

BRANSCOMBE BLACKSMITHS



by John Torrance

Introduction

A hundred and fifty years ago, in 1865, most villages had a blacksmith's shop; now there are hardly any. As petrol engines replaced horses on roads and in the fields, smithies closed down, or quite often became garages. Branscombe is one of the few villages that still have a working smithy, the Old Forge.



The Middle Ages and after.

Already in the Middle Ages most large villages had a smithy. In 1332 a tax return for Devon listed 63 people with the names 'Smyth' or 'Faber' (which means 'smith' in Latin) of whom 59 were in rural areas. At that time the name was still an indicator of occupation.

No wonder Smith has become such a common surname now!

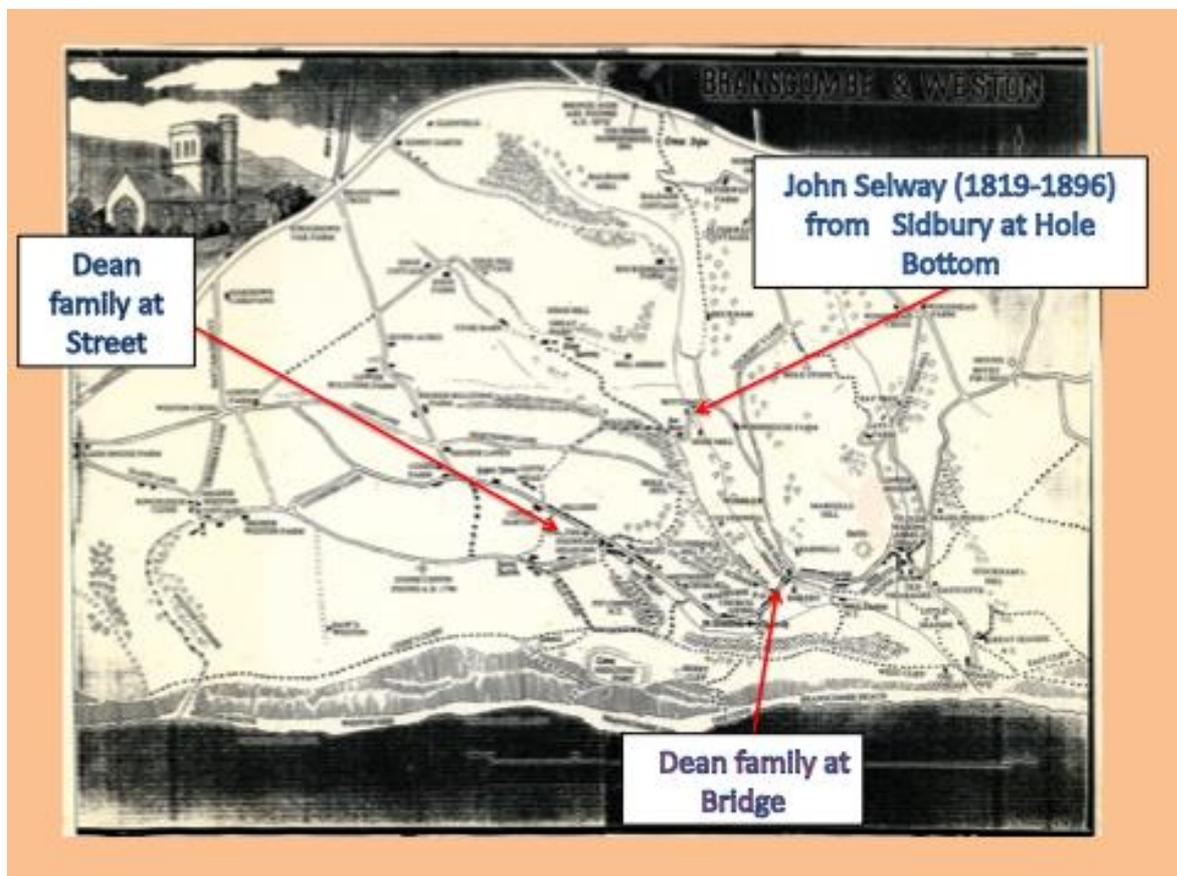
In Branscombe, a list of tenants in 1339 includes William le Smyth. He held a messuage — that is, a house and premises, i.e. a smithy — and a 'ferling' of land, the standard peasant holding of about 8 acres, but there's no clue as to where it was. The village population was nearly what it is now, but there were many more horses.

A John Smyth also was listed in 1339, among the cottagers. They were the poorest villagers, often elderly, and he was perhaps a retired blacksmith, possibly William's father.

After that the only blacksmith's name we have is John Taylor, unusually described by his trade as 'blacksmith' in the parish register when he married Anne Whitmore in 1656.

Three smithies

Continuous records of blacksmiths in Branscombe exist from 1775. At that time the Old Forge was the only smithy, but by 1840, as the population grew towards 1,000, there were three: The Old Forge at Bridge, The Fountain Head smithy at Street, and a smithy at Hole Bottom. All three were beside streams. Blacksmiths need cold water to harden red-hot iron and to cool hot tongs.

