

The Forge at Welford-on-Avon

Introduction

For at least three hundred years, and probably far longer, a smith's fire burned somewhere in Welford-on-Avon. The last one went out in the early 1960s, in a wooden shack beside the garage on the Binton Road. Before that it burned for the best part of a century in Chapel Street, between the Shakespeare Inn and the corner where the butcher's shop later stood. A house there is still called The Old Forge.

This essay tells the story of that forge and the people who worked it. It is a longer companion to the shorter essay *The Forge at Welford*, written earlier from the same archive. That essay followed the Matthews family through the Society's interview notes and the 1969 parish magazine. This one goes further back and wider. It uses the census returns from 1841 to 1911, the trade directories, the deeds of the wheelwright's yard opposite the lych gate, a wartime memoir, the Society's minutes, and a 1938 parish history. Together they show something the earlier essay could only guess at: who the smiths of Welford were, where they came from, and how the trade passed from family to family.

Three discoveries shape what follows. The first is a family tree that runs from a Welford blacksmith baptised in 1745, Matthew Mills, to George Tribe, the village smith of the 1840s. The second is the census of 1891, which shows that James Matthews, the smith who arrived in 1868, came from Salford and had worked at Dorsington before Welford. That probably explains a puzzling phrase in the interview notes. The third is the Johnson family. In 1911 Charles Edward Johnson was the journeyman blacksmith at the Matthews smithy. His son Frederick, then aged three, grew up to be the Fred Johnson who, with his brother Ted, shod horses and built boats beside the garage in the 1940s. The "Mr Johnson" who ran the last forge until about 1962 was almost certainly one of them.

The Welford meant here is the Warwickshire village on the Avon, four miles south-west of Stratford. Until 1931 it lay in Gloucestershire, which is why its census returns and directory entries appear under that county. All the documents quoted come from the archive of the Welford and Weston Local History Society, scanned into this project, unless a web source is named. Each picture is captioned with the folder and item it comes from.

The sources do not always agree. Directories, censuses, memories and building surveys were made for different purposes by different people, and they often contradict each other on dates, names and places. Where that happens the essay says so and does not quietly pick a winner. The questions still open are gathered at the end.

Smiths before the Matthews family

A village like Welford could not do without a smith. A survey of the Arrow valley, a few miles to the north, put it plainly: "The village blacksmith was an important man for the livelihood of the parish; his work included fixing the metal tyre to wooden wheels, shoeing horses, mending farm machinery or any metal objects." The same gazetteer, kept in the Welford archive, found that the trade usually ran in families. A Studley boy was apprenticed to a smith in 1753, and a smith of the same surname was still working there in the 1930s. The

Masons of Broom and Barton, the Horns of Coughton and Exhall, and the Hemmings of Studley and Arrow all held forges for generations. Welford fits that pattern exactly.

The earliest names

The oldest Welford smith in the archive is a J. Okes, recorded in 1686. He appears in a Society member's notes on the "Lychgate deeds", the run of title deeds for a group of cottages opposite the churchyard gate. The note-taker listed the occupations of the people named in the deeds, starting with two weavers, J. Okes and W. Battersby, in 1600. Against the 1686 blacksmith J. Okes the note-taker wrote "(relatives?)". It is a reasonable guess that the weaving family had produced a smith, but it is only a guess. The same deeds later name a cooper, a shoemaker and two generations of wheelwrights on the same plot.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust holds deeds naming two more early smiths. One is a deed of sale by several members of the Roberts family, one of whom is "Robert Roberts alias Campden of Welford, blacksmith". The alias suggests a man, or a father, who had come from Chipping Campden. The other is a draft conveyance of 30 May 1807, by which Joseph Marshall of Welford, farmer, and Robert Fisher of Weston, gentleman, transferred land to "Matthew Mills of Welford, blacksmith". Both are known here only from the Trust's online catalogue summaries, which could not be opened from this project, so their full dates and descriptions remain to be checked.

Matthew Mills and George Tribe

Matthew Mills links the Trust's catalogue to the Society's archive. Folder 48 holds a printed family tree of the Tribe family, compiled by a descendant. It begins with "Matthew Mills, blacksmith", baptised at Welford on 26 December 1745. He married Sarah Allcock at Welford in 1771, and she was buried there in 1788. Their daughter Mary married Thomas Tribe, a London-born coachman, in 1805. Their son George Tribe, baptised at Nuneaton in 1806, became a blacksmith like his grandfather. He married Hannah Hancock of Luddington at Welford in 1834 and was buried there in 1871.

