. One of her decisions must have been to close down production at Balham and concentrate production at Waltham Abbey, thus the state of decay noted in 1723.

Abbreviations

CLRO City of London Record Office
 GLRO Greater London Record Office
 PRO Public Record Office

References

- [1] GLRO, E/BER/S/E5/3/1
- [2] GLRO, E/BER/S/E/4/1

- [3] GLRO, E/BER/S/L9/14/1
- [4] GLRO, E/BER/S/L9/14/2
- [5] PRO, WO 48/41 unfoliated; PRO, PROB 11/415(119); PRO, PROB 6/87;
 K.R. Fairclough, *Early Gunpowder Production at Waltham* Essex Journal, Vol 20 no.1 (1985), 11-16
- [6] CLRO, Misc Mss. 2874; PRO, WO 55/344 fos. 176-79
- [7] PRO, WO 47/24 fo.270
- [8] House of Commons Journal, xv. 358, 362, 366-68, 384, 385, 387-90, 567;
 House of Lords Journal, xviii. 310, 315, 317, 319, 324-27;
 H.C. Tomlinson, *Guns and Government: The Ordnance Office under the Later Stuarts* Royal Historical Society, Studies in History, Series no.15 (1979), 116.

Acknowledgements

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