

**C**RAFTSMANSHIP is something we all admire, and the craftsman's pride has been very strong in producing a good quality article, hand-made, well finished and pleasing to the eye. This pride is indeed still very strong in the small remaining and declining numbers that are now left.

Pride in the job is now unfortunately missing, because, except for the small minority of craftsmen who still manufacture a product from the raw material stage, right through to the finished article, the worker of today usually performs one process in a system of mass production on a very quick scale. Thus, he is deprived of the great sense and feeling of creation.

I personally do not know of anyone who is doing more in a practical way to keep alive the best traditions of one of our national crafts than 76-year-old Sidney Williams, the village "smith" of Wilcot in Wiltshire.

History reveals that several hundred years before the Romans came, there were ironworkers in Britain. The Celts were also skilled ironworkers.

Sidney Williams' shop, very appropriately named "The Forge", stands hard by the side of the road. I entered through a two-half-section door which is typical of all the old workshops of the blacksmiths. The bottom half originally kept in the horse that was being shod, and the top half let in air and light.

Mr. Williams was hard at work—there was the forge with its glowing fire and the polished handle of its large double bellows providing proof of constant use. Quickly, amid flying sparks he hammered the piece of iron into the desired shape on an old anvil set at a convenient height on a large block of wood. Nearby was a tank filled with water where the tongs and iron are cooled off.

In the dark corners of his shop was a strange assortment of implements long laid aside; old hooks, chains, wheels and horseshoes lay in a buried mass, in fact it was a treasure trove of forgotten ironmongery that brought back all the characteristic taste of early industrial England when men were content to manufacture things with their hands.

Tucked away in the yard were fascinating relics of the bygone era of the horse and carriage, and lying across the roof rafters was part of a large wooden hand plough. Outside on the floor lay a half-finished stair balustrade for which Mr. Williams was at that moment actually producing some ornamental sections.

Originally Sidney Williams served the usual five years' apprenticeship after leaving school and that gives him 61 years in the actual trade, which is a very long time. "At one time", he said, "round about the 1914 period, I was shoeing 80 horses per week, and this was my main work, but there were all the other odd jobs and repairs to farm implements such as that of re-tying wooden cart and wagon wheels, to do as well".

Now with us in the 20th century is the motor and the tractor age when horses on the roads are so rare that they usually attract special attention, and the blacksmith is in a very different position, although he still occupies a very important place in agriculture. The disappearance in the number of horses now used has led to the closing of a large number of these village workshops.

"In any case", continued my friend, "I didn't really mind the passing of the horse in one way. Shoeing was hard and heavy work, and as I was getting on in years I gradually became fully occupied in wrought iron work".

Whilst I was in "The Forge" Mr. Williams, who lives in a pretty thatched cottage next door, took down from a nearby shelf a dusty oblong block of stone which bore



● Sidney Williams at work on an ornamental wrought-iron stair-case.

## THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH

by Cyril May



the date 1705 and a pair of initials. "This came out of my cottage", he said. "The initials are undoubtedly the builder's and as far as I know this workshop was built at the same time as my cottage, which makes them both nearly 263 years old. Look at the roof rafters, a wonderful job and no nails—all the joints are mortised, tenoned and pinned. There is no work today to compare with this", he concluded.

From a nest of shelves situated in the dark end of the shop, this old blacksmith took a huge bunch of plans to show me. They were mostly architect-designed to customers' requirements, in fact one was a five feet square "life-size" plan of a piece of ornamental work that had been completed and delivered several years ago. I saw the complicated measurements that had to be complied with and I could see that this wrought-iron work was no easy task and demands precision work of the highest order.

Near the door stood a large cylinder of oxy-acetylene gas which Mr. Williams told me he rarely used. "Only for the quicker jobs", he remarked. "The majority of my customers require their articles to be riveted; it takes much longer but this old-fashioned method of fixing the segments together is still demanded".

Beautiful examples of this smith's handiwork can be seen throughout Wiltshire and also in other counties; they are too numerous to mention them all, but here are just a few of the notable customers he has supplied with his various products, who are worthy of inclusion.

Altar rails and a garden gate for Lady Phipps of Wilcot; a well-head for Ufcott House, near Broad Hinton; two ornamental gates for Commander White-lock at White Lodge, Cirencester; old-fashioned door furniture and a weather-vane for Bangor University; a gate incorporating a basket of fruit for Blayden Lodge, London; a shepherd's well-gate for a London firm; an entrance porch for Lord Devlin at Westwick House, near Pewsey; a pair of tall gates for the entrance to Clyffe Hall, near Market Lavington; the west door hinges for Bratton Church; one large gate for General Heath at Avebury; fireguards for Mr. Merton, the Enford artist; garden tables and chairs for Lord and Lady Hudson, formerly of Fyfield Manor, near Marlborough; two pairs of garden gates and a door knocker for the Hon. Lady Fry at Oare House; one pair of gates originally made for the late Lord St. Mure which are still standing at Wilcot Manor and a large gate for the Lodge at St. John's Wood, London.

One of Mr. Williams' recent products is a pair of gates which now hang inside the comparatively new Catholic Church at Pewsey.

If you wander far enough and look hard enough you will be sure to find a rural "smith"—just the same as I did—working beside his forge and happy at his work, full of the arts and crafts of the iron trade that after centuries of service still linger on, reminding us of the olden days when life was far less complicated, admittedly slower, but so very free and easy-going.

My talk with this kind old farrier proved so interesting and his hand-made articles so very fascinating that I shall certainly give him another call . . . when I pass along that Wilcot road again.

● Top: The beautiful gates and "rising sun" arch which adorn the garden at Oare House, Wiltshire, are just one of the many products of veteran Sidney Williams.

● Above: At the end of a pretty wisteria percola stands a piece of Sidney Williams' handiwork at Oare House, Wiltshire.

● Left: The village "smith" outside his premises at Wilcot. The picturesque old thatched cottage on the right is his private residence.