ARJO-WIGGINS' HIGH-TECH ENTERPRISE AT DOVER

An EYE-OPENING Tour of Buckland Mill

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IT WAS A FINE and comfortably warm evening when twenty two members signed in at the mill office, collected their visitors' passes and were directed through a well-kept garden to the elegant Buckland House, built in 1823 by the mill owner, Thomas Horne.

On arrival we were offered coffee and biscuits and given a warm welcome by the Technological Services Manager, Mr. Keith Barr, who briefly described the history of the mill, as outlined in a company leaflet which was available for visitors.

In the eighteenth century Buckland was one of several small mills in the Dover valley. Paper was made by hand until 1814, when Buckland Mill burnt down. By the time it was rebuilt there were advances in paper-making. A new machine had been invented which produced a continuous sheet of paper of indefinite length and the first machine of this kind was installed in Buckland in 1830. The mill changed hands several times until in 1888 it was sold to Wiggins Teape Co. Ltd., from which time there was steady expansion until the present day. The mill was enlarged, modernised and completely electrified by 1936. War damage forced the mill to close until 1945. Since then the demand for more

exacting and sophisticated specifications led to necessary new buildings and expansion to keep pace with the changing modern market.

In 1992 Wiggins Teape amalgamated with Arjo Marie, based in Southern France, to become Arjo-Wiggins. The British side of the joint enterprise consists of three mills, at Buckland in Dover, Ivybridge in Devon and Aberdeen in Scotland.

Buckland Mill has a specialised production, making four colours of Conqueror notepaper and fine art papers. It also has storage facilities for all export orders to Europe, which are loaded here and driven to their destinations via Eastern Docks or the Channel Tunnel.

We set off to view the mill buildings in four groups, led by Mr. Barr, Mr. Len Southwood, Mr. John Smith and Mr. Andrew Dibley. The tour began by climbing a long metal staircase into the mill to see the first process of paper-making, the" pulpers", large vats containing a warm, bubbly, whitish mixture of chalk, eucalyptus pulp and cotton linter. We were surprised to learn that the paper today is made of mainly eucalyptus pulp from Brazil, Portugal or Spain and not, as formerly, from Swedish softwood. The small proportion of cotton linters required are brought in. Once 200 women were employed just to sort rags on the premises.

We proceeded through each stage of the paper-making process, beside impressive machines with their huge rollers spewing out yards of wet-looking, off-white sheets, others cutting, measuring, trimming and much else - all in a relentless, efficient manner.

We were fascinated by all we saw and heard and appreciated the patience of our guides when we bombarded them with questions. We learned that the mill employs about 230 workers and operates twenty four hours a day, with the men working in five teams on twelve hour shifts. the machines stop only for one week at Christmas time. All operations are controlled by computers, which are based strategically throughout the mill at key points, each one under the watchful eye of a man on duty, while the central computer unit is manned constantly by three operators. Everywhere we went we were aware of flashing lights and numbers recording every detail of the work in the different areas through which we passed.

Operations at the mill are governed by the criteria of efficiency, safety, non-pollution of the environment and the highest technological standards. All the water used in the pulpers is treated and recycled; electricity generated in the CHP plant does not cause air pollution; up-to-date machinery is used throughout. There was so much to see and learn. We were impressed by the high safety standards. There were handrails on all staircases and instructions to use them. Earstops were provided in noisy areas. The drying machines were fenced and within glass walls, the process visible but safe.

One of the most satisfying sights at the end of the whole process was to watch pristine, even-sized stacks of paper being automatically wrapped in coloured paper, glued and stuck down as though by some giant hand, then stacked on pallets for storage.

Finally, most of the party accepted the invitation to see the latest acquisition of the company, the Combined Heat and Power Plant, commissioned in 1994, financed jointly by Scottish Hydro and Arjo Wiggins Fine Papers. This involved a change from coal to natural gas, a more "environmentally-friendly" fuel, to power steam turbines to generate electricity, making the mill self-sufficient in energy once again. Almost half the electricity made is surplus to requirements and is supplied to Dover Harbour Board via underground cable.

We must take this opportunity to express our thanks to our guides and our appreciation of the friendly attitude of all the staff we met on this most informative tour. <>

EDITOR'S NOTE

London Road and Crabble Hill can be seen in the heading picture of this article, running bottom left to top right. At bottom right can be seen part of the site of the recent Saxon grave finds.