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Talking to the old inhabitants of Wheathampstead in 1956

by Daphne Grierson (1909 - 1994)

Transcribed by **John Wilson**, Lamer Lodge, between 1987 and 2002

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CHAPTER 2. BLACKSMITHS AND FARRIERS

(Percy Smith & Harry Westwood)

Harry Westwood: "Blacksmith's apprentice, Yes that's me. Up in the **Swan** yard it was then - used to be on the corner where **Charlie Collins** is now - but it moved just before I started. Now, wait a minute - I can show you something. This leather case, it's for letters and papers and that; I got it as a prize at the **Primrose League** sports up at Lamer - 100 yards race and I was second - beaten by **Jim Titmuss**, that's this one's father. I keep all sorts of things in here but they're not what I'm looking for - ah! here we are my Apprentices Indentures, a bit dirty now but wonderful thick paper, and can you read the writing? It's a good hand isn't it and stamped with Queen Victoria's stamp and half a crown stamp; you can read that: 'I agree to serve **John Smith or his Sons** to learn the trade of blacksmith for four years, commencing this 26th day of October 1896, ending 26th October 1900. Rate of wages - 1st year, 8 shillings, 2nd year 9 shillings, 3rd year 10 shillings and 4th year 12 shillings; to be paid only when at work. Over the page: 'Conditions of this agreement are fulfilled October 26th 1900.' Right up to the day!. Of course the last year I was over at Knebworth with him and that extra 2 shillings, you see, that was my lodging money only.

"Those were happy days, they were, things are different now - people aren't satisfied these days - mind you, I didn't start at the Smithy, I was in the coal yard at the Station first, along with **Mr Seabrook** of **Lamer Farm**; eleven years old I was. I used to help load the coal and make the books up: one year I spent there. Then Mr Simmons saw me - **Mr George Simmons** that was, this one's grandfather. He asked me to come and work at the shop and I was with him 4 years as Butcher's Boy 1892 - 1896. Pony and cart and I used to drive round to all the big houses, delivering.

"I remember once there was a big wedding over at Digswell and I got them to send me over with the meat. I had to get the train to Welwyn and walk, and when I got to the house they gave

me something to eat at the back door and that was just opposite the Church, so I was able to stand there and watch the wedding procession come down the path. I had wanted to see that wedding.

"But you know it was long hours at Simmonds - 7 AM till 8 at night and sometimes later, Saturday and Sunday as well; I stayed till I was 16. We were living in **Brewhouse Hill** then so I hadn't far to go. Of course it should have been called Brewing House Hill, you know, because of the old Brewing House where the **Maltings** have got it now, just below the old Maltings; the place where they spread all the barley to dry and my mother used to take her leg of pork to hang up there to cure it."

"We lived further down Bury Green side; I would work at 6, go home to breakfast at 8, home for dinner and tea of course, work on till 7 (5 on Saturday). We used to go to church three times on Sunday. Well, that's how I started my trade. I used to get the fire going in the Smithy, first thing in the morning - we were glad of that in the winter. Cold weather we had in those days and dark it was so early. We had one in the forge and paraffin lamps; sometimes there would be two or three or four farm horses waiting to be shod, but I didn't learn the shoeing straight away - I had to learn to make the shoes first. We charged three shillings for farm horses, four shillings for road horses because they took heavier metal; ponies eightpence a shoe and in bad weather when the roads get ice on them, taking the shoes off and turning up the two ends and two studs at the front.

"In the summer it was different, it used to get sweltering hot in the forge, we had the doors open and people would come and stand and chat. We had a lot of 'cutting and shutting', that's what we did in hot weather - a lot of that was shortening the bands of metal that went round the cartwheels, because the wood of the wheels had shrunk. I can hear those wheels going along the roads, really rough roads they were in those days. just the flints thrown down and spread out to be trodden down by the traffic, it was hard on horses shoes; and the dust - the shopkeepers had to water the road in front of their doors. There were no pavements for them and ladies out delivering had veils tied over their hats and dust coats, you know, to keep the dust off.