George Tribe is the first Welford smith we can actually see at work. The 1841 census, the first to name every person, lists him in the village of Welford, aged 30, as a blacksmith. With him were his wife Hannah, their children James, Mary and Matthew, and a 20-year-old called James Rouse, described as "Blacksmith App[rentice]". The baby's name, Matthew, honours the great-grandfather who began the line.

Six years later the smithy came up for sale. A Society notebook of sale notices, copied from the Trust's records, records an auction at the Bell Inn in February 1847 of two freehold houses "with the Garden, Orchard, Blacksmiths shop" in "the centre of the village". The tenants were William Rouse and George Tribe. A Rouse as apprentice in 1841 and a Rouse as co-tenant in 1847 cannot be a coincidence: the Rouse family were evidently learning or sharing the trade.

Oddly, the Post Office Directory of 1856 lists no blacksmith at Welford at all, although it names three carpenters, two butchers, four shoemakers and a wheelwright. Directories depended on who paid or answered, and a smith working for others might not appear. The 1861 census does have one: Henry Bennett, aged 30, living with his widowed mother and described as "ag. lab./blacksmith". A farm labourer who also worked as a smith suggests the

trade had shrunk to a part-time job, at least for a while. If so, it would explain why a smithy stood ready for a newcomer in 1868.

The wheelwrights opposite the lych gate

The smith rarely worked alone. Iron tyres, axles and fittings had to be married to wooden wheels and carts, and in Welford the wheelwright's yard lay opposite the lych gate of St Peter's. The deeds in Folders 10/17 to 10/22 trace it in unusual detail. In June 1831 Richard Brookes, wheelwright, "only son and heir at law of Henry Brookes of the same place, wheelwright", sold three houses and a timber yard "for many years past" used as such to John Stanley, wheelwright. The 1851 census shows John Stanley employing two men. His son William, also a wheelwright, conveyed the property in 1869.

By 1873 the schedule to a mortgage described the same group as "3 freehold thatched cottages with wheelwrights & blacksmiths shops, roofed sawpit & large garden", occupied by Charles Timms, James Tilson and Jacob Hayward, "lying together opposite the Lich Gate of the parish churchyard". In March 1875 Charles Timms, wheelwright, bought them for £220. So for a time Welford had two places where iron was worked: the smithy in the centre of the village, and a smaller blacksmith's shop attached to the wheelwright's yard by the church. Which of them was the ancestor of the Chapel Street forge is not certain.



The lych gate of St Peter's, about 1930, from a Walter Scott packet of twelve snapshot views. The 1873 deeds place three thatched cottages "with wheelwrights & blacksmiths shops" and a roofed sawpit opposite this gate. Welford and Weston Local History Society archive, 16/25.

The building in Chapel Street

The Forge stood on Chapel Street, the lane that runs east from the maypole towards Duck Lane and the old Manor Farm. Several sources place it precisely, and they agree with each other more than the earlier essay could show.

The best evidence is the 1911 census. Its summary book gives the street address of every household in the order the enumerator walked, so the village can be put back together. Alfred Davis, the school attendance officer who did the counting, went along Chapel Street "past Wynns Cottages, the grocer's shop, the smithy, the Shakespeare Inn and the Shakespeare Stores". Schedule 44 is entered as kind of building "Smithy", occupier "Mr Matthews", with four males and one female. A researcher's note on the same household adds that it was "shown as living between Shakespeare Inn & Maypole Stores, so likely at The Forge". A Society talk on the 1901 census says the same: "Next door to the Shakespeare is the old Forge."



The Shakespeare Inn, Chapel Street, photographed for the 1992 Conservation Area Study. The 1901 and 1911 censuses place the Matthews smithy next door. Welford and Weston Local History Society archive, 15/08, fig. 53.

What the building is

The house now called The Old Forge was listed Grade II on 15 May 1997. Historic England's entry, typed into a Society binder at 47/50, describes a seventeenth-century cottage with early

nineteenth- and twentieth-century alterations. It has a timber box frame with square plastered panels and tension braces, a brick north gable, an external stack on the south gable, and a plain tile roof. It is three bays long, single-storey with an attic, and has a seventeenth-century panelled door inside. The Society's typescript keeps a typing slip, "reaised eaves", which shows how carefully it was copied.

Five years earlier the 1992 Conservation Area Study had described the same house quite differently. Its gazetteer of unlisted buildings gives "Map Ref 143 – The Old Forge, Chapel Street. C19, detached, dwelling, painted brick, thatch roof, two storey." The two accounts cannot both be right about the roof and the date. The likeliest explanation is that the 1992 surveyors judged from the street, where a painted brick front could hide an older frame, and the 1997 inspector went inside. The study's next entry is just as telling: "Map Ref 142 – Colin Smith Butcher, Chapel Street. C20, shop." The butcher's shop stood immediately next to The Old Forge.

