SHARNBROOK FORGE

and fond fireside memories

The Victorian philosopher Thomas Carlyle wrote, in the typically imperious manner of the age, that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." The resurgence of interest in genealogy in recent years - stimulated in part by the BBC's diverse *Who Do You Think You Are?* series - shows there is much, if not more, to be drawn from the vibrant chronicles that constitute all our less 'great' biographies. The myriad ways our families' lives developed; the concerns that drove our ancestors to travel and change; or the means by which they built an increasingly more familiar world where they were, are endlessly captivating.

by

David Lewiston Sharpe

The conversion, a number of years ago, of an old mill in the Bedfordshire village of Sharnbrook shows how something serving one use can undergo a revitalising redirection, and a fundamental modification of practical purpose. My family has ancestry that came from Bedfordshire, and in fact from Sharnbrook, who similarly changed direction - and in doing so, they found they had to move away. Stoke Mills in the village has become a theatre, and so a thousand-year working tradition of milling flour by the water power of the Great Ouse eventually came to an end. By the same token, my Bedfordshire ancestors - who worked as blacksmiths in Sharnbrook back at least as far as the seventeenth century - moved with the times and, soon enough in the case of my three times great grandfather, James Payne, moved away to London around the 1850s.

It has been something a topic of wonder in my family as to the life James and his forebears had led in Sharnbrook. We can never fully know, at least in specific terms. But, applying a general awareness of local history, and rural history more broadly, contemplating his story suggests some tantalising possibilities.

You can picture the scene - some time in winter, perhaps. The forge's fire serves its function for the smithy's work. But it is also no doubt a source of warmth for any horse owners awaiting the shoeing of their beasts. And as they loiter, perhaps for longer than the task at hand will take, local gossip and news emerging from the confines of their parish or arriving from communities further afield would be exchanged. This would make the blacksmith a kind of newscaster for their times; and also party to a position of power in their knowledge of who was who, and what they were up to. That they also often held the position of church warden - and their key function in the parish would have ensured their role in helping to keep order and promoting unity in the work of the church for the congregation - will have maintained focus for his wider importance locally.

The family story among our more recent generations is that James' grandson, Henry Payne, had worked as a farrier in Islington in London, up to about 1920. Before the wider introduction of early motor cars and other powered transportation, shoeing horses - among other smithying work - must have been a continuing activity for a few years into the twentieth century. Some fascinating genealogy that has led us to investigate various strands of family history has shown us that there were apparently two Payne families involved in blacksmithing in Sharnbrook by the first half of the nineteenth century. The 1841 census appears to suggest this. Perhaps this is what precipitated Henry Payne's grandfather, James, to move to London, and the chance of similar work in the big city. Whatever the real reason (old census returns and other records

continued on page 14

continued from page 12

SHARNBROOK FORGE

and fond fireside memories

can go only so far), two households living on opposite sides of the village were perhaps finding it tricky to maintain a living from the same kind of work. And so James Payne moved away during the early Victorian period.

It seems that the craft learned in Bedfordshire was able to sustain a further two generations of smithying - at least for a while into the following century. But the industrial leap forward from the 1850s onwards had already brought the railway to the village by 1857, and the opportunities of the city that this technology would have permitted the inhabitants to take advantage of, conceivably, encouraged my ancestors' migration south.

Again, family history records link James to a Thomas Payne, who appears to have lived on the east side of the village, where it's known there was a blacksmith's workshop – and to this day, down Godfrey Lane, off Kennell Hill, there is a well, which attests to the presence of the forge in those days. After Thomas' death in the 1870s, his wife maintained the forge and workshop for another twenty years.

The job of farrier – which principally indicates shoeing horses – became the mainstay of blacksmiths' activities as the industrial revolution proceeded into subsequent periods of mechanisation and automation during the later decades of the Victorian period. During the eighteenth century, blacksmiths were among the most well-to-do of any given rural community. But, with the increase in the number of farriers, however, there was diametrically a decline in the number of working blacksmiths nationally too. Their central role in the community, not least from the functional point of view in repairing and making farm tools, building metal components of structures and buildings (including gates, fences and walls), underwent a sidelining and ultimately a displacement. Our Henry Payne, in the end, even in London, became a grocer. As developments took hold, any role the blacksmith played in bringing village life together through their work on farms or for the local church must have undergone some degree of de-focus.

There are associations with the wizardry of the alchemist and the magician – harking back to the origins of smithying in the Iron and Bronze Ages and their quasi-religious mysteries – which no doubt left their 'residue' on the tempering and case-hardening work that the smith demonstrated. But I would not protest such profound status for my ancestry and family, however attractive these notions become, the more one imagines the flames, the sparks and the moulding of glowing, semi-molten metal.

The graveyard at St Peter's church in the village paradoxically awakens the reality of their lives for a number of generations of the Payne family. It shows to some degree how long they had remained in this part of the world. The furthest we have been able to go back, tracing the male line one generation after another, is to a William Payne, who lived in Sharnbrook from 1653 to 1713. He is buried at St Peter's too.

Although, by and large, recent generations of my family were born and grew up in north London, various uncles, aunts and cousins have headed north again, to Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and even Norfolk. Perhaps there is a vestige of a former home haunting us, or flowing through our veins, inherited by blood from our collective forebears.

Just south of Sharnbrook flows the Great Ouse, snaking its way in a north-easterly direction through Bedfordshire and into Cambridgeshire. We have remarked in our family how odd it is that, much later, my grandparents moved to Haddenham, north of Cambridge, thus returning to a home near the banks of the Ouse. The ancient Greeks said that "you can't step twice into the same stream", and our ancestors' subtle or swiftly shifting existences show us that we can't lead the same life twice either. But a return to a familiar location can make us explore, question and revivify our 'rootedness', and my grandparents showed me how a return home is a comforting thing to do at any stage in life.