This Gunpowder Trail is one in a series of leaflets promoting walking round Faversham and its environs. Besides being fun, walking is the ideal way to explore the unspoilt delights of a town like Faversham with its many pedestrian-only areas. In total this circular trail is just over 2 miles and an easy walk with only a couple of small hills. It should take between 60 and 120 minutes.

This leaflet has been produced by The Faversham Enterprise Partnership in association with:
- Faversham Town Council
- Faversham Society
- Faversham Website
- Shepherd Neame

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Portrait of Nelson courtesy of The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich Hospital Collection 10/05

We hope you have enjoyed this trail. If you would like to know more about Faversham, the history of its gunpowder industry and other aspects of its extraordinary past, why not browse through the picture postcards, books and booklets on sale at the Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre, Preston Street.

To learn more about Faversham you may like to join a Faversham Walking Tour led by an experienced guide. Tours operate every Saturday morning April to October inclusive. Meet at the Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre at 10.30am and for a nominal fee history will be brought to life as you are guided around the town.

Faversham’s excellent range of visitor attractions also includes the town’s Fleur Museum, Preston Street, and the Shepherd Neame Visitor Centre, Court Street.

For further information, please contact: Faversham Tourist Information Centre, Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre, 10-13 Preston Street, Faversham, ME13 8NS
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Located in the beautiful Kent countryside Faversham is a picturesque market town waiting to be discovered. The town and surrounding villages have excellent transport links and are easily reached from the M2, M20, A2 and Thanet Way. There are also fast mainline rail links from London, the Medway towns, Canterbury, Dover and Ramsgate.

Visit our website @ www.faversham.org
When gunpowder, the first high explosive, was invented in 1846, the first town, and the Marsh, about 1 mile to the northwest. The government closed, much of their machinery and staff transferring to a location at Ardeer in Ayrshire less vulnerable to attack from Europe. Gunpowder manufacture was established in England at Bermondsey around 1530 and in Faversham about 1550. What attracted early gunpowder pioneers to this area was the proximity of the sea for importing sulphur and saltpetre, plenty of low-lying woodland, with alder and willow to make into charcoal, and streams to power the water-mills.

By the 1680s the Faversham industry was well established and the arrival of skilled Huguenot refugees from France gave it fresh impetus. In 1759 the government established a factory of its own here. By 1786 there were three powder factories in the Faversham area -- the Home, the oldest, and the only one actually in the town, Oare, second-oldest, situated 1 1/2 miles west of the town, and the Marsh, about 1 mile to the north west. The government factories, the Home and the Marsh, were known as the Royal Gunpowder Mills. When guncotton, the first high explosive, was invented in 1846, the first factory in the world to produce it was the Marsh Works. Later, when huge high explosives factories were added alongside The Swale between 1874 and 1912, the town became the main centre of the national industry. A special railway was built to take workers to the Swale-side factories.

In Faversham the explosives industry has left a larger legacy than anywhere else in the UK and many traces can still be seen. But don’t expect ‘Satanic mills’ or other eyecatches. The industry never left scars. To minimise blast damage in the event of an accident, its factories were often also quiet beauty spots, the various processes taking place mostly in small sheds spread out and insulated from one another by earth banks and trees. Water-power was used as far as possible, and for safety reasons transport from process to process was mostly by ‘service waiters’ in hand-propelled punts.

Faversham’s Best Sporting Powder from the mills in Faversham

1. Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre, Preston Street is a good starting point, 2 minutes’ walk from the central car park and 4 from the mainline station. Visit its museum to see a video on the local explosives industry.

2. 76 Preston Street (opposite the Fleur de Lis) A 15th-century building elegantly refronted in red mathematical tiles in the 18th century by local GP Edward Jacob. Welfare facilities at the government gunpowder factories were in advance of their time and staff and their families enjoyed cheap healthcare. Dr Jacob was contracted to provide it.

3. 8 Preston Street (The Book Shop) A 16th-century building where members of the Grueber family once lived. Huguenot refugees from Lyon, they played a big part in the local industry for over 100 years from 1684.

While I was near this town some years ago, a most surprising accident happen’d, namely the blowing up of a powder-mill, which stood upon the river, close to the town. The blast was not only frightful, but it shatter’d the whole town. Several people were killed in the powder-house itself; tho’ not any, as I remember, in the town. But the most remarkable in it all was, that the oldest son of the master of the powder-mill, a youth of about 15 years of age, who was not in the mill, or near it, when it blew up, but in a boat upon the river, sawning cross for his diversion, was kill’d by a piece of the building of the mill, which fell down upon him in the boat.

So recalled Daniel Defoe, author of Robinson Crusoe, in 1724

In fact the ‘youth’, Francis Grueber, was not quite 13. Poignantly, his grave can still be seen inside Faversham Church in the centre aisle of the south transept. His father, also Francis, is buried with him.

