

CHAPTER 5: HOME FARM AND THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH

How do I know so much rumour and gossip about West Dean House. Estate and Park, the village and its residents? The chief reason is; my Dad had almost daily communications with people who controlled, visited, worked at, or had association in general with the estate. My Mother was frequently employed for her seamstress and millinery skills by the important ladies who visited West Dean House or those who lived in the consequential lower social level residences. My Mother and Father conversed at home and I listened.

My Mother and Father were very cleanliness conscious people, very hygienic. Despite the fact that we lived in relatively primitive conditions compared to modern times. We only used a portable galvanized tub for bathing the whole body once a week or special occasions; otherwise there was the daily routine of washing at the sink; ‘topping and tailing’ with a wash cloth and for me, always behind the ears. My Father shaved every day with his ‘cut-throat’ razor, sharpened on a, so-called, leather ‘strop’. Even using this tool with great dexterity, he often nicked his skin and made it bleed.

Pigs were never a large part of Home Farm’s animal stock. I believe they were mainly kept for using up large quantities of waste food from West Dean House. This was mixed with ground oats and boiled up in a large copper cauldron in the pigsties before being judged safe to feed the pigs with it. The resulting mess of food was aptly called ‘pig swill’. James did not like the thought of excess food being dumped and there was always plenty of this that was brought up from the main house to the farm. Pigs came to stay and then went, bought and sold by Coker the farmer. Sometimes there were black and white colored saddleback pigs, so called because of the white saddle shape across their backs. One time we had a large white female pig, a sow, it gave birth to litter of thirteen white piglets. One turned out to become a, ‘runt’, it did not survive well because all the other piglets denied its access to the mother pig's teats. This runt was taken care of by my mother who fed it with cows milk in a baby bottle. This was the errant piglet that ended up in the story of the Monkton Hall piglet saga.

Milk cows at Home Farm were really pampered by my Father and enjoyed a nutritious diet; as well as their meadow grazing, they had daily hay in their meadows or in their mangers in the milking parlour, also ground oats and an occasional treat of imported cacao beans. Mangel roots were served either out in the meadows or in their mangers. In winter time they were fed

cow –kale, which provided Vitamin C. Orange coloured salt rock was strewn around the meadows for them to lick. Water was provided alongside their manger. At every milking time, twice a day, their udders were washed and their rear ends were cleaned. Sullied straw was removed and new put on the floor for them to stand on. All the manure they dropped was removed to the dung heap and the cement floors were all washed down after every day's milking.

Sometimes my Dad recognized that a cow was having a difficult birth, perhaps like humans, a breech birth, legs only out first and the Veterinary would be called in. It was most intriguing for me to watch the Vet. His shirt off and his arm up to his shoulder in the cow's vagina, a real messy business, trying to manipulate the head of the calf for a better birth. Of course, the cow would be securely tied up in the stall and its tail secured also the rear legs lashed together whilst this was going on. An irritating procedure for the cow.

Milk fever or mastitis and cowpox were ailments that could strike cows and this could be serious enough for them to be dispatched to the slaughter house. Foot and mouth disease of cattle occurred in England from time to time but fortunately Home Farm was never affected, perhaps due to its isolation and minimal livestock movement.

I remember at least one of the cowmen contracting cowpox and he showed me the tell-tale rings of infection on his arms; I believe this resembled the related smallpox disease and gave him immunity from this.

Before the coming of the Massey-Ferguson tractor in 1937 (Farmer Coker was always fond of American wheels. He owned several Essex sports' coupes in succession). I often begged a ride in the 'rumble' seat of these cars. Cart horses had always been the primary power movers on the farm. I remember when they did all the heavy farm work prior to the coming of the tractor. The horse drawn super size 'Sussex' harvest four wheel wagons were still used after the acquisition of the tractor. These were the same wagons that were originally designed for fitting through the 'tithe' barns, a tax principle imposed by the British Government in the 18th.century but disused by the 20th.century. Many 'tithe' barns still exist in the British countryside, with their obvious large opposing double doors for drive-through on each elevation. Some of these 'tithe' barns have been successfully converted to homes. The Double Barn at Double Barn on the top of the hill above West Dean village is an example of this type of building. The 'Sussex' wagons, the two wheel carts and the Dray cart were kept in the farm cart sheds on the north and south sides of the entry drive to the farm. Fortunately these sheds still exist and I trust the Tithe barn at

Double Barn does as well. The two wheel carts were for general use, hauling for example, manures, root crops and cow kale etc.

