

The Forge at Welford-on-Avon

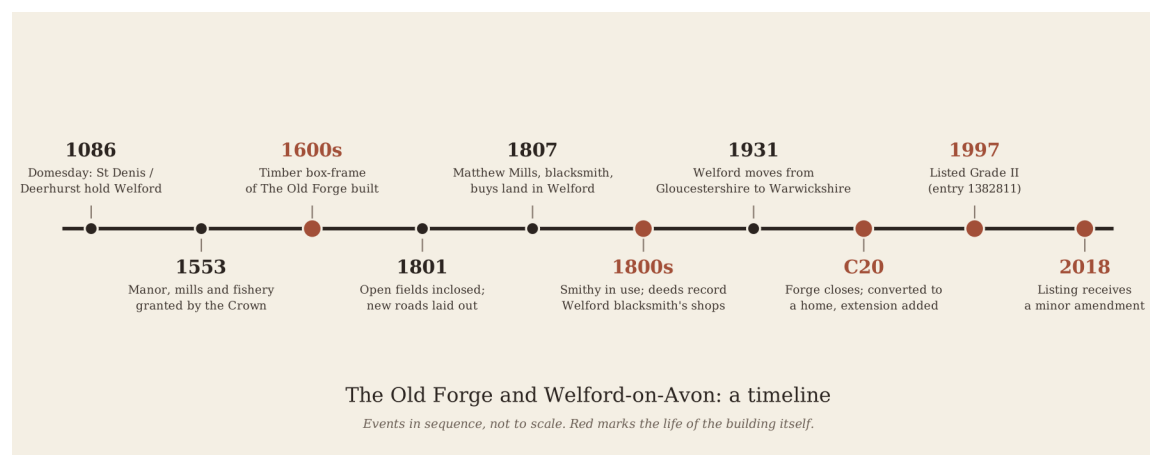
Introduction

On the south side of Chapel Street in Welford-on-Avon stands a small, low, timber-framed cottage known as The Old Forge. It is a seventeenth-century building of three bays, a single storey with rooms in the roof, and it has been a Grade II listed building since 15 May 1997 ([Historic England list entry 1382811](#)). Its neighbour, only a few metres to the east, is The Shakespeare inn, itself a listed building. To a passer-by it looks like one more of the picturesque cottages that have made Welford one of the best-known villages in the Stratford district. Its name, however, records a different past: this was a place where iron was heated, hammered and shaped, and where the village's horses were shod.

This essay is about that building and about what it stands for. It treats The Old Forge in four ways. First, as a piece of architecture: a box-framed vernacular cottage whose fabric records three and a half centuries of alteration. Second, as a workplace: a smithy in a farming and market-gardening village where the blacksmith was among the most necessary of craftsmen. Third, as a social space: the forge as a meeting place, a source of news and a fixture of village life. Fourth, as heritage: a building that outlived its trade and survives today as a home protected by law.

A word of caution belongs at the start. The documentary record for small rural buildings is thin. The official listing describes the fabric in detail but says almost nothing about the people who worked in it. Archives held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust name several Welford blacksmiths across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and record sales and mortgages of a "blacksmith's shop" in the village. They do not, in the extracts available online, tie any one smith to this exact address. Where this essay connects named people to The Old Forge, it says so as a probability rather than a proven fact. Where it describes the work of a village smith in general, it draws on what is well established about the trade across rural England.

The Old Forge is worth that care. It is one of only a handful of buildings in the Stratford-on-Avon district that Historic England tags as a former smithy, and it sits at the heart of a village whose story it helps to tell. To understand it, we need to begin with the village itself.



Welford-on-Avon: the village around the forge

Welford-on-Avon lies about four miles west-south-west of Stratford-upon-Avon, tucked inside a deep meander on the south bank of the River Avon ([Wikipedia](#)). The name itself describes the place: a ford across the Avon, close to the spot where the church and the mill now stand. According to the Victoria County History, the church tower was raised to an unusual height in the fifteenth century, probably to serve as a landmark for travellers making for that crossing ([VCH Warwick vol. 5](#)).

The village has deep monastic roots. At Domesday in 1086 the Abbey of St Denis near Paris held 15 hides at Welford, as part of the estates of Deerhurst Priory in Gloucestershire. Deerhurst passed to Tewkesbury Abbey in 1467, and Tewkesbury held Welford until the Dissolution. In 1553 the manor, with its two mills and its fishing rights in the Avon, was granted away by the Crown. It later passed through the Greville family to Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex, and descended with neighbouring Weston-on-Avon ([VCH](#)).

