



The Friends of Chain Bridge Forge Social Changes, Shoeing, Wheels & Harbour Master

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- Ian And as far as the .. if we can then move on to role of the blacksmith, we've already been able to highlight just what a key position it was within the town and the fact that the blacksmiths knew everybody and everybody knew who the blacksmith was, the sorts of work that your .. when your grandfather and father were in operation, what sort of work would they have been dealing with on a day-to-day basis?
- Geoff Er .. still I would think, mainly farm work and work for builders and contractors, ironwork, garages, whoever ..
- Ian And you, we've already illustrated the fact that the number of horses being shod fell appreciably from before the First World War compared, for example, just after the war, my question to you is what would have filled the gap? What would ..? How would the business have subtly changed over that time?
- Geoff You mean post war? The .. er.. one thing that cropped up was the horticultural industry began to get underway again and when my father was able to start doing some work that wasn't too heavy, we did quite a lot of greenhouse heating, installing hot water pipes in greenhouses which were being built just after the war, obviously hadn't been many built during the war, fitting boilers and pipes, mainly welded, one or two cast iron, growers bought second-hand cast iron piping. A lot of greenhouses down in the ... what's the valley just north of London .. a lot of old fashioned wooden greenhouses were being demolished and they were modernising, taking out the old cast iron pipes and we re-installed those for local growers. It was rather cheaper than fitting new pipes.
- Ian So it really was a continuation of the make do and mend philosophy.
- Geoff Yes, yes, yes, yes and if they weren't using cast iron pipe but were using second hand 4 ins steel pipe which I think mainly came from ships boilers.
- Ian And in terms of, if I can just look at, er, the work that they may have done with horses because that was a specific skill in itself, how would they go about shoeing a horse? So a horse with its owner, talk me through what would need to be done.
- Geoff Right, well, er .. first you would remove the old shoe. The nails the shoes are nailed on with are put in so that they come out inch and a half or so up the hoof and then is clipped off and bent down, clenched which keeps it tight. There's a little tool we have, we call it a buffer, to .. which is like a chisel with a handle, a very short chisel with a handle on the side to cut off the clinches and then pull off the shoe with a pair of blacksmiths pincers which are not like a carpenters pincers, they have very thin edges to the pincer end so that it will go between the .. you can get it between the hoof and the shoe to ease off the shoe and ease it around from one side to the other to be pulled off with the nails still in.
- Ian And you mentioned before that very often shoes would be taken off, the nail clipped and then the shoe put back on.
- Geoff Put back on, yes, that was known as removes. The hoof, of course, keeps growing and after five or six weeks, if the shoe wasn't worn out, it would need to be taken off and refitted.
- Ian Right
- Geoff A process exactly the same as putting on a new shoe but it was done for half the price in my grandfather's time, 3 and a half pence for each shoe, 7p for a new one. When I was shoeing I think I was charging £2 10s and removes would be about 25s.
- Ian I see and who is holding the horse while it's being shod.
- Geoff Normally, once they get used to it, in fact, most .. a lot of farmers not perhaps before they broke in a horse, send it to be shod and by the time the blacksmith has struggled to get the shoes on, I think the horse was half broken in. Wasn't quite the right way of doing things but it did happen.
- Ian And so would anybody have been holding the horse.
- Geoff No, no they were normally tied up to the hooks in back of the shoeing shed.
- Ian And in terms of the horseshoes, would you have done all four hooves or ..
- Geoff Usually not, most of the shoeing that I did were farm horses which weren't working on roads so they didn't wear out the shoes particularly quickly and a horse at work, most of the work is done with the front legs.

Ian Why is that?

Geoff Well, if you think the collar is round its neck and he's pushing into it with his chest then the front legs naturally are the ones that are doing the pushing.

Ian And that really illustrates the work that you did in terms of the farrier side of the business which was integral to being a blacksmith.

Geoff Yes, well for a shoeing smith it was, there were blacksmiths who didn't shoe horses, in the early days I would think not very many apart from specialist blacksmiths, decorative ironwork.

Ian So would it be fair to say that the work that your grandfather and your father did and in turn yourself that you were more of, is the phrase, a general blacksmith applicable?

Geoff Oh yes, certainly, yes my grandfather termed himself a shoeing smith, as did my father and, well, I did too.

Ian And we also looked at a wheelwright and I understand there is an important distinction, talk me through what one would need to do if you were doing that side of the business.

Geoff I myself did not do any shoeing of wheels, well I did one, retired blacksmith who lived in town had a horse and a trolley and it was a bit of a higgler ..

Ian What's a higgler?

Geoff A higgler .. they go back a long, long way but he would have a horse and a trolley or a cart and he would do transport, a freelance and also in those days a lot of working men had an allotment which was rather bigger than what we think of and allotment these days, would be half an acre or an acre or more which would need ploughing but he wouldn't have a horse of his own and a higgler would plough the land for him.

Ian And so although your knowledge of that side of the business wasn't particularly great somebody of your grandfather or father's era, what relationship would they have with specific wheelwrights?