"Of course we did other work besides shoeing, repairs to ploughs and harrows and that sort of thing; cast iron work, anything that came along and all the welding by hand, and we made tools, axes, and that. Why, just the other day someone showed me an axe that had been turned out at our place, as good as ever it was and sixty year old or more. Sometimes it was pony-carts and sometimes gates, but of course it's **Harry Westwood** who's famous for iron gates. He was on the other side of the road, where paper shop is now; very clever with his iron-work, oh very.

"Yes, I liked the shoeing best. Children would stand around, you know - always the children. Smell of the hoof when you laid the hot metal on to mark it, and clouds of steam going up as you put it in the water. Then blow up the forge, that's the boy's job. And strike the metal and see the sparks fly. I did shoeing at the **Hatfield Show**; competition, that sort of thing. When I was over at **Childwick** under **Sir John Blundell-Maple** - I'd gone over to Harpenden races and I saw a fellow there, old friend of mine, he says, 'Why don't you come over to Childwick, and work in the forge there?'. That was when I had done my apprenticeship - well, there was one particular horse there I knew very well: he was a dustman's horse and a clever one at that. Ooh, he was a clever one. He used to come along the road at a whistle and take your cap off your head and give it a shake, he had all sorts of tricks. But he was funny behind - he'd let you shoe him in front but when it come to the hind feet he'd start shifting around, and one day he got hit by the hammer. After that you couldn't get his hind feet shod in the forge, he'd have his fore feet done but I used to be sent over to shoe the hind feet cold in the stable. I had to talk kindly to him - you had to talk

to the horses so they come to know you. After a bit he got more used to it and then we got to be able to shoe him properly in the Smithy.

"I come across my old leather apron not long ago, the one I always wore; I didn't know what to do with it, but I daresay someone would have been glad of it, there was plenty of wear in it. Another thing - I noticed in Collins shop the old jack plane put in the window: kind of antique. The one that belonged to my father, with the part at the side dented in smooth where his fingers went. There's plenty of people don't know this, but that mark was cut out on purpose, not just worn away by his fingers as you might have thought. It was put there for a grip: my father himself could have made that tool but as a matter of fact though, he didn't, not that particular one. He made plenty of tools, but all of them had his initials on.

"In the end I had my own business. Seventeen and a half years over at **Lemsford**; but I had two or three other blacksmith's jobs after I gone away from Childwick. Once I was at home six weeks working for **my father: he was wheelwright** here, Brewhouse Hill. I helped him do some fencing while I was there, but he says to me, 'Tom, its time you went back to your trade'. And one day I went back for my dinner, I was just sitting down and my mother, bless her, she was bringing the dishes and she says, 'Your father's been on again about your getting back to work'. I said, 'Well, I think I'll get right away this time'. 'No, don't you do that', she says. I answered advertisement in The Chronicle for a job at Erith, Kent. Never heard of such a place; right miles away I thought it was. But the head gardener at Wheathampstead House, he came along of me in the train to London and crossed over London with me and put me on the way, and I got the job. Yes, seven years I was there, came back 1909.

"That clock there on the mantelpiece - see what that says? Presented to me by the **Hertfordshire Master Blacksmiths and Farriers Association**, St Albans Branch. They gave that to me when I was married.

"Famous for iron gates? Famous?. I'll tell you about it. Here, let's have some doors open. Can't sit in here with no air. Yes, I'm better, I suppose - they tell me I'm better, but I don't feel it. Sitting here day after day: do you think I'd rather sit here instead of going down there and getting on with my work? It's my legs though that's the trouble... my blessed legs won't carry me.

"No, they can't do the ironwork now; they could do it, but they haven't the time! Too much repair work and work for the farmers. No, there's no time these days...

"Do you want to know one of the first bits of ironwork I ever did? Here you are: door knocker. (Yes, a print, that's right, for a slide, pity it's got broken). Twenty of them knockers I did, for **Mr Salisbury** over at Harpenden, brother of the artist. I did him a pair of gates too - Mr Salisbury the artist. Very ornamental; there was a sea-serpent in them, bunch of flowers, mermaid, egg-timer, porcupine. Egg-timer, that's right... it's what he asked for. And when he saw one of those gates hanging in the yard, he was delighted, he was really delighted.

