

OCCUPATIONS IN A MID-19TH CENTURY FOREST-EDGE RURAL COMMUNITY

Broom-maker, cordwainer, fly-driver, hoop-bender, straw-bonnet maker: just a few of around 60 different occupations recorded by local wheelwright and census enumerator William Wells in the 1851 census.

His enumeration district took in parts of Forest Row and the northern edge of Ashdown Forest. On census night in April 1851 he recorded one grocer, one shoemaker and two bakers. There were also no less than 88 manual farm labourers. This reflected a mainly agricultural society supported by a wide range of skilled craftsmen and women pursuing traditional rural crafts.

Where possible the plentiful resources of the Forest were used. For example, it is believed that a local stone mason, John Blackstone, quarried local stone for the building of Holy Trinity Church in Forest Row in the 1830s. Such use was usually legal but sometimes not.

This wide range of occupations reflects a typical, small mid-19th century, forest-edge community: quite isolated, mainly self-sufficient and as yet unaffected by the local railway developments of the 1860s

Although only a few miles from East Grinstead the journey from the forest edge would have been much more difficult and time consuming than today. Before the modern A22 was built around the Brambletye bends, the main route to East Grinstead was up and down the steep Wall Hill, the scene of many accidents.

In 1851 the Census shows that the daily needs of the local community were met by a variety of traders such as two bakers, four butchers, one poulterer, two drapers, two grocers, three millers and 15 farmers. Their spiritual needs were met by a Church of England curate and a Baptist minister. Incidentally, Jane Martin was paid £2 and 9 shillings a year to clean the church. One surgeon provided medical assistance.

The local craftsmen such as carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, sawyers, stonemasons, wheelwrights and thatchers, provided the community with essential services. For centuries they had claimed Commoners' rights to exploit and use forest resources and vigorously defended their ancient privileges.

However, by the mid-19th century the traditional way of life of settlements on the forest edge was increasingly threatened. There was an ongoing dispute between the seventh Earl de la Warr and leading Commoners, a group of wealthy of high social rank, concerning the earl's attempts to limit and control their activities on the Forest. This led to what became

celebrated in legal circles as the 'Great Ashdown Forest Case' (1875-1882), which finally settled the dispute in favour of upholding Commoner's traditional rights and privileges, guaranteed and protected by the setting up of a Board of Conservators.

Broom-makers and hoop-benders were important local craftsmen. Broom-makers were based in Forest Row at the traditional Broomyard site in Highgate Road . They produced birch brooms, charcoal, pea and bean sticks and firewood. Birch was cut locally in the Forest in winter, (usually with an agreed payment to the landowner), horse-drawn to the broomyard and piled up in covered stacks up to 30 feet high. Brooms were made on site, some under cover, some in the open, the handles shaped to a point by a draw knife, then fixed onto the wire-bound birch twigs. Broom-makers made many dozen brooms in a variety of shapes and sizes a day.

The Hoopyard at Chapel Meadow in Highgate Road was the centre for making wooden hoops to fit wooden barrels. This traditional craft expanded greatly with the development of the British Empire , with British barrels travelling all over the world ,their precious contents secured by wooden hoops. Local hoop-makers split (cleaved) various woods, often hazel, chestnut and ash sourced from the Forest and processed into rods in local sawpits. Some lengths of rod were sent straight to the coopers, the barrel-makers , while others were worked on in the Hoopyard. Through soaking and steaming, hoop coils were made and grouped into barrel size sets. Different size barrels needed different numbers and sizes of hoops.

In the late 1860s railway developments (which saw the Three Bridges to East Grinstead branch line extended to Tunbridge Wells, with a station and goods sidings at Forest Row) allowed produce, timber, poultry and a wide variety of goods to be sent direct to London. This really transformed the distinctive economies of the forest-edge communities.

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