Geoff If a wheelwright did not have his own blacksmith the business would make up the wheels and bring them to the blacksmith to have a tyre fitted. It was a job that needed a lot of experience because the blacksmith would have to judge the state and condition of the wheel, if it was a new wheel would be ... compared with an old wheel would be rather loose and the, I mean the principle to know is that the tyre is heated to expand it but the amount of expansion that the blacksmith allows for when he welds up the tyre before he puts it on, if the contraction when the tyre is cooled, is what they call the nip and if the tyre was given too much nip it could break the wheel or crack the bellows, those are the curtain bits around the circumference of the wheel, the wheel would be set up, just propped up off the ground, and with a traveller which was a steel disc, 9 or 10 ins in diameter with a notch at one point or if not a notch the blacksmith would put a chalk mark on it, chalk mark on the wheel and run the traveller with its handle around the circumference of the wheel. Then he'd have the circumference and then roll the traveller along the bar of iron while it was straight and he would have the length. That bar of iron then went through the rollers to turn it into a ring. It might have to be put through a number of times to gradually .. into a circle before it was welded in the fire and then heated. My grandfather .. put a sheet of iron on the forge to extend the area and the sheet would be piled up with wood shavings and the tyre put horizontally in fire, gradually worked around and around until it was hot enough expanded enough to put it onto the tyre. The wood shavings would keep the, would burn and keep it hot. Father wasn't that keen on the fire, carry it outside into the workshop when the wheel was clamped down on the shoeing plate, a cast iron, a circular cast iron disc which could be clamped down a nut and bolt in the middle. The tyre dropped onto the wheel and there were special tyre levers to ease it on and hammered on with a sledge hammer as quickly as possible because the wheel's hot and it's burning the, sorry the tyre is hot and it's burning the wheel so that we could get it on as quickly as you can and then run around with watering cans and buckets of water to cool it off.

Ian And how long would this process take if they were quite skilled at what they were doing? How long would that process?

Geoff Certainly as I remember it but I ... the longest part of the process was getting the tyre hot I should think but to make a tyre from scratch I don't recall, I should think it would take several hours and I would think to bend it, welded up and fitted ..

Ian And because it did take a relatively long amount of time was the cost of doing it quite high because of the time the blacksmith had actually spent on it?

Geoff I suppose it would but it seems ridiculously cheap when we look at the day books from 1917 and earlier and if I can find it I'll ... and see how many, going through it, find out how many he had tyres grandfather was fitting in those days but .. He wasn't doing it every week that's a fact, had he had a wheelwright ... some blacksmiths, sorry, some blacksmiths attached to a wheelwright for heating the tyre had a vertical, like an oven, like a steel oven which was 8 or 9 ins wide I should think, and make a fire in the bottom of it and the wheel could be stood up vertically and turned around which would have been more straight forward and easier than trying to heat it horizontally in a comparatively small fire of the forge.

Ian And in terms of the wheelwright side of the business it was very much something they may well have done but it wasn't something that was done regularly compared with

Geoff No, not shoeing horses. Groom Brothers in High Street made wheels and I should think most of the wheels in grandfather's shop were made by Grooms, new wheels and refitted tyres on old wheels, new tyres on old wheels, probably most of those would be done too for Grooms.

Ian And in terms of perhaps another side of the business, the dealings with the port, now you've mentioned before that the activity in the port area in that in Spalding is something that was reducing over time, what involvement would you grandfather and father have had other than being technically the Harbour Master, what work, if any, would they have done on the shipping, the barges?

Geoff Yes, by, I would think by grandfather's time, Plowmans, corn merchants in High Street was still using the river until the First World War George Plowman tells me. Birchs were the only people that were using the river commercially, I suppose occasionally there might have been an odd job to do for Birchs on the boats but on the barges that Birchs used there was very little gear apart from the hull of the boat itself.

Ian I see. And so really what you're saying is the level of work done on that side of the business, if I can term it like that, was really quite minimal.

Geoff Oh I would, I would think so, yes. We might find grandfather was doing a bit in the early years he was in the day book

Ian And there was a ... er... there was an amount of money your grandfather was paid to be the Harbour Master and that was how much a year?

Geoff £5 a year, I think it stayed at that till he died.

Ian £5 a year. I see, And am I right in saying it was a 1s a time?

Geoff A 1s. for ... He had charge of the Albert Bridge, the swing bridge, he had charge of that which is right beside the workshop or was right beside the workshop, for a retainer of £5 a year and that 1s each time he opened it.

Ian And you mentioned the Birchs earlier, the company who were using the river still in the inter war period, that time frame, how often would that bridge be opened? Would that be a daily occurrence?

Geoff It .. I wouldn't think so, no, I mean Birchs had, also had lorries by that time and they had a warehouse at Fosdyke where their sea going ships would off load and .. but the economics of it I'm not sure, they certainly had lorries but were still using the river so I imagine it was worth their while to load the barges and then unload them at this end.

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Ian Meeting between Ian and Geoff, 27th October. We're starting with the social changed that Geoff would have witnessed in his role as blacksmith and we could start Geoff, by talking about, in general terms, the increasing mechanisation that occurred, certainly in your early days as well as that of your father and grandfather.