For most of its history Welford was a Gloucestershire village. It sat in the upper division of the Hundred of Deerhurst, and its parish church of St Peter still belongs to the Diocese of Gloucester. Only in 1931 was it transferred to Warwickshire ([Wikipedia](#)). That border position matters for the forge. A smith in Welford served a community that looked both ways: south and west to the Vale of Evesham and the Cotswold edge, north and east to Stratford and its markets.

A village of timber and thatch

The Victoria County History, written in 1949, described Welford as larger than most villages nearby and well known for its picturesqueness. It counted some thirty small timber-framed buildings, none apparently older than the seventeenth century, about two-thirds of them thatched and the rest tiled. The main street ran south from the river to a small triangular green with a maypole; a side road ran east from the maypole to the river on the far side of the bend ([VCH](#)). The Old Forge belongs to exactly this group of seventeenth-century framed cottages.

The maypole is still the village's emblem. It still stands on its green at the south end of the village street, and village children still dance around it each summer ([Rated Trips walk guide](#)). The general store opposite it is named after it, and so is a listed house nearby.

Roads, fields and change

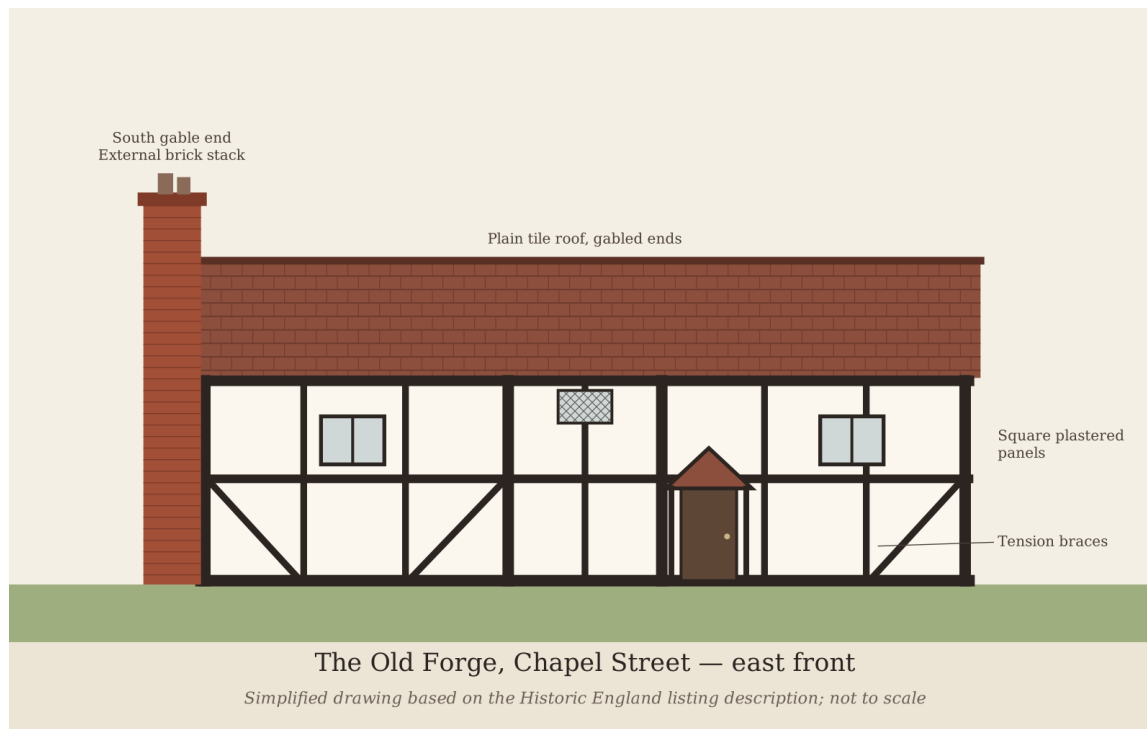
The pattern of roads that a modern visitor follows is younger than the cottages. Welford's open fields were inclosed by a private Act of Parliament, with the award made on 2 June 1801, and most of the present roads seem to have been laid out then. Before that, the Gloucestershire historian Samuel Rudder complained in 1779 that the roads of this district were miry lanes and field headlands, nearly impassable in winter ([VCH](#)). Inclosure meant hedges, gates, new farm buildings and better carts, all of which created work for a smith.