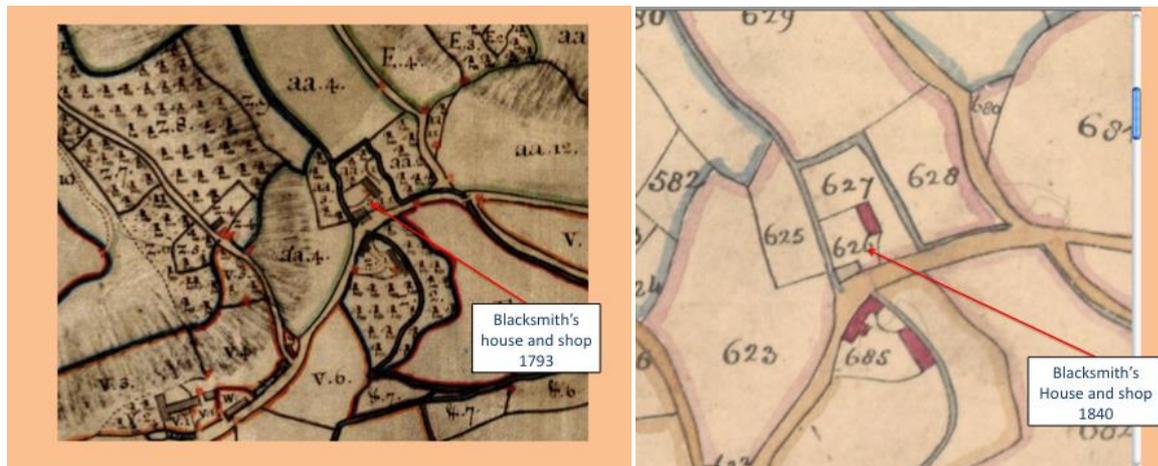


The Old Forge



The age of the Old Forge is uncertain. It is a listed building, dated by Historic England to the 1700s. But in 1955 Kingsley Squire reported that a stone had been found built into the forge inscribed '1580', which is not an impossible start date. In any case, it may be on the site of previous smithies.

The earliest pictures we have of the Old Forge — aerial views, you might say — are on Alexander Law's estate map of 1793 and the Tithe map of 1840. The notes accompanying the maps say that the 'blacksmith's shop and house and orchard' were part of Bridge Farm. They stood together in a square patch bounded by the road, by the stream, and by the mill leat that runs past the Old Forge and under the road towards the Bakery. The smithy is shown standing by the road, as now, and Law's map also shows the thatched canopy in front. The eastern extension, where the present entrance is, was not added until 1865.



The blacksmith's house stood where the National Trust car park is now. Peter Orlando Hutchinson, Sidmouth antiquarian, painted the Old Forge about 1855, with the blacksmith's single-storey house showing behind it. It is our only image of the house, which was in ruins by the 1890s, when photography and postcards came along.



The house was once the farmhouse of Bridge Farm. This was an old copyhold farm of 21 acres, which had grown from a smallholding whose tenant in 1339 was Walter atte Brygge. By 1793 it had long ceased to be an independent farm. William Ford of Gay's Farm records using Bridge Farm fields in his diary of 1791.

By 1840 Bridge Farm belonged to William's brother, John Ford, who had bought the copyhold. In the 1800s the Fords, who imported coal from South Wales for their limekilns, became the village's coal merchants, and they would have supplied the smithy. The blacksmiths at the Old Forge remained tenants of the Ford family

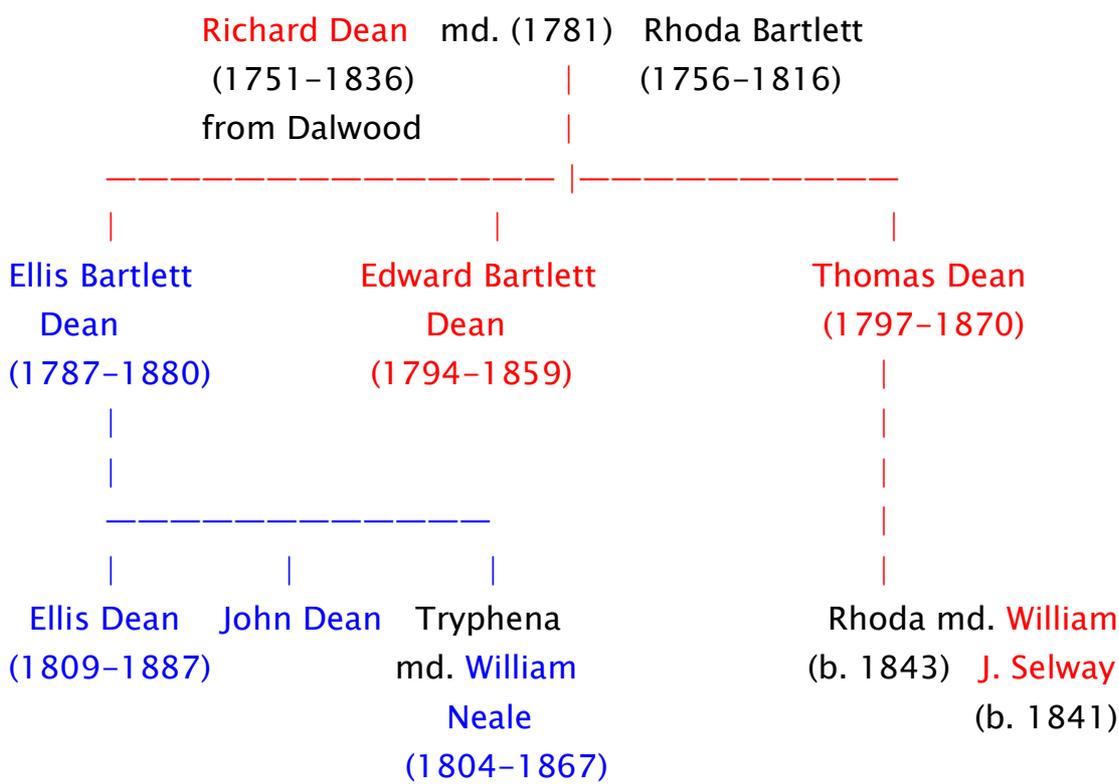
until the 1960s, when the National Trust became landlord, and built its office on the site of what had been the blacksmith's orchard.

