

VICTORIAN BLACKSMITHS IN STANSTEAD ABBOTTS

**BY
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The 1840 tithe award gives us details of the two working blacksmiths that had premises in Stanstead Abbots at the start of the Victorian period. At the time the core of the village was centred at the junction of Roydon Road and the High Street. Although at that time the High Street was known as Main Street and later in the C19th Tollbridge Street. Both blacksmiths had their premises located on Main Street. Henry Suckling's being located next to the Red Bull [later the Pied Bull] and Benjamin Smith along the High Street on the site now occupied by a residential building known as 'Richards Court'.

A blacksmiths had been for centuries an essential asset to any village providing in addition to the shoeing of horses the many hand-made metal items for horse drawn transport, local industry and farmers not to mention fixtures and fittings for villager's homes. When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837 that traditional importance still prevailed but over the next century this importance was to be usurped as the coming of the railways allowed cheaper standardised factory made metal items to be easily distributed. In the C20th the rise of the motor vehicle was to further erode the importance of the blacksmith as the number of horses greatly reduced. Henry Suckling and Ben Smith in 1840 were of course unaware that they were the last of the really traditional local Blacksmiths in the village, unchallenged for the moment by what was to come.

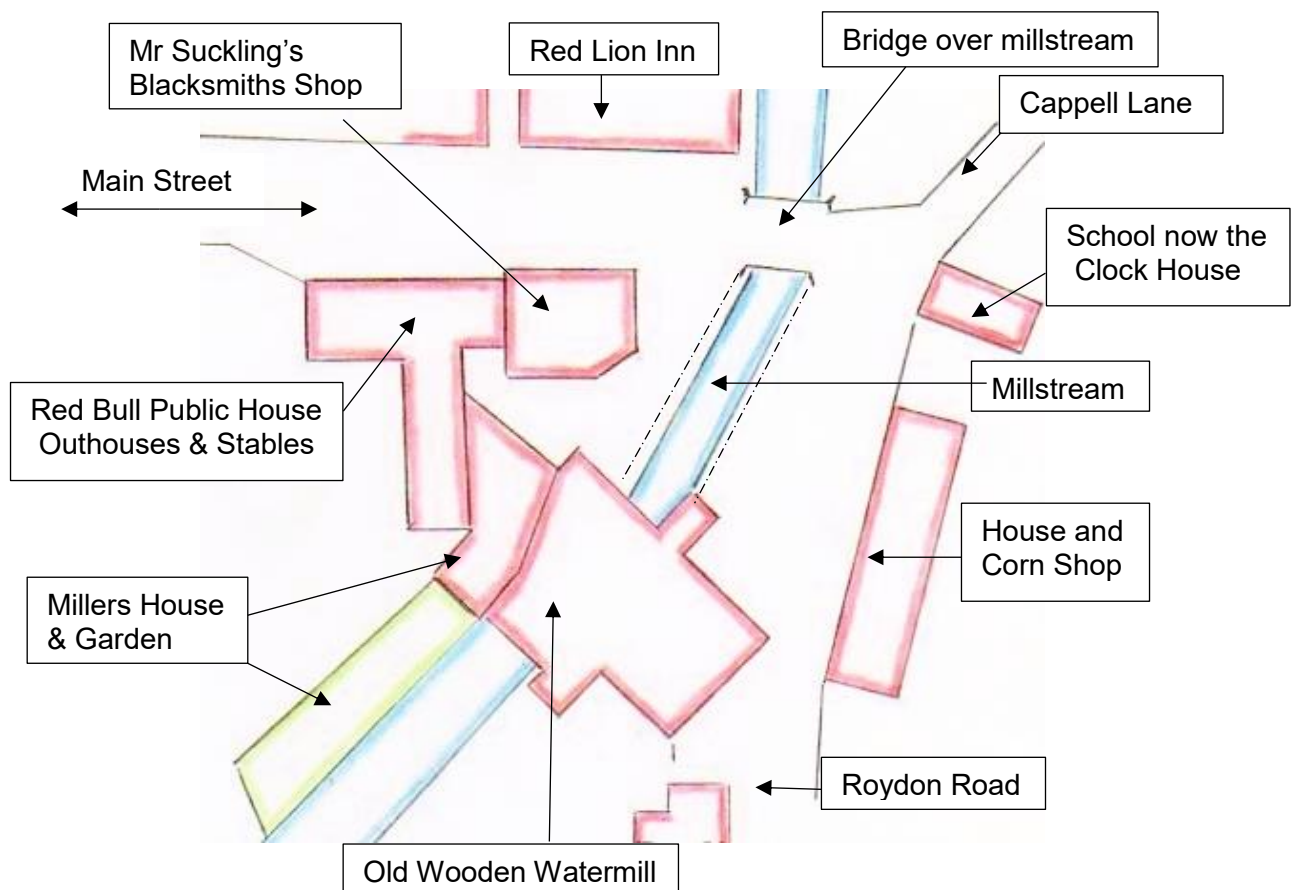
Henry Suckling was born in 1809 in Stanstead Abbots to John William and Elizabeth Suckling and had married Mary Ann from Watton in the early 1830s. The 1840 tithe award has him living and working in Main Street Stanstead Abbots in premises next to the Red Bull Inn opposite the Red Lion. He is renting his home and blacksmiths shop from the trustees of the late William Henry Fielde. In the 1841 census Henry aged 30 is recorded as a Blacksmith living with his wife Mary Ann 39 years of age and their children Sarah 4 and George 2. By the 1851 census John 9, Isabella 7 and Charles just 7 months had been added to the family. In 1861 a further and final child William by then aged seven was also recorded. However the 1861 census also shows that Henry and his family have moved away from Stanstead Abbots and he is working as a Farrier and Publican in Amwell End in Ware. His son George is also working as a Farrier, no doubt having been trained under his father's tutelage. Henry was to move on again as he is recorded in 1871 working as a Blacksmith in Cheshunt with his son William then aged 17 working with him. Henry was to live just two more years with his burial at the age of 63 recorded as taking place on the 20th march 1873 at Waltham Abbey.