Geoff What was happening in my grandfather's time and yes, in my father's time, was the increasing mechanisation of farming and that the horseshoeing dropped away, I suppose, fairly quickly over

the years. I don't remember grandfather shoeing every day. I mean, there were horses frequently there but looking at the early day books when .. in the early years, the early 1900s before the First World War and he was shoeing horses, several horses every day, Gradually through the 20s, after the war through the 20s, looking through the day books there were fewer and fewer horses and probably there were fewer horses doing road work. There were horses on the farms which probably didn't need shoeing if they were working on land all the time and their feet fairly sound, a trim now and again was sufficient.

Ian So would it be fair to say that you could split the use of horses between those that did roadwork and those that worked in the fields?

Geoff Oh certainly. Birchs who had horses delivering corn and meal all the time, then their horses had to be shod fairly regularly, perhaps every five-six weeks. Grandfather talked of one horse they had which could wear out a pair of shoes in a couple of weeks. He called it a slaummy ole thing.

Ian Slaummy! What does slaummy mean?

Geoff Slaummy means – tap, tap, tap (Geoff slapping the table!!) – it walked, it trailed its feet I suppose. I've heard it used, the same word used of people who slide their feet rather than walking properly.

Ian Right – that's a local word?

Geoff I think it probably is.

Ian And so, increasingly there was less roadwork that the horses were involved with, was that because the local employers were switching from the use of horses to lorries.

Geoff Oh, certainly, yes and there are items in the day books, marked which I was talking about .. there are Mawbys farmers at Spalding Marsh that used items, of repairs to lorries or brackets made for lorries and so on and occasionally draw bars and alterations to draw bars on tools to adapt them to tractors.

Ian And why was it that there wasn't a move towards tractors, for example, at this stage? Why were people still using horses in the fields?

Geoff I don't quite know the economics of it but I should think tractors would be fairly expensive. But a horse of course, to keep a horse, I'm not sure what the figure is, but you'd need an acre or more of land to feed a horse which with a tractor could be productive. I don't know quite when tractors became an affordable item for a small farmer, probably only as second-hand tractors came onto the market as the bigger farmers were buying new ones ...

Ian And as far as the tractors were concerned, they were beyond the reach of many a small farmer so they would have continued to use horses.

Geoff That's only an assumption, I really don't quite know how the economics of that, that would be during the 20s, certainly before my memory.

Ian And when you get to the latter part of the 1930s and going into the Second World War, there wasn't any great moves towards at that point, it was only after the Second World War

Geoff Oh, tractors were fairly common. The old Ford tractors were fairly common, I think, before the War. There was still, a lot of work was still done by using horses.

Ian And were there certain jobs that, for example, something horse-drawn was preferable to something that was mechanised? Was there ..?

Geoff I don't know. During the war we went in school holidays to my uncle's farm at Postland picking potatoes, they were still ploughing out with a horse plough but certainly before the war there were potato spinners, a machine which was driven, the forks would spin them out so the potatoes would land on top of the soil for people ... still a lot of them using the single furrow port..... plough.

Ian And you mentioned in previous discussions, certainly the use of private motor vehicles was very low compared with now.

Geoff Oh yes,

Ian In your class at school, for example, how many would have had ..

Geoff Certainly before the war, I can only remember one family who had a car and I'm sure, my father would, we wouldn't have had a car but for the business so we had use for recreational use of it as well. That was the ...

Ian And what was the state of the roads at the time?

- Geoff Ah, I would think pretty fair. Course you didn't expect to travel 60 mph on a country road or even the main road.
- Ian And, so, by just before the First World War, the Second World War and certainly afterwards you got more and more mechanisation happening, we've got more tractors round and about and therefore you've got less horses that required new shoes and so that part of the business tailed off appreciably..
- Geoff Dropped off
- Ian And what would you father and grandfather, what would they have been doing to diversify the business away from horses?
- Geoff I can't think of any actual new jobs that they hadn't done before coming along but I mean, certainly after the War, the building trade sort of got much busier so there was work for builders and construction people.
- Ian And would the business, would the Dodd family, would they have had part of that new business in some shape or form?
- Geoff I'm sure they did. There were local building firms but for bigger developments companies came in from out of the area and of course they needed work as well.
- Ian And which areas of Spalding were seeing that development?
- Geoff Well. What was most obvious to me anyway was the St. Paul's development but to look at map of Spalding now and a map of Spalding immediately after the war and to see the huge areas that have, and of course is still going on.
- Geoff So there were big housing estates going up.
- Geoff Well certainly the St. Paul's was a big, a big development, yes.
- Ian And where is that in Spalding?
- Geoff Where is that? It's the area between Queens Road and Commercial Road and Holbeach Road. There was also development on or further development on earlier council estate on the other side, on the Holbeach side of Queens Road. It's the, there was quite a big council estate, pre-war council estate, there but that was ????
- Ian And do you remember your father and grandfather having to look further afield for work or would they have retained their customer base?
- Geoff No, I don't .. I don't think they went out of the area. It was firms from out of the area who sometimes brought them in work and those working well out of town occasionally, I mean, they would need a blacksmith because there weren't so very many blacksmiths by that time anyway.
- Ian And why was that? Why were there fewer blacksmiths in the immediate post war period?
- Geoff Well most machinery, most equipment by that later period was industrially produced so that much more standardisation and spares were available, some machinery spares. Johnson Bros., High Street, had quite a big showroom and stores for machinery spares. Levertons, later on firms like Pettits and farmers, of course, could get, pick up, their own spares. It wasn't a matter of a repair.
- Ian So, would it be fair to say that local farmers had more choice in who they dealt with?
- Geoff Well, I suppose yes but the .. I mean, well, the firm, I mean Lowdens and Johnson Bros., I mean, they'd been in existence a long, long time but the range of spares for equipment was obviously growing and they had the blacksmith's shop in Bath Lane. They had the ironmonger's retail shop in town. They built a big agricultural, wasn't mainly showroom, there was showroom space and an extensive stores for spares.
- Ian And was there an increasing use in sort of modern methods or diversifying of crops at this time?
- Geoff Certainly in the time I remember potatoes but sugar beet was apparently a very profitable crop at that time and fairly closely organised by the Sugar Corporation. Farmers bought their seed through the Sugar Corporation and allocated an acreage and so at one time that acreage could be sold by one farmer to another. He'd sell his allocation to another farmer and it was profitable enough to .. for that to happen.
- Ian And was this era, so we're talking after the Second World War, the late 1940s – early 1950s, when the bulb industry really took off in this part of the world?
- Geoff Well, it had taken off before the war but of course, production had to be put into food for the war and it was illegal to grow bulbs.

