



19TH & 20TH CENTURY BLACKSMITHS IN BLINDLEY HEATH, DORMANSLAND AND LINGFIELD

The Blacksmith's Craft

Working - or 'forging' - metal into the required shape by hammering whilst at the correct heat, either direct or through a variety of tools, is the oldest method of making things from iron or (more recently) steel. Part of the art is the ability to recognise instantly the right temperature for a specific process - this is done by eye, and it is obviously no coincidence that certain degrees of heat are referred to in terms of colour - ranging from a (relatively) low black heat through dull red, bright red, and bright yellow through to white heat (the hottest). For example, bright red heat would be the temperature at which to bend metal while white heat would be required for welding iron. Varying degrees of heat are also used to make the metal harder, tougher or softer - hardening, tempering or annealing - for different applications.

A man who worked hot iron was originally known as a 'smith' but in later centuries he came to be known as a 'blacksmith' to distinguish his trade from that of a 'whitesmith' who was mainly concerned with work such as plumbing and tinsmithing. The term 'blacksmith' is one of the longest established trade names.

During the Middle Ages blacksmiths were the leaders of industry. As well as their own tools they made tools for a number of other craftsmen, together with a variety of items ranging from the functional (e.g. knives, weapons and armour, cauldrons, tankards) to the decorative (e.g. intricate locks, patterned keys, scroll-work, hinges for castles and cathedrals). However, the main day-to-day tasks for most blacksmiths would have been making and repairing agricultural implements and equipment (e.g. ploughs, harrows, spades, rakes, hoes, scythes), including the forging of numerous small items such as chain links, hooks, eyes, nails, rivets, staples, bolts, pins, shackles, and so on.

Much of the blacksmith's work was centred around horses. The gentry travelled on horseback or in horse-drawn carriages, farmers used horses to pull ploughs, carts and waggons, and both people and goods were transported by horse-drawn vehicles. As well as shoeing horses, the blacksmith made parts for their harnesses, stirrups for their riders, and fittings for carts and waggons. A blacksmith who specialised in making and fitting horseshoes came to be called a 'farrier' - he needed to understand the character and anatomy of the horse, and perhaps have some veterinary knowledge, as well as being an expert blacksmith.

The blacksmith's skills were passed down from generation to generation, with sons starting to learn at an early age when they would help by pumping the bellows. As they grew older and their knowledge increased they would progress to more demanding tasks. Others learned their skills by being apprenticed to a blacksmith. Once qualified, following a seven-year apprenticeship, a smith generally became a journeyman blacksmith and would usually then work for a master blacksmith. (The terms 'journeyman' and 'master' were common to a number of trades - 'journeyman' came about because a man was expected to journey and broaden his experience before settling, 'master' was generally used to denote a man who employed other similar craftsmen.)

A trade closely allied with that of the blacksmith was the wheelwright - a craftsman who made wooden carts and waggons as well as wheels. The blacksmith would provide the metal fittings needed by the wheelwright, in particular springs for suspension and iron tyres for the wooden wheels. In many places their workshops were in close proximity as both men would be involved in fitting a hot tyre to a wheel then shrinking it by carefully cooling with water. This ensured a perfect fit, helping to hold the wheel together and strengthen it.

Equipment

Central to the blacksmith's equipment was the hearth containing the fire. Bellows were used to increase the heat of the fire by introducing more air, and the blacksmith would use tools such as a poker, shovel, rake and swab to manage the fire. Adjoining the hearth would be the water trough, into which the blacksmith could plunge hot metal in order to quench it (i.e. cool it quickly), and a rack containing a selection of tongs in various sizes and with differently-shaped jaws for holding items whilst working on them. Nearby would be one or more anvils, benches, mandrels and swage blocks, as well as racks containing a variety of hand and sledge-hammers, chisels, punches and drifts. To protect himself and his clothing from hot sparks, the blacksmith wore a long leather apron.

From the mid-19th century the increasing use of steam power led to a gradual decline in the use of the horse as a source of motive power, and a subsequent corresponding decrease in trade for the blacksmith. Until the early 20th century most villages had at least one smithy or forge, but following the introduction of the motor vehicle the demand for the blacksmith's traditional skills declined rapidly. Some blacksmiths adapted and modified their skills to maintain and repair these vehicles (several forges subsequently became village garages), while others concentrated mainly on decorative ironwork - which provides the market for the modern-day blacksmith whose skills also include more recent techniques such as gas-welding and flame-cutting.

