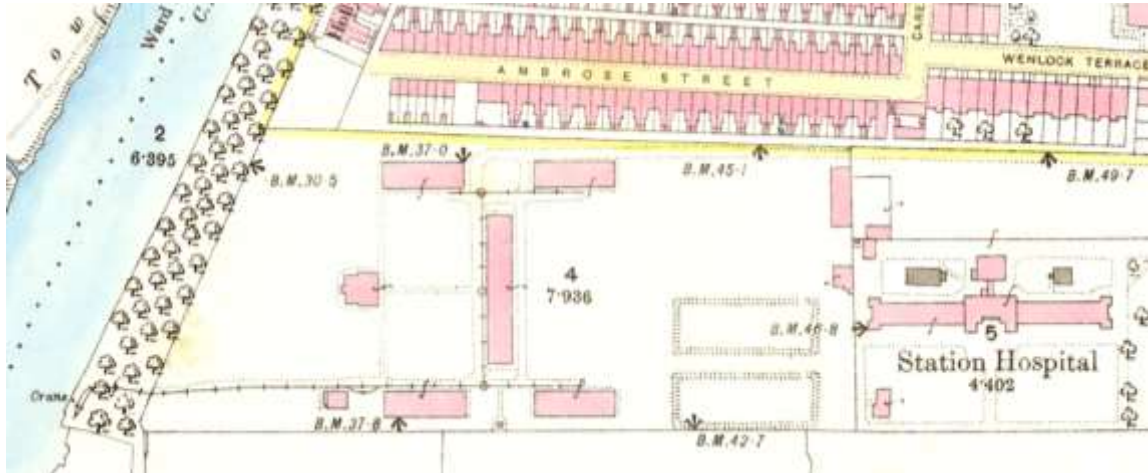


Ordnance Depot Railway – History, Maps and Pictures

Workshops and stores for the Royal Army Ordnance Corps were built around 1890 between the military hospital and the Ouse, and a wharf was constructed on the river bank.

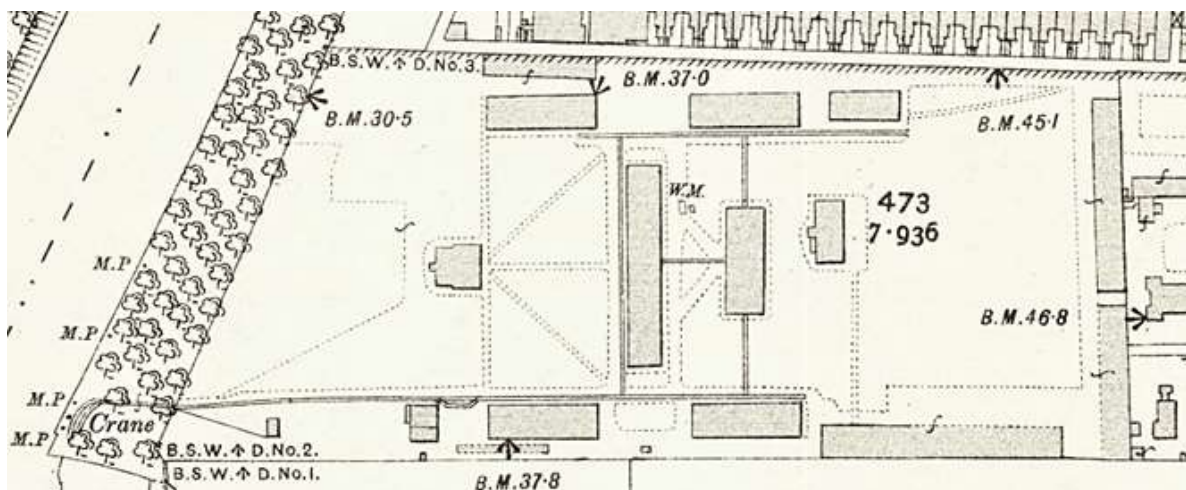
The narrow gauge railway and the first Ordnance Depot buildings are shown on the 1892 OS map below. Also shown is the large hospital.



Ordnance Depot and Military Hospital in 1892

The long building in the centre was the Ordnance Depot Headquarters and it survives today as Cycle Heaven. The northern pair of smaller buildings also survive, but the others have been demolished. Two rectangular areas shown in the south-east part of the Depot may be storage for explosive shells, surrounded by small embankments. An access road runs along the northern boundary from Fulford Road and partly survives today as Ordnance Lane.

