

A life-size steel lion for Palm Beach, Florida; others have been made for Longleat

Industrial revolution —at the Broughton Forge

THE ANVIL HAS GONE — BUT A MORE
EXCITING SPIRIT HAS TAKEN ITS PLACE...

by J. S. P. Agg Large

IN an age when every kind of small business, from the family grocer's to the local bus company, is being forced out of business by the great monopolies, it is always pleasing to come across a reversal of the trend. Village blacksmiths have suffered more than most family concerns in this respect, being edged out by the farmers' co-operative societies. But not even the largest group farming co-operative can match the Broughton Forge for versatility.

When Mr. Philip Blake, owner of the concern today, first began at the Forge, 90% of the work was shoeing horses. Today, none is. This has meant that to keep in business, the blacksmith has had to expand his activities a great deal, and this is precisely what Mr. Blake and his five employees have done. Enquiries from Czechoslovakia for a charcoal burning kiln or an urgent appeal from a house in the next road whose wall is falling down are all answered with a nonchalant efficiency by Mr. Blake.

When he first went into partnership at the

Forge he was 19. He took his certificate of horsemanship in Winchester, where the fire-station now is.

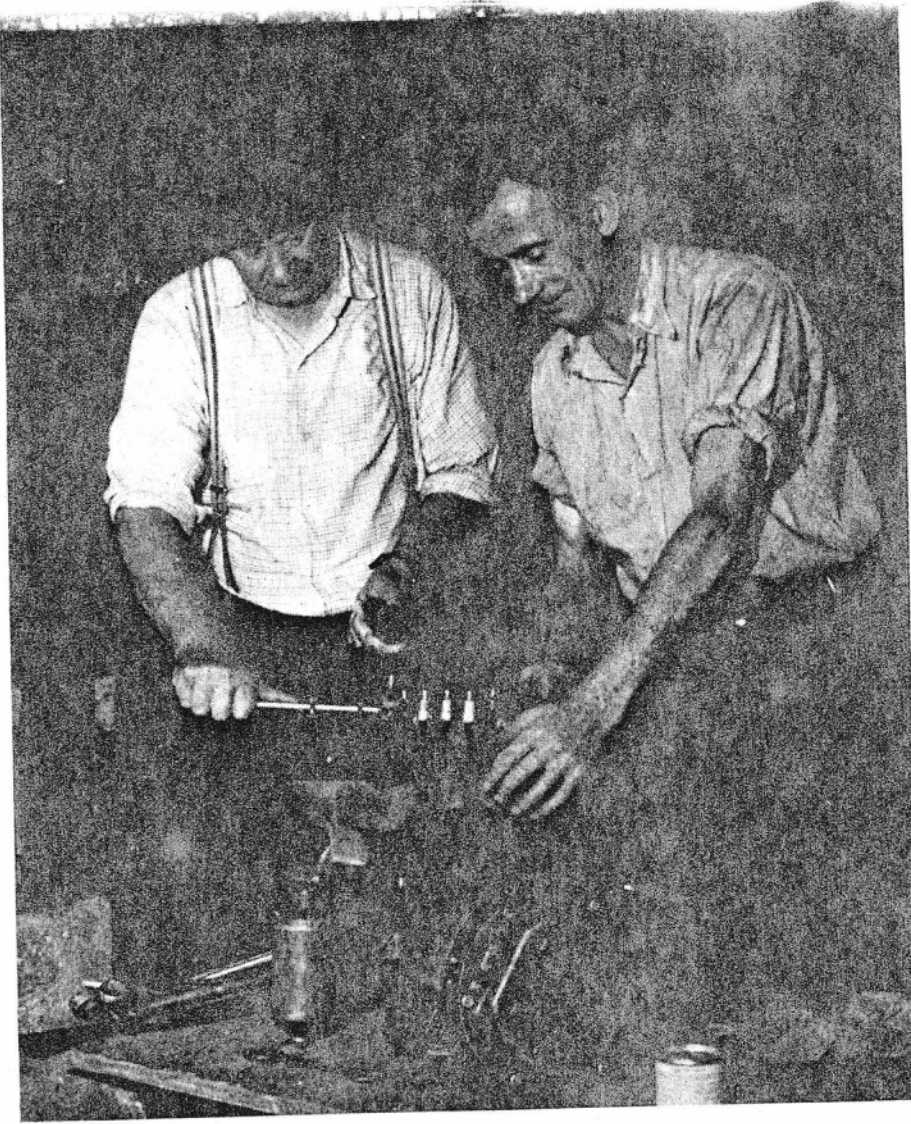
"One was meant to be 20 before taking it, but I was a big lad and they never knew the difference," confides Mr. Blake proudly. "Anyway, I had been shoeing horses for seven years by that time, and I couldn't wait any longer."

In those days there were three blacksmiths in the Wallops, one at Houghton, three at Stockbridge and no fewer than six at Broughton. Mr. Blake's business is the only one that remains today.