Ian That was seen as frivolous and something that wasn't for the war effort?

Geoff Oh, I don't think so, no, I think it was essential. At the same time it had to be given the impression that this business was serious so several things like the removal of iron railings which I'm sure wasn't essential but made people think ..

Ian It was part of the war effort.

Geoff Yes.

Ian I see, I see. And in terms of immigration, we're aware in the times that we live in that the immigration from Eastern Europe but that's just one of many ways of immigration that there has been in the past. Talk to me about the Irish who were here. It ..

Geoff I don't think to talk of it as immigration is quite right. They were seasonal workers in the same way that the girls who worked in the herring industry followed the herring harvest but they wouldn't be thought of as immigrants and the Irishmen came for, mainly for the potato work. I don't think what else the extra labour was needed for, for corn, wheat and sugar beet, crops like that but certainly all, because all potatoes were, at that time, picked by hand.

Ian So labour intensive.

Geoff Yes, yes.

Ian Right, ok. And in the farming year, what sort of .. what time of year would there have needed to have been this seasonal influx?

Geoff Well, at er .. in the autumn, I suppose mainly for potatoes. I can't think of any other crop that the paddies came for.

Ian And they were colloquially called paddies.

Geoff Paddies, yes, paddies yes. Every farmer of any size had a paddy hut which may have been just a wooden caravan on a trailer, trailer caravan that was used for .. that was used by contractors who were cutting corn and thrashing the corn, would take a living van with them.

Ian And was it your understanding that there may well have been an agent back in the Republic of Ireland who would have got the workers required over?

Geoff I really don't think so, I've not, never heard of such gang masters that organised.

Ian So the question would be – how did these people come over? Did they make their own way over?

Geoff I think so, yes. It was purely a tradition really.

Ian I see, yes, and were they taken from all parts of the, of southern Ireland, Eire as it was called at the time? (still is!!)

Geoff I really don't know. When the paddies stopped coming over, I'm not sure, probably by the 60s, I wouldn't think there were as many Irishmen.

Ian And did any of them settle in the local area?

Geoff There certainly were a few, certainly were a few Irishmen but whether they had come over in the first case as agricultural workers, I wouldn't know.

Ian And we've mentioned that there was also an influx of people who would come from the Sheffield area.

Geoff I haven't mentioned it. No, I don't recall Yorkshire people coming as migrant labourers, no.

Ian And were there any other ethnic groups that came over to do work?

Geoff Smedleys, the canning factory on Marsh Road had Maltese girls come over every year and there was a hostel on the factory site for them.

Ian And they were all female or ..?

Geoff As far as I remember, yes, all girls.

Ian And this ..

Geoff They were known as Maltesers.

Ian Maltersers, right, ok. And was this something that was happening before the Second World War or was it something that happened after?

Geoff I don't think so, no. I don't recall continental workers. There were .. they took on extra labour in the strawberry season for canning straw.. or preparing strawberries for strawberries for canning but whether they came from out of the area, I'm not sure.

Ian And was there any resentment that there were people like this.

Geoff I don't remember any.

Ian Purely because it was of a seasonal nature.

Geoff Yes, yes and of course it was necessary.

Ian And the question is I suppose, I would pose, why weren't there the local people to do those roles?

Geoff I don't know, I don't know that there was that sort of pool of labour waiting. I mean but certainly, but certainly local women did seasonal work. In the pea-pulling season, farmers down the Marsh would provide transport for them. I certainly remember Jack Cross who was the chimney sweep, just on Commercial Road, 50 yds away from the workshop, who was also the town crier. He didn't have a fancy uniform like the town criers have now, he wasn't a public employee but it was just another job that he did. He knew the areas of Spalding where he was likeliest to find the people who were looking for work and he would stand just across the road at the end of the workshop to say that Mr. Proctor needed women for pea pulling on Monday morning. Most of them, I think, made their own way but farmers further down the marsh provided transport for them and that was piece work of course, so much a bag.

Ian I see. And was this an era where there was relatively full employment?

Geoff I rather think so, yes.

Ian And were there any other groups of workers that you were aware of who would have come to work in and around Spalding at that time?

