

A history of
The Old Forge
Compton, Surrey

Philip and Sally Gorton
2020



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Introduction

The Old Forge lies on the northern side of Compton Street, on the brow of a gentle hill that climbs up from the common. It is a very dry place on which to build, a situation that has probably helped to preserve this ancient medieval dwelling.

The property was, for at least three hundred years and probably longer, the home of a village blacksmith with a workshop close by. The last forge was demolished in the early 1970s when the village street was widened.



The Old Forge in April 2019.

For most of its early life, the cottage was not owner-occupied but leased to a succession of blacksmiths. It was not at any time the home of a wealthy man. Nonetheless, although this is a modest house, whoever had it built had the resources to employ a professional builder who constructed a dwelling that has stood for well over 500 years.

The medieval house

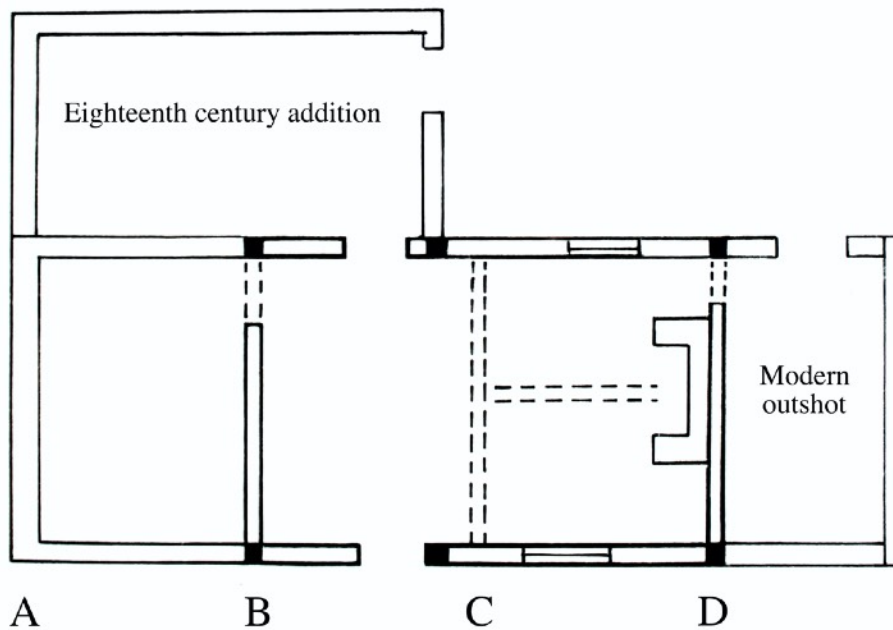
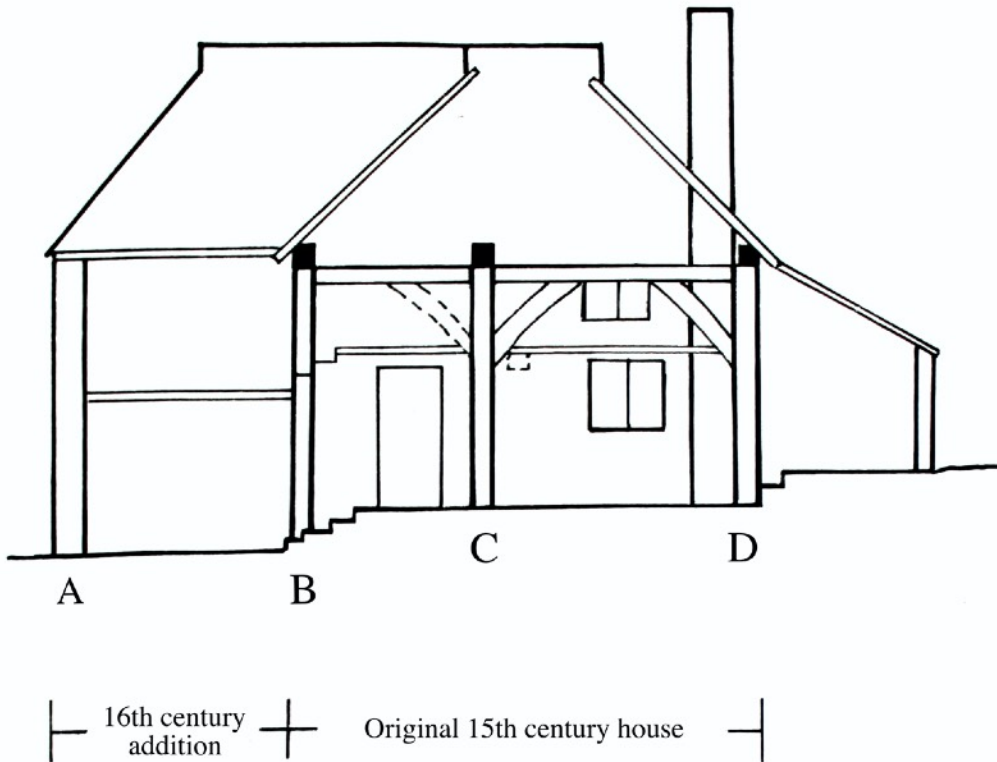
The oldest part of the structure dates from the fifteenth century when it was a very small two-bay cottage, open from the floor to the rafters. The open hall form of construction was used throughout the medieval period between the Conquest and the early sixteenth century and no precise date can be attributed to the cottage. It is difficult to date from its features as building styles changed but slowly in the fifteenth century. Only a dendrochronological analysis of the timbers would give an exact year of construction.