The narrow gauge railway tracks serve each of the buildings and small turntables allow the trucks to be turned from one track to another. A turntable shown outside the headquarters building indicates that tracks went into the buildings.



Ordnance Depot with more buildings and railway tracks in 1909

Later maps show more buildings, with tracks running through what is now Fulford Autos, where tracks can still be seen inside and at the entrance doorway. There is a passing place on one line of tracks and the small turntables may indicate that trucks were moved along the tracks individually, rather than being coupled together to form a train. This would also suggest that the trucks were individually pulled by a horse or pushed by soldiers.

Not possessing a public park or similar place of popular resort, York feels a just pride in those delightful promenades, the New Walk and the Esplanade, which the Corporation have from time to time beautified by the planting of trees, whilst giving every attention to the necessary repairs of the walks. This year the repairs on the New Walk have been of a general character. We may remark, *en passant*, that the War Department have commenced the erection of their wharfe at the far end of the walk, from which they contemplate laying a tramway direct to the Barracks. On the Esplanade the piling operations have been completed.

This paragraph is part of a New Year's Eve review of the year:

“the War Department have commenced the erection of their wharfe at the far end of the walk, from which they contemplate laying a tramway direct to the Barracks.”

Yorkshire Gazette – October 6th 1888

THE NEW ORDNANCE STORES IN YORK.

The building of the new ordnance stores by Mr T. B. Barry, contractor, York, is being prosecuted with vigour, and it is anticipated that the work will be completed about the middle of next year. The site is in a field at the far end of the New Walk, and behind the military hospital. The stores comprise three large blocks, forming three sides of a square, and in the centre there is the site for caretaker's offices, so that the officials will have the supervision of the whole three blocks. The buildings are of red brick, relieved by black Staffordshire flints, and roofed with slate. The whole is surrounded by a high boundary wall, also of red bricks, coped with circular Staffordshire copings. Opposite the frontage to the river Ouse a jetty has been constructed, and arrangements have been made for laying a tramway which will run from the river bank, through a gateway in the wall, and take a semi-circular direction, touching each of the three blocks of buildings. The stores will be used to hold accoutrements, food, and in fact everything wanted at the barracks and at Strensall, if not for the whole of the Northern District, and will be an important acquisition to the already extensive military undertakings in York.

The article above was written during construction of the depot in 1888 by building contractor, T. B. Barry. It describes some of the buildings still remaining on the site, including what is now Cycle Heaven, with this high boundary wall surrounding the site, capped with Staffordshire blue ½ round copings.

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“The stores will be used to hold accoutrements, food and in fact, everything wanted at the barracks and Strensall, if not for the whole of the Northern District, and will be an important acquisition to the already extensive military undertakings in York.”

Rather than storing large quantities of ordnance for use in foreign wars, it is thought that the munitions were brought to York for training the various military units based in York. During the Great War, the ‘Hospital Fields’ just south of the Depot, were used for training in field gun practice and there were rifle ranges in the Barracks. Walmgate Stray was used for fitness training and trench warfare.

Ivan Martin, Council member of the Yorkshire Architectural and York Archaeological Society, was a civilian employee at the depot and has kindly provided these personal recollections:

I joined Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) as a civilian in 1965, working in the HQ Main Building of the depot (now Cycle Heaven). I became heavily involved with the transfer of the other workshop facilities to Strensall, which was finalised in 1968, when the new workshop was retitled 41 District Workshop REME.

The rail tracks inside the Depot had gone by the time I began working at the depot. All the pathways (some likely to be the route of the tracks) had been tarmacked over and the entrance gateway through the wall to New Walk had been bricked up.

REME was formed on 1st October 1942 and the repair aspects of Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) were then transferred to REME and 8 Command Workshop, operating from the Fulford Ordnance Depot. Prior to that, the RAOC based at Fulford was responsible not only for the storage and supply of Army material, but also for the repair of military equipment returned as unserviceable.

Many of the buildings within the Fulford RAOC Depot were used as workshops for this repair function, each dedicated to the repair of a different type of equipment; e.g. arms (pistols, rifles etc.), artillery, optical equipment (binoculars etc.), watches, rangefinders (the central tower of the Minster used to calibrate these!), radio equipment and many more. Military vehicles were repaired in the old tram sheds (now Aldi).