Geoff Not that I can recall. Possibly.

Ian And we've touched on the fact that the sorts of crops that were being grown had altered in the first part of the 20th century so there was a lot more sugar beet that was cultivated as well as obviously potatoes and wheat and so on. How big did the production of the bulbs get in the local area?

Geoff Bulbs?

Ian So, tulips specifically?

Geoff Tulips, well, tulips. Course the bulb industry started way back by a local man producing snowdrop bulbs and from that hyacinths, daffodils. It was .. what the acreage would be before the war but there certainly was a Mr. Hewson who was the RAC, what was he .. he was the senior man in the area anyway and he with, in conjunction with the council people worked out a tulip route so that visitors in their cars could go around the route and find suitable tulip fields and would be not choc-o-block with cars all the way round for 30 miles but for long stretches, a continuous line of cars and buses. The buses had a slightly modified route because they .. some of the minor roads weren't quite suitable but the growers did, I think cooperate to try and make it a worthwhile visit because bulbs can, tulips particularly, can only be grown for a limited number of years on one patch of land, so then they have to be moved to, for disease and other problems.

Ian Yes, I see. So you had more sightseers coming into the area.

Geoff A lot, a lot of sightseers before the war and then immediately after the war when the bulb industry got going again, even busier. And then after a few years the .. we had a Tulip Queen for a number of years who would be at various places on the route to greet the visitors and then after a few more years the flower parade started.

Ian I see. And the flower parade started in what year?

Geoff '52 I believe it was.

Ian And was this a marketing idea?

Geoff Oh absolutely, yes, yes, yes.

Ian And I'm looking at a book which is the history and photographs of the Spalding family by a lady called Margaret Johnson and she has in it a photograph of a Miss Tulipland back in the early '80s which just happens to be her daughter.

Geoff Daughter-in-law.

Ian Daughter-in-law, I beg your pardon.

Geoff Beg your pardon, beg your pardon ..

Ian It's either her daughter or daughter-in-law, yes, and ..

Geoff It is her daughter, sorry.

Ian And this is all part of the tulip growing that you see at that time.

Geoff Yes

Ian So the flower parade starts in 1952 and how did you get involved with the flower Parade.

Geoff One of my customers, that was Stassens who were a .. what .. they were bulb merchants, wholesalers and I think they retailed by mail order. They were already a customer, I did work on the nursery. Mr. Keller was the, not sure the manager, I think probably the owner and he decided he'd put a tulip float in the Flower Parade and came to see me with the Mr. van Driel, the senior, the original designer of the floats. When they determined to produce a flower parade they went to Mr. van Driel who was already designing floats for a parade in Holland, which had been going I think for about five years. At that time he was the obvious man to talk to and Mr. Keller and Mr. van Driel came to see me and he, they explained that, not in great detail, what was involved in building a float. He brought one or two drawings to show me and I built that float and then when the Parade organisers heard that I was building one float, they had another entry and brought that to me and I built that float for the, a joint promotion between promoting Swanson Bros. sponsorship by a national, not flower producers, national publicity set-up for the flower industry, I think and because and the and the Royal Mail because such a lot of retail bulb sales were done by mail order.

Ian And that side of the business, for you anyway, grew ex???????

Geoff It was at that stage something of a salvation really. The work that I was doing, mainly repairs, wasn't stretching me mentally anyway and I wasn't, because of the state of the state of the workshop, it wasn't really a suitable in today or even at that time, 50 years ago. It wasn't a suitable workshop to be able to work efficiently. The tulip floats we built originally on the road. The first two floats, on the roadside. Traffic problems weren't quite the same then as they are now and they needed a very big, a much bigger workshop than ever I would be able to provide so the parade organisers rented buildings wherever they could or better still, if they could find them, borrow them without paying a rent. Farm buildings in various places over the years to build the floats in.

Ian And had you ever given any consideration to perhaps moving the location of your workshop?

Geoff Well, just prior to this I had, before the Flower Parade appeared, yes, I'd certainly come to a stage where I would either give up blacksmithing altogether or find a more suitable workshop where I could probably make some money, put the right sort of machinery into it.

Ian And what level of involvement did you have in the Flower Parade. So you mentioned there's this first float and back in, I think, 1953 ..

Geoff 2-3, yes, it was the second year of the

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Ian So a resumption of the interview with Geoff on the 27th October. You were mentioning, Geoff, that you had built the first float for the parade in about 1953, how did your involvement grow and over what time period?

Geoff Quite quickly, certainly in the following year I built three, possibly five but certainly the year following that I was building five and then quickly over the years. Some firms had been building their own floats and that limited how elaborate the float could be. Some of them were built in wood. Cracknell Slope, a building firm, actually built one or two floats in wood. Ernie Cracknell was already my customer so if there were some bits .. parts of the float that couldn't usefully made in wood, then I made them in iron and we worked together but quite quickly I was building three-quarters of the parade and then not so very long after that Geest, who had a .. their float was built by their plumbing department and Geest also built the Tulip Queen's float, I think without making a charge for it.

Ian And how big were these floats? As somebody who's never seen ...