Where the hammer fell

That adjacency helps with the puzzle the earlier essay left open. In his interview Arthur Matthews put the old blacksmith's shop "where the Butchers Shop is now". The 1969 parish magazine had the family "working and living at the Forge in Chapel Street". The 1992 map shows these as neighbours. The family seem to have lived in the timber-framed house and worked in a shop beside it. That shop was pulled down in about 1920, and its site later took the twentieth-century butcher's shop. The house kept the name of the trade.

The Society's own records show the name passing to the house. Its December 1983 review of buildings worth protecting listed "the Forge" among Chapel Street's buildings. The 1950 house survey has Frank Clarke at "The Forge". The 1987 electoral register lists Alice, David and Jennifer Clarke at "The Forge", Chapel Street. By then no one had shod a horse there for more than fifty years.

One other building may once have been a smithy. Historic England's entry for Watermill Cottage describes a c.1600 house "joined to formerly separate wing, believed to be blacksmith's shop". The archive says nothing more about it, but it is a reminder that a village could have several forges over the centuries, as the wheelwright's yard by the church shows.

Three generations of the Matthews family

The Matthews era began in 1868, when a smith and his wife came to the Welford shop. The earlier essay could not give the grandfather a first name with certainty. The census returns and directories now can.

James Matthews, 1868 to 1900

The 1891 census lists the household at schedule 74. James Matthews, 53, "general smith (employer)", was born at Salford, most probably Salford Priors, a few miles west across the Avon. His wife Elizabeth, 52, came from Evenlode near Moreton-in-Marsh. With them were four grown children. Walter, 26, was a general smith; Amy, 23, had no occupation given; Archie, 20, and Arthur, 16, were both general smiths. Walter and Amy were born at Dorsington, the next parish to the south.

That birthplace solves a small mystery. The interviewer's notes from Arthur Matthews in the 1970s say his grandfather "first had Doors in for blacksmith shop & came to Welford shop 1868". The Society's commentary flagged "Doors in" as making no sense, and suggested it might be a place name. The census suggests it is: Dorsington, written down by ear. James seems to have run a smithy at Dorsington in the 1860s before moving to the bigger village.

James is in every directory of his time. Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire for 1897 lists "Matthews James, blacksmith" among 41 traders, highlighted by a Society reader. Spennell's Almanack for 1900 has "Matthews J. blacksmith". The 1891 census also shows a second smith next door, John H. Farr, 41, blacksmith, born at Stratford, with his wife and four children. He was probably one of the three men the family employed besides the sons.

James is also the man in the photograph that sums up the forge's place in village life. When the village raised a new maypole in 1896, a photographer captured the crowd on the green. The typed caption that came with the print names "Mr. James Matthews, the village blacksmith, who made the weathervane", holding it up with both arms.



The raising of the maypole, 1896. The typed caption with the print names the man with arms raised, holding the weathervane, as James Matthews, the village blacksmith, who made it. The man in the white apron is the village shoemaker. Welford and Weston Local History Society archive, 16/53 (caption at 16/52).

The 1901 talk says James died in 1900, having been a blacksmith in Welford since 1868. It also credits him with something the interview notes give to "Grandfather": he "built and repaired bicycles for the village, one of the first blacksmiths to do so". His widow evidently outlived him, since it was she who told her grandchildren that Welford was "an independent people village", where ordinary families could buy freehold land and set up for themselves.

The sons

The interview notes say James had four sons and a daughter, and that three of the sons went into the trade, while the fourth became a prison officer at Pentonville. The 1891 census gives the daughter, Amy, and three of the sons, Walter, Archie and Arthur. The fourth is probably Thomas.

In 1901 Thomas Matthews, 38, blacksmith, working on his own account, was living alone at schedule 88 in Chapel Street, next to the Shakespeare. The Society's talk on that census calls him "the resident blacksmith" at "the old Forge" and "the son of James". Two doors away at schedule 86 lived Archie, 30, also a blacksmith on his own account, with his wife Fanny and two small sons, Percy and Harold.

Thomas raises a question the archive cannot yet answer. The Virginia Cottage papers describe a Thomas James Matthews, "a blacksmith of Upper Quinton", born about 1863, who married Sarah Rosetta Wilson at Welford on Christmas Day 1886 and died in 1908. Their son was Private James Arthur "Jim" Matthews, whose letters from the Western Front fill Folder 43 and who was killed in 1917. The Society's note on the 1891 census treats this as "a different Matthews family" from James's. Yet the age fits the Thomas of 1901, and "James" as a middle name would fit a son of the smith. If they were the same man, Jim Matthews of the First World War was James the blacksmith's grandson. Thomas's own birthplace is hard to read on the 1901 sheet, perhaps "Toddington", which does not settle it.