The population grew modestly through the nineteenth century. It was 516 in 1801 and 669 in 1831; by 1851 the parish counted 659 people in about 146 houses ([Parishmouse, citing the 1851 Parliamentary Gazetteer and Kelly's 1856 directory](#)). In 1931 it stood at 751. The 1949 history noted that many inhabitants worked in market gardening, the intensive cultivation of fruit and vegetables for which the Avon valley and the nearby Vale of Evesham were famous ([VCH](#)).

This was the world The Old Forge served: a compact riverside village of a few hundred people, built largely of oak and thatch, ringed by arable fields and orchards, with a mill at the river, a church at the old ford, a maypole on the green and three inns along its streets.

The building: oak, plaster and tile

The Old Forge is a seventeenth-century timber box-frame cottage, altered in the early nineteenth century and again in the twentieth. That one sentence from its official listing compresses about 350 years of building history. Read slowly, the fabric shows how a modest working building was made, used, adapted and finally converted into a home ([Historic England 1382811](#)).



The frame

The walls are a timber box-frame: a cage of oak posts, sill beams, wall-plates and rails, jointed together with mortises and pegs and raised on site. In box framing, the roof sits on the walls rather than on great curved timbers springing from the ground, as in the older cruck tradition of the West Midlands. The panels between the timbers here are square and plastered. Tension braces, diagonal timbers running down from the posts to the sill, stiffen the frame against racking.

Square panels are typical of seventeenth-century work in this part of the Avon valley. Earlier and grander houses often used close studding, upright timbers set tightly together, which displayed wealth by spending oak freely. By the 1600s oak was dearer, and ordinary builders spaced their timbers widely and filled the gaps with wattle and daub or later with brick. The Victoria County History notes that most of Welford's framed houses are of this "ordinary 17th-century type" ([VCH](#)). Painted black and white, this framing gives the village the look for which walkers' guides now celebrate it.

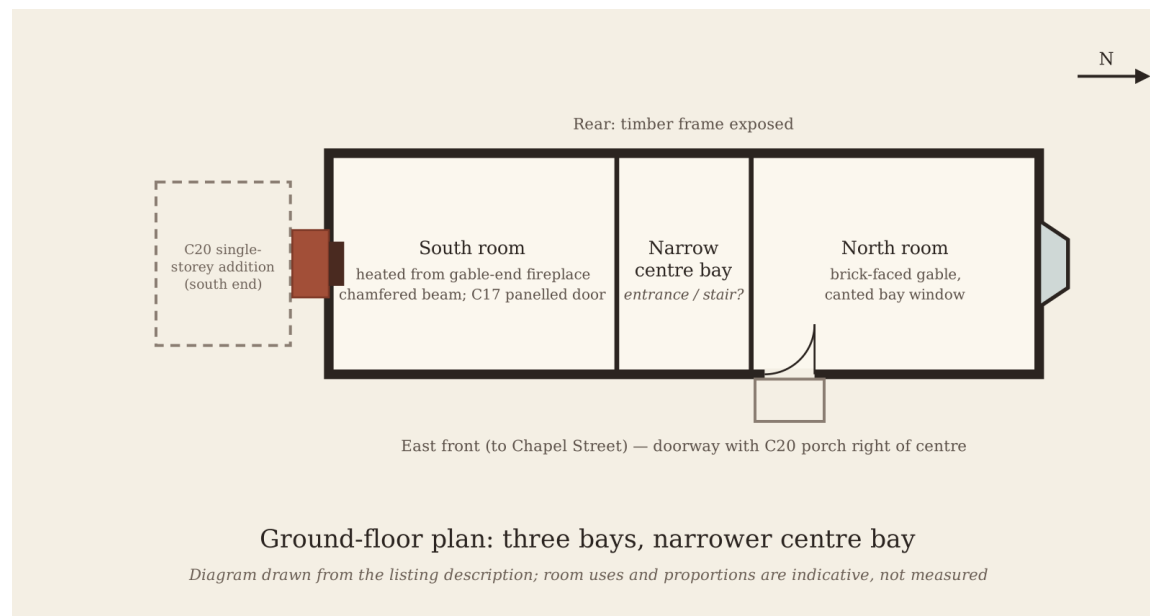
Roof, walls and chimney

The Old Forge has a plain tile roof with gabled ends, and its eaves are raised at the front. Many Welford cottages are thatched, so the tiles are worth noticing. A forge is a fire risk, and a working smithy beneath thatch would have been a constant worry. Whether the tiles are original or a later replacement, they suit a building with a hearth that burned hot all day.