Blacksmith families

Parish registers show how blacksmithing ran in families. The founder was often an incomer, who would rent a vacant smithy and sometimes married the previous blacksmith's daughter. For a hundred years after 1780 two families — Dean and Selway — provided most of Branscombe's blacksmiths.

The Dean family at the Old Forge

The Dean family were blacksmiths at Bridge in 1793 and 1840, when the Old Forge first appeared on maps. Here is part of the Dean family tree:



RED = Blacksmiths
at Bridge

BLUE = Blacksmiths
at Street

Richard Dean (1751–1836) was the second son of Reuben and Mary Dean of Dalwood; we don't know whether his father was a blacksmith there. Richard came to Branscombe in 1781, to marry Rhoda Bartlett (1756–1816). Rhoda's father Ellis Bartlett had died in 1780, and may have been the previous blacksmith at the Old Forge — only so far it has not been proved.¹

Richard Dean was blacksmith at the Old Forge when his first child was baptised in 1782. Along with the smithy, he seems to have taken on an assistant, James Goldsworthy, a blacksmith from Colyton (but originally from Buckerell) who came to Branscombe in 1775 to marry Sarah Perry, and who worked at the Old Forge. He probably went on working with Richard Dean while his sons grew old enough to learn the trade.

Richard's younger sons Edward Bartlett Dean (1794–1859) and Thomas Dean (1797–1870) worked with their father, and carried on after he died in 1836. After Edward died in 1859, aged 64, Thomas continued and retired about 1865, aged 68.

Thomas's daughter Rhoda (b. 1842) was snapped up in marriage by William John Thomas Selway (b. 1841) who ran the Old Forge until about 1880. He was the son of another Branscombe blacksmith (see below).

So this line of Deans and Selways (red in the family tree above) ran the Old Forge for a hundred years.