Archie Alan Matthews, about 1900 to 1935

Archie became the master of the forge. In 1911 he was 40, "Shoeing & General Smith" and an employer, living in the smithy with Fanny, born at Grafton, and their three sons. Percy, 13, was already "assisting in business". Harold was 11 and Alfred 8. Kelly's Directory for 1914 gives his full name: "Matthews Archie Alan, blacksmith".

That entry settles a question left open in the earlier essay. The 1927 newspaper report of the new maypole said "the weather-cock and iron work were made by Mr A. A. Matthews, blacksmith, of Welford". A. A. was Archie Alan, the master smith, not his son. When the same pole was struck by lightning, the Stratford Herald of 27 September 1935 said the ball and vane had been made by "the late Mr A. A. Matthews". So Archie died between 1927 and 1935. That fits the interview's statement that smithing carried on at the old site "until 1935".

The interviewee, recorded as "Mr Arthur Matthews born 1902 by the Maypole", must be Archie's youngest son. The 1911 census calls him Alfred, aged 8; the researcher who copied it noted that "Alfred Matthews, the son of the Blacksmith, was 8 in 1911". Arthur and Alfred are easily confused by ear, as Dorsington and "Doors in" were. His "father & grandfather were Blacksmith", which matches Archie and James exactly.

Archie's other sons took the business in new directions. Harold started selling and repairing bicycles in 1917 and moved to the garage site in 1934, as the next section tells. Percy, the boy assisting in 1911, may be the brother who, according to one page of the Society's draft history, "reopened" the smithy beside the garage and built up a haulage business. A Percy Matthews, sometimes printed as "Perry", was also a founder member of the Welford dramatic society, playing Sam Shipley in January 1950 and the handyman Sam Pecker in *Quiet Week End* that December.

Iron for the whole village

A country smith was a general engineer before the word was common. The Matthews family listed their work as smithing, wheelwrighting, plumbing, ladders, wheelbarrows and "occasionally dentistry". They did the farm smithing at Milcote Manor and Weston Sands. Their plumbing on the high west wall of the Rectory, put up around 1900, was still working in 1969 "in spite of its Heath Robinson appearance". The daily round, though, was horses and wheels.