The north gable end is faced in brick and painted, and has a canted bay window on the ground floor with leaded casements. An external brick chimney stack rises against the south gable end. The listing records that the left, or south, room is heated from that gable-end fireplace ([Historic England](#)). That is probably the domestic hearth rather than the smith's forge itself: a smithing hearth usually stood free inside the workshop, or against a wall, with its own hood and flue.

Plan and interior

The plan is three bays, with a narrower centre bay. This is a common arrangement in small seventeenth-century houses. The narrow middle bay often held the entrance, a lobby or a stair, with a room to either side. At The Old Forge the doorway, now sheltered by a twentieth-century timber porch, is just right of centre on the east front, which fits that pattern.



The building is a single storey with an attic. Upstairs rooms are lit by windows set into the roof slope or under the eaves. On the east front is a small early-nineteenth-century fixed window with leaded panes, set under the eaves at the centre; the other front windows are small twentieth-century metal casements. Inside, the listing records exposed wall-framing and framed partitions, a chamfered cross-beam without stops in the left room, exposed purlins in the roof, and a seventeenth-century panelled door with scratch mouldings at the south end of the ground floor ([Historic England](#)).

That door is easy to overlook and quietly remarkable. Scratch mouldings are shallow decorative grooves cut with a simple scraping tool rather than planed with a moulding plane. They are a hallmark of vernacular joinery of the period. A door of this kind surviving in its original setting is a direct link to the people who first lived and worked here.

Additions and the rear

In the twentieth century a single-storey brick extension was added at the south end. At the rear the timber frame is left exposed, so the cage of oak can still be seen much as its builders left it. The listing was given a minor amendment on 25 September 2018 ([Historic England](#)).

What the fabric says about the forge

Nothing in the listing describes surviving smithing equipment: no hearth, bellows or anvil base is recorded. That is normal for a converted forge. When the trade ended, the tools were usually sold and the hearth taken out to make room for living space. The building's name and Historic England's classification of it as a smithy are the main surviving evidence of its working life.

The arrangement of the building fits that history. In many villages the smithy was a lean-to or a separate shed beside the smith's cottage, and the two were sold together. The deeds in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archive describe exactly such units in Welford: "a house and blacksmith's shop" and "tenements and a blacksmith's shop" ([SBT arch-8490](#); [SBT arch-8067](#)). The Old Forge may once have been half of such a pair, with the workshop since absorbed into the cottage or replaced by later additions.

The blacksmith's trade in Welford

Welford had blacksmiths for at least three centuries, and the archive of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust preserves several of their names. Deeds drawn up by local solicitors, above all the Stratford firm of Slatter, Son and More, record smiths buying land, selling workshops and raising mortgages. Read together, they give a rare glimpse of the men who worked Welford's forges.

Named smiths in the record

Smith	What the record shows	Source
Robert Roberts alias Campden, of Welford	A party to a deed of sale of lands in Welford, one of several members of the Roberts family	SBT archive
Matthew Mills, of Welford	Bought land in Welford from Joseph Marshall, farmer, and Robert Fisher of Weston-on-Avon; draft conveyance dated 30 May 1807 (ER3/1432)	SBT archive
William Osborne, of Barton in Bidford	Conveyed tenements and a blacksmith's shop in Welford to William Strong, a Welford weaver	SBT arch-8067
James Matthews, of Welford	Mortgaged a house and blacksmith's shop in Welford to William Cox of Birmingham, a	SBT arch-8490

Smith	What the record shows	Source
	toll-gate keeper	

These records tell us several things. First, smithing in Welford was continuous: there were smiths here in the early modern period, in the years of inclosure around 1807, and through the nineteenth century. Second, the forge was property as well as a workplace. It could be bought, sold, let and mortgaged like any house. Third, ownership and working did not always coincide. William Osborne lived in Barton, across the Avon in Bidford parish, yet owned a blacksmith's shop in Welford; he sold it to a weaver, who presumably let it to a working smith.

