

The Village Blacksmith

The news that Basil Elliott is retiring and selling the smithy seems to mark the end of an era in the village. There was a blacksmith in Alderbury named John Dennis whose will was dated 1671 and left goods totalling £52 16s 9d, Twenty-five years later John Harris left £94 9s 7d in his will. There was a forge in Alderbury in 1699 when it is mentioned in an indenture for a smith's shop, house and garden to Thomas Stringer and Edwin Clare, naming the previous occupant as a man called Langly. How long the forge had existed prior to this date is unknown.

In 1765 when, according to the description which accompanies A Map and table of the Freeholders, Leaseholders and Copyholders of the Manors of Alderbury and Whaddon it was held on leasehold by Mr Long and was occupied by John Harris. Thomas Long was a Salisbury clothier and owned the Green Dragon alehouse as well as some land adjoining the Common and Ivy Church Wood. John Harris may well have been a descendant of the man of the same name mentioned above. Ivy Church Wood was owned by the Lord Folkestone of the day. A will dated 1803 named George Tutt as the Alderbury blacksmith.

In the 1849 Tithe Award the forge was occupied by John Dowty. The 1841 Census also lists William Dowty – presumably John's son - as being a blacksmith whilst Henry Prewett was a Journeyman Blacksmith. By 1851 William occupied the Forge whilst there is no mention of John. William employed one man - James Sims a journeyman blacksmith who lodged with the Dowty family. Ten years later William employed two men – Henry Butler and Henry Thomas, respectively a journeyman blacksmith and an apprentice journeyman Blacksmith who also lodged with their employer. In 1871 he employed one man and one lad, the former was James Noyce who again lodged with the Downtys, it is not obvious who the lad was, By 1881 no-one seems to have lodged with William and his family but John Moulard was a journeyman blacksmith living in Silver Street who had William Stride and Henry Maidment lodging with him and his family. The former was a blacksmith and the latter a journeyman blacksmith. William Dowty lived at the Forge until at least 1885 and seems to have died in 1890.

His successor was John Moulard who seems to have taken over the blacksmith's shop by 1889. In 1891 he appears to have employed Henry Maidment whilst William Gould had been taken on as an apprentice and lived with his parents in Silver Street. Ten years later John was employing his son Bertram as well as Henry Maidment and his son Algernon who was an apprentice. In 1911 John was employing his son Wilfred and his nephew Ralph as well as Henry Maidment and presumably Bertram who was by then living in Junction Road and was listed as the village blacksmith. John seems to have remained at the Forge until at least 1912 and to have died in 1913. His wife Emma seems to have taken over as she is listed in the 1915 Directory but she later moved to Nether Wallop. By this time Wilfred had emigrated to Canada where he enlisted in the Canadian Army in November 1915 in which he served for about 18 months until his death in action at Vimy Ridge in April 1917. There's a photo of the Forge on page 170 of the original Millennium book and according to the WI Scrap Book history the forge was rebuilt 'right round the old one, while the men went on working in the old forge. This was in 1909.'

In 1925 James Sims was the Alderbury blacksmith, presumably having succeeded Mrs Mouland and lived at the Forge. Whether he was related to the man of the same name who worked for William Dowty in 1851 we don't know. He seems to have worked with Charles Worsdell who lived near the Chapel. Presumably James Sims left that year as that was the time that with Stan Riches came to the Forge. In those days shoeing horses and ponies must have constituted a large proportion of their work.

There's a mention of the forge in Charles Dickens's novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* which was published in serial form in 1841-4 and in the June 5th 1948 issue of *The Field* Ralph Whitlock published an article entitled *The Modern Blacksmith* about Alderbury Forge. This reveals that: Stan Riches purchased the forge in 1937 having worked there for the previous 12 years, at that time the village had recently acquired an electricity supply although the smithy was still lit by oil lamps, he was the smith for three villages – by 1948 the figure had risen to 10; at first he used a bicycle to go around on, later a pony and trap, by 1948 he had a car and trailer; he dealt with over 150 horses, repaired farm machinery, made wrought iron gates and repaired a wooden leg; he said he could get assistants but needed houses for them; in 1937 his pay was 50s for a 48 hour week, by 1948 2s 4½d per hour; shoeing cost 14s for a set for ponies, 23s for a set for carthorses, ten years previously the price had been 12s; materials were hard to come by.

Stan Riches was succeeded by his son Pete under whom the business expanded dramatically into steel fabrication and garden machinery amongst other things but the business eventually became the victim of its own success and finally folded, some of the men who worked there leaving to found Alderbury Engineering Partnership (AEP) which was based at Petersfinger for several years. Unfortunately, Pete died whilst this article was in preparation. Baz took over the business about 1993 and earned a fine reputation for his work. The old forge was eventually sold and converted into a dwelling and the business moved into the building across the road.

From 1851 if not earlier until at least 1912 there was a smithy in Whaddon, it was in Castle Lane just behind what is now M&M Motors. Stephen Bungay was the first person named as being blacksmith here. By 1859 Henry Pollard had replaced him and twenty-one years later he had himself been replaced by Thomas White during whose tenure work had presumably declined as in the 1901 Census he was listed as a blacksmith and a dairyman and in the 1907 the Salisbury & District Directory he was described as being a farmer as well as a blacksmith although the Census had him as a general labourer in addition to being a blacksmith.

Was it a coincidence that both forges were close to pubs? Probably not as this seems to have been true with several other villages in the vicinity, possibly showing that pubs and forges were some of the earliest buildings established in those settlements or could it be that the nature of the blacksmith's work meant that the workers required the liquid refreshment that the pub provided?