Geoff ... we were limited in width by the roads but they were built on a basic framework, squarish framework that fitted over a tractor which was 7 ft wide, I believe, and we could extend that sideways to about 12ft, 12ft wide and we were limited in height by the overhead cables in the town and the length. Smaller floats were simply a tractor unit so the width could be extended at the front and the back to, let me see, to 24-5ft, perhaps a bit more but the bigger floats had behind there a 50ft trailer so that an entire float could be something like 60 ft, yes, not a 50ft trailer but with the trailer an entire float could extend to something like 60 ft.

Ian And that was quite normal in?

Geoff Yes, there would be several floats of that size in a normal parade.

Ian And was this something that employed your time and ingenuity throughout the year?

Geoff No, till May but from later in the year, November and through to May usually and that involved very long days and seven day weeks.

Ian So, if, would it be fair to say, Geoff, that it was a very frenetic six month period from sort of November time to the parade and then things were quieter in the intervening ..

Geoff That's it. It was certainly frenetic towards the last few weeks anyway. The designs and the sponsorship and organising, sometimes the designs didn't come along as quickly as I would have liked them so that it .. the pace quickened a lot towards the end.

Ian And were they something that you worked on on your own or did you have help?

Geoff No, I had, certainly had help, my father the first few years. My father was working with me as much as he could manage but then as the parade got bigger and the floats more elaborate I took on a casual worker, perhaps one chap in the evenings/weekends. Then sometimes if the pressure was ... there would be two or three helpers.

Ian I see. And the work involved putting these 50-60ft long floats together, what tools would you have been using? You've been constructing them on the roadway by the workshop, how would you have actually gone about constructing?

Geoff Well, using the tools I'd got to start with but a little bit later on when we had a more suitable workshop then I made tools to help. I mean, the construction was simply a framework to hold, what in the early days, to hold a straw matting foundation to pin the flowers to so it was only quite a light framework but it had to be sealed up on the inside so that it didn't collapse with the skin of the float which was quite light.

Ian And who would have actually put the flowers on, not yourself but who would have actually done all that?

Geoff Well, there was the straw covering first, of course, the straw matting. Later we covered them with polyurethane foam, I think it was, in .. about 1/8 ins thick which was glued on to the framework, usually at lot of it had a double layer but it ... that's glued on. Straw was tied on or stitched on with sacking needles and string. The chap Pete, Pete Bell, he did the bulk of the strawing and of course, the pinning on of the flowers all had to be done in the last couple of days or so before the flower parade so local growers brought their gang labour in. I mean, they were seasonal workers often that each bulb grower had their own or if they had permanent staff, they also had gang labour who were available.

Ian And would the floats have been reused from year to year?

Geoff Well, the basic frameworks, yes. The tractor framework and the trailers, in the early days, we used farm trailers, low farm trailers if we could get them and then as we got better sponsorship we actually built purpose-built trailers for the parade which I built.

Ian And would you have been responsible for actively seeking sponsorship or was that somebody else's

Geoff No, no, that was all done by the parade organiser.

Ian I see. And what would one of these floats have cost to produce?

Geoff Obviously they cost more as time went on but the actual constructing of the steel framework was only a fraction, probably the biggest single item but the labour of putting the straw on and the heading, the gang labour, there might be 20 women or more working on one tulip float for a couple of days.

Ian So it was predominately females who

Geoff Pretty well, yes.

Ian Yes. So that then became a sufficient livelihood for you to have in that period?

Geoff Not on its own, no, no, no. But it certainly made a difference to my annual turnover I suppose, really because it was, because of the long hours, although it was probably only a third of the year and in the early days a fair amount of material as well, more than I would use over an average week.

Ian And would you agree a fixed price before you had actually ..?

Geoff No, I didn't .. they would have liked to, it probably would have helped them but there would have been a very difficult job to quote for without putting in a high figure to cover possibilities. It was quite often when you were half way through a float and you'd find that this is taking longer than I thought it would. I always did it as an hourly rate as I did all the rest of the year.

Ian I see. And would there have been anybody else in Spalding who could have done what you did?

Geoff Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure there would have been, yes.

Ian And the question therefore is, you know, why was your involvement such a long one in that period and why did the work go to you?

Geoff Perhaps they thought the devil you know! I know I was doing a good job, in fact I know they were well pleased, the sponsors were well pleased with the results they got. Johnson Brothers built one float for the Spalding Chamber of Trade, Johnson Bros. were a member of the Chamber of Trade but the chaps in the workshop didn't like the job because they had to fit it in with the daily work that was coming in and to a certain extent I did but the other work was dropping off a bit by that time.

Ian So apart from the involvement in the Flower Parade, which was a big part of your turnover, a big part of your year, what other things were you involved with during this time, so in the 50s and 60s throughout the 70s?

Geoff As ever it had been, there was still farm work, most, I should think probably the farm work was mainly bulb growers and nurserymen, builders and contractors, garages, casual jobs that came in – can you mend this.

Ian And you mentioned in a previous interview, you never advertised.

Geoff No, never.

Ian So in your role as the blacksmith you would have to have been a very personable character and somebody who had those personal contacts and that was the way it worked.

Geoff Probably but if the .. I don't suppose there's ever been more blacksmiths than were needed. By blacksmiths naturally dieing I suppose and going out of business but I can't think of any blacksmith who ever had to actually advertise.

