

A WORKING MAN - BRANSCOMBE BLACKSMITH HARRY LAYZELL (1897 - 1988)

I grew up in the schoolhouse on the hill just above the Old Forge where Harry Layzell, the blacksmith, worked for most of the last century. An early riser, he would be down in the thatched forge starting his day's work before most people were up and I woke up to the ringing sounds of his hammer on the anvil. In the late 1930s and early 1940s my father and I often walked down the road by the forge where we would stop to watch Harry at work, making or repairing a farm implement, shoeing a horse, trimming cliff donkeys' feet, sharpening tools on his millstone grit grinding wheel - sometimes I was allowed to turn the handle.....In those days long before Health and Safety concerns I don't remember him with goggles or a visor, but he did wear his large leather blacksmith's apron.

The Old Forge has certainly been there by the stream at the bottom of Bridge Hill since the 1700s and probably for much longer. It is still a working Forge. In Harry's time the space under the front canopy was littered with bits and pieces of old farm machinery, metal bars, wheels, cans, pipes and other remnants. His orchard, by the side of the forge, was cluttered with larger items such as broken down carts, discarded ploughs, parts of old hay rakes and rusty chain harrows. Partially obscured by tall grasses and other vegetation in the summer months some of these abandoned farm implements looked as though they had been embedded in the orchard for centuries. I suppose he kept them as a potentially valuable store of spare parts. After all, seventy-five years ago it was not easy for him to order something and expect it to be delivered in a few hours. It was wartime. Like many of us Harry kept chickens to supplement his rations and his chickens had the run of the orchard and the road. His orchard is now a car park. What a change!

When I passed the forge I often wondered what went on inside. One day we were encouraged to come in. Going through the door I entered another world, a great black, sooty cavern..... a place of heat, smoke, noise and characteristic smells, which I can't begin to describe. His hearth with its glowing coals was at one end and Harry stoked it up, vigorously pumping the bellows. Then, using

tongs, he plunged in a metal bar. Increasing the heat he watched carefully for colour changes until he judged that the temperature of the metal was just right for the anvil. Under the blows of his heavy hammer great showers of sparks flew off in all directions, illuminating the black sides and floor of the cavern. After more rounds of heating and hammering, the final quenching of cold water from the brook completed a memorable experience in a cloud of hissing steam and smoke.

On another occasion we were fortunate to be passing the forge when Harry, his father Fred (1866-1942) also a blacksmith, and several local men were about to fit an iron tyre to the wooden rim of a cart wheel, another skill handed down through generations of blacksmiths. This exacting task was carried out under the canopy of the forge where the heavy cartwheel was placed on a flat tyreing plate. The blacksmiths brought out the red hot metal tyre which had a diameter slightly larger than the cart wheel. They dropped it over the wheel and quickly moved it into position using tongs and hammers. Satisfied that it was in place, the men who had been standing ready immediately poured on gallons of water from the brook, resulting in clouds of steam. At that point the contraction of the cooling metal tyre on to the wooden rim pulled the wheel together under enormous and permanent pressure. This was another unforgettable experience and for me, an early science lesson on the expansion and contraction of metal.

I now know more about Harry's working life and the way in which the traditional way activities of farriers and wheelwrights were gradually affected by wider-world changes in the mechanisation of transport and agriculture. As time went on there were fewer horses to be shod and the demand for cartwheels and metal tyres declined. These and other changes became more marked in the years following World War 2. While he was able to keep some of his traditional blacksmithing activities going, such as mending farm implements, he used his practical skills in some new directions - repairing roofs, sweeping chimneys (central heating was for the future), making metal ornaments and weather vanes. He made souvenir miniature lucky horseshoes for sale to summer visitors, many of whom were fascinated to come across an ancient forge and a village blacksmith at work in it. When Harry's brother-in-law, the village postman John Perry, died in 1950, Harry took on his postal round - another reaction to the changing post-war world.

From the late 1890s the Old Forge was a favourite subject for picture postcard photographers and their photographs give a good impression of the appearance of the forge at different times and from various angles, They also show Harry at work - shoeing horses, talking to visitors and mending a broken cart with his father, who ran the forge before him - a glimpse of life as it used to be.

For many years Harry Layzell ('Mr. Layzell', as I knew him), was a popular figure in Branscombe. He was cheerful, friendly and amusing . One of his favourite pastimes was playing billiards in the old village hall on Saturday evenings as a member of Branscombe Men's Social Club. Here he was in his element and I remember him as a champion potter and storyteller. Harry left the forge when he was 81 and he spent the last ten years of his life in Seaton. Some of the things that Harry made survive - garden tools, donkey shoes, miniature horseshoes, brake shoes and so on - now cherished souvenirs from the many years of his working life in the Old Forge at Branscombe.

Geoff Squire 20/3/2017