"Any amount of gates I've done; any amount of them. See all those photographs? Yes, that's where

I put everything, in this desk. Plenty of dust in here - plenty of rubbish, my daughter says. Here, look, do you know who this is? Why, that's **Lord Cavan** and the hounds. And the fox, only

you can't see it. Weathervane, yes. No, I don't know where that went to; I haven't the least idea: somewhere Nottingham way, I fancy it was.

"**Prizes**, oh yes, and medals. Bronze medal for a pair of gates for someone over Hertford way. Can't recall the name, but his father - his father was Lord Mayor of London... Take hold of that, heavy isn't it? Bronze. But you don't want all this to be about me do you? I can tell you plenty of things what I've done, but that's not interesting. What's that you got hold of? Yes, that's right, big gate for **Mr Norbury**. I made another for him too, a little one. Ay, that was a beauty that one.

"And three gates for, where was it? Somewhere in Bedfordshire; something-or-other Park, I can't always remember all the names... But that gate of **Mrs Norbury's**, it had a panel in it, like that, two foot by three foot. That panel I did for the Exhibition and in the schedule it says 'No files, no paint', and it took me one week. One week. Then afterwards it was incorporated in Mrs Norbury's gate. And that gate I made for **Mrs Cory-Wright** - all piece work, that gate; holes pierced at the joins, you know - what they call Westminster Emblem, can't tell you why.

"Dozens of gates; all different patterns, not one the same. Yes, made them up: all invented except that one for **Mr Walton**, that was his design. But I had to alter it, it had no ties! Bolts at the corners; it could never have kept square. You couldn't possibly have kept that square, it would be waving about all over the place... No, I never drew anything, I made it up as it went along. Did the frame first, to the size that was wanted, then up the middle, then fit the different scrolls in. They came as they want to, and all the scrolls done with the hammer, you know...Oh dear no, I never drew them.

"**The Queen Mother**? Ah yes, that would be the Hatfield Show. I fancy he was Prince of Wales then, I don't know; long time ago. Well, she just came up to me to congratulate me and she said 'I see you come from Wheathampstead; that's not far from my old home' 'Yes, your Royal Highness' I said, 'I've been over there many a time' 'Have you really' she says, 'Whatever were you doing over there?' 'Oh, mending casements and suchlike' I said. Bath and West Show it was that I took five firsts, one second and one third - five firsts, one second and one third! Here, I reckon that's enough about me. You don't want all this to be about me, do you?

"Wait a minute, here's something. **Mr Bernard Shaw** and the gate I did for him; '**Shaw's Corner**' in letters across it.....that's the postcard he sent, 'Are you still working? He wanted me to do him a gate like I had done for **Mr Ames** - and that's the photograph. Turn it over and see what he wrote 'Bernard Shaw the author looking through the work of Harry Westwood the craftsman'. And then, when it was done, this one: 'With many thanks for first-rate job, G. Bernard Shaw'; signed, you see. Old **Sir William Beach Thomas** (oh yes, we were good friends, we were) he'd have made a whole book out of what I've told you, he would.

"How I started? I started at **Lattimore's Farm**, No Man's Land way, and I had a job there charlock-pulling. Eight or nine years old. Maybe you don't know the names of the farms in those days? No, this wasn't Lattimores at Place Farm; that **Mr Lattimore** at Place, he always wore a top hat and rode on a thoroughbred horse. Then **Bury Farm was Ransom's**, John Ransom. Always walked with his hands behind him. Town Farm - Chennell's of course, and there was a butcher's shop on the corner there as well: did you know that? And Ransom - he had his rickyard up top of Brewhouse Hill, where those bungalows are, and we used to go ratting - my word there were a lot of rats!

"A bit of farm work, then after that I used to go all over the country, all over the place hay binding, with a man. Then I went to **Wren's** the wheelwrights; I was there four years, just about. I got very handy there, I could spoke wheels and that sort of thing. Anyway I left there at seventeen or something like that.

"Then one Monday morning I got up early; father said to me 'Where are you going?' 'Going to get another job' I said. 'You don't want to do that' he said to me 'You'd better come along with me'. I'd often stood on a block to strike for him, when I was a little boy, you know. **Tool-makers** it was in the first place, and **smithy** for the horses of course. I've got a hurdle-makers axe my grandfather made somewhere about; and a faggotting bill. Goodness knows where they've got to now.