The Osborne and Matthews deeds describe a "blacksmith's shop" without naming a street, and the online catalogue entries carry no dates. It is quite possible that one or both concern the building now called The Old Forge, but the surviving summaries cannot prove it. The full documents, held in Stratford, are the place where that question could be settled.

One small puzzle sits in the 1856 Post Office Directory. Its list of Welford traders includes carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, a wheelwright (John Stanley, also a farmer), a miller, butchers and innkeepers, but no blacksmith ([Parishmouse transcription](#)). Directories were often incomplete, especially for craftsmen who worked for others or whose trade was combined with keeping a pub or a farm. The gap more likely reflects the directory than a village without a smith.

What a village smith did

The word "blacksmith" comes from the black scale that forms on hot iron, as against the "whitesmith" who worked tin and bright metals. A smith in a village like Welford was a generalist. His work fell into a few broad groups:

- **Farriery.** Shoeing horses was the steadiest income. Farm horses, carriers' horses and riders' mounts all needed new shoes every five to eight weeks. A farrier removed the old shoe, trimmed the hoof, shaped a new shoe hot to fit, and nailed it on.
- **Agricultural work.** The smith made and mended ploughshares, coulter, harrow tines, hoes, scythes and billhooks. Before mass-produced tools, a farmer's whole kit passed through the forge.
- **Wheelwrighting partnership.** Wheelwrights built cartwheels of wood; the smith made and fitted the iron tyre. Heated in a ring of fire until it expanded, the tyre was dropped over the wheel and quenched, shrinking tight and pulling the joints together. Welford had wheelwrights of its own, among them the Alcock family in the eighteenth century and John Stanley in 1856 ([SBT arch-81052](#)).
- **Building and household ironwork.** Hinges, latches, hooks, gate fittings, window bars, fire irons and pot-hangers all came from the forge. After the 1801 inclosure, new fields brought new gates, each needing hinges and catches.
- **Repair.** Above all, the smith mended things. Broken chains, cracked kettles and bent harrow frames were brought to the forge long before anyone thought of buying new.

The workshop

A forge of this kind was small, dark and hot. Its heart was the hearth: a raised brick or stone bed holding a fire of coke or coal, blown to working heat by a pair of great leather bellows worked by a lever. Beside it stood a water trough for quenching. The anvil, a block of wrought iron with a hardened steel face, sat on a heavy wooden stump within a step of the fire. Around the walls hung tongs, hammers, swages, fullers and punches. Outside, there was usually a tethering ring and a stone or wooden floor for shoeing.

The light was kept low on purpose. A smith judged the heat of iron by its colour, from dull red through cherry and orange to the bright yellow-white of a welding heat. Too much daylight made those colours hard to read.



Inside a village smithy

Illustrative scene of a typical forge — not a record of this building

The forge in village life

A village forge was never only a workshop. Its position on Chapel Street, next door to The Shakespeare inn and a short walk from the maypole green, placed it in the busiest part of Welford. The forge, the pub and the chapel together made this stretch of street one of the village's social centres.

A meeting place

Shoeing a horse took time. Farm hands and carters waited while the smith worked, and the forge became a place to talk. News of prices at Stratford market, the state of the roads, the harvest, births, quarrels and deaths passed across the anvil. In winter the warmth of the hearth drew people in who had no business there at all. Rural writers of the nineteenth century often described the smithy as a kind of open parliament, and Welford's will have been no different.

The neighbouring inn made that role stronger. The Shakespeare was one of three pubs in the village, alongside The Bell and The Four Alls, all three named in a modern walking guide to the village ([Rated](#)

[Trips](#)). In 1856 the Bell was kept by Thomas Matthews and the Four Alls by Mrs Lucy Mills ([Kelly's 1856 via Parishmouse](#)). The surnames are suggestive. Matthews and Mills are also the surnames of two Welford blacksmiths in the Birthplace Trust deeds, James Matthews and Matthew Mills. Village trades often ran in families, and smiths frequently combined their craft with keeping a beer house or an inn. The link cannot be proven from these sources, but it fits a common pattern.

Chapel Street

The street takes its name from the chapel that stands on it. The 1851 Parliamentary Gazetteer records a Wesleyan Methodist place of worship in Welford, and Primitive Methodists also had a presence in the parish ([Parishmouse](#)). Methodism found many of its strongest supporters among rural craftsmen and labourers, and the forge, the chapel and the inn stood within a few yards of each other. It is easy to imagine the tensions as well as the companionship of such a street, where Sunday sermons on temperance were preached a short walk from the tap room.

