

Perspectives on Chinnor

Blacksmiths & Farriers

Up until the early part of the 20th century, village blacksmiths were a critical part of any community and blacksmiths were also employed on any large farm or estate, as well as in the military. In fact, wherever there have been working horses there must have been the capability to shoe them, so blacksmithing and farriery must have existed as trades long before the trades were documented.

Blacksmiths became even more critical as the Industrial Revolution and the railway network developed and they are still needed by the heritage rail operations. Probably the last industrial blacksmith operating in Chinnor was the blacksmith employed at the cement works until its closure in the 1990s. His job was a development of the traditional role: although by the late 20th century, much metalworking could be carried out by machinery, there were still jobs in any substantial manufacturing operation (mainly impromptu repairs and the like) that needed forging expertise.

The historical portrayal of the smith as a big muscular man in a leather apron, hammering away on an anvil, in a smithy, on the edge of the village green is really now just romance. Blacksmithing would always have been fairly hard, physical work often carried out in hot, uncomfortable conditions and would have required a significant level of stamina, if not actual brute force.

As communities developed and grew, so the “job description” extended dramatically. The village smith was the original “jack of all trades”, although he generally performed two major functions and, unlike many “jacks”, he had to become an expert in both:

- As a blacksmith, he made and maintained farm machinery, made cart wheels (as a wheelwright), in times of conflict made weaponry and armour (as an armourer), repaired domestic equipment and did many of the jobs that a “handy man” might do today.
- As a farrier, the making of horseshoes and shoeing of horses was always a very significant and specialised part of his work.

In the very early years of the motor car he was also often the village mechanic, although as the years progressed, it was the motor mechanic or motor garage that took over much of the blacksmith’s role and effectively took much of his job away. Those blacksmiths who still operate tend to specialise in areas such as artistic, architectural and decorative ironwork, as well as educating the general public in the history of their craft. This is certainly not to denigrate their abilities, as it is still a highly skilled profession, but more to identify their ability to adapt with the times.

The use of horses as the primary source of motive power had been dominant since time immemorial but declined very rapidly in the years after the second war as the petrol engine and mechanical vehicles took over. There was even a sense amongst farriers that the role of a farrier might completely disappear and it was only the development of the leisure riding market that augmented the fairly specialist requirements of the mounted services and the horse-racing yards, and kept the profession alive.

Farriery has always been a highly skilled trade and is now tightly regulated. Horses are large animals and can be unpredictable and, therefore, quite dangerous if not handled correctly. A farrier has to

be entirely comfortable with horses, even the less manageable animals, and also needs a substantial amount of equine veterinary knowledge. Historically, he may well even have offered some broader animal health service or advice in the days before veterinarians really became established. Even in the days before regulation, there was always heavy reliance on the transfer of knowledge through apprenticeship, hence the trade was often carried on down family lines.

Blacksmithing goes back several generations in my family and around the 1930s - 40s my grandfather and uncle (Bert and Laurie Pullen) ran the forge that once existed behind Richmond House in Lower Road, next to the old Royal Oak pub. They had moved to Chinnor from Ickford where the family had run the village forge since the mid 1800s. Later, they ran forges in Bledlow (near the top of Perry Lane) and in Askett near Monks Risborough and, as things turned out, they were the last blacksmiths in our family line.

Although I am a moderately practical individual and am not uncomfortable with horses, I am not sure whether I could take to hammering nails into a horse's hoof - even though I know that if done correctly it won't harm the animal!

Poor farriery can easily lame a horse and render it useless and valueless, so a farrier's reputation was, and remains, paramount. Today, farriery and traditional blacksmithing tend to be carried out separately and many farriers are mobile specialists, travelling from customer to customer in a van containing a self-contained, gas-fired forge. They offer routine shoeing services as well as remedial advice, and appropriate hardware, to correct defects in a horse's gait, much as a podiatrist would do for us humans.

At the end of the 19th century, Chinnor had 3 smithies and it is likely that Henton also had one. A blacksmith also lived in Oakley at around the same time and, I believe, had a forge adjacent to East End House. In Chinnor, one was located in Station Rd opposite the Black Boy pub, one in Lower Rd by the Royal Oak and one on the Crown corner (near the Crown pub). These three are all shown on the late 19th century maps of the village, but the only site still remaining in a fairly identifiable form is the Old Forge and Cottage, in Station Road roughly opposite Paul Farrelly Antiques - once the Black Boy pub. That outside the Crown was converted to a motor repair shop in the later 20th century but even that has now disappeared. The site is now part of the Crown pub car park. The 1881 & 91 censuses show a Frederick Eustace, blacksmith, living in Henton although I haven't been able to find out where the forge was. It certainly seems to have gone by 1901.

In case you haven't spotted the connection, blacksmiths almost invariably had their forges close to a pub! Clearly, smithing was thirsty work and this arrangement was common nationwide, even to the extent that many blacksmiths also had a parallel existence as the licensees of a pub, or at least a beer house. In the 1881 Chinnor census, one Charles Newell was shown as smith and publican of the Crown - then known as the Chinnor Inn. It seems likely, therefore, that any smithie in Henton might have been somewhere in the vicinity of the Peacock (then the Eagle)!

I haven't been able to verify it, but I was told that, at around the turn of the 20th century, there was also a "donkey farrier" in the village who operated from a premise in Keens Lane near the railway line. He specialised in the shoeing of the donkeys used by bodgers, who had their "workshops" in the beech woods on the hill, and used the donkeys to bring their products into the village.

This has all now disappeared in Chinnor and watching (and hearing) a blacksmith at work is now a rare experience for most people. It is, however, still quite evocative as it seems almost to be part of our national DNA and the experience recalls romanticism and days of old and a much slower pace of life.

Maurice Pullen

June 2021