

## Old Forge Cottage and the Village Blacksmiths

The blacksmith's shop or forge building still exists in a prominent position on the Sandy Road near the Moggerhanger village crossroads. It is a timber-framed, black-boarded barn, dating from the 18th century which has recently been restored. At the rear is a 17<sup>th</sup> century thatched cottage, now known as 'Old Forge Cottage', in which succeeding blacksmiths and their families lived. Formerly this was a pair of cottages known simply as 2 and 4 Blunham Road. One had two rooms, the other four. The forge and the cottage and its gardens have probably always been one property. They were owned successively by the Thorntons and then the Dawkins of Moggerhanger House (as part of the Moggerhanger Estate), then by the Reverend Edward Mayo (Vicar of St Johns between 1884-1900) from 1886-1901, the brothers Thomas and Charles Gurney of Blunham (market gardeners) from 1901-1933 and by Mr William James Brown (of the Avenue Moggerhanger, Porter at the Sanatorium) from 1933-1958. He was the first owner of the property who actually lived in the cottage in all its 300 year history to that date.

Mr Brown is still remembered by older villagers for being the part-time village barber. On Sundays he would open the double doors of the forge and set a wooden chair there and wait for custom. He was also a fastidious gardener, maintaining precisely trimmed hedges. (K. G. Lawrence)

At the time he purchased the cottage from the Gurneys the gardens of the cottage stretched from the barn to a point opposite No 3 Blunham Road but were not much wider than the cottage.

In the sale particulars it was described as:

"All those two cottages & gardens & blacksmiths shop site at the corner of the Sandy and Blunham Roads in the Psh of Moggerhanger in the Coy of Bedford formerly let to W Watts, John Dowson and W Barker & and then of Laurence Chas Minney and containing about 1 rood and 17 perches (more or less)"

In 1937 Mr Brown bought a plot of land abutting the east of the cottage of about 1 rood from the Gurneys. This brought the total property to 2 roods and 17 perches. ie about 0.6 acre (1 rood = 1,210 square yards = 1/4 acre; 1 rood is an area 40 perches long and 1 perch wide or 40 square perches)

William Brown sold the property to Audrey Hudson of Little Barford in April 1958. She was a member of the Allington family of Little Barford.

In November 1967 the property was sold by the executors of Audrey Hudson's estate will to Ivan Robert Twigden and Jack Joyce Hillson, builders, of St Neots who built the 3 houses to the north and east of the cottage in the garden

Both Cople and Willington also still have their village blacksmiths buildings. The smithy at Cople, in size and looks not unlike that of Moggerhanger, is now part of a garage, while that of Willington is incorporated into a half timbered cottage. All occupy positions near to the principal village crossroads.

The first blacksmith in Moggerhanger of which we have knowledge is Thomas Hills. The 1851 census records him aged 40 and born in Muggerhanger. His wife Letitia is 44 and born in Bedford. They had eight children Jabes 16, Nancy 14, Margaret 11, Richard 10, Thomas 9, Charles 6, Frederick 4 and Emma 1. It is very likely his father was blacksmith before him. We can imagine him carrying out tasks for both the Thornton and Dawkins families.

In 1857 there was a sale by the Thorntons of properties belonging to the Moggerhanger Estate. One of these, the forge and cottage, was bought by the Dawkins family. It was described then as "Cottage, Blacksmith's Shop and Garden in two Tenements, including site of Pound". The tenants at the time were Thomas Simms and Thomas Hills. An accompanying map shows a small rectangular enclosure, about two thirds the size of the forge on the corner of Sandy and Blunham Roads. This was the Pound. It would have been used to keep stray farm animals and would have been overseen by the blacksmith or the inn keeper at the Guinea.

The Pound has been officially recorded and is described thus:

"... near the northeast corner of the crossroads opposite the Guinea Pub was a pair of now demolished pounds (HER 9785), these were used until 1860 when they were demolished."

These were likely to have been brick walled enclosures with gates.

In the 1861 Census, Thomas Hills, now aged 50, is still working. His wife Letitia now has three less in the household to care for, as Richard 20, Nancy 24 and Margaret 21 are no longer at this address. Also Jabes 26 and the three other sons aged 18, 16 and 14 are all agricultural labourers. Emma aged 12 and Mark 10 (born since the last census) are scholars

By the time of the 1871 census Thomas now age 60 must be nearing the end of his working life. Letitia now 64 has only Frederick 26, Mark 19 (both labourers), and Emma aged 21 at home. None of the sons has taken over the smithy from Thomas.

At the 1881 census, the village blacksmith has changed. It is now Thomas Mash aged 32 who was born in Bedford. His wife is Elizabeth aged 31 who was born in Blunham. They have a son Frederick 10 born in Blunham and two pairs of twins, Rose 6 and Anne 6 born in Potton, and Lilly 4 and Jemma 4 born in Morhanger. Therefore the family could have moved to Moggerhanger between 1875 and 1877. This family seems to have been frequently on the move so may not have stayed for many years.

On the 29 January 1886 the property consisting of blacksmith's shop, 2 cottages and gardens was sold to the Reverend Edward Mayo, Vicar of St Johns Church. Tenants at the time in the two cottages were Anne Fields and Thomas Mash. The vendors were the Reverend Edward Dawkins' son, Edward Henry Frederick Dawkins and his son Edward Charles Honeywood Dawkins.

It would appear that the next blacksmith was a Mr Barker who lived in Willington. He apparently walked to work each day from there. (H.S. Brown, Moggerhanger 1777-1911 p.15). A Mr W Barker was listed in legal documents as a tenant of the property, possibly just the forge.

Next to the plot containing the forge and cottage and fronting Sandy Road, was a large rectangular field called the Blacksmith's Pightle. In 1919 when it was bought by Thomas Gurney from Colonel W. Brooke Thornton, it consisted of pasture of approximately 3 acres. It was in the tenure of E G. Hart with a rental of £7 per year and with timber valued at £42/11/6. It is possible in earliest times the village blacksmith might have been given use of this land as a timber resource, hence its name. The outline of the Blacksmith's Pightle can still be discerned, the northern edge being defined by a line along the back garden boundaries of the houses on the north side of Sandy Road, the eastern edge by the footpath from Sandy Road to the Playing Field and the southern boundary being the Sandy Road itself.

As had been mentioned above, a similar blacksmith's shop and adjoining cottage, stood in Cople. Now a garage, it is on Northhill Road just south of the junction with Grange Lane. It was sold to Ernest Hart a blacksmith from Moggerhanger in 1921 by the owners, the Church of England. There is no record however, of Ernest Hart ever practising his smith's trade in Moggerhanger but this is of course possible. There is however an Ernest George Hart listed as the tenant of a number of plots of land in Moggerhanger in documentation on a sale of land by Colonel W. Brooke Thornton in June 1919. These plots included the Village Farm and the Blacksmith's Pightle as well as arable and pasture plots, so he was a man of some means. It is possible that Ernest George Hart was the last blacksmith in either of the two villages.

### The Old Forge in 2012