Local Blacksmithing Families

The TERRY family

The TERRY family were blacksmiths in Lingfield for the best part of a century. They are believed to have moved to the village during the latter part of the 1820s, and Alfred TERRY ran the business until around the time of his death in 1869 when his son John took over. (John's older brother Alfred junior had moved to Tandridge, where the 1861 census shows him as a journeyman blacksmith.) John TERRY was the village blacksmith until his death in 1890 when he was succeeded by another

member of the family, William TERRY, who remained as the blacksmith in Lingfield until the early 1920s - when the village forge presumably closed as a result of the changing times. (Editions of Kelly's Directory between 1915 and 1922 list William as Blacksmith and Collector of Poor Rates, but in the 1930 edition he is shown only as Collector of Poor Rates.)

The 1851 census shows Alfred TERRY senior as a Master Blacksmith employing 1 man (presumably in addition to his sons Alfred and John) and it is likely that this employee was Thomas MILLS, a journeyman blacksmith living in Lingfield.

John TERRY is recorded in the 1881 census as a blacksmith employing 1 man and 1 apprentice. James HUGGETT is the apprentice, living with the TERRY family, and the other man was probably Henry PARSONS - another blacksmith who lived in Lingfield.

The 1901 census shows William TERRY as an employer but does not state how many men were working for him. However, there were 3 other blacksmiths living in Lingfield, recorded as workers - Henry PARSONS (mentioned above), Walter SPARROW and Alfred TAYLOR - who probably all worked for William.

The HEAD Family

The HEAD family were blacksmiths in the area since at least the late 1700s, and had smithies at Blindley Heath and Dormansland.

(Blindley Heath was originally within the ecclesiastical parish of Godstone, becoming a separate parish in 1842. Similarly, Dormansland was originally within Lingfield ecclesiastical parish, becoming a parish in its own right in 1885. Therefore, although early references to the HEAD family mention Godstone and Lingfield it is almost certain that these relate to Blindley Heath and Dormansland respectively.)

William HEAD of Godstone, Blacksmith, died in 1791. His Will refers to his wife Elizabeth and 6 children - William, Elizabeth, Thomas, George, Charles and James. It is thought that Elizabeth was William's second wife and that William junior, Elizabeth and Thomas were his children by his first wife Sarah. Thomas and George followed in their father's footsteps and became blacksmiths. (Charles became the innkeeper of The Star Inn, Lingfield and was the father of Charles HEAD and George HEAD, both of whom became carpenters. Charles junior subsequently succeeded his father as innkeeper of The Star Inn, and also served as Parish Clerk.)

Blindley Heath

George HEAD is believed to have succeeded his father William as the blacksmith at Blindley Heath. George died in 1830 and in his Will he requests that his son James 'take care and carry on the business of Blacksmith for my said Wife Elizabeth and that my said Wife Elizabeth shall pay unto him wages for so doing.' Although the 1841 census records Elizabeth HEAD's occupation as Blacksmith no doubt James, who remained living with her, ran the business for her until she died in 1853. James then carried on the business until his death in 1870, when his older brother George took over. George died in 1882 and his son, George junior, appears to have carried on the business until around 1910 when it finally passed out of the family - George

junior's son, George William, having died in 1899. (Walter CROWHURST is listed as the blacksmith at Blindley Heath in the 1911 edition of Kelly's Directory.)

It appears that George also had a smithy at Crowhurst, possibly serving the brickworks. A set of sale particulars dated December 1887 relating to the 'Old-Established Brick & Tile Works at Drewsherne, by Crowhurst Lane End' and 'The Waste Farm in the Parish of Crowhurst' includes reference to 'An Ancient Timber-Built and Tiled Smithy with Forge and Chimney and space in front next the Road, this is let to Mr George HEAD, a Shoeing and Jobbing Smith'.

Around the same time George was advertising as follows in 'The Lingfield, Dorman's Land, Blindley Heath & District Annual General Directory Illustrated Almanac & Diary for 1888':

G Head
Shoeing & Jobbing Smith, Blindley Heath, Godstone, Surrey
Carriage horses & Hunters Shod on Scientific Principles
Spades, Shovels, Digging Forks, and Wire Netting in Stock
Estimates given for wire & continuous fencing

Dormansland

Thomas HEAD of Godstone, Blacksmith, is believed to have moved to Dormansland after his marriage to Elizabeth COLE of Lingfield in 1783. All three of their sons - Thomas junior, William and John - became blacksmiths. Thomas junior was a blacksmith and farrier at Hurst Green, and his son Thomas is recorded as a farrier at Fetcham (near Leatherhead) in the 1881 census.

