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NEWBOLD VERDON

Douglas carries on a 500-year tradition

A farrier is born, not made. Douglas Partridge, aged 58, of Dragon Lane, Newbold Verdon, can vouch for that - there have been farriers in his family for 500 years.

Farriers and blacksmiths belong to two different branches of metal craft; a farrier uses his skill on animals, while a blacksmith does more general work in metal or agricultural engineering. A farrier will often combine his specialised work with that of a blacksmith.

One of a family of 12, Mr Partridge was born in the rural village of Billesdon. When he left school at the age of 14, he decided to follow in the steps of his great uncle and become a farrier.

He took an apprenticeship in 1935 when they took seven years instead of the four years it takes today.

"The old farriers," he remembered, "Were as hard as the iron they worked with. Many carried on working until they were in their eighties".

When Mr Partridge finished his apprenticeship in 1942, he joined the Army and spent the next three years serving in the Far East.

When he came back and returned to farriery, he found life very hard despite the lack of competition. So, to supplement his income, he turned to blacksmithing and did general repair work of tools and farm equipment.

"Even that has changed today," he said, "Because most farm machinery is mass-produced. Even the finished article is cheaper than the iron I would have to buy to make it.

"Iron gates, for instance, can be bought for as little as £15, but will not last as long as those made by a craftsman for maybe four times the price. If I made an iron gate it would last for generations".

The future looks bleak for the horse, according to Mr Partridge. "People have been buying horses for the prestige and recognition they bring and not for the love of them", he said.

"The last ten years have been a very sad time because people buy them and many do not realise the cost and care involved in keeping them.

"I have seen horses ruined by amateurs trying to break them in 'do-it-yourself' style. They seem to think sticking the bit in a horse's mouth is the end of the matter which, of course, it is not. They have to be introduced to it slowly or they develop a 'hard mouth' ".

He said the condition of hard mouth renders a horse useless to a rider, as the horse relies on the signals from the reins telling it to go left, right or stop. With a hard mouth it cannot detect the signals and therefore cannot respond to anything less than a sharp tug on the rein.

"Most of the old hunting gentry have gone and the old England is disappearing. Soon it will be one great concrete jungle", he said.

The situation still seems quite secure for the farrier though. Mr Partridge estimated if 50 per cent of the horses disappeared, which he predicts will happen in the near future, there will still be enough work for the farrier.

This is due to the lack of people wanting to become farriers. "It is not a job everyone can take. If you picked 1,000 people you would probably find only two who could take the job on", he said.

The Farriers' Registration Council, which was set up in 1976, describes farriery as "a very ancient and responsible craft for someone who enjoys working with horses. Someone who is skilled with his hands and has good co-ordination between hand and eye. He needs to be fit and agile; great strength is not really necessary".

In England and Wales it is estimated there are approximately 16,000 farriers. There are 44 in Leicestershire, which is a highly horse-populated area.

When Mr Partridge and his family moved to Newbold Verdon in July 1969, he found he was the only farrier in the area apart from one in Market Bosworth.

Today, within a radius of 15 miles of his home, there are four. One of them is 35-year-old Brian Flint of Charley Mill Cottage, Copt Oak.

Unlike Mr Partridge, he was the first member of his family to become a farrier.

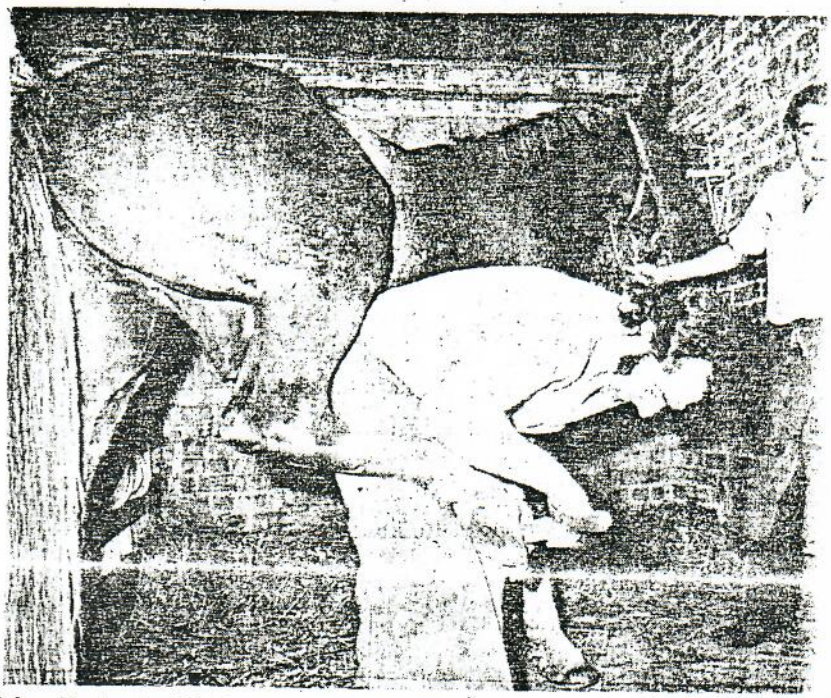
He has always been interested in horses and on leaving school his first job was as a groom in Copt Oak Forest. Mr Flint has lived in the Markfield area all his life and he and his wife Marion have been married for 16 years. They have two children.