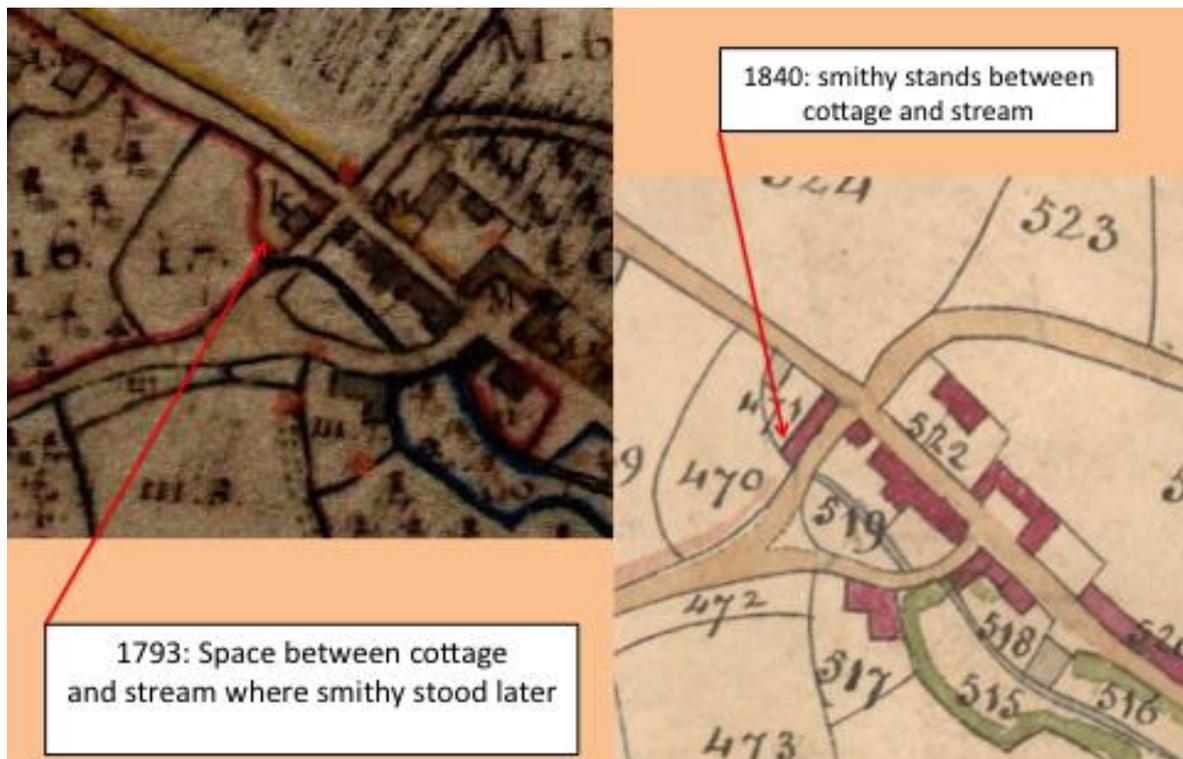
The Dean family at Street

¹ There were many Ellis Bartletts in the 18th century. This one might have been the son of John and Prudence Bartlett, baptised in 1721. He married Elizabeth, daughter of Edward and Jane Hurley of Budleigh Salterton, in 1749.



Richard Dean's eldest son Ellis Bartlett Dean (1787–1874) was working with his father at Bridge in 1807 when he married Tryphena, daughter of Abel Brown, the miller and parish clerk. He was still there in 1824, but in 1830 he leased a cottage called Bussells at Street, formerly held by William Newton Tilman and apparently named after James Bussell, who appears to have been Tilman's ancestor. The 1841 census shows Ellis Bartlett Dean as a blacksmith at Street, assisted by his son John.

Bussells was probably the cottage that became the Fountain Head Inn, for it must have been Ellis Bartlett Dean who built the smithy there, by the 'fountainhead' of the western valley stream. Law's 1793 map shows a space between the cottage and the stream, but on the 1840 Tithe map the space is filled up — by the smithy.



By 1851, Ellis (aged 64) had taken up farming: he rented 37 acres around Street and 38 acres elsewhere and employed 3 labourers. His sons John and Ellis ran the Street smithy with William Neale (1804–67) a blacksmith from Yetminster in Dorset, who married their sister Tryphena.

Then, in 1861, Ellis senior appears in the census as ‘innkeeper’. Perhaps he had the cottage licensed as an inn to provide an income in his old age. (But had it been a cider house — that is to say, an unlicensed drinking hole — before that?) The earliest census in which the name Fountain Head appeared was that of 1871. By then, Ellis (aged 84) was still innkeeper, and had enlarged his farm to 99 acres. His wife Tryphena and his son-in-law William Neale had both died, and his daughter Tryphena Neale was his housekeeper.



At this point Ellis senior became involved in a feud between his landlord, Henry Ford, and the vicar, the Rev. Tomkins. It was the customary 'turn' of the tenant of Paytons Farm — Ellis's farm — to be one of the two churchwardens for the year. But Tomkins vetoed his appointment, presumably because he was an innkeeper, and the Archdeacon ruled that he had the right to do so, and also to appoint one of the churchwardens himself. Not long afterwards Henry Ford forced Tomkins to resign, but Ellis never became churchwarden, and died in 1880, aged 93. In 1881 his sons were listed in the census as 'retired blacksmiths'.

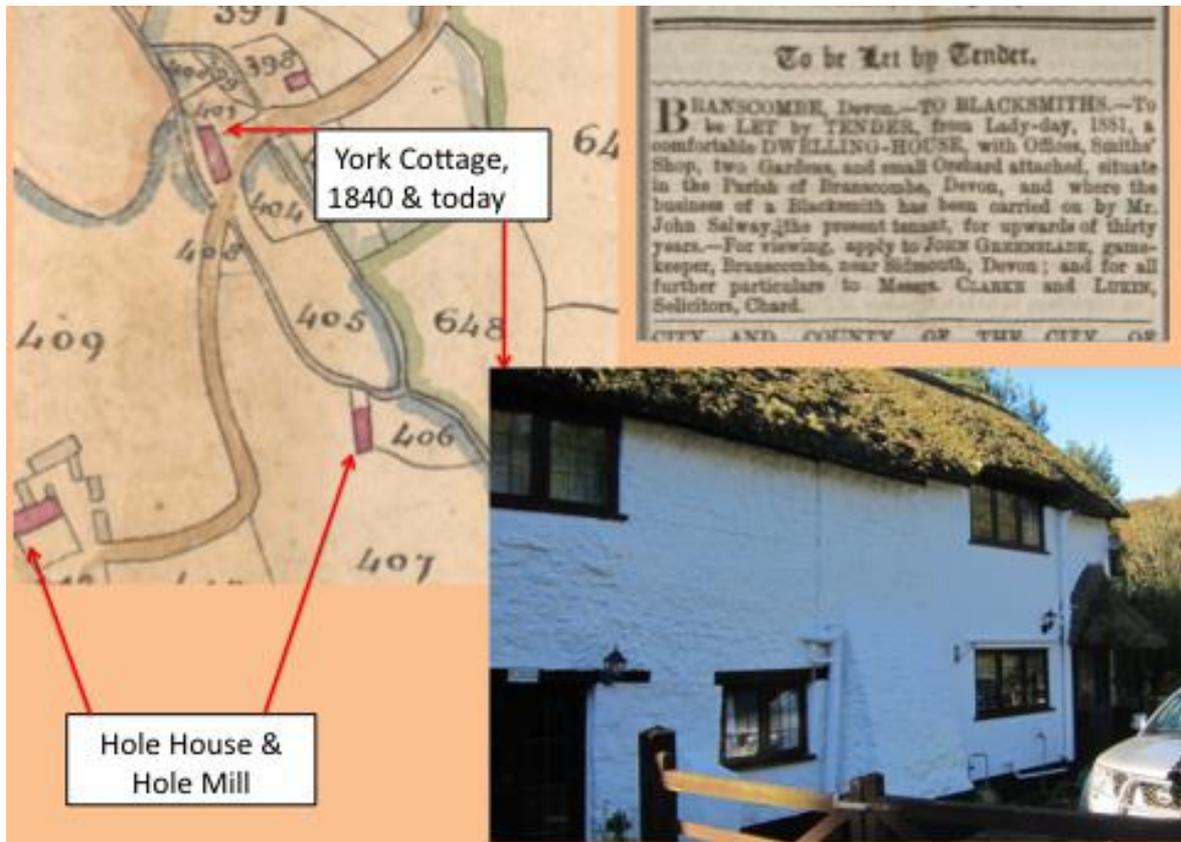
So this line of the Dean family (blue in the family tree above) ran the Street smithy for nearly 50 years.