Thomas senior died in October 1829 and in his Will, dated 4th September 1829, he bequeathed his property and 'ready money, stock in trade, goods and effects' to his son William, while John received a legacy of £50 (worth approximately £2,000 today). William's son John was also a blacksmith, and the 1851 census shows both William's brother John and son John working for him.

During the 1860s William moved to Brighton and it is believed that the business passed to his brother John rather than his son. Certainly in the 1871 census John senior is living at the Blacksmith's Shop and House and is listed as a master smith employing 2 men, with John junior living nearby.

At that time the blacksmith's shop was in what is now Ford Manor Road (having been there since at least the early 1700's when Richard PAYNE was the blacksmith). The 1881 census lists 3 blacksmith's families living in 'Heads Cottages' and it is believed that these were the houses more recently known as 'Ralphs Cottages'. Among those living with John HEAD senior are his son-in-law Edgar SKINNER and a servant, Samuel CULLEN. The occupation of all three men is given as Smith. Other households at Heads Cottages are John HEAD junior, Smith, and family, and John ASHBY, Shoeing Smith, with his family.

John HEAD junior died in late 1881 so after this date there is no doubt that the business was run by his uncle, John senior.

'The Lingfield, Dorman's Land, Blindley Heath & District Annual General Directory Illustrated Almanac & Diary for 1888' also carries an advertisement for John's business:

Established over a Century
John Head
Shoeing & General Smith
Dorman's Land, Lingfield

John HEAD senior died on 1 January 1888, and his obituary in a local newspaper referred to him as 'a well-known and respected tradesman'.

John had no surviving sons (both having died in infancy) so the business passed to his son-in-law Edgar SKINNER, who had married John's daughter Avice. It was also around this time that a new smithy was built in Plough Road.

The 1891 census shows Edgar SKINNER and family living at No 5 Plough Road. In 1901 their address is given as Blacksmith's Cottage, Dormansland, which is believed to be the same cottage, adjacent to The Forge. In another household at Blacksmith's Cottage (possibly in the adjoining house) is James HUGGETT, Shoeing Smith - who was apprenticed to John TERRY in the 1881 census.

Edgar SKINNER died in 1904, but some later Kelly's Directory entries still list him as the blacksmith in Dormansland. However, other entries show his widow, Mrs Avice SKINNER, as the proprietor and it is probable that their son Frank looked after the business on behalf of his widowed mother in a similar way to that in which James HEAD looked after the business in Blindley Heath.



Avice SKINNER (née HEAD) in the garden of the family's cottage in Plough Road adjoining Dormansland Forge

Avice died in 1930 - the last of the HEAD family of blacksmiths in the locality. However, her son Frank SKINNER continued as blacksmith and farrier at Dormansland Forge until his retirement in the early 1950s. He was assisted at various times by Gordon MAYO, Sidney SIMMONS and a Mr WALLIS. When Frank died in 1958 his obituary in a local newspaper recorded that until his retirement he had 'carried on the family blacksmith's business founded between 150-200 years ago'.

Following Frank SKINNER's retirement, the forge was run by a Mr GUTSLOW who specialised in ornamental ironwork and changed the name of the business to 'Wealden Iron'. He was joined in 1957 by Albert ('Tim') REDDICK, who became proprietor following Mr GUTSLOW's death in 1970 and renamed the business as 'Reddick Forge'. Tim REDDICK retired during the early 1980s and the business was taken over by Jon JONES, who had originally joined him as an apprentice, but the name of Reddick Forge was retained. The forge in Dormansland finally closed when Reddick Forge relocated to Felbridge in 1998, the building having been put up for sale by the owners of Greathed Manor (formerly Ford Manor) from whom it was leased, and the property was eventually converted into a house.

However, Dormansland still has a tangible reminder of its forge in the form of the village sign, erected at the entrance to Newhache. The sign, made by Mr REDDICK at Reddick Forge, was presented to the village in 1980 by Dormansland Afternoon Women's Institute to mark its Diamond Jubilee and was unveiled in September of that year.



Frank SKINNER (right) with his assistant Gordon MAYO

Sources:

County Craft Tools by Percy W Blandford

Reddick Forge - Felbridge & District History Society Group factsheet

The Blacksmith's Craft - An Introduction to Smithing for Apprentices and Craftsmen
published by the Rural Industries Bureau

Traditional Crafts in Britain published by Reader's Digest