

Extract from the book

The East India Company's Arsenals and Manufactories

by

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pages 106-109 "The Bengal Gunpowder Manufactories"

including the role played by Martin Costelly

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complaints of the powder made at Calcutta, where every ingredient was to be had in plenty and perfection. They urged manufacture by contract or under the 'Inspection of Propper Supravisors', and enjoined the utmost care to see 'that strictest justice is done us in the Quality as well as Price'. They kept a strict eye on expenses, as witness a letter of March 1759: 'to prevent needless expense of powder on board their ships, new regulations have been made allowing cheers instead of guns'.

In February 1757 the Council ordered the mills at Perrin's to be repaired and 'Major Killpatrick to supravis with same gratuity as was allowed to Buchanan'. Killpatrick was ill, so Mr. J. McDonald, assistant to Captain Brohier, the Chief Engineer, was ordered to oversee the mills and manufacture gunpowder on the Company's account, to be paid Rs. 800 a year for his trouble and attendance. McDonald got into trouble the following year on account of weak and defective powder, which was ordered to be returned to him to be made over again; but evidently that was not the whole trouble, as at the same time Government resolved to fine heavily any one with salary supervising the making of gunpowder, if it could be proved that he had made any advantage over his pay. The Court wrote again in March 1758 commenting on the Council's orders of February 1757, saying that manufacture was of the greatest importance and they should be able to make sufficient not only for Bengal but elsewhere. They directed all powder to be proved by a Standing Committee of the Major, the Engineer, the Storekeeper, and the Gunner.

In March 1759 the purchase of the whole estate was effected, as it was considered necessary that the person who made the powder should reside on the spot. The mills were again repaired and Mr. Martin Costelly was appointed to their charge, being allowed Rs. 60 a month for this. He was formerly Captain of the *London* sloop, which was lost at the capture of Calcutta and for which and for other losses he was granted Rs. 4,226 as compensation. In the register of mar-

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riages he is shown as having married 'Anna, a country woman', in February 1750.

Unfortunately in May 1759 the mills and adjacent godown took fire and blew up, with the loss of 150 barrels of powder; but the mills seem to have been quickly repaired. Brohier reported in August that the powder made by 'Pistals and Mortars' was much better and in greater quantity than formerly, and said it was necessary to enlarge the ground and to enclose it. It was found that the cost of buying ground to the southward to extend the works was excessive, being Rs. 30,000 plus Rs. 10,000 for levelling, so it was in contemplation to acquire a site about a quarter of a mile beyond the Ditch. In December the Court were informed that the works had been entirely destroyed and it was intended to erect new ones on the new site which had been rented from 'Petumber Seat' for Rs. 250 a year. Costelly had pointed out the dangerous position of the existing works from their proximity to straw and other buildings. He was ordered to take possession of the new site and to remove utensils and materials to it and to put forward a list of buildings required. When the Council saw Costelly's list of buildings required, they refused to sanction what they called the immense expense, stopped the removal, and ordered the most effectual methods to be taken to make the works safe at Perrin's. In informing the Court of their action, in February 1760, they mentioned that the powder was not turning out to their expectations.

Evidently for some time the supply of powder from the mills was neither sufficient nor good, and heavy demands had been sent home, with the result that the Court wrote in April 1760 a letter dealing with the whole subject. They said it was impossible to send out the quantity required, so they would accede to the request for some person well skilled in the manufacture. They had entertained William Smith as Powder Maker at £170 a year, and Robert Smith, as his assistant, on £100 in full for wages, diet money, and all other

allowances except house-rent, and they added that they had been to the expense of having William Smith instructed in burning charcoal and refining brimstone. They sent out with these men models of a horse mill, corning and dusting houses, a gunpowder press, and several other materials for the works.

The history of these works in Bagh Bazaar during the next ten years or so seems to have been most unsatisfactory. The two Smiths inspected the works on their arrival, and in November 1760 reported, 'the method that is used now by the Director of the Powder Works, in all respects seems to us so inconsistent to true Reason that we think it a meer impossibility that it can be of Perfection, either for present or future service'. The Engineer was ordered to make inquiry of ground proper for powder mills, to calculate cost and lay plans before the Board; but nothing seems to have come of this, and in March 1761 money was allowed for repairs to the bridges and to the straw buildings for making the gunpowder. Some efforts to improve matters seem to have been made, and a Mr. Edward Davis was entertained as Millwright for three years on £100 a year; but the Court in March 1763 had again to complain of the heavy demands for powder from home, and they said they had heard from Smith who reported that the works were not completed and spoke of interruption from Costelly. The Court also referred to samples sent home and tried and found to be unfit for any service. In May 1764 the Court wrote again, and said it was very difficult to find a person well versed in the manufacture of gunpowder. Mr. Walton had been for three or four years qualifying himself and had offered to proceed during the next season, when he would be fully master of the whole process. They stated that as an encouragement they would appoint him a factor on the Bengal establishment to rank after the lowest factor at the time of his arrival. Again writing in February 1765 they said they were surprised to learn that, though Smith had greatly improved manufacture, powder was still inferior, charcoal very bad, and brimstone

not properly refined. They said they were sending out Mr. Walton, who was thoroughly experienced, and they ordered that a Committee, composed of the Military Storekeeper, the Chief Engineer, and the Commandant of Artillery, was to inspect the works every month.

In June 1766 the Committee reported the works to be in a very bad condition, stating that temporary repair would cost Rs. 2,000, while the estimate for works on Mr. Walton's plan would amount to from 80,000 to 100,000 rupees. The Council, of course, decided for repair. Walton died in 1768, when Smith resumed charge as Master of the Powder Works. Some improvements were made by Major du Gloss, when he was appointed Commissary of Stores in 1769; but Smith seems to have continued in immediate control till another change was made in 1774.

The Court wrote in March 1774:

'Upon consulting with Lieutenant Colonel Campbell on the means of putting the Manufacture of Gunpowder on the best footing, We have thought it necessary to recommend it to you to Appoint Mr. Robert Stewart, Assistant Engineer, to superintend your Powder Works and to give him charge of that office, now held by Mr. Smith, as soon as may be after the receipt hereof, the latter continuing as Deputy as formerly under Mr. Walton.'

Captain Stewart took over the works in December 1774, and soon represented the inconvenience and danger of their position and submitted plans and estimates for new works. The Court were informed in November of the following year that Stewart had selected a site and had been authorized to proceed with the erection of works on the plan submitted by him. The site selected was at Akra, at the bottom of Garden Reach, four miles due west of Kidderpore Docks; it was directly opposite Muniakhali Point on the other side of the river, which is presumably the reason why the works were sometimes referred to as being at Manicolly. The site is said to be now entirely under water.

Manufacture continued in the old works in Bagh Bazaar