"And I'll tell you something: one of my uncles - my mother's brother - was working over in the osier beds, cutting osiers, and he was using a pocket-knife - ordinary pocket-knife like this, with a straight blade. And he came and said to my father 'Jimmy, could you make me a better tool than this?' 'Yes, I should think so' my father said to him, and he turned it over to me. And I did him one with a wooden handle and the blade curved, and my uncle did his piece of osier cutting and finished and sat down and waited for the others. Of course, they wanted to know why he was sitting down and he showed them. 'My old brother-in-law made me this'. After that we made a dozen or more and they all had them.

"There's a lot I remember. There was that **Gilbert Orchard** up behind the **Maltings**, which went straight back to there. Owned by **Thrales**, oldest family in Wheathampstead. My father bought the Gilbert's off him one year - there used to be a Thrale as miller at the Mill.

"Have you seen some of the old pictures of the village? **Workhouse Yard**; of course it was a Workhouse! Beautiful oak beams with fluting and beading at either end. And you could walk right through from one end to other of the cottages, through all the bedrooms. One night I remember I had to go and fetch the Doctor and the Nurse to someone along Folly Way and going back to Marford, I'd just got past Chennell's and a cow coughed over the hedge up above me! In the dark, my hat went up and its never come down since. Oh dear, oh dear....

"Looking at those pictures? Steel-engravings I should say; I've seen them like that, horse-keepers and ploughmen coming down from Gustard Wood farms with their horses, and wearing smocks. Yes, of course I remember them, and the hats - like parson's hats. Beaver, would they be? I can't say I remember them. That's a good likeness of a horse; there was an artist, I don't know who it was, but he came to me and he asked if I can get him a ragged-hipped old horse for him to paint. Well, I got hold of the boy to bring this horse down - iron-grey mare - she came to be shod, about five or six of a morning. And she stood outside in the yard - this ragged-hipped 'un - and the artist painted her and she was hung in Bond Street.

"One hundred and sixty horses I shod, up till the War. Then I only had eleven (shoes) left and I gave up the shoeing. And I used to get the cripples: two horses from **Turner's Farm**, got their feet turned under, you know, turned right over from standing in soft stuff and had to have their shoes built up. It cured them. There was another one I remember - Hitchin way. I got a tandem bike to go over there and I remember this: a man at Welwyn said to me, 'D'you want to sell that bike?'...'That depends what you'll give me for it', I said.... 'Well' he says 'What d'you want for it?'...I says 'I want fifteen pound'...Well, he has it, but I never saw the money, and he sold it again at once and it was all smashed up under Prior Reed's dray - forty, fifty years ago.

"Yes, well, I went to put the shoes on this old colt, 'I can do it', I says, 'if you've got a flat floor' Well, he was alright: there was a good concrete floor and he stood there quiet as a chicken. The foot was right under, walking on the fetlock joint, same as those others, and I built the shoe up (built it up in the front) so the foot couldn't turn and that colt run in the baker's cart after that for eighteen years; and someone came in one day and wanted it for polo-pony.

"Yes, and I've made shoes for **pit-ponies** too; same thing - shot their joints. Then, there's one I remember got strained leaders and the vet couldn't do anything. 'No cure, no pay' he says. So they came to me and I put a bar on the shoe and bound it up to his hock - put a string from the shoe to the hock to hold the foot in the right position so it couldn't drop. But it wasn't any good; someone untied it. Pity, wasn't it. Ah, yes, I loved the horses.

"Do you know my grandfather made the **spire on Ayot St. Peter's** , the old Church. That was my grandfather, over at Welwyn, been dead a hundred years."

"We used to get beautiful coal in those days, from Wales. Lovely coal it was - you can't use what we get now; coke clogs round the metal and falls in. Partly why I've had to given up ornamental iron-work. See this finger? Yes, cut the top clean off it; tied it on and went up to the Doctor - **Doctor Chittenden** it must have been, before **Doctor Smallwood**. He treated it eighteen weeks, then one day the maid says to me before I went in, 'You're going to have the top off that today' 'I certainly am not', I said. 'Good morning' I said and off I went, back. And here you are, you see - good as new. And I wish this other one was as good."