One of the more recent 'Made in Broughton' lines has been some steel, life-sized lions which have been ordered by the Marquess of Bath for Longleat House. Seven were ordered altogether, which were originally to have been made in bronze, but steel was decided upon in view of the great saving in price.

The shape of the lions was cut out approximately on the machines, and then trimmed by hand into a detailed likeness. A farmer's wife





Mr. P. H. Blake and Stanley Brewer at work on an engine

in the village drew Mr. Blake an artist's impression of a lion, and he transcribed this on to sheet steel.

When the Hampshire Egg Producers' Society were having trouble in purchasing a conveyor belt for their packaging station at Cadnam they asked Mr. Blake to make them one. Sure enough in due course a fine conveyor belt left his shed in Broughton for Cadnam, where it was duly tested by conveying Mr. Blake — no slight figure — and two other men from one end of the egg producers' building to the other.

A man who does business with egg producers one week could hardly be expected to be advising a circus proprietor the following week, but this is life at the Forge. Chipperfield Brothers have their winter quarters at nearby Chilbolton and spend their off season preparing their equipment for the forthcoming season. Mr. Blake makes various pieces of metal trapeze apparatus for them.

Perhaps the presence of one of the world's top trapeze girls swinging from a crescent shaped metal moon by her teeth in a blacksmith's shed is not entirely in keeping with the image of the old smithy of rural England, but it does provide rather more glamour than the traditional routine of sharing one's premises day after day with a steady supply of old carhorses.

Good examples of the complexity of individual specifications are the animal cages at Southampton zoo. Many customers find that recognised firms producing metal worked goods are reluctant to embark upon anything outside their standard range of products, which is where Mr. Blake is called in. At the zoo, Mr. Blake's men used three miles of electric welding rods in producing these highly specialised animal cages.

An application which evolved from this was a cattle feeding gate device, where a button mechanism can fix and release the animals' heads into position at the troughs. Agricultural implements round Broughton way are embarking upon a new era of technological development, which should put Hampshire farmers really to the fore if we join the Common Market!

The Houghton Fishing Club, which breeds thousands of trout in the Test at Stockbridge, got the Forge to make them a water wheel and pump to divert water into their breeding shed. This, too, is doing invaluable service.

But perhaps the application which has attracted the most widespread demand has been that for charcoal burning kilns. Those who believed that the age of the charcoal burner ceased when the gipsies vanished from the rural scene, or when the sly, broken-nosed characters who fried hedgehogs in clay in the

forest clearings slunk off into obscurity, will be happy to learn that plenty of burning is still being carried on.

Some timber yards try rather amateurishly to burn their own charcoal, but Mr. Blake supplies the kilns for the true professionals — some in Scotland, some down in Devon and some still in the New Forest. These kilns have both inlet and exhaust channels in the bottom of the cauldron, and taper slightly towards the top.

The reaction of charcoal on steel has produced some marked results, in Mr. Blake's experience. The steel becomes more subtle and hence more resilient, which impressed the Army enough for them to treat tank steel in this way.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is still a steady demand for charcoal in modern industry. One of the concerns that buy their kilns from Broughton use them in connection with their work in manufacturing steel for Rolls Royce aircraft jet engines, all of which seems a far cry from the Broughton Forge, situated in as tranquil a spot as any in England between the placid waters of the Test and the village main street, used as much by the local riding stables as by the motorists.

Mr. Blake's brother, Royston, is the 'brickie' of the partnership. He has had a hand in renovating many of the houses in the village since he first began his builder's apprenticeship at the age of 14, and he now combines this work with being Chairman of the Parish Council.

Recently he has completed restoration work on a 500 year old house in Broughton, which has included adding an extension in Cotswold stone. Very little of this is found as far east as Hampshire.

Standing in the yard at the Forge one is conscious of the meeting point of two eras. Inevitably, the anvil has gone for ever, but a more vital, more exciting spirit has taken its place. Although the rural atmosphere of mooing cows, a Hampshire breeze, washing out to air in the gardens and ivy on the wall seem thousands of miles away from a Black Country metal workshop, the sweating brows, clanging hammers and precarious heaps of sheet and cylinders from every type of metal make this every bit as lively a concern as any in the suburbs of Birmingham.

Mr. Blake talks of his domain with an easy-going good nature which suggests that although changes have revolutionised his activities since he came on the scenes, he has not changed a hair.

"Course, we could have expanded," he contemplates, "but what would be the point? I'm 64 now and keeping very pleasantly occupied as it is. We've never had to ask for work, people just bring it along."

As long as there is a forge at Broughton, people will always just bring their problems along. There will always be a demand for the real country craftsman, and even in an age of nuclear power stations and supersonic airliners the ingenuity and skill of the finest tradition of British blacksmiths are attributes we cannot afford to be without.