An economic hub

The smith was among the most important tradesmen in any farming village. Almost every other occupation depended on him. The miller's machinery, the farmer's plough, the carrier's wagon, the carpenter's tools and the housewife's kettle all needed iron work. Payment was often seasonal. Farmers ran up accounts through the year and settled them after harvest, sometimes partly in kind.

This dependence gave the smith a respected standing. He was skilled, independent and often literate enough to keep accounts. The deeds show Welford smiths owning property, buying land and borrowing against their workshops, the actions of men with capital and credit. Matthew Mills's purchase of land in 1807, during the reorganisation of the parish after inclosure, shows a smith investing in the changing village.

Craft and continuity

The forge also connected Welford to wider networks. Iron bar came from the ironworks of the Black Country, carted or later sent by rail. Coal and coke came the same way. The Birmingham toll-gate keeper who lent money to James Matthews is a reminder that a village craftsman's affairs reached well beyond the parish. Yet the work itself was intensely local. Every ploughshare was shaped to suit a particular field's soil; every horseshoe was fitted to a particular hoof. The smith knew his customers' animals, implements and debts in detail.

For children, the forge was a source of wonder: the roar of the bellows, the shower of sparks, the hiss of hot iron in the trough. Generations of Welford children walking to the maypole or the chapel will have stopped at its door to watch.

Decline: from forge to cottage

The village smithy flourished for centuries and then disappeared within two generations. Across England the number of working blacksmiths fell steeply from the early twentieth century, and Welford's forge followed the national pattern.

Why the forges closed

Three changes undid the trade. The first was industrial manufacture. Through the nineteenth century, factories in Birmingham, Sheffield and the Black Country turned out tools, nails, hinges and horseshoes in quantity and cheaply. A farmer could buy a ready-made spade or ploughshare from an ironmonger in Stratford rather than wait for the smith. The smith's role narrowed towards repair and shoeing.

The second was the motor vehicle and the tractor. Horses had kept the forge in steady work, and when they went, the forge lost its core business. Lorries replaced carriers' carts in the 1920s and 1930s. Tractors spread rapidly on English farms during and after the Second World War, as the drive for food production pushed mechanisation. A village that had needed dozens of working horses soon needed almost none.

The third was the new machinery itself. Tractors and combine harvesters were made of steel castings and machined parts, not hand-forged iron. Repairs needed welding equipment, spare parts and a mechanic's skills. Some village smiths adapted, becoming agricultural engineers or opening garages. Many simply retired, and their sons found other work.

After the fire went out

Once a forge closed, its building was usually put to a new use. The tools were sold or scrapped, the hearth removed, and the workshop turned into a store, a garage or living space. Welford's housing was changing at the same time. Through the twentieth century the village grew as a desirable place to live within easy reach of Stratford, and old cottages were modernised for new owners.

The Old Forge's fabric records that process. Its twentieth-century metal casements, timber porch and single-storey brick extension at the south end belong to its life as a home ([Historic England](#)). The name stayed. Across England, hundreds of houses are called The Old Forge, The Smithy or Forge Cottage, a quiet record of how widespread the trade once was. Historic England's own catalogue lists several in the Stratford district alone, at Upper Brailes, Wimpstone and Sutton-under-Brailes among others ([British Listed Buildings, smithy tag](#)).

What was lost and what remained

The closure of the forge took away more than a service. It removed one of the places where villagers met as a matter of course, and it ended a line of skill passed on by apprenticeship over centuries. The pub, the shop and the chapel carried on, but the clang of the hammer on Chapel Street fell silent.

What remained was the building. Because it was modest and well built, it was worth keeping and adapting. Because it was adapted rather than demolished, its seventeenth-century frame, beams, purlins and panelled door have survived to be recognised and protected.

Conservation and the Forge today

The Old Forge was added to the National Heritage List for England at Grade II on 15 May 1997, under list entry 1382811 ([Historic England via British Listed Buildings](#)). Grade II covers buildings of special architectural or historic interest; it is the grade given to the great majority of listed buildings in England.