Returning to Stanstead Abbots we find both Henry Suckling and Ben Smith listed in the Post Office Directory of 1855 as Blacksmiths. However in the 1860s we discover that Henry Suckling's home and Blacksmith's Shop became a victim of the changes made to the road junction at the Roydon Road end of the High Street. This was done in connection with the rebuilding of the Old Wooden Watermill and its replacement by a new brick built mill by Richard Hunt the then lessee of the Mill business. The old mill did in fact burn to the ground in 1864. However the plans for redesigning the road junction were well known by then and work was already in progress. This redesign meant that the Blacksmiths shop and Henry's home would need to be demolished. It is likely that this is why he moved to Ware sometime between 1855 and 1861.



Mr Suckling's home and blacksmiths shop was located as an additional building on the gable end of the Pied Bull now a residential property. It would have extended well out into the current road about as far as being level with the right hand traffic island. The High Street used to come straight towards the photographer and made a junction with Cappell Lane and Roydon Road just behind where the photographer was standing.

Mr Suckling's Blacksmiths Shop location in 1840



The map above is based on the tithe map of 1840 and shows a markedly different layout of roads than we are used to today. The Red Lion, Red Bull {Pied Bull} and the Clock House are the only buildings labelled that survive today. The Red Bull was the village's traditional stopping point for the limited stagecoach services that passed through Stanstead Abbots which perhaps made this a suitable location for a Blacksmith to set up his business. The Millstream crossed a wide open public space, guarded by railings either side, before entering the watermill. Henry Suckling's Blacksmiths shop was located between the Red Bull and the Millstream. To the side of the Blacksmiths shop was a private roadway which led to the old mill and to the Miller's house. When in the 1860s the old mill was removed its replacement was built further away from the Red Bull and no longer intruded into the highway. An additional bridge allowed the Roydon Road to cross the millstream close to the new mill. These changes allowed the line of Roydon Road to be moved to approximately to its current position with the corner into the High Street tight up against the Pied Bull's gable end wall. This meant that Mr Suckling's premises had to be sacrificed to allow this to happen. Despite losing Mr Suckling's establishment the village still had Benjamin Smith's expertise as a Blacksmith to call on, his business being located roughly centrally in the High Street.

Benjamin Smith was born in Ardleigh in Essex in 1796 and was married to Sophia Kiddell of Dedham Essex in 1823 at Colchester. The first reference to Benjamin as a Blacksmith in Main Street Stanstead Abbots is in the 1839 Piggott's Directory. He was at that time aged 42 and had four children and it is likely that he was a Blacksmith in the village some years before that date. The 1840 tithe award reveals to us the location of his premises on Main Street, a site now occupied by Richards Court a residential property opposite La Velles' hair salon. The property in 1840 included a Blacksmiths Shop and house both owned and occupied by Benjamin. He also rented a field situated along Cappell Lane alongside the Millstream and not far from the present day Easneye South Lodge.



A modern view showing Richards Court residential property on the left with the Off License just beyond. The modern building occupies a similar street frontage as Benjamin's Home and Blacksmiths Shop. The Smith family were to run a Blacksmiths business from this location for approximately 100 years.

The 1841 census notes that Benjamin Smith 45, a Blacksmiths, lived with his wife Sophia 40 and children Benjamin H. 15, Charles 14, William Whitby 9, Thomas 6 and Sophia 3 on Main Street Stanstead Abbots. Sometime in the 1840s Benjamin H. married Mary from Hungerford. They are recorded in the 1851 census with Ben working as a Blacksmith and both living in Little Amwell with their one month old baby son Andrew. Meanwhile his father and mother were still at Stanstead and had added Louise 9, Frederick Ekins 8 [a nephew] and Alfred 7 to their household. It is thought that Benjamin H. and his family moved to Stanstead Abbots about 1854/5. In 1861 Benjamin senior and junior as well as Alfred [*Benjamin seniors son now 17 years of age*], are all recorded as working as Blacksmiths. The census of 1861 also confirms that Benjamin Smith is employing 1 man and 1 boy. Ten years later both Benjamins are still Blacksmiths in Stanstead Abbots but Andrew Smith now aged 20 is recorded as a Blacksmith living in Enfield Lock. All was however to change in 1873 when Benjamin Smith died at the age of 77.