The roof is steeply pitched, indicating that the house was originally thatched. There are very few small two-bay cottages such as this; the Old Forge is a rare medieval survival and at the time of its creation it was a low status house.¹

There was no chimney in the medieval cottage: throughout the day and into the night the fire burned in the middle of the hall on an open hearth and its smoke filled the hall finding its way out of the house where it could. The rafters of the Old Forge, now hidden, are still coated with the soot from these medieval fires. This open bay was used as a very rudimentary hall and was a basic, low-status echo of the some of the grandest properties of the kingdom, most of which had open halls.

The hall was the centre of life in the medieval house for it was here that the family and servants, if they had any, lived and ate. The layout of this area reflected the hierarchy that existed within the household. At the "high" end of the hall was the master's table. Often, in the grander properties, there were decorated cloths hanging from the wall behind and other embellishments that reflected the master's status. His private rooms lay in the upper part of the two-storied bay behind the table, whilst the service room occupied the ground floor.

Open halls went rapidly out of fashion in Surrey after the 1530s and new houses were built with an upper storey throughout. Existing halls were adapted by inserting a floor above head height within the hall space to create an upper room, which is what happened on this case.



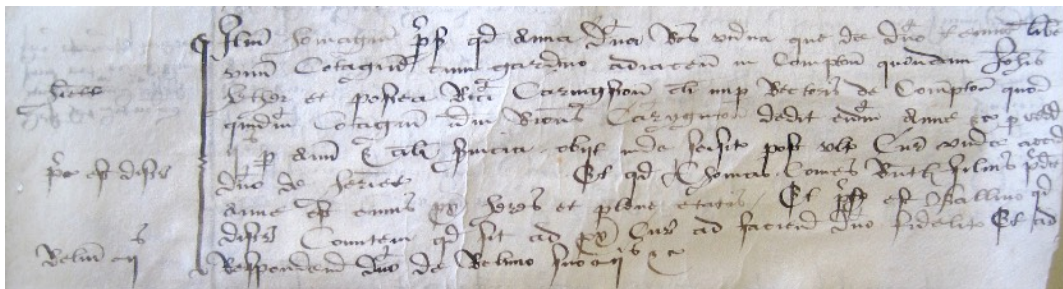
The structure of the house.

The two bays between B and D are the original fifteenth century house. The western bay, A - B, was added in the sixteenth century, as were the upper rooms and the chimney stack in the old part of the house. The northern extension was added in the eighteenth century.

Early owners

The earliest known owner of this tiny cottage was John Hether, who held it at some time in the later fifteenth century. Nothing is known of him except his name for he left no will and there were no parish registers at that time to record any of his life events. We do know from the records of the manor of Compton Westbury, however, that the property passed from him to Richard Carrington who was rector of Compton between 1478 and 1502.²

Unfortunately, there is the same lack of documentary evidence for Carrington. Indeed, we cannot be sure that he lived in the parish at all as some of Compton's rectors chose to reside elsewhere and pay a curate to undertake the day-to-day work of the church. It is possible, but not certain therefore, that he lived nearby at the rectory house, which is now the site of The Grange in the Avenue.