4. 114 West Street (Ardennes Restaurant) started life as the Fountain Inn in the late 17th century. A hundred years later it provided quarters for some of the senior government staff involved in running the Home and Marsh Works. They organised production, worked out budgets and monitored safety precautions.

The 114 West Street Inn was one of the many buildings that provided the raw materials for the gunpowder factories. In the 1700s, it was used as a warehouse for the gunpowder factory, and later as a restaurant.

5. 93 West Street, another late 17th-century house, was the boyhood home of William Drayson (1776-1863), son of the builder of the tower and spire of Faversham Church. Following in his father’s footsteps, he was in charge of building maintenance at the Home and Marsh Works and was later promoted to be Clerk of Works at the Waltham Abbey gunpowder factory.

6. 68 West Street William Smith, who lived here 250 years ago, was head-hunted to pioneer gunpowder manufacture in Bengal. He sailed on the Lord Anson in 1760 accompanied by scale models of works machinery.

7. 65 West Street was on the doorstep of the Home Works, so a succession of workers lived here, among them in 1832 Thomas Haywood, a millwright.

8 & 9. Tanners Street Numbers 50 and 52 were built for factory staff soon after the government nationalised the Home Works in 1759. No expense was spared; they have splendid brickwork. Number 49 started life as an oasthouse: hops were grown nearby. Back in the 1770s it became an early residential conversion. One of the first residents was a Sam Small whose job was to ‘dust’ gunpowder (screen finished grains for powder ‘dust’ that could be recycled). Further along the road, numbers 37 to 41 provided homes for French refugee Huguenots; around 1700 Solomon Chabrand and Louis Chatwert were neighbours here.

Since 1759 all the several numerous houses, buildings and works belonging to this manufactory have been rebuilt in the most substantial and expensive manner, so as to render it as complete and extensive as possible for the purpose. Edward Hasted, History of Kent, 1798

10. The Three Tuns This Shepherd Neame house is home to one of Faversham’s most enigmatic and enduring legends: that Admiral Lord Nelson visited the pub to pay off one of his crew. It is known Nelson twice visited Faversham, but research through his own journals has neither proved nor disproved this particular tradition. But the ‘Tuns’ has another, more certain, claim to fame. A pub since at least 1743, it is the only one of Shepherd Neame’s original three houses still trading, making it the granddaddy of the brewery’s current estate of almost 400 pubs in South East England.
11. The Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel overlooks the Westbrook, the stream that replenished the millponds that powered the Home Works watermills. It started life in 1861 as a school for factory workers’ children—provided free by the owners. Downstairs was an armoury for the powder mill ‘Volunteers’ (equivalent to today’s TAVR). It was converted into a church in 1937.

12. Stone walls beyond the church curving into South Road mark part of the boundary of the Home Works, which was extended in 1851/2. Till then the late 18th-century houses behind it were outside the factory area. The stone gatehouse was built at the same time. Security was tight at the gates (no matches!) and workers wore special clothing without pockets to guard against dangerous articles being brought on site.

13. Kosicot A picturesque Victorian cottage forming part of the Home Works. The big millpond it overlooked was filled in and houses built over it in the late 1960s. From here to No. 14 take the pleasant streamside walk or retrace your steps and go in by the former Works entrance gates at No. 12.

14. Chart Gunpowder Mills were a group of two pairs, each pair operating in tandem off a central water-wheel. One complete mill remains, the oldest of its kind in the world. In 1966, destined for the scrapheap, it was rescued and restored by the Faversham Society. It is open free of charge from April to October, 2-5 pm, on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays. It has served as a prototype for replicas at Ballincollig, Co Cork, and Launceston in Tasmania. Displays inside include a superb scale-model of the mill machinery.

11. The contrivance in the erection of the mill-houses, though simple is very proper, the covering being made with fir boards, lightly fastened, so that when by accidents, no way to be accounted for, they blow up, the blast, meeting with little resistance, hath sometimes done no other injury to the buildings, than blowing off the roof.

Edward Jacob,
*History of Faversham*, 1774
15. Boundary Stones just outside the mill. One marks the point where the parishes of Faversham, Davington and Ospringe met. (TLF stands for Town and Liberty of Faversham.) The other is a factory boundary stone rescued from the Marsh Works. William Hall was a partner in the gunpowder factories after they were privatised.

16. Westbrook Walk sports another Works’ boundary stone, this time in its original position. The Westbrook, which rose about two miles away in Ospringe, was one of the Home Works’ main sources of water-power.

17. Stonebridge Lodge was built by the government about 200 years ago as the headquarters of the Powder Mills Volunteers raised to guard the Home Works against Napoleonic invasion. Faversham mills probably supplied powder for both Trafalgar and Waterloo.