The Smith Family's premises are shown above. On the extreme right can be seen part of an open barn like structure within which horses were re shod with the forge in the building to the right. Beyond is the Smith family home all under the one roof with the forge.

In 1876 James Thorne had part 2 of his book a "Handbook to the environs of London" published which gives a little glimpse of the High Street in Stanstead Abbots. It mentions "*a shabby picturesque smithy and a heterogeneous variety of shops some quite rustic in the varied businesses*" It is strange to imagine today that the sound of a hammer hitting metal on the anvil would have been a day to day event in the High Street in those days.

The 1881 census shows Benjamin H Smith now 56 has taken over his father's business. He is living in the High Street premises with his wife Mary, daughter Kate 20, grandson Walter J. 5 and a servant Henry aged 25. It is very likely that Henry was working for Benjamin H. as a Blacksmith. In addition Andrew Smith, having married Kezia Lane at Milton near Gravesend in Kent in 1873, has moved back to Stanstead Abbots. He is living in South Street with his wife and son Arthur 3. Andrew is listed as a general smith who would have been making metal items for a range of local uses but probably not dealing with horses

Ten years on in 1891 the two Blacksmiths were still working in their respective businesses, although Andrew is now recorded as an agricultural engineer. Sadly in the next decade both the father and son were to pass away, Benjamin H. aged 68 in 1892 and Andrew aged 49 in 1900. The 1901 census records that Kezia Smith was running a Blacksmiths in the families High Street premises with her son Arthur. It would appear that Andrew and his wife moved to the High Street premises after his father's death in 1892. Andrew running the business for just 8 years before his widow was then left to take over on his death. Kezia Smith was to continue to own the business aided by her son Arthur, for over 30 years until her death in 1932 at the age of 81.



The used horseshoe illustrated above is from the Smith family Blacksmiths on the High Street. It was taken home by Frederick Bright who worked for the Smiths between about 1896 until his untimely death aged 23 in June 1905.

It was during Kezia's ownership that the introduction of motor vehicles began to eat away at the profitability of the blacksmith trade. None the less a general Smith was also still active in the village from at least 1911. The business was run by Henry Sammans who lived in Litchfield Terrace in St Margarets located in station road on the far side of the level crossing. It is Henry Sammans who took over the Blacksmiths business when Kezia died in 1932. This fact being recorded in the Kelly's Directory of 1933. Kezia's son Arthur was by 1939 working for a leather factory as a Maintenance engineer in Merton and Morden, a rapidly urbanizing area in Surrey at the time. He was living there with his wife Alice. Arthur was to live to a ripe old age dying in 1972 aged 94 in Winchester Hampshire.



A modern view of the location of the old Blacksmiths shop where the red brick and timber building now stands. The white painted building to the right was a Temperance Hotel for much of the Victorian and Edwardian periods becoming Tea Rooms after 1914.

It is not known exactly when Henry Sammans gave up the Blacksmiths premises in the High Street but definitely by the late 1940s. This is when Mr. George Sweeney, previously described as a farm produce salesman, opened a green grocers store in the old blacksmiths shop. Sometime later he also sold fish and chips from the same shop on two or three evenings a week in parallel with the green grocery sales during the day. Rather unusually the shop was entered up a couple of steps from within the old open barn like part of the premises where the horses had once been attended to. This was left open and much as it had always been, its new use being the storage of various products before display within the shop. The fish and chip business was not a long lasting addition to the business but the green grocery trade was continued to the mid 1960's. It was at this time that Mr. Sweeney transferred his business to number 24 High Street, [now occupied by 'Abbotts Stoves'], located opposite the entrance to the car park. This had previously been a greengrocers run by a Mr. Butcher. The Sweeney family took over the business when Mr. Butcher retired. The old Blacksmiths shop and house next door were demolished soon after Mr. Sweeney vacated the premises and the site stood unused for some years. Today's flats collectively known as Richards Court were constructed sometime after 1975 on the land once owned by the village blacksmiths. It is now over 40 years since any of the premises used by the Victorian Blacksmiths of Stanstead Abbotts were still standing. There is therefore little to remind today's residents of the Blacksmiths who were for centuries a vital part of the local economy. Even the ironmongers that replaced them, supplying villagers with many useful metal items for about 100 years, have also gone requiring a visit to a local town to buy such goods.

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[Article created by Stuart Moye based on research by Gerald Coppen.]