An extract from Westbury manor court book dated March 1527/28

"Item. The homage present that that Anne Roos widow who held of the lord freely a cottage with a garden adjacent in Compton formerly John Hether's and afterwards Richard Carrington's late rector of Compton because . . . the same Richard Carrington gave the cottage to the same Anne, etc. It is held at the [quit] rent of 2s per year".

Whilst our knowledge of this early history is sketchy we can be sure that, by 1515, the cottage was a very small part of an extensive estate held by Anne Lady Roos, owner of Field Place. In the Westbury manor records, it is described as a 'cottage caller Hatchers late Richard Carrington'. Lady Roos also held two other pieces of land from the lord of the manor of Westbury called *Emes* and *Remnans*, both of which lay near Polsted.

It is not clear when Lady Roos became owner of these properties because there are no Westbury manor court records surviving from before 1515. The earliest records note that the cottage had previously belonged to Richard Carrington, who was rector of Compton from 1478 until his resignation around 1502. That he gave the cottage to Lady Roos rather than her husband suggests that the transfer took place in the two years

between the death of her husband in 1513 and the court baron that was held in 1515. There is no reason given in the court rolls for the gift.

Anne Lady Roos was an extremely well known and well connected lady. Her mother, Anne Plantagenet, was the sister of both King Edward IV and his successor Richard III. Her father, Sir Thomas St Leger, had enjoyed a very good relationship with his elder brother-in-law, Edward IV, who had bestowed some fine gifts upon the family. These included the manor of Field Place and other significant properties in the area.

After Edward's death in 1483, family relations soured and Sir Thomas was involved in a plot to overthrow Richard. The plan was discovered, he was executed and his property was confiscated by the king and given to a favoured subject. This state of affairs did not last for long: after the defeat of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, the new king, Henry VII, restored the property to Sir Thomas' heir, his daughter Anne.

Anne was, by then, the wife of George Manners (Lord Roos of Hamlake) and, unlike previous owners of the manor, it seems likely that Lord and Lady Roos actually occupied Field Place. In the late eighteenth century Manning and Bray wrote in their *History and Antiquities of Surrey* that there was a strong tradition still current in the village at that time that Lady Roos had lived in the house. She certainly held other property within Compton and her tenure of it is recorded in the records of Westbury manor. The belief that they lived locally is also supported by the fact that Lord Roos was one of a group of neighbouring lords and gentry who contributed towards the repair of Godalming church during the reign of Henry VII. His coat of arms and that of his father-in-law are to be found on some of the ceiling bosses there.



The tomb of Lord and Lady Roos in St George's Chapel, Windsor.

Lord Roos died in 1513 and his wife Anne thirteen years afterwards. They were buried in the St Leger chantry chapel at St George's Chapel Windsor in a very ornate tomb that leaves us in no doubt of their eminence. In his will, Lord Roos left money to the high altar of Compton

church for “tithes forgotten”, a bequest that also supports the idea that he lived in the parish.

After the death of Lord and Lady Roos, Field Place and its estate remained in the hands of their sons, Thomas, Earl of Rutland and Sir Richard Manners, until 1542 when they sold the property to Thomas Hall and his wife Joan.³

The Hall family

The property that Thomas Hall bought from the Manners brothers not only included Field Place and the forge but also an estate in the parish of Shalford. Altogether, it was a sizeable purchase that consisted of 440 acres of land with ten houses and gardens. Thomas himself was to enjoy Field Place for just a handful of years but his descendants were to own the property until 1709.

After Thomas died in 1546, just four years after acquiring the estate, it passed to his widow, Joan. A few years later, she married James Rokely who held Field Place on her behalf for the duration of her life. However, he did not retain it after he was widowed and after Joan’s death the estate passed to her son, George Hall.

We know little of the estate during these years although surviving deeds in the Loseley Collection indicate that the Hall family lived in Compton. We also know that when George Hall died in 1569 the new lady of the manor was not his widow, Juliana, but their daughter Elizabeth who was just eight years old when she inherited the property.⁴ One can imagine, as the years progressed, that this very eligible young lady would have had quite a selection of suitors. Surprisingly, perhaps, her husband was to come from lower down the social ladder than herself but, as we shall see, he was a shrewd man and his family were certainly ascending that ladder. Their partnership marked the start of a very colourful period in this history.