The Selway family at Hole Bottom

John Selway (1819–1896) was the son of a Sidbury farmer. He came to Branscombe from Otterton in the 1840s, with his wife Hermina. He set up a smithy at Hole Bottom, in what had been a labourer's cottage, backing on to the leat for Hole Mill. Perhaps he hoped to make a living by serving the valley farms and the mill traffic.

He worked there with his sons. But in 1865 his wife died after the birth of a daughter, and his eldest son, William John Selway, left Hole

Bottom, as we have seen, to marry Thomas Dean's daughter and take over the Old Forge. Another son, Richard, married in 1866, and in 1868 was working as a blacksmith in Colyton. A third son Robert married in 1876, and both he and a fourth son James had left the village by 1881. It seems there was no longer enough work to keep a family smithy going at Hole Bottom.



The tenancy of the smithy was put out to tender in 1881, but no blacksmith took it on, and the premises became part of York Cottage. John Selway, aged 63, moved up the road to Hooknell farmhouse with his three daughters. There he went on blacksmithing for a while with a living-in assistant, Albert Holloway from Broadclyst. In 1891, aged 73, he was the only Selway in Branscombe. He lived in the Square and worked as a postman.

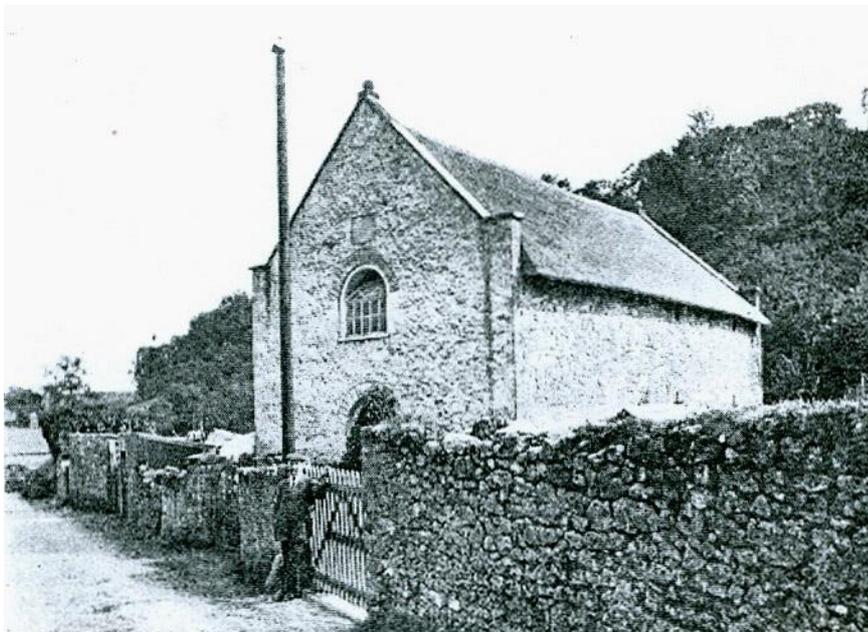
Old era, new era

The 1880s saw the end of the Dean and Selway era at Bridge and Street. But memories lingered: in 1955 Lillian Pike told Kingsley Squire that her father, as William Selway's apprentice, had spent a whole winter's night shoeing oxen at Edge Barton, to work on frozen ground the next morning.

Henry Parrett (1859–1940), a Branscombe man, succeeded William Selway at the Old Forge. The old farmhouse was now in ruins, so he lived up the road at Bank. His father (like most Parretts) was a shoemaker. It was unusual for a villager from a non-blacksmith family to become a blacksmith; indeed, few Branscombe men owned the small capital needed for a smithy.