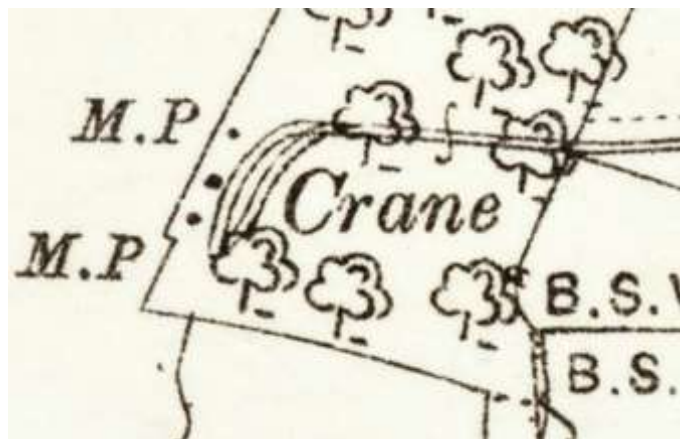
With the increasing sophistication of military equipment in the 1950s, it became apparent that these separate workshops in ageing buildings, some wooden, were not ‘fit for purpose’ and would relocate to a new purpose built workshop at Towthorpe Lane Strensall. The vacated workshops within the Fulford Depot were then de-commissioned (cleaned of contaminants) prior to some being demolished, making way for the whole site to be developed as it is to-day.



Narrow gauge flat-bed railway truck of the type that may have been used at the Depot and a similar munitions truck being pushed by soldiers during the Great War.



Horse drawn narrow gauge military railway wagons and a 20HP Simplex engine of 1916, both photographed at Beamish Industrial Museum.



The maps show mooring posts (M.P) and a crane at the riverside wharf (probably similar to this one at Dundas, on the Kennet and Avon canal). Local historian, Van Wilson, reports that in 1880, in preparation for construction of the Ordnance Depot, York Corporation charged the War Department £1-10s to fell a poplar tree on New Walk, so they could build the wharf.

The crane was probably manually operated and was used to unload ships and barges bringing munitions to the Depot from Woolwich Arsenal.

One ship was a Ketch named 'Princess' and locally referred to as the Powder Boat. Sailing ships were used rather than steamships, to reduce the risk of an explosion.

Rather than storing large quantities of ordnance for use in foreign wars, it is thought that the munitions were brought to York for training the various military units based in York. During the Great War, the 'Hospital Fields' just south of the Depot, were used for training in field gun practice.



Field gun training on Hospital Fields and rifle training Salisbury Plain, both during the Great War

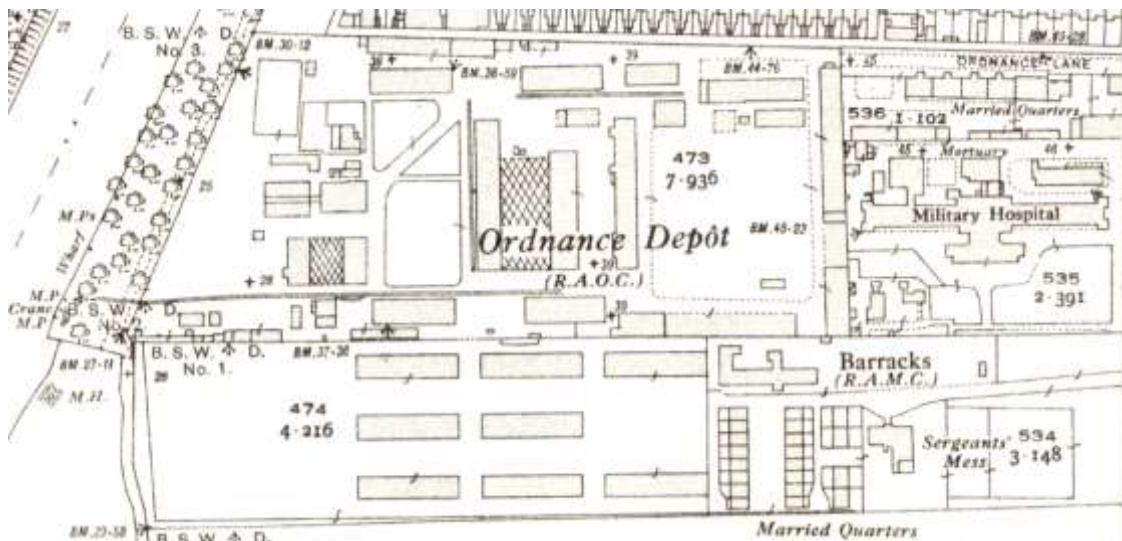


Field gun training on Hospital Fields during the Great War, with the large Military Hospital beyond the Depot