The 'Sussex' wagons were magnificent in their beautifully made, simple but elegantly shaped woodwork, painted with traditional blue and red 'milk' paints. The wheel hubs spokes and tyre frames, were made by a wheelwright of oak and ash woods and the iron tyres were made and fitted by a blacksmith. A blacksmith would also make the brake shoes and all the other wrought iron attachments for connecting horses' traces and brackets for the harvest-excess wood-ladder loading frames.

Incidentally 'milk' paint was an ancient method of making paint; consisting of using milk left over from making cheese and butter, which was then amalgamated with linseed oil and lime. Dyes were added to the mix for colouring.

Mr. Warner the village independent blacksmith had his forge and workshop on the main West Dean road opposite the farm entrance (Now re-located). His wife ran the sweetshop next to the forge and the family lived behind and over the shop. They had three sons, Ron, Dick and Ernie; sometimes they were allowed to come down to the farm buildings and play 'cowboys and Indians' with me. They were the only children permitted by my Dad to visit the farm and certainly not when his precious cows were in the milking parlours; they were not to be disturbed, in case their milk yield was affected; we were not then allowed to play noisy games.

Mr. Warner, the blacksmith was a true artisan; like so many tradesmen of the era, he had descended from a long line of other family blacksmiths. In truth he was a dedicated craftsman and artist. From his forge he could conjure, shape and join the most remarkable feats of ironwork.

He made horseshoes of many sizes and special fittings for different horse's hooves. Blacksmiths from the early 19th.century no longer made the nails of the special shape required for the horseshoes; they were manufactured. He repaired ploughshares and many other iron parts for the farming community and of course West Dean Estate.

Hot riveting was another technique he used for repairs; he did not have welding equipment. Hand bellows were still used for the forced air to the forge in those days and was arranged so that the blacksmith could reach it himself, although sometimes Ron his son or myself was engaged to operate them.

The most memorable and outstanding example of this skill, to my mind; was the making and fitting of iron tyres to the wood spoke wheel frames, used on most horse drawn vehicles. Imagine a wood wheel ready for an iron tyre, maybe a 'Sussex' harvest wagon tyre, which was about four to five feet in diameter. The process was in those days, to take a length of 'black' iron about four inches wide and half an inch thick, of a suitable length for the circumference of the wheel; very heavy and awkward to manipulate. He would pass the length of iron through his forge repeatedly and then the heated and thus softened length would be bent through hand formers until it was by eye-judgement the round shape of the wheel. Then he would heat both ends of the iron bar to a cherry red colour and overlap the two ends, all the time checking the precise diameter of the iron tyre. Then the super heated ends would be rapidly and repeatedly hammered together until it 'shut' (An ancient term). The constant hammering caused the two ends somehow to 'fuse' together as one continuous piece by molecular change. The join would then be shaped to be the same as the rest of the wheel by more heating and hammering.

The artistry of the blacksmith inexplicably produced an iron tyre that fitted the wood wheel exactly. The iron tyre was then tried on the wood wheel outside on the iron tiring plate. This was a round solid and perfectly level one inch thick iron plate, with a hole in the middle to accept the hub.

The circular iron tyre was then placed in the forge again and rotated through until it was mildly red hot all around. At a time determined by Mr. Warner the tyre was declared ready. The large and heavy 'Sussex' wagon tyres required the blacksmith and two other men to carry it out from the forge with angled long handled iron pliers and place it on the waiting wood wheel frame. From about eight year's old his son Ron and I had duties as water boys and we would stand ready with buckets of water.

First the wood wheel frame would be thoroughly soaked in water to retard burning, then the red hot iron tyre placed carefully on the wood rim of the wheel would be hammered on and would burn its way to shape the wood wheel and fit exactly. At a precise moment the blacksmith would shout 'water' and the helpers and us boys would rush forward and douse the hot iron with our buckets of water. This did several things, it stopped the burning of the wood, annealed the iron to harden it and shrank the iron tyre to fit tightly. Finally nails were hammered into the wooden wheel, through the holes in the iron tyre made prior to fitting.

I never saw a tyre that did not fit the first time. What innate skills, patience and fortitude and artistry this man possessed! He always presumed to know that this endeavour would be successful.

From time to time in the future when the wood wheel became extremely dry and shrank and the iron tyre therefore became slightly loose, the wagon or cart was taken to the river Lavant and left in it to soak and swell the wood wheels, which tightened the tyre. The same reason why Constable's painting the "Hay Wain" is parked in the pond.