Farming and village life were changing. Ploughing with oxen went out, and farm machinery, steam-powered or horse-drawn, began to appear. Some of the ironwork once made by blacksmiths was now factory-made, and cost less from an ironmonger.

Methodist blacksmiths

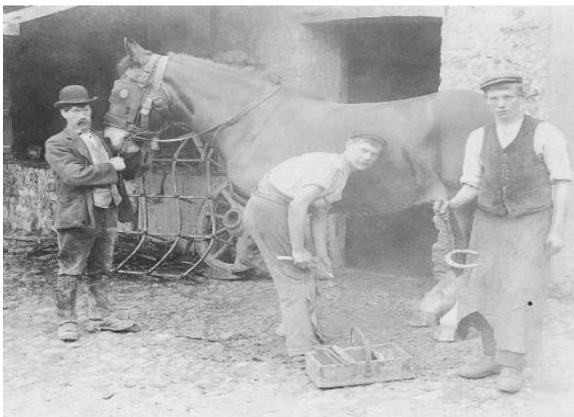


From this time on a number of the blacksmiths in Branscombe were Methodists. Methodism was partly a temperance crusade, and didn't appeal to the Dean family at the Fountain Head, who combined drink with blacksmithing. But their successor at the smithy was John

French (b 1836). He came from an Anglican family in Sidbury, but he and his wife Augusta became keen members of the congregation of the Wesleyan chapel that had opened at Street in 1830. Three of his children were baptised in the chapel in 1877, 1881 and 82. The Frenches didn't live by the pub, but up the road on Berry Hill, and they left in 1890.

John French's departure brought the Layzell family to Branscombe. Fred Layzell (1866–1942), who took over the Fountain Head smithy, was the son of a farmer at Salcombe Regis, and his mother was one of the Branscombe Gills. So Fred, as a bachelor of 25, lodged at The Fountain Head with his cousin, Thomas Gill, who had followed Ellis Bartlett Dean as innkeeper.

Fred Layzell married an Exeter girl in 1895 and they moved to Chapel Row. Although brought up an Anglican, he too joined the Methodist congregation. In 1903 they moved down to Bridge, and the Fountain Head smithy was taken over by James Loveridge (1877–1965). He ran it until 1938, and some time after that it was rebuilt as part of the pub.





Declining profits are suggested by this story from Sid Sweetland:

His father-in-law Cliffy Gosling remembered that one day, after working as a striker in the smithy, Loveridge said 'Missus'll cook 'ee some dinner'. When he sat down, Mrs Loveridge fried an egg hard and gave him half.

Perhaps that was all there was.

The new Wesleyan Methodist church had opened, downhill from Street, in 1900. Fred Layzell became Society Steward and was a trustee for 40 years. He had a 21-year record of unbroken attendance, and visiting preachers would put up at his house.



A newspaper account of Harvest Thanksgiving in 1926 illustrates the Methodist involvement of blacksmith families. Fred Layzell, whose hobbies were gardening and poultry, donated fruit and veg, and his

wife Florence decorated the church, helped by Edith and Ethel Butter, whose sister Maud was Jimmy Loveridge's wife. These were the three daughters of George Butter the baker, also a Methodist. James Loveridge's daughter Margery was organist and choirmistress.



Blacksmiths and wheelwrights

Road improvements during the 1800s meant harder road surfaces, so carts and waggons needed iron tyres to protect their wooden wheels. Tom Gill, innkeeper at The Fountain Head, was also a wheelwright, and relied on the smithy next door to put tyres on his cartwheels.



This was done on a tiring plate fixed to the ground. The plate from the Street smithy, no longer *in situ*, is visible leaning against the wall opposite the pub, and the plate in front of the Old Forge is cemented down, with its cover.

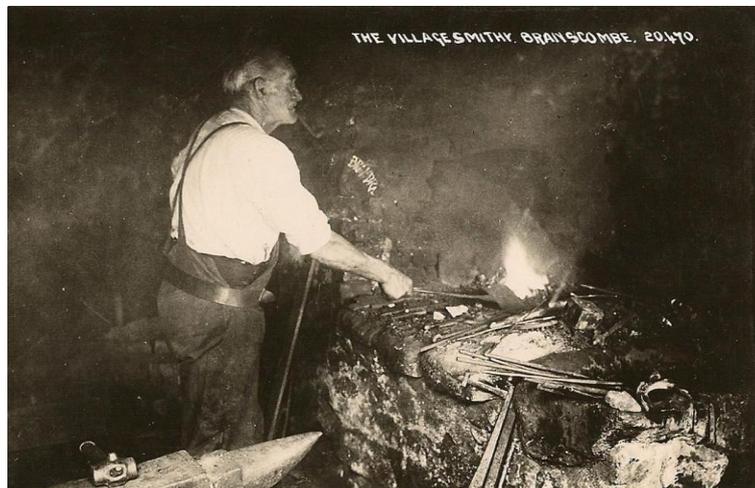


The wheelwright would place a newly made cartwheel on the plate, threaded over a vertical bar with the hub resting in a hole in the ground. The wheel was held in place by a cover fitted over the bar. The blacksmith would measure the wheel, cut his iron to size, and