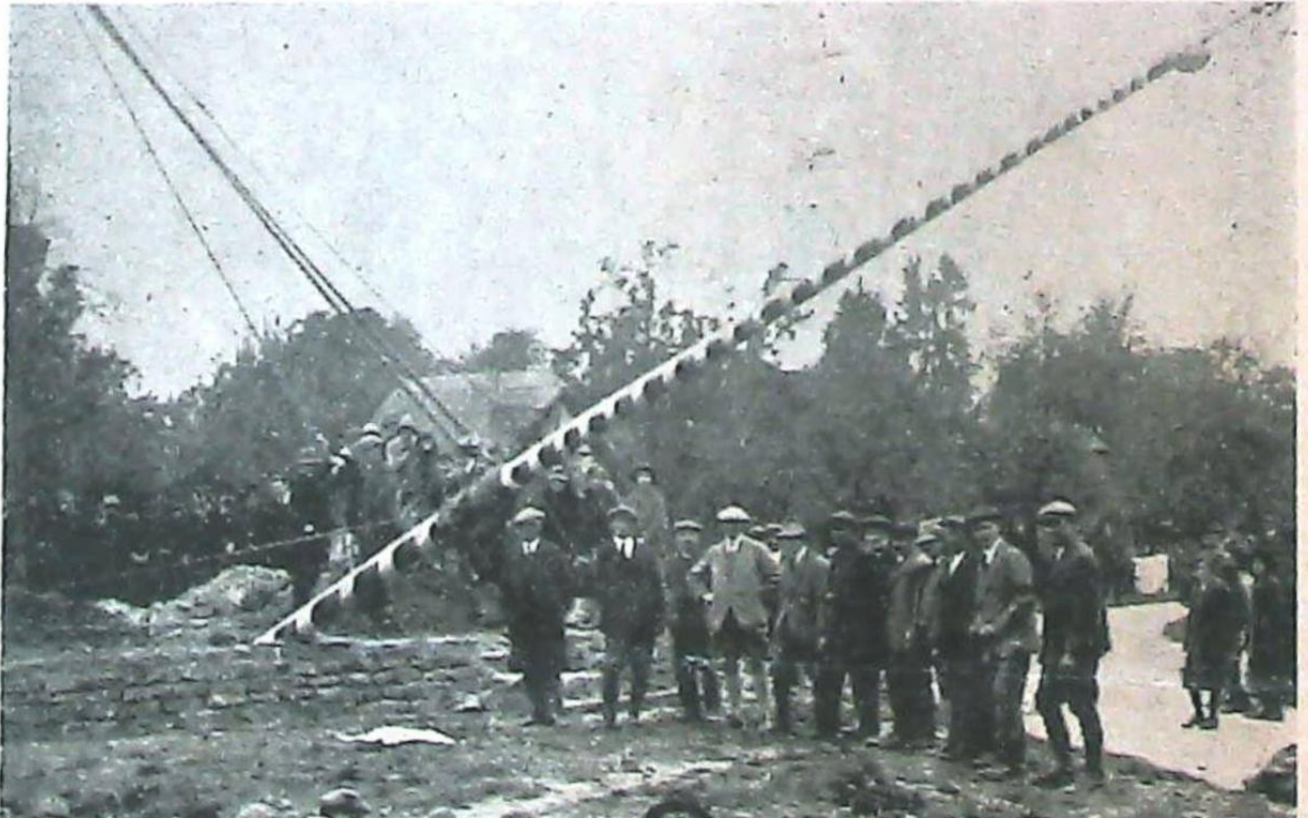
Shoeing and tyreing

Archie Matthews described himself in 1911 as a "Shoeing & General Smith", and shoeing came first for good reason. Welford's farms, carriers and market gardeners all depended on horses. The 1969 parish magazine remembered that "the horses, cart and plough horses, hunters, the smart pony, were all brought to the forge to be shod". Hunters mattered too: meets were still held at the maypole in 1938.

The most memorable job was tyreing a wheel, which needed both trades that Welford's deeds keep putting side by side. The wheelwright built the wooden wheel. The smith made an iron hoop slightly smaller than the rim, heated it in a ring of fire until it expanded, and dropped it over the wheel on an iron plate. Water was thrown on at once, so that the iron shrank tight and pulled the joints together. The parish magazine's writer watched it as a child: "what excitement for the children on their way to and from school to see the heavy wagon wheel rim, red hot, being lifted from the fire and dropped over the wooden wheel lying on an iron turn-table." At a Society panel on "Welford before electricity" in 1977, residents again named the forge fitting cart tyres as something the village did for itself.

The maypole

The forge's most public work stood on the green. James Matthews made the weathervane for the 1896 maypole. When the village raised a new pole of Norwegian timber in May 1927, "the weather-cock and iron work were made by Mr A. A. Matthews, blacksmith, of Welford". The pole was erected on 2 May 1927 by Frank Ball, whose father had raised the poles of 1879 and 1896. The weathercock had a dramatic end. On Tuesday 24 September 1935 lightning struck the pole and brought it down into Chapel Street, the forge's own street. The vane "was thrown a considerable distance", and the "bird" was later found "roosting" in a tree.



"The erection ceremony, May 2, 1927", reprinted by the Stratford-upon-Avon Herald on 27 September 1935 after lightning destroyed the pole. The Herald credits the ball and vane to "the late Mr A. A. Matthews". Welford and Weston Local History Society archive, 47/925.

When the village replaced the pole in 1938, the work went elsewhere. The new pole of nearly 70 feet stood on "a strong steel base, specially designed and made by Mr. Frank Ball of Messrs. Ball Brothers, Stratford-on-Avon, hinged so that the pole can be lowered for repainting". Its new vane, a fox, was presented by Mr Saunders of Moseley. With Archie dead and the old shop closed, the village's ironwork now came from a Stratford engineering firm. It is a small sign of how the trade was changing.

Side trades and a missionary

Smiths often had a sideline. A handwritten parish history of 1938 records that "agricultural machinery was also made here by at least two of the old village wheelwrights and blacksmiths. One of the latter introduced the Papier Maché work also, and one of the iron moulds for making papier-mâché trays can still be seen here." The writer does not name him. Papier-mâché trays were a Midlands speciality, made in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, and a Welford smith who forged the moulds was tapping into that trade.

The trade could also carry a man a long way. John Howell was born at Welford on 23 January 1861. According to a Baptist Missionary Society tribute in Folder 07, he "received an excellent training for work in Congo by learning a trade as a blacksmith and maker of agricultural implements". He went to the Congo in 1889, built the paddle-steamer *Pioneer* at

Kinshasa, made 170,000 bricks for a mission school, and convened the 1911 Congo General Conference of Missions. The tribute does not say where he learned his trade, and by 1885 he was in Birmingham. Even so, the practical skills of a smith took a Welford boy further than any other villager in this archive. The tribute is very much of its period in how it describes Congolese people, which the Society may want to note if it quotes from it.