18. Stonebridge Pond, the lowest of the Home Works millponds, and now the only survivor, feeds via a sluice into the tidal waters of Faversham Creek. Here in 1781 three tons of powder blew up, killing three staff. The huge explosion was heard as far away as London and felt like an earthquake in Canterbury. So much damage was done to nearby property that in 1786 the more dangerous processes were transferred to a new factory (the Marsh Works) outside the town.

See also the Information Panel by the pond

The most horrid accident happened in 1781, when the corning-mill and dusting-house were blown up. A pillar of flame and smoke was caused by it, which ascended a considerable height in the air before it expanded, and was seen in the Isle of Thanet. The air for near the space of a mile round was so impregnated with sulphur, as almost to prevent persons breathing in it, but with great difficulty.

Edward Hasted, History of Kent, 1798

19. Davington Parish Church, the oldest extant building in Faversham, served the Benedictine priory founded adjacent to it in 1153. The priory pitered out in 1535 after which parts of the church were demolished, leaving today’s nave and north aisle. Inside is a memorial to Bartholomew Bennett, building works superintendent at the Royal Gunpowder Mills from 1779 till his death in 1795. Nineteen victims of an 1847 guncotton blast at the Marsh Works are buried in an unmarked grave in the churchyard.

England has no reason to regret the asylum which she has in all times so freely granted to fugitives flying from religious persecution abroad. Least of all has she reason to regret the settlement within her borders of so many industrious and intelligent French Protestant refugees, who have not only stimulated, but in a measure, created, British industry.

Samuel Smiles, The Huguenots, 1867

20. Davington Priory has been a private house since the last nun left. Only the Victorian entrance lodge (now parish rooms) can be seen from the road. The priory was severely damaged in the 1781 explosion at nearby Stonebridge Pond. Outbuildings and two of its six gables were demolished by the blast.

21. Ravenscourt was for many years the home of Edward Wilks’s son Frederick, who followed in his father’s footsteps, starting service in the Royal Gunpowder Mills in 1788 and rising to be Deputy Storekeeper by 1832.

22. Stonebridge Pond, from this vantage-point is seen as a network of narrow-gauge canals as well as a millpond. All the process-houses have long since gone, but at the creek end of the pond are the stone beds of several powder mills.

I went through Faversham. A very pretty little town, and just ten minutes' walk from the market-place up to the Dover turnpike-road. Here are the powder-affairs that Mr Hume so well exposed. An immensity of buildings and expensive things. Why are not these premises let or sold? However, this will never be done, until there be a reformed parliament.

William Cobbett, Friday 7 December 1821 (Rural Rides, 1830)

23. The Lawn, a handsome Georgian house provided by the government to house in some comfort the Royal Gunpowder Mills’ Clerk of Cheque (treasurer/accountant).

24. Ordnance Wharf at the head of the creek, sulphur and saltpetre imports arrived and finished powder was loaded for delivery — originally to the Tower of London, once the nation’s main arsenal, and later to Chatham Dockyard, Woolwich Arsenal, and magazines in London and Liverpool. For over 100 years from 1800 sailing barges dominated the trade. As a warning to other shipping, they flew a red flag at their topmast when they were powder-laden.

25. The Brents Church, now deconsecrated, was opened in 1881 to serve a suburb that had developed on the west bank of the creek. The entire cost was met by the widow of William Hall mentioned in 15.

26. 24 Court Street was the town’s Custom House for much of the 19th century, its officials keeping a watchful eye on shipping cargoes, including powder, and beers from Shepherd Neame’s nearby brewery. The present house is Georgian but in its medieval predecessor in Elizabethan days lived Richard Gill, a gunpowder dealer. Probably his supplier was his brother Thomas, a manufacturer who lived in Preston Street. From here walk via delightful Abbey Street and Abbey Place to No. 27.

27. Old Grammar School, dating from 1587, houses the town’s three Masonic lodges. Some of the gunpowder staff belonged to Harmony, the oldest, formed in 1763.

28. Faversham Parish Church Its graceful crown spire is perhaps its greatest glory and one of only a few in England – most are in Scotland. Completed in 1797, it replaced two earlier towers, both of which proved unstable, perhaps following exposure to successive explosions at the Home Works not far away. So to build a new open-work spire was a wise precaution.

29. Faversham Cemetery, Love Lane, has a memorial to the 108 victims of the Great Explosion of 2 April 1916. Despite precautions, accidents still happened and the Great Explosion was the worst. Fifteen tons of TNT and 150 tons of ammonium nitrate blew up at Uples, north-west of the town centre.

Though little damage was done in Faversham itself, because of the lie of the land, windows were blown out in Southend, 14 miles away, and the shock was sensed as far away as Norwich. It is a longish walk to and from the cemetery from the town centre. Visitors with cars may choose to drive there and park outside.