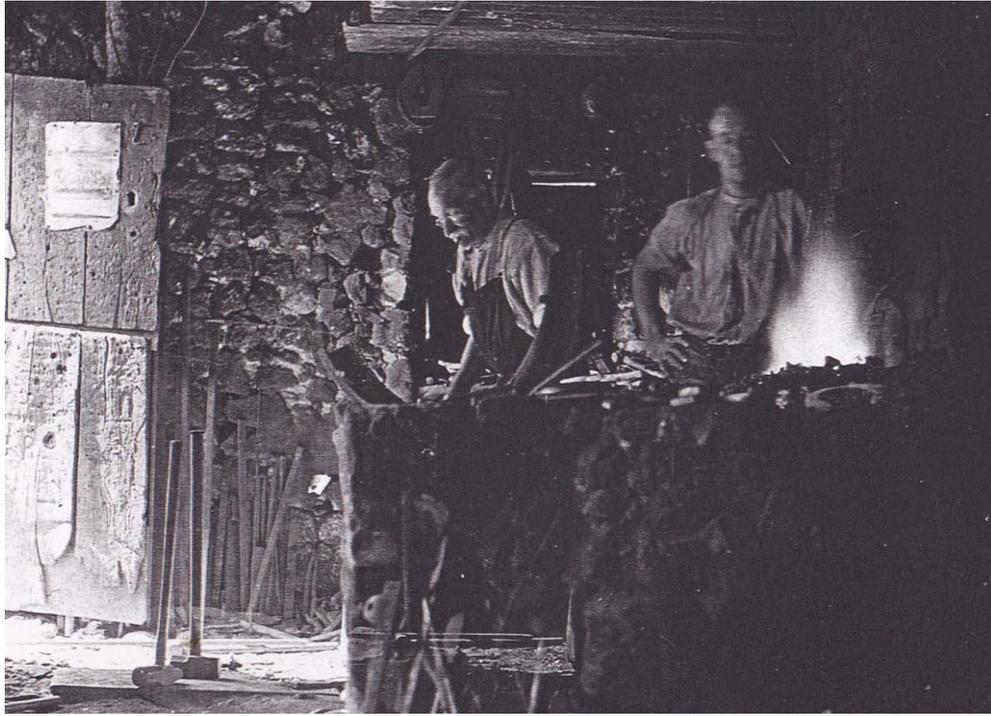
work it into a flat hoop in the furnace. Then he levered and hammered it on to the wheel.

Water was poured on the burning wood — sparks, smoke and steam went everywhere. Then the wheel was lifted, rolled to the stream, and revolved in the water to cool the tyre. As it cooled, it shrank, compressing the wheel and tightening the wooden joints. Finally the blacksmith nailed the tyre firmly in place.

The Layzell family at the Old Forge



When Fred Layzell took over the Old Forge in 1903, his family moved to Forge Cottage opposite, where his wife Florence sold teas to visitors. Fred and Florence had three children, Harry, born in 1897, Annie who died unmarried in 1970, aged 70, and Florence who died in 1920 at the age of 18.



Harry Layzell (1897–1988) began working with his father at the Old Forge just before World War 1, and came back there after serving as an Army farrier in France and Belgium. He married, in 1928, Dora Perry of Branscombe, who became a well-known lacemaker. They lived at 2 Cliff View cottages, two doors up from School Lane. Their only child, Florence, did not survive. The little girl in the photo is Jenny Saunders from next door, of whom more below.



After Fred Layzell died in 1942, Harry Layzell ran the Old Forge, the last traditional blacksmith in Branscombe. Various Branscombe men assisted the Layzells from time to time. Harry told a story about Zachary Abbott, who worked for his father as a striker: 'First time he tried it he hit so hard that the iron was hit to the floor, and the tongs were broken'.

The village still relied on the smithy for more than just shoeing horses. Harry said in 1955 that making and repairing farm implements was his main work. His ledger for 1964, kindly lent to the Branscombe Project by Jenny Newton (*née* Saunders), shows him still shoeing farm horses, removing donkey shoes and trimming donkeys' feet for cliff farmers, making new tines for harrows, sharpening tools, making wedges, and doing various welding jobs.





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35	Shoes Sallet gro	1	3.6
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200	Shoes Sallet gro	1	3.6

Childhood memories of Harry Layzell

Geoff Squire: I lived in the school house just above the forge and on most mornings I woke up to the ringing of his hammer on the anvil ... Often he would encourage me to go through the door into the forge — a great, black, sooty cavern, a place of heat, steam, noise and characteristic smells. His hearth, the centrepiece of this dark workshop, was at one end. Mr Layzell would stoke it up with his bellows and then, using tongs, plunge in the metal. Increasing the heat, he would watch for colour changes until the metal was at

exactly the right temperature for the anvil. Under his heavy hammer sparks would fly over a wide area, a contrast with the black background of the forge. A final quenching of water from the brook completed this unforgettable experience.

