



HISTORY

TONY GREENBANK

Echoes of a long-gone explosives industry

HUGH Parker is an Elterwater local who was 'exiled' to nearby Chapel Stile at the age of two. He's lived in Landgale for eighty-one years, having been born just after a momentous event in the valley. The gunpowder works at Elterwater, which had begun in the early 1800s and was latterly run by ICI, closed in 1930 so village lads like him grew up in the aftermath of a busy industrial scene quite alien to today's tranquility with its view from the cattle grid on Elterwater Common to Langdale Pikes

unrivalled in England.

As lads did, they would venture into the once security-conscious thirty-five-acre (14 ha) site on their bikes – now the Langdale Estate timeshare. What sights there were to see: giant waterwheels that had been powered by streams from the pools and ponds in the grounds to drive the millstones grinding the powder, and burnt-out buildings without roofs which ICI had 'fired' to banish any traces of gunpowder lodged in the stonework of the masonry.

Above, a gunpowder parade from 1907; right, the cannon which test-fired batches of explosives



Here they explored a ghost world where the mixture of charcoal, saltpetre and sulphur had been at the heart of operations, the black powder so in demand in those years in local mines and quarries – and far beyond to North America and South Africa. And with it had been the danger ever-present of fatal explosions, as happened on four occasions through the years.

Today, Hugh still lends a hand when needed on his son Mark's farm in Chapel Stile; he has always been a farmer, he says, and always will. His heyday in 1961-76 was shepherding on the Pikes from Middlefell Farm, a building familiar to climbers and walkers as the white lime-washed farm-

house adjacent to Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel near the end of the valley.

Now, however, his home is back on the stomping ground of his boyhood, near the old gunpowder works. And recently he has been interested in a development for which he – along with other locals – gives due credit to the Langdale timesharers in restoring a feature of the village that was destroyed last November.

It was then that floods caused havoc in Cumbria, with the Langdale occurrence just a minor blip compared with the damage done elsewhere. The weir in Langdale Beck just below Wainwright's pub in Chapel Stile was swept away by the flood waters eddying round a fallen tree and destroying the masonry. Crucially, it had once helped divert water into the estate to provide the power necessary for manufacturing gunpowder (without the use of engines and risk of sparks).

But now, thanks to financial help from the timesharers involved, the weir is being replaced. And so a scenic part of Langdale Beck where families play and picnic on the riverbank in summer will have been restored at the third time of asking, the weir apparently having been damaged in earlier years too.

The Elterwater Works, Hugh tells me as a by-the-way, was one of seven gunpowder mills in the South Lakes area and its lifespan slotted in between the others. These were centred basically on Sedgwick, Haverthwaite, Gatebeck and Bouth – with Old Sedgwick being the first to open in 1764 and Gatebeck being the last to shut in 1937.

It was in 1823 when self-made banker from Kendal, David Huddleston, started up the Langdale gunpowder mill because, the story went, he became bored in retirement. A fast-flowing beck capable of turning large waterwheels; a then-secluded area; local woods where charcoal could be produced; and outcrops and woods which would screen the inevitable explosions (actually, Elterwater had a very good safety record despite four disasters) all favoured the manufacturer of 'black powder' here.

And so it proved, only for the gunpowder works to close down as a victim of the 1930s' depression and because of the devel-

opment of more modern explosives such as dynamite. Such is the way of progress.

During his farming years at the dale head, he was even then still reminded of the large-scale activity that the making of gunpowder must have created. It came back to him most frequently when he was helping other farmers gather Herdwick sheep around Stickle Tarn, that glorious mirror reflecting the light below Pavey Ark. He mentions how its dam was built to supply the gunpowder works in the valley with water, and how his great-grandfather, John Bowness – "a strapping big fellow, I believe, who lived in Elterwater just around the corner from the Britannia Inn" – won the wheelbarrow race down from the dam to Mill Beck after construction had been completed. His reward? A barrel of beer. And his technique? "He dashed down the screes and rocks by Mill Gill carrying the wheelbarrow on his back.

"I think he was a stonemason," says Hugh. "He would be one of a good number of men working on the dam, walking up and down the hillside by Mill Gill through all weathers. You've seen what a construction it is. There's a tunnel that goes in underneath right in the middle of the dam itself.

"Here was where a man would go inside to operate the sluice gate. They used to go in to regulate the flow on a Sunday night. So it would be down here for Monday morning. If it was a dry time they would lower the tarn right down and control its level to keep the gunpowder works going.

"They would let a percentage out to go down Mill Gill into Langdale Beck. But this facility was only used when they needed it. It would be all timed. An hour – maybe longer to get down to the river. Then it flowed on down to the weir below the pub in Chapel Stile, and into the powder works



Hugh Parker, on Elterwater Common with Langdale Pikes in the background, looks out over the gunpowder works where the trees and buildings are in the middle distance

to drive the waterwheels and keep the millstones grinding the powder."

What a different world this was. It was one where everything was done to eliminate sparks on the Langdale estate. The fact the water power was used for this reason was only one such sign of how seriously this risk was viewed. Ponies stabled at Elterwater provided the transport within the estate, shod with copper horseshoes, these again being 'sparkless'.

The workers wore wooden-soled boots or clogs and cartwheels had wooden rims rather than being shod with iron. Local quarries at this time might be using steam locomotives and traction engines but Elterwater works could not use them. Even mighty millstones weighing several tons were made of limestone which does not produce sparks like gritstone.

Despite such precautions there were explosions, three of them involving a part of the manufacturing process that took place in the Corning Mill. This was where the gunpowder mixture – which had been pressed into hard slabs – was broken up by dashing them on a rope against the sides and passing the resulting grains through a series of sieves.

The first catastrophe happened in 1840 when five men were killed; and the last in 1916 which sadly accounted for four lives lost. In 1901 a joiner was killed in the mill when given a lighted candle by which to work.

Yet all around the gunpowder works, such is the irony of life, everything to do with sparks detonating explosions and starting fires was in evidence. Banks, Cowter, Spout Crag, Thrang Crag and Dulcanter quarries



The Langdale Timeshare where the gunpowder works stood

were all going full blast with their detonations reverberating through the dale.

And above the woods of Langdale – like Baysbrown Wood which still stretches from the campsite at Chapel Stile to Elterwater – smoke would coil up to the ridges of the surrounding hills from the kilns of the charcoal burners who supplied the works with this vital ingredient and kept production going.

And to cap it all batches of gunpowder were tested by the cannon – now displayed in the timeshare restaurant. It fired heavy cannonballs from just below the bowling green in the village, into Elterwater Tarn

and the adjacent field (known as the Target Field), something that could not be envisaged today as a different type of industry now prevails – the tourist business.

“Times change,” says Hugh, “and things are very different today, but who can say which is better? The gunpowder works employed a lot of people, but so does the timeshare today, and the good thing is people are still interested in what went before, as shown by the rebuilding of the weir in Langdale Beck. Langdale has seen many changes and doubtless there will be more around the corner. But one thing is for sure, the valley will always survive.” ■