Ian And would you have been involved with, you mentioned about the bulbs, there being more greenhouses.

Geoff Yes.

Ian Did that provide work?

Geoff It certainly after the .., after the war the greenhouse horticultural trade had been busy with food production all through the war but with the bulb industry being deregulated growers were erecting greenhouses to force tulips for cut flower trade. I mean, what .. the Spalding area were bulb growers. I mean the prime ... what ... was producing bulbs rather than flowers to sell bulbs to retail. Flowers wasn't quite incidental. If there was always .. if there was trade, if people wanted to buy bulbs, flowers then the flowers would be cut but if you cut the flower off a bulb, the bulb is no good for a year or two as a garden bulb. Greenhouses were going up and we were .. my father had done a certain amount of greenhouse heating before the war. In those days mainly cast iron pipe but after the war there was second-hand steel from ships for each ... to buy to be welded together and fitted with proper joints, that's what we were using. And for a number of years he was telling me, father and I would be busy, almost exclusively heating greenhouses in September/October and (couldn't hear)

Ian So in that way your working year was filled up quite nicely with – there were months when you had a high level of activity with the Flower Parade, there was a certain amount of time that was done with the heating and boiler ..

Geoff Yes, They didn't actually overlap because the greenhouse heating had dropped away before Flower Parade had started. Greenhouses became hot air heating replacing boilers and pipes(can't hear clearly)

Ian And when was your, if I can use the term, when was your quieter time of the year? If, indeed, there was one?

Geoff Yes, quieter, perhaps not absolutely quiet but out of the flower parade season in the 43 years I was busy with the flower parade the rest of the year was certainly not so busy. It was the after the flower parade the floats had got to be dismantled.

Ian Which is something you were involved with?
Geoff Oh, yes, I took them to bits.
Ian And where were the components stored?
Geoff Wherever the Flower Parade Committee could find space. I mean, it was obvious, when we were dismantling them which were the bits that which would be likely to be used again, the rest of it would be scrapped which went into a skip and then scrap merchant.
Ian I see. And what sort of private work were you doing, if I could use that term? So people who would have needed your skills as a blacksmith for repairing things or for making things. Would you have done any of that work?
Geoff Yes, yes.
Ian And what sort of things were being done at that time?
Geoff Oh, I should think all along the bulk of the work was repairs but I did make sort of gates to order although manufactured gates could be bought at that time. Basic and the big manufacturers who could sell the gate and weigh the gate, it would have cost me as much to buy the iron almost as you would buy the gate for. At that stage, for people who wanted something rather better quality. I've never been a decorative iron blacksmith, that's a trade on its own but scrollwork and wrought iron work of not quite the same standard whereas a gate made by a wrought iron smith would be wholly riveted together and every bit of iron would be forged. But those sort of gates would cost a lot of money and probably more than most people in this areasort of wealthy area perhaps closer to London.
Ian Yes, and would you have obtained work from slightly further afield? Not just Spalding.
Geoff The one thing that I did get work for, I know I had a good reputation for making car draw bars for pulling trailers and caravans in the 50s-60s before manufactured drawbars to fit different models of car were available.
Ian And of course, caravanning was becoming increasingly popular ...
Geoff Yes, and more people wanted to use even an ordinary trailer. Cars in those days had a chassis and all the different ... and I made quite a lot of tow bars for cars and did have a reputation because people did come to me from quite far afield.
Ian I see and was that a relatively easy job to do? Was it quite straightforward?
Geoff I suppose, yes, but it did .. it er .. I mean, each one had to be individually made and certainly had to assess where the suitable places were to fix it.
Ian And what tools would you have used? What would you have ... I come to you and I say right I want this tow bar please, Mr. Dodd. Talk me through how you would have got it from a request to something that is delivered.
Geoff Well, much the same really as any job, any job at all. It would certainly be made of, well, extra flat iron and channel iron and angle iron.
Ian And what are the differences, if I may ask, what's the difference between channel iron and flat iron.
Geoff Well flat iron is what it says it is and I suppose channel iron is the same. It's a wide u shape section.
Ian And so you start off with flat iron and channel iron, what would you do from there? Would you mould it as required?
Geoff No, there wouldn't be a lot of bending, it would be cutting and welding largely and just being able to spread the load to suitable parts of the car.
Ian Because, presumably, there was a safety element there in that if you didn't spread the load.
Geoff I'd heard of tow bars being pulled off the back of cars

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Ian So the last part of the interview with Geoff on the 27th October. We were talking about the tow bar work you were ...
Geoff This was the days before ball hitching of course, when a simple pin to drop in.
Ian And .. so that work was of good quality, you were widely known, and people would come to you for that work specifically. And were there any householders who would have come along with various requests for things and what were they?

Geoff One job, and I've seen the same thing in grandfather's day books before the First World War, somebody's name blower made, whatever blower .. The old fashioned household grates with the little fire in the middle, oven on one side and water boiler on the other, fitted into a chimney alcove and the flue was over the fire and there was a metal hood in there, sheet metal hood which was known as the blower and above that, between the, don't know if you can see it there, between the .. above the fire a soot plate which closed off the whole chimney above and that had a little drop down hinged door for the chimney sweep. The blower was the hood and these rusted out and periodically had to be replaced so there were soot plates that I saw that grandfather's .. check and make a note ... blower made, I've forgotten the price but I was still making blowers because lots of cottages still had these old fashioned grates in them, certainly several years after I started work. I was making blowers, not quite on the same ??? as grandfather's.