Anne Kerswell: I came very often in the summer and had holidays here with Grandma and Grandpa. Mother and Father made an arrangement with Harry Layzell for Kit to have her shoe'd. I would ride the day before, and then she would spend that night in grandfather's orchard, up beside the slaughterhouse, abattoir as it was. Then the next morning I'd take her to the smithy and Harry Layzell would shoe her magnificently, nobody did it as well as he did. He was so kind and a lovely person ... It was a lovely thing to go to Harry with your horse for shoeing.



Jenny Newton: You'd go down to the smithy and he'd allow you to blow the bellows, which he'd have to obviously lift you up, and he used to say:

*Blow the bellows lightly,
Make a pretty light,
Here comes Jenny
Dressed in white.*

He took me riding bareback on Topsy, a lovely old horse that belonged to Mr Frank Woodrow, every time she came to the smithy to be shod.

Linda Hudgins (née Perry): *The Layzells lived in a tiny cottage with no running water and no electricity. Their water came from a tap the other side of the road. On Mondays which was their traditional day for doing their washing, Dora would get the water and put it in a big pan on the range around 4 a.m. so that it would boil in time to do their washing.*

There was a large dining table by the window with a fly-paper hanging over it. I had the best meal with them ever, cooked in their open range cooker in their living room.

They read the Bible every night by the light of gas lamps. Harry had very bad eyes, mainly from looking into the fire when making horseshoes and also from reading by very bad lamplight each day.

Harry also pointed out to me the inscription on each tin of Tate and Lyle Golden Syrup, which he could identify by chapter and verse from the Bible: 'Out of the strong came forth sweetness'.



The Branscombe Project is grateful to Linda Hudgins for the loan of George

Barnes' painting of the Old Forge, commissioned in 1958 by her grandfather Alexander Charles Perry, Dora Layzell's brother.

The end of traditional blacksmithing

Blacksmith's work was drying up by the 1970s. Harry's ledger for those years showed his increasing dependence on making souvenir horseshoes for tourists. He also became the village's chimney sweep and shared the job of postman with his brother-in-law Jack Perry.

Chimney 1975		NEW SHOES Tourist 1976	
9/1/75	Mason, J. Barber 1	50	
31	William Stacey Perryman 2	50	
26/3	Northcott, Edward 1	90	
7/4	Collier, 2 Colliers 2	30	
	Woodrow	50	
7/6/	Scott Down Klippen 1	20	
13/	Warren, Sonner 2	90	
9/9/	Tedbury	50	
	Gill, Fisher, Carpenter 1	30	
	Starch, Sonner 1	50	
	Wilmington Wilson 1	30	
2/12/	Mason, J. Barber	60	
	Phillips	50	

He would sing hymns on his long rounds, and often carried one of the two little girls from next door on his shoulders or on his bike. Jenny and Marilyn Saunders (as they were then) have vivid memories of rides with their Uncle Harry.

In 1978 Major Hibbert wrote in the short-lived *Branscombe Chronicle*, which he produced at Hole House:

Now we come to a subject that we as a community, and the East Devon Council should be thoroughly ashamed about. Harry and Dora Layzell were born in Branscombe before the turn of the century, and Harry has been the village blacksmith since 1919. And now, in their old age, when all of us want only to be surrounded by the places, and things, and people we know and

love, we can find no place for them to live in Branscombe, and they are to be 're-housed' elsewhere.'

The Layzells moved to Seaton, but sometimes Harry still walked seven miles each way to do a bit of shoeing at Branscombe.



He was as keen a Methodist as his father, but he lived to see the Wesleyan congregation at Branscombe dwindle, until the chapel closed and was sold in 1983. Harry Layzell died in 1988, aged 81.

Any old iron?



The old blacksmiths have gone, but a number of the things they made remain. Some are treasured, like the miniature steel horseshoes made by Harry Layzell for Jenny Newton's wedding-cake, or the seaweed knife made for Cliffy Gosling, last of the cliff farmers. Others, such as ox shoes, donkey shoes, or brake shoes for cartwheels, are kept as curiosities. Gate-hangers and latches can still be seen in the fields, many still in use. Sid Sweetland owns and uses garden tools made by Harry Layzell.



The Old Forge today

When Harry Layzell retired, the smithy was taken for a while by a farrier, Peter Myers. Lyn Hall, originally his apprentice, continued after he left. Andrew Hall, whose father was a farmer and blacksmith in Wiltshire, took on the lease from the National Trust in 1985, and developed a modern ironworking business, creating useful and decorative wrought-iron goods for the tourist and luxury markets.



In 2011 Andy Hall left Branscombe to take over a bigger forge in the grounds of Powderham Castle. A prizewinning master blacksmith, he has become celebrated for the commissioned works of art produced there. His business, now called Ash Ironworks, still includes the Old Forge at Branscombe, which is run on the same lines by his brother Gary Hall. Part of his showroom appears in the photo. His most recent contribution to the village has been the refurbishment of the church gate.

JT 4/2016

With grateful acknowledgments to Andy & Gary Hall, Jenny Newton & Marilyn Woolland, Sid Sweetland, David Seward, Viv Lamb, the late Bill Carpenter, Sue Dymond and the Branscombe Project archive, and J. Butler, ed. *P. O.*

Hutchinson's Travels in Victorian Devon.