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The Blacksmith's Craft

By RAYMOND J. SKINNER

On a chill winter's day the blacksmith's forge, with its roaring fire, would always have been an attractive place in which to stop for a chat and to hear the latest items of village news and gossip. The smithy was a meeting place as much frequented as the inn or the church and a centre of communication for the local inhabitants. The smith himself was also once looked upon as the community's adviser, sometimes even its oracle; and such traditional respect accorded to the craftsman in iron was heightened by a certain awe of the mighty man who could shape the highly-resistant substance of iron into decorative, as well as highly practical, objects. More than just a farrier, the blacksmith was, once upon a time, an essential figure in a community which depended on the horse for transport as well as to provide the motive power for farming.

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Nowadays, however, the smith is perhaps most significant for his contribution to an expanding leisure industry: shoeing horses for the many local riding schools and for the expanding world of show-jumping. He is no longer confined only to a single town or village but frequently uses a mobile workshop to cover a wide area.

During the reign of the first Elizabeth, Thirsk in North Yorkshire was the workplace of Lancelot Whitelocke, a blacksmith who died just over four hundred years ago. In the large contiguous parish of Topcliffe there are several townships such as Baldersby, Rainton, and Skipton-on-Swale, which, in the sixteenth century, each had its own smith, also surnamed Whitelocke. In Topcliffe village was Richard Whitelocke; at Baldersby, George Whitelocke; at Rainton, Henry Whitelocke; and by the bridge over the River Swale at Skipton the blacksmith was a John Whitelocke. The two last named, Henry and John, were each described as 'Smith' in the Topcliffe register; in the preceding cases the occupation is as given in the respective wills of George and Richard. Seemingly the family had a monopoly of the trade in this small area.

That George and Richard were brothers is evidenced by the former's will of 3rd May, 1602, in which he asks to be buried 'in the churchyard at Topcliffe as nere the place where my brother Richard [is buried] conveniently may be'. Richard had died leaving no male children, consequently his will of 1595 left his son-in-law, Thomas Porter 'my cognisance or badge and all the right title and term of yerres that I have of my shoppe'. Richard had been most unfortunate in the fates of his children, all daughters: Katherine and Ann both died in infancy and Sibble was drowned in the nearby Swale in June, 1585. She was not yet ten years of age.

It is fascinating to imagine the events that Richard and his contemporaries may have seen, or even been a part of, at Topcliffe, during their lifetimes. This now peaceful and uneventful village was once a strategic centre of power and influence associated with the

great northern family of Percy. Since William the Conqueror first granted Topcliffe and other manors to William de Percy after the Conquest the family had held land and a manor house there. Many were the pageants and tournaments which took place nearby and in the meadows by the Swale. On the darker side Henry Percy, the 4th Earl of Northumberland, was murdered here whilst endeavouring to collect taxes on behalf of Henry VII in 1489. The only remains today of the Percies' castellated mansion is the mound upon which it stood, now called Maiden's Bower, and still encompassed by a moat.

Richard Whitelocke, blacksmith, did not, however, live long enough to witness a further infamous episode in Topcliffe's history when, in 1646, Charles I was handed over by the Scots at the Moot Hall in the village in return for half the sum of £400,000 paid as the price of their treachery.

A mile or so westwards across the fields from Topcliffe worked Henry, the Rainton blacksmith. He was buried on the 3rd February, 1591, and may also have been a brother of Richard and George. It seems probable that the fourth member of the quartet, John, of Skipton-on-Swale was yet another brother, and that all four blacksmiths were descendants of an earlier John of Baldersby who is recorded as holding land there in 1521 during the reign of Henry VIII.

In that year a lease of Fountains Abbey lands was granted by Marmaduke, the abbot, to Thomas Exilby, gent., who lived in the Manor House at Baldersby. The lease mentions 'all his closes and divers lands in Baldersby, in the tenure of John Newsom, John Whitlocke and others, paying yearly £13.8s.8d.' (dated 13 Henry VIII; fo. 69 of Dods MSS. vol. 129, p.44). The Exilby family had apparently lived at the Manor from as early as 1455.