Ian And you mention being, I'm just looking at a document you've lent me which is three generations of blacksmiths and the reminiscences of Geoff Dodd and you mention here the 1950s. There had been a plan that emanates with the Council to demolish the forge.

Geoff The workshop, yes,

Ian Can you shed any light on that?

Geoff Well, it was only unofficially but my father was alive at the time, that we heard of it. It was just a scheme that the Council had in mind for some time in the future to try and straighten out this little bit of a kink in High Street / Commercial Road junction and we were assured that the workshop would go and some of the houses on Commercial Road would have to be taken to straighten the road. They'd be demolished and we were assured that if, when or at least when this happened there would be a site for us where the houses had been demolished. I presume the Council would have had to build a workshop which would have solved a lot of the problems that we had with this old workshop. Consequently we didn't do any maintenance on the workshop and it began to deteriorate. When I spoke to someone on the Council some, I don't know, probably nearly 20 years later – oh, that scheme was dropped years ago. They'd never let us know. And by that time the forge wasn't beyond reclamation but in .. the amount of money to have put it in decent order would have been too much for the result.

Ian I see

Geoff It wasn't a suitable place to turn into a modern workshop, spent a lot of money repairing the roof but everything else wouldn't have been viable.

Ian I see and moving on to the 1980s, can we just touch briefly on the fact that you actually sold it to the Council for a nominal fee.

Geoff I had a letter, rather formal letter, from the Council signed by a chap who was an old friend and I knew extremely well asking, basically asking what I intended to do with the workshop and I think what they had in mind was to put a closure order on it because the roof certainly wasn't good. I'd done some temporary propping up on the inside. It was, yes it was certainly unsafe and a closure order was probably what it really needed but it wasn't leaking to make it difficult to work in, I could still manage, and telephoned Norman .. have we got to keep this as formal as this Norman? He said no Geoff, I'll come and see you, which he did and called in saying as he stepped down into the workshop and looking up, I love this old place, you know. I'll go and get my boss, and some time later he came with five people, Susannah who was then curator of the Ayscoughfee Museum, who I knew, and one of her staff, and three other people from the different departments of the Council and Norman himself and I think there were six of them and five of them barely knew it existed. And again I remember one of them stepping down into the shop and looking up and saying – we can't let this go – and after negotiation I sold it to them for .. they wanted to restore it and obviously couldn't unless they owned it and in the event I sold it to them for £1 which I never saw and they did some restoration work, took off the whole of the roof and rebuilt the front and back walls of the main part of the workshop and replaced the roof with second-hand timbers but didn't make a particularly good job of it but at least it didn't leak. There were odd drips but it was usable and it's been mine to use rent free as long as I've had any interest in it at all, certainly to work in and for the last few years I suppose I've looked at myself as more of a caretaker than a tenant.

Ian And we're now moving into an era where you've got the Friends of Chain Bridge Forge, how did that come about because really from the 1980s the Council had wanted to restore it but didn't really do anything with it other than some temporary repairs, how have things moved on until we get to the stage where we're actively looking at preserving what is part of the local heritage?

Geoff From the very start of working in the workshop, anybody showing any interest at all, I've always invited them in and told them the story if it was convenient and I've had, at different times, groups of visitors by arrangement for .. well since 1950 but in October of last year, 2010, the .. er .. received a letter from a Geoff Taylor who was a fairly recent newcomer to Spalding, exact details I'm not sure, but he certainly heard of the workshop, visited it, we had it open for a Heritage weekend I believe, visited it, he'd recently retired and was looking for something to do but he was doing some work in the Council offices and enquired about the workshop and discovered that nothing had been done since the Council had taken on ownership and wrote to me, he said hoping that he could set up a group of friends to eventually open the workshop as a museum, to do what alterations might be necessary and he's certainly putting in a lot of time and a lot of mileage. We've visited similar projects in different parts of the country and advice and people have been very, very, very helpful. And we're now off the ground with a group of friends and volunteers who are helping in the workshop itself and right up to date we've put in for a Lottery, Heritage Lottery grant. They advised us to ask for £50k, which they granted us, and one or two grants from other people. The Lincolnshire Co-operative Society is celebrating 150 years of existence and made .. we applied for one of a number of grants they were willing to make and they've given us £5k. The County Council gave us a couple of thousand pounds to help us get off the ground. Local Council haven't got any money but they've been quite cooperative in other ways. We've had offers of tools and equipment from several people who've not known quite what to do with it.

Ian And would it be fair to say that as far as all the equipment is concerned, that the tools you might have used, the fact that you didn't throw things away and that you've kept a lot of them, that's stood the Friends of Chain Bridge Forge in good stead.

Geoff Well, yes, I've never thrown anything away for a little ..and part of the deal with the Council was that when I stop using the premises, this of course was long before the Friends was formed, part of the agreement I made was that everything that I considered belonged to the forge would stay in it when I packed up. So, in fact when I've seen interesting bits of equipment and I've been able to get hold of then with my .. sometimes have ... all the difficulties of the workshop, knowing that they would stay there eventually.