His interest in farriery began when he watched horses being shoed by Mr Brian Porter, of Barrow Lane, Quorn. The two became friends and at the age of 23, Mr Flint became apprenticed to him.

Today's Farriery Apprenticeship Scheme, which is administered by the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas, is intended for applicants from 16 to 19 years.

Forty-eight-year-old Mr Porter started his apprenticeship in 1945 and, like Mr Partridge, was a bound apprentice for seven years. Farriery has been in his family for at least five generations.

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He has been married for five years to Sheila and they have a four-year-old son who Mr Porter hopes will follow him into farriery.

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Mr Porter and Mr Flint think the horse will come into its own soon with the rising cost of petrol.

"Even with the rising cost of living", said Mr Flint, "People will always find money for pleasure so the horse should remain as popular as it is today".

Mr Partridge, Mr Flint and Mr Porter are all members of the Farriery Registration Council.

The Council was set up after the Farriers Registration Act was passed in 1975. It gave the Farriery Council the duty of approving conditions for the training of entrants into farriery and for the examination.

It said in Great Britain only those on the Register could call themselves a farrier or shoeing smith. From June this year, it has been illegal for any unregistered person in England and Wales to practise farriery.

It also set up a Disciplinary Committee to judge complaints of misconduct with power, in serious cases, to take a farrier off the register which means he has lost his means of making a living.

The Council defines farriery as "any work in connection with the preparation or treatment of the foot of a horse for the immediate reception of a shoe thereon. The fitting by nailing or otherwise of a shoe to the foot or the finishing of such work to the foot".

Those exempt from having to register are apprentice or trainee farriers, vets or student vets and those who give first aid to a horse in an emergency.

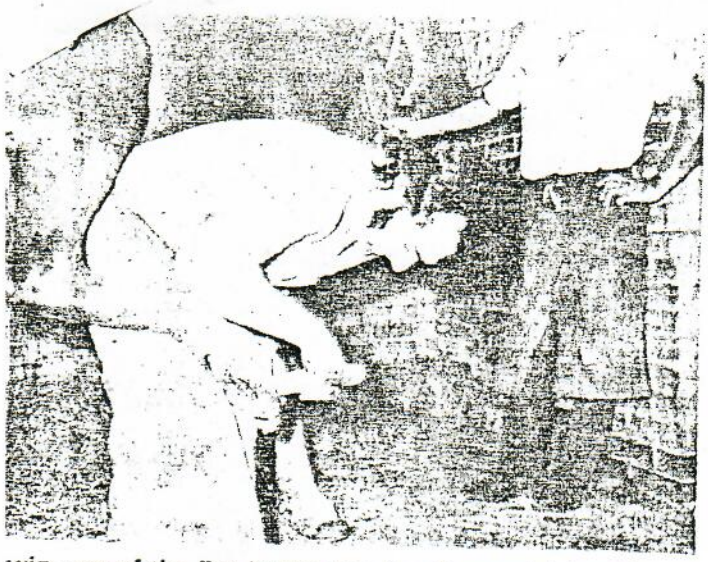
Mr Tom Beighton, the Farriery Council's Registrar said it was set up to raise the standards within the profession

Anyone who is not registered, he said, is warned they are breaking the law and if they ignore the warning they are liable to prosecution, in which case they face a fine of £100.

Mr Beighton said next year apprentice farriers will have to pass an examination before they are allowed to practise. The exams are arranged by the 300 year old Worshipful Company of Farriers which was set up by King Charles II.



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Mr Douglas Partridge fashions a shoe in the forge behind his home in Newbold Verdon.