The smith's apron

The archive also keeps a piece of smith's folklore. A cutting pasted into a Stratford scrapbook, "A Trade Legend", tells how a village blacksmith explained the snipped fringe on his new leather apron. At the building of the Tower of Babel, the story goes, the king gave a feast for all the workmen except St Clem, the blacksmith, who made their tools. St Clem stopped work, "the first strike in history", until the king held a second feast in his honour and made him "King of Tradesmen". The jealous tailor then crawled under the table and snipped the smith's apron. St Clement's Day, 23 November, was the blacksmiths' feast across the Midlands.

A TRADE LEGEND.

Going into our village blacksmith's shop, I found him sporting a brand new leather apron. The curious fringe round the bottom, caused by the leather having been snipped for a depth of three inches, puzzled me. He told me it was an old custom of his trade arising from a legend of the building of the Tower of Babylon. During the building of the Tower the King of Babylon gave a feast to which all the workmen were invited except St. Clem, the blacksmith, who made all their tools. The omission so offended St. Clem that he refused to make any more tools for the workers engaged on the Tower. This must have been the first strike in history. Now, as the workmen quickly wore out their tools and St. Clem refused to make them new ones, the work on the Tower soon came to a standstill. When the King heard of this he sent for St. Clem and demanded an explanation. This was readily forthcoming, and the King, considering that the blacksmith's resentment was justified, ordered a fresh feast to be prepared, with St. Clem as the chief guest. The second feast duly took place, and St. Clem occupied the seat of honour. Unfortunately, however, a shadow was early cast upon the merry-making. For the King told St. Clem that it was his duty as King of Tradesmen to fix the time at which everyone should start and leave off work, and St. Clem accordingly decreed that everyone should work from six in the morning till seven at night. Now this decree greatly annoyed all the workmen, for only St. Clem had been working such long hours, he having to make the tools for all the rest. Most upset of all was the King's tailor, for he had always worked to suit himself, being a very lazy man. So, in revenge, when St. Clem was merry over his wine, the tailor crawled under the table and snipped the blacksmith's apron across the bottom with his scissors. This is how all blacksmith's aprons came to have their fringe.—

"A Trade Legend", an undated newspaper cutting about St Clem and the fringed blacksmith's apron, from a Stratford-area scrapbook. The village is not named. Welford and Weston Local History Society archive, 23/54-69, p. 72.

From horses to motors

The twentieth century took away the forge's main customer, the horse. The Matthews family did not fight the change; they rode it. James had already built and mended bicycles in the 1890s. In 1917 his grandson Harold, Archie's middle son, started "a new side to the business", selling and repairing bicycles and accessories in a shop on the site where the house called Barndale later stood. In 1934 he moved to the site of the present Welford Garage on the Binton Road, and ran it, mostly single-handed, until he retired in 1969. He told the parish magazine that the first car in Welford belonged to Mr Cleveland Green of Welford House, who looked like Edward VII and drove a one-cylinder Rover.

Welford was not unusual. The Arrow valley gazetteer records the same story in village after village. At Mappleborough Green the smithy of James Ross, who "mended mowers, traction engines from miles around", became Forge Garage, with "a bowser petrol pump here before 1920". At Oversley Bridge a wheelwright's shop became the Bridge End Garage around 1930. Smiths had the tools, the yard and the mechanical skill, and the motor trade grew out of their workshops all over the Midlands.

The carrying trade changed the same way. Wilson Matthews, son of the Thomas James Matthews who married into the Wilson family, took over his grandfather John Wilson's carrier business and ran it with motor lorries. In the 1930s market gardener Mr Lively sent his asparagus to Messrs Daniels in the Birmingham vegetable market on "Mr Wilson's motor lorry, garaged on Matthews ground".

The last forge

The old shop in Chapel Street was pulled down about 1920, "beyond repair". Smithing carried on at the site until 1935, the year Archie's death is first recorded. In about 1936 a wooden shack went up beside Harold's garage as a new blacksmith's shop. The Society's draft history gives two accounts of who ran it. Page 1 says Mr Matthews' brother reopened it, developed a haulage business "(decline of horse)", and handed over to Mr Johnson on retiring in 1962. Page 2 says it was "carried on by Mr Johnson until c. 1962 when horse work had virtually ended".