Machine gun training during the Great War (photo not at York)

The Infantry Barracks had rifle ranges and parts of Walmgate Stray were used for training in trench warfare during the Great War. In his booklet, *Heslington Memories*, Donald Ward recalls hearing the sound of rifle fire from the Barracks, going on day after day during the 1930s. Munitions like this would probably have been delivered by ship to the wharf on New Walk and taken into the depot on the narrow gauge railway.



1935 map showing fewer railway tracks but an enlarged Ordnance Depot and new Barracks buildings on Hospital Fields

During the 1930s, the army built houses and barracks buildings on the eastern part of Hospital Fields. The Ordnance Depot was enlarged with new buildings and glass-covered areas between buildings (shown hatched on the map). The map appears to show the railway tracks broken into separate sections, so perhaps road transport had become the main supply route, particularly as transporting munitions by sea risked enemy attack.

The gateway from the wharf was bricked up when the Ordnance Depot closed in the 1950s (date to be confirmed) and the site began its transformation into an industrial and commercial estate. The narrow gauge tracks crossing New Walk are a small reminder of York's long association with the military.

Photographs from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps Archive



Ammunition boxes stacked inside one of the Ordnance Depot Buildings during the 1940s



Military materials stacked inside one of the Ordnance Depot Buildings during the 1940s



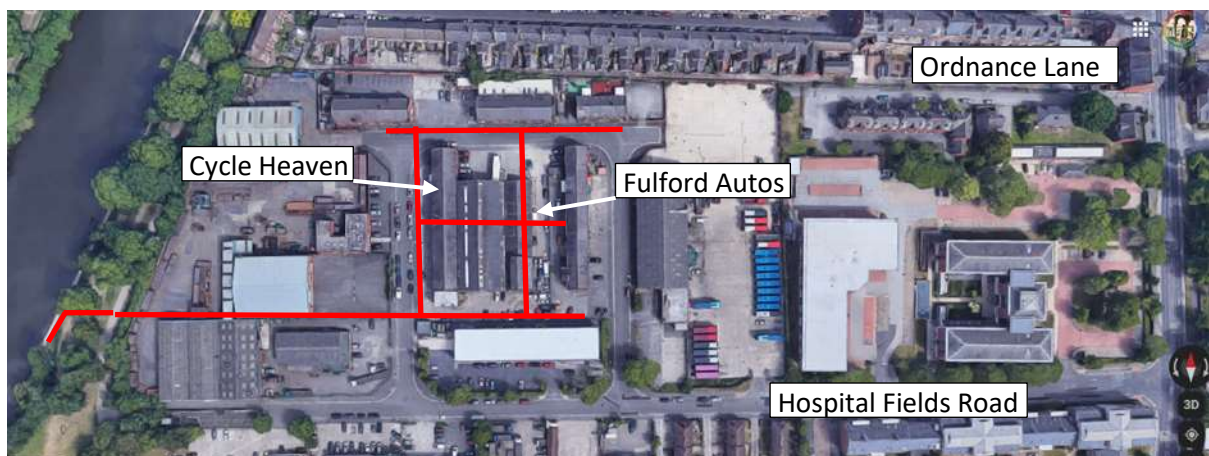
Officers of the Army Ordnance Depot, York. December 1915



Ordnance Depot Clerks. C. 1920



Royal Army Ordnance Corps Depot Trophy Winners in 1924, outside the 'Arts and Crafts' house in Ordnance Lane (currently threatened with demolition by York Council)



The Ordnance Depot and Military Hospital site today, with the route of the narrow gauge railway shown in red



The tracks are often inundated with water when the river Ouse floods, leaving a covering silt which will bury them if not cleared away.



Friends of New Walk regularly clear away the silt and in the spring of 2021, volunteers from Goodgym dug away a thick layer of silt to expose the twin tracks by the wharf.