Why it was listed

The listing came relatively late. Its neighbour, The Shakespeare, was first listed in 1967 ([British Listed Buildings](#)). The 1990s brought a fresh survey of many parishes, and modest vernacular buildings received more attention than in earlier rounds. The Old Forge qualified on several grounds that the listing text makes clear: its seventeenth-century timber frame survives substantially intact, its interior keeps exposed framing, an unstopped chamfered beam, purlins and a period panelled door, and its later changes are legible rather than destructive.

Its historic interest as a former smithy adds to that. Few rural workshop buildings survive in recognisable form, and those that do record an occupation that shaped every English village for centuries.

What listing means

Listing protects the whole building, inside and out, along with fixtures and some structures within its curtilage. Any work that would affect its special character, such as altering the frame, replacing historic windows or removing the old door, needs listed building consent from Stratford-on-Avon District Council. Owners of listed cottages commonly face particular care over matching materials: lime plaster rather than cement in the panels, oak for frame repairs, and clay tiles for the roof.

The building also contributes to a wider group. Chapel Street and the streets around the maypole hold a dense cluster of listed cottages, including The Shakespeare, The Maypole, Hornby Cottage, The Scullards, The Thatch, Cider Mill House, Low Thatch and Magpie Cottage ([British Listed Buildings](#)). Hornby Cottage shares its name with the Hornby family of carpenters and farmers named in the 1856 directory. Together these buildings make the village street scene that visitors come to see.

The Forge today

Today The Old Forge is a private home, not open to the public. It can be seen from Chapel Street, and its exposed rear frame from where public views allow. Visitors are asked to respect the privacy of the people who live there. Photographs of the building are collected on the [British Listed Buildings photo page](#) and on [Geograph](#), and Historic England's Missing Pieces project invites people to add their own.

The best way to appreciate it is on foot. A circular walk from the maypole along Chapel Street, past The Shakespeare and The Old Forge, out across the fields to Weston-on-Avon and back by the river to the church, takes in most of the village's timber-framed buildings ([Rated Trips walk](#)). Walked slowly, it shows how the forge sat among the other landmarks of village life: pub, chapel, green, mill and church.

Conclusion

The Old Forge on Chapel Street is a small building with a long story. Its oak frame was raised in the seventeenth century, when Welford was a Gloucestershire village of open fields held by the heirs of a medieval monastic estate. Its hearth served the farms, carts and horses of the parish through inclosure in 1801, through the nineteenth-century world of carriers, market gardens and Methodist chapels, and into the age of the motor. Then, like thousands of village forges across England, it fell silent and became a home.

What makes it worth study is how much it holds together. In its fabric, the box frame, square panels, tension braces, chamfered beam and scratch-moulded door record how ordinary people built in the

1600s. In its name, it preserves a trade that was once indispensable and is now almost gone. In the deeds of Welford's smiths, Robert Roberts alias Campden, Matthew Mills, William Osborne and James Matthews, it is linked to real people who bought, sold and borrowed against forges like it. In its setting beside The Shakespeare and close to the maypole, it recalls a village street where work, drink, worship and gossip all met.

There is still more to learn. The Slatter, Son and More deeds in Stratford could show which of Welford's blacksmith's shops stood here. Census returns from 1841 to 1921 would name the smiths living on Chapel Street in each decade. Old photographs and the memories of older residents might show when the last horse was shod. These are tasks for local historians, and The Old Forge rewards the effort.

For now, the building does what it has done for three and a half centuries: it stands quietly on Chapel Street, adapted but recognisable, a working past held in oak and plaster.

Sources and further reading

- [The Old Forge, Welford-on-Avon — Historic England list entry 1382811](#) (via British Listed Buildings), with [photo gallery](#)
- [The Shakespeare, Welford-on-Avon — list entry 1382813](#)
- ["Parishes: Welford-on-Avon", Victoria County History of Warwick, vol. 5 \(1949\)](#)
- [Welford-on-Avon — Wikipedia](#)
- [Welford, Gloucestershire Family History Guide — Parishmouse](#) (1851 Gazetteer, Kelly's 1856 directory)
- Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archive: [William Osborne conveyance](#); [James Matthews mortgage](#); [Matthew Mills conveyance, 1807](#); [Roberts deed of sale](#); [Alcock wheelwrights](#)
- [Black-and-white buildings in Welford — Rated Trips walk](#)
- [Smithy-tagged listed buildings — British Listed Buildings](#)
- [Geograph photographs of Welford-on-Avon](#)

Illustrations in this essay are original drawings made for it, not photographs of the building.