

The Village Blacksmith

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The sound of heavy hammer on the blacksmith's anvil is heard throughout the valley, as Mr Edward Blagden starts his day's work by shaping up the red-hot iron to make horseshoes and other implements for farmers and the local community.

After seeing service in India, Mr Blagden on demobilisation bought the blacksmith's business from Mr Tom Pepler who had retired in 1919/1920. The 'shop' was situated in Stradbroke on the corner of Church and Luccombe Roads where garages now stand. He carried on this business until well after World War II when he too retired.

Years ago, the horse – both heavy and light variety – was much in demand for pulling ploughs, hay and corn wagons, farm water-carts, reaping machines and the brewers' drays, milk delivery floats, grocery delivery vans, wagonettes, governess carts etc, and all these horses needed iron shoes as the roads were stony and rough.

The service carried out by car and tractor today was in Mr Blagden's day carried out by horses. Ted, as he was known locally, worked a hard and long day six days each week. As well as making horseshoes, he also made iron rims for cartwheels, hasps for gates, drag shoes for heavy carts and oblong patches for repairing beds of wagons.

His first job in the morning was to bank up the furnace with wet slack, to ensure that the fire would last and the heat be concentrated in the core of the furnace into which the strip of mild steel would be placed. Before placing the steel in the furnace, the fire had to be blown up using a very large pair of leather bellows, which needed a pair of very strong arms to operate.

The next job was to fill the water trough situated at the foot of the forge. Near the forge was a rack of tools such as large pincers, rasps, files, tongs and fire rake. His large heavy shovel was kept handy near the furnace, and in the pocket of his leather apron he kept a very sharp curved knife.

When the horse arrived, it was tethered to the end of the shed in which the shoeing was to take place, and the hoof lifted onto a tripod, or Mr Blagden's leg (whichever was the easier). The old shoe was removed by pulling out the old nails with a large pair of pincers. This shoe was usually used as a pattern for the new one. Next, the horny part of the hoof had to be pared and re-shaped, and this was done by the large coarse file and the sharp knife.

The iron anvil was placed to one side of the furnace. At one end of the anvil were two holes, one round and the other square. The round was for punching holes and the square for holding tools. The body of the anvil was oblong with a sharp point at the opposite end to the holes. Lifted from the furnace when it was white hot, the strip of

steel was placed across the nose of the anvil and beaten with a heavy hammer into shape, sparks flying in all directions.

A shoe might be re-shaped several times before the blacksmith was satisfied that it was a good fit; it then had to be punched to take the nails, and the edges turned over. It was then quickly cooled in the trough, and using special square-headed nails – often made by him – the shoe was fixed to the hoof with wisps of smoke as it settled. The sharp ends of the nails were then twisted off using the claw end of the hammer. As both hands were engaged in fitting the shoe, Mr Blagden often had to hold the nails in his mouth. When he was absolutely satisfied with his work, the hoof was filed lightly and oiled.

His main job was shoeing horses. During his 22 years in the Royal Horse Artillery he had become very familiar with horses of every description. At this time there were about 30 farms in Bratton – one farmer with at least eight horses. Other less important jobs that came his way were the repairing of the rungs of kitchen chairs and the making of iron hoops and guiders for young boys to play with.

As today, some farmers were slow to pay their bills, which were delivered by hand once each month – the rest of the family was drawn into this task.

Many old horseshoes adorned his shop – although worn, the iron could be re-used. Local people were always glad to receive one for good luck. The long strips of newly bought iron were kept in a cradle between the shop and the large cart-shed which stood in front of the smithy.

Nearby was the shallow pit filled with sand, in the centre of which stood a wheel cone. This was used for bonding wooden wheels with iron tyres which was an arduous, hot and heavy job.

Following the removal of the wheel from the vehicle, it was carefully measured round its circumference and its width was checked. The strip of steel needed was then also carefully measured and cut to make a very tight fit and placed in the furnace until it was white hot.

It was then shaped and welded to form a complete tyre. In the meantime another man had placed the wheel over the cone (usually done by the farmer), and the iron tyre was lifted from the furnace by using two large dogs and placed over the wooden wheel. It was tapped into place and then the whole outfit was rushed over and placed into the nearby stream. The urgency was to save the wooden wheel from catching fire. As the iron cooled, it contracted to fit the circumference of the wheel exactly. Iron tyres were necessary to combat wear from the rough and stony roads.

The blacksmith's shop was a friendly place and many people gathered to watch Mr Blagden at work. Boys often helped by blowing the fire and men by helping with the lifting and holding horses while they were being shod.

When four children were buried alive in the sand quarry nearby in the 1920s, Mr Blagden was one of the first on the scene. He used tools from his shop, excavated the deep sand and helped to rescue two of them still alive, but unfortunately the other two were suffocated.¹

He died in 1977 at the age of 98 and the village lost one of its most interesting characters.

This small establishment had been the springboard for R & J Reeves and Son Ironfounders, whose factory was situated in the centre of the village. This was during the 18th century.

¹ *Footnote added in 2012:* The year was 1922 and the two small children who lost their lives were Elsie and Frank Mullins.