The Johnsons were no strangers to the forge. In 1911 the blacksmith at the Matthews smithy was Charles Edward Johnson, 25, born in Welford and working for wages. His wife Fanny Elizabeth came from Binton, and their children were Ethel Maud, 5, and Frederick William, 3. He was probably connected to the family of William Johnson, carpenter, who lived next door to the smithy in both 1901 and 1911.

Thirty years later a newcomer to the village wrote down who she found beside the garage. Mrs G. E. Edgington, whose husband worked at the garage before joining the RAF, remembered for a V.E. Day anniversary:

"Next to the garage on the Binton Road ... were the Johnson brothers, Ted and Fred. They were blacksmiths and boatbuilders. They would shoe the horses and repair anything that needed their attention. Any repairs required on boats were also carried out by these two expert men. Their boats gave a great deal of pleasure to many people."

Fred Johnson the boatbuilder was very likely the three-year-old Frederick William of 1911, trained in the trade at his father's side. If so, the forge did not pass from the Matthews family to strangers. It passed to the family of the man who had worked at their anvil for years. That would also explain the two versions in the draft history: a Matthews brother may have owned the business while the Johnsons did the smithing. Building and mending boats on the Avon was a natural sideline for a village whose river had once carried barges to a wharf at the end of Boat Lane.

The horse work dwindled through the 1950s, and the forge fire went out around 1962. Elsewhere in the county a few smithies lasted longer. In 1938 the Duke of Kent visited Charles Bettridge's smithy at Wellesbourne, where 78-year-old Walter Pitcher had "worked at the forge, man and boy, for 63 years". The Arrow valley survey found a Bidford smithy "still in working order" with its fourth generation. Welford's survived in other ways.

What was kept

Two pieces of the forge outlived it. When Les Wilshaw took over the garage from Harold Matthews, the anvil came with it. A later note filed with the 1969 article says "the old anvil is still at the garage and in use". Les gave the bellows, through Mrs Gray, to a museum, "we believe ... at Mary Arden's but we are not sure". The Society's minutes for 1987 confirm it. Mrs Green of Mary Arden's House told members that "the Blacksmiths billows that used be in the old Smithy next to the Garage in Welford are still in the Blacksmith's" shop there, where visitors could watch a smith at work. Welford's cider press and vat went to the same museum. Mary Arden's Farm at Wilmcote, run by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, still puts on blacksmithing demonstrations.

Conclusion: a trade handed on

Put together, the documents show a forge that was never really one family's. It was a village institution that passed from hand to hand. A J. Okes was a blacksmith opposite the lych gate in 1686. Matthew Mills was baptised in 1745 and was still buying land as a blacksmith in 1807. His grandson George Tribe worked the smithy in 1841 with a young Rouse as apprentice, and shared its tenancy with William Rouse in 1847. James Matthews came from Dorsington in 1868 and made the 1896 maypole's weathervane. His son Archie Alan made the ironwork for the 1927 pole and died before 1935. Charles Edward Johnson worked at the Matthews anvil in 1911, and his sons Ted and Fred carried on shoeing horses and building boats beside the garage. The fire finally went out around 1962. At almost every step the trade was taught to a son, a grandson or an apprentice who lived a few doors away.

The forge also shows how a village adapted. The same family that shod the horses mended the first bicycles, opened the garage and ran motor lorries to Birmingham. Smiths were the village's engineers, and when engineering changed, they changed with it. The garage on the Binton Road is the forge's real successor, and for years it kept the old anvil in use.

What remains is modest. The Old Forge, a seventeenth-century house, still stands in Chapel Street next to the Shakespeare Inn. The bellows went to Mary Arden's Farm. The rest survives on paper: census sheets, directory entries, deeds, a cutting about St Clem, and the notes the Local History Society took from Archie Matthews' son in the 1970s. Those notes are the reason this history can be written at all.

Questions still open

The sources leave several questions for anyone with access to the originals.

- **The "1570" date.** The Matthews family said the blacksmith's shop went back to 1570. No document in the archive confirms it, and the earliest named smith found so far is J. Okes in 1686.
- **Which smithy is which.** It is not clear whether George Tribe's smithy of 1847, the blacksmith's shop opposite the lych gate in 1873, and the Chapel Street forge were the same place. The Trust's deed of James Matthews conveying "a house and blacksmith's shop" to William Cox, a Birmingham toll-gate keeper, should describe the property and may settle it.
- **Thomas Matthews.** Was the Thomas Matthews at the Forge in 1901 the same man as Thomas James Matthews of Upper Quinton, husband of Sarah Rosetta Wilson and father of Jim Matthews? Baptism records for Dorsington, Salford Priors and Quinton would answer it.
- **Arthur or Alfred.** The interviewee is "Arthur" in the notes and "Alfred" in the 1911 census. A check of the original interview sheet and the 1902 baptism would decide.
- **The last smith.** The draft history gives two versions of who ran the shack by the garage from 1936. The Johnsons were clearly central, but whether a Matthews brother owned the business, and which brother, is not recorded.
- **The building's date.** The 1992 Conservation Area Study calls The Old Forge a nineteenth-century thatched brick house of two storeys. The 1997 listing calls it a seventeenth-century timber-framed cottage with a tiled roof. A look at the building would settle which is right, or whether the house has changed in between.
- **The papier-mâché smith.** The 1938 parish history credits one of the old blacksmiths with introducing papier-mâché work to Welford, but names no one. The surviving iron tray mould, if it can still be found, may carry a mark.