It seems reasonable to suppose that there was some family relationship between these four blacksmiths and the Lancelot Whitelocke of Thirsk mentioned earlier. Lancelot's will of 1st April, 1589 was

witnessed by a Richard Whitelocke — possibly the smith of Topcliffe. Lancelot was buried within the week following his will and left three sons, Christopher, Francis and Lancelot. His first bequest to his wife, Jennet (née Jeffreyson), left 'my house which I now dwell in and two acres of land during her naturall life'. To his second son, Francis, recently married, he bequeathed 'the lease of my shoppe withall my interest therin to him and his assigns'. To his eldest, but unmarried, son Christopher, he left the house 'after the death of his mother to enter to the same'. To Francis he also left the lease of Clark Close at Bagby, and 'thre acres of land in the west fields of Thirsk'. Youngest son, Lancelot, also received a small parcel of land at Bagby. Three daughters were also mentioned in the will: Dorothy, Catherine and Anne; the last-named received 'two kine over and besides her childes portion'. The executors of Lancelot's will were Richard Wrighte and Rafe Hushwait, both of the neighbouring village of Sowerby; and each received 3s.4d. 'for their paines'.

Some three centuries later — a brief period in the long history of the blacksmith's art — Flora Thompson in her trilogy of books on country life, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, describes the blacksmiths who worked in the forge owned and supervised by her employer, Miss Dorcas Lane, at Candleford Green, as follows:

'Most of the horses were very patient; but a few would plunge and kick and rear when approached. These Mathew himself shod, and under his skilful handling, they would quiet down immediately. He had only to put his hands on the mane and whisper a few words in the ear. It was probably the hand and voice which soothed them; but it was generally believed that he whispered some charm which had power over them, and he rather encouraged this idea by saying when questioned: 'I only speaks to 'em in their own language'...

'Secure in the knowledge of their own importance in the existing scheme of things, the blacksmiths boasted: "Come what may, a good smith'll never want for a job, for whatever may come of this new cast-iron muck in other ways, the horses'll always have to be shod, and they can't do that in a foundry!"'

Only a generation after Flora Thompson wrote this description, many smiths were tentatively becoming the first motor mechanics, learning by trial and error how to repair the new-fangled horseless carriages, and proving that they themselves were no less capable of being shaped by circumstances as the very material in which they worked.

The blacksmith's art and his artefacts have a long history, stretching back centuries before even the Elizabethan tradesmen of Thirsk and Topcliffe, back even into the dark days of pre-Christian history. Their continuing tradition of magic and power was associated with the most potent of charms — fire, iron and horseshoes, and was also the servant of the sacred and powerful horse. The many white horses so conspicuously carved on our high hills, and particularly the Uffington White Horse in Berkshire, inspired Thomas Taylor, a schoolmaster of Kilburn, near Thirsk, to carve his nineteenth century example on Roulston Scar above the village.

The megalithic long barrow, known as Wayland's Smithy, on the Ridgeway path, also exemplifies this tradition of magic; here, so the legend tells, if a passing rider placed sixpence on the stone lintel of the tomb and waited he could have his horse magically shod by Wayland, a Scandinavian god. The sacred significance of the smithy and its principal symbol, the anvil, is also manifest in the celebration of runaway marriages which took place in forges such as Gretna Green in past years.

Such a continuing and widespread belief in the associations of magic and power with the blacksmith's art can perhaps best be summed up in the tradition that smiths once refused to work on Good Fridays. The common reason given was that nails must not be handled on the anniversary of their use for the awful purpose of the Crucifixion. [Raymond J. Skinner lives at 'Whitnal', Post Office Lane, Broad Hinton, Swindon, Wilts SN4 9PB].