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Master Blacksmith (Harry Westwood)

by Jim (Cecil) Westwood (post 1950)

Jack of all trades - but master of iron - this was the village blacksmith of 50 years ago. Such a man was Harry Westwood of Wheathampstead.

From his blacksmith's shop at the rear of the Two Brewers Inn (now the village newsagents) he hammered out shoes for cart horses, tradesmen's horses, and the gentlemen's riding hacks. He repaired the ploughs, made hinges for the farm gates, fitted iron tyres to cart wheels and solid rubber tyres to bicycles. He hand forged implements for the farmer, casement and widow fittings for the houses. He even re-leathered the beer engines for the pubs. In fact he would tackle any job in the village in wood or iron. He started at six o'clock in the morning and worked until 10 o'clock at night. After a busy day at Wheathampstead smithy he would walk four miles to Kimpton in the evening to work in the little forge there.

Harry's great love was wrought iron work, and at creating gates he was a master. Here the solid country craftsman became an artist in iron. Every part of his gates were hand forged - a virgin bar of iron was plunged into the red hot fire. Then on the anvil Harry hammered and sculptured his forging - With a strong arm, a quick eye and a soul, he wrought from the iron design and beauty.

Each forging was then passed to his son Alf for fitting by rivets to the frame and slowly the delicate tracery of the gates was created.

The Westwoods with their wrought iron work were forging strong links with the past as they worked together. They were carrying on a traditional craft which came to England from Venice in the 14th Century - an example of iron work of this period is the iron gate leading to the choir stalls in the Cathedral at St. Albans. The Westwoods in 1913 made all the wrought iron work for the Church of St. Peter's at Gustard Wood, and due to a last minute decision to have wrought iron altar rails, Harry worked for a fortnight almost to the point of exhaustion, in order to complete the work in time.

They also made the gates at Shaw's Corner for Bernard Shaw. Alf is the proud possessor of two of Bernard Shaw's famous short pertinent post cards.

Further examples of their work are the Churchyard gates at Wheathampstead, the lovely gates at Red Gables, West Common, Harpenden and at Mr Waltons, Amwell Lane. Also Inn signs at the Plough and Harrow, Wheathampstead and the Harrow, Harpenden. Many homely pieces of domestic iron work like door knockers, bell pulls and foot scrapers can be seen everywhere in the village of Wheathampstead.

Harry won the Bronze Medal of the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths for his work, but his greatest satisfaction was penned by Bernard Shaw in his brief post card which read "Job well done etc."