Sources and picture credits

Archive references are folder/item numbers in the Welford and Weston Local History Society archive scanned into this project. All five pictures come from that archive.

Source	What it supports
10/17–10/24: notes on the "Lychgate" deeds, 1600–1889	J. Okes, blacksmith, 1686; Brookes and Stanley wheelwrights 1831; 1873 "wheelwrights & blacksmiths shops"; Timms 1875
48/65: Tribe family tree	Matthew Mills, blacksmith, bap. 1745; George Tribe, blacksmith, 1806–1871
48/01: 1841 census	George Tribe, blacksmith, and James Rouse, apprentice
11/30: sale particulars notebook, 1815–1956	1847 sale of blacksmith's shop let to William Rouse and George Tribe
48/13–48/22, 46/98, 46/99: directories 1856, 1897, 1900, 1914	No smith listed 1856; James Matthews 1897 and 1900; Archie Alan Matthews 1914
48/04, 14/12, 48/07, 48/08, 48/09, 48/10, 33/48: censuses 1851–1911	Stanley wheelwrights; Henry Bennett 1861; James Matthews family 1891; Thomas and Archie 1901; the smithy and C. E. Johnson 1911

46/37–95: Society talk on the 1901 census	The old Forge next to the Shakespeare; James died 1900; bicycles
08/04 and 08/07: Matthews interview notes and draft history, 1970s	1868 arrival, "Doors in", trades, 1920 demolition, 1936 shack, Mr Johnson to c.1962
13/01 and 01/14: "Welford Garage", Parish News, June 1969	Shoeing and tiring; cycles 1917; garage 1934; anvil and bellows
44/01–41, 33/42–46, 43/03: Virginia Cottage and Wilson papers	Thomas James Matthews, blacksmith of Upper Quinton; Wilson Matthews, carrier
01/75–89, 01/73, 47/925, 16/52–53: maypole papers	1896 vane by James Matthews; 1927 ironwork by A. A. Matthews; 1935 lightning; 1938 Ball Brothers base
47/1–66: listed building descriptions	The Old Forge (47/50); Watermill Cottage wing
15/08: Conservation Area Study, 1992	Old Forge described as C19 painted brick; butcher's shop next door
10/32, 01/56, 30/05: 1983 review, 1950 survey, 1987 register	The Forge as a dwelling, Clarke family
31/06: Mrs G. E. Edgington's V.E. Day memoir	Ted and Fred Johnson, blacksmiths and boatbuilders
37/01–04, 38/01–03: Society minutes	1977 tyre-fitting memory; 1987 bellows at Mary Arden's
54/105: handwritten parish history, 1938	Smiths making machinery; papier-mâché mould
07/06: tribute to the Rev. John Howell	Welford-born blacksmith and missionary
03/21–31 and 12/06: Arrow valley industrial archaeology gazetteer	Regional smithies and smithy-to-garage examples
11/19: Evesham Journal, 1938	Wellesbourne smithy visited by the Duke of Kent
23/54–69: scrapbook cuttings	"A Trade Legend"

Web sources:

- [Historic England, list entry 1382811: The Old Forge](#), also summarised at [British Listed Buildings](#).
- [Shakespeare Birthplace Trust catalogue, James Matthews of Welford, blacksmith](#). The Trust's entries for Matthew Mills (draft conveyance, 30 May 1807, ER3/1432) and Robert Roberts alias Campden were seen only as search summaries, because the catalogue could not be opened from here.
- [Mary Arden's Farm](#), Wikipedia, for the farm museum at Wilmcote.

Pictures, in order: lych gate c.1930 (16/25); Shakespeare Inn 1992 (15/08, fig. 53); maypole raising 1896 (16/53); 1927 maypole erection, reprinted 1935 (47/925); "A Trade Legend" (23/54–69). For more pictures held online, see the credited links in the earlier essay, *The Forge at Welford*.