The Quenell family

Elizabeth Hall’s husband was Robert Quenell, who came into the ownership of the Field Place estate when he married her in the later sixteenth century. Quenell, a yeoman farmer, owned land that lay in the parishes of Haslemere and Chiddingfold, much of which was rich in iron ore. As a freeholder, he held a respectable position in society but this

would not normally have placed him in the same social stratum as the lord of Field Place manor.

Robert was an iron maker and his lands, which he had inherited from his brother in 1571, brought him great wealth. Iron ore lay in bands within the Wealden clay that made up most of his farm at Imbhams in Chiddingfold. The coppice woodland that surrounded the area provided a continuous supply of charcoal to fire the furnace, whilst streams running through the farm were dammed to provide power for the furnace and forge.



Robert Quenell's house at Lythe Hill with his new wing added to the front of the original medieval house.

The Weald of Surrey, Sussex and Kent lay at the heart of the iron making industry during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the ironstone and coppice woodlands that proliferated throughout the area made many landowners, including the Quenells, very wealthy indeed.

Robert Quenell, therefore, was able to marry above his station into a wealthy family and in 1580, at about the time of his marriage, he added a large, showy, gable wing to his farmhouse at Lythe Hill near Haslemere (now the Lythe Hill Hotel). Built of the finest timber it would have been apparent to all that Robert Quenell had made his way up in the world.

The Quenells were subsequently blessed with thirteen children. The eldest, Peter, was born in 1580, and was to be the first of a succession of three Peter Quenells to own Field Place. Throughout his childhood, the iron industry flourished and his father acquired more land as his fortunes increased.

In 1599 Peter married Alice Cranley of Wisborough Green in West Sussex. The young newlyweds were given large estates as part of their generous marriage settlement. These included Field Place, which in turn included smaller properties in Compton including the forge. They were also given the property in Shalford that Thomas Hall had bought from the St Leger family.

It is not known who was occupying Field Place in the early seventeenth century. Certainly, it was not the Quenell family for they were still living at Haslemere and Chiddingfold: Peter Quenell II, the first son of Alice and Peter, was baptised at Haslemere in 1603, whilst his grandfather Robert Quenell was buried at Chiddingfold in 1612. Interestingly, despite the family rise in fortune, he still regarded himself as a yeoman farmer and is recorded as such in the burial register.⁵

After Robert's death, his son, Peter Quenell I inherited the lordship of the manor of Field Place, together with the house and its estate, and he held his first manor court there in 1615. Like his father, he sought to raise the family status: he had his son, Peter II, educated at Magdalen Hall in Oxford and in 1624 he requested a coat of arms from King James I. The Quenells were staunch royalists, making guns and shot for the sovereign from the iron produced at Imbhams and it is not surprising that they were, in due course, granted their coat of arms.

House improvements

In the meantime, significant changes were made by the Quenells to the forge cottage that removed its essentially medieval character. In the late sixteenth century a chimney stack was built to channel the smoke from the fire out of the house. It was this that enabled the open hall to be floored over and upper room created. The fashion for open halls was passing as the sixteenth century progressed, with new houses being built with two storeys throughout. We know that householders in Surrey were very much a part of this growing trend, for a dendrochronological analysis of buildings in the county has revealed that open hall houses suddenly went out of fashion after 1540.⁶ At the same time, older houses with open halls were being converted to the newer style by having a floor

inserted to create an upper storey within the hall space. Clues as to the timing of this can be found in the step tongue stops on the joists, which are a typical feature of the later sixteenth century.



The Old Forge in 1969 showing the chimney that was built in the late sixteenth century when the open hall was divided.

The popularity of the new style of houses was observed by William Harrison of Essex in his Description of England written in the decade up to 1577:

“There are old men yet dwelling in the village where I remain, which have noted . . . things to be marvellously altered in England within their sound remembrance. One is, the multitude of chimneys lately erected, whereas in their young days there were not above two or three, if so many, in the most uplandish towns of the realm . . . each one made his fire against a reredos [fireback] in the hall were he dined and dressed his meat”.

Another reason for the rapid increase in the number of chimneys was the fall in the price of bricks. Until the end of the sixteenth century, they were expensive and tended to be used for the most prestigious buildings. However, as production increased so prices fell and bricks became more commonly available, especially as brick-making was now taking place on the Pease Marsh common. As the seventeenth century progressed, bricks

were used increasingly for building construction and, gradually, the tradition of timber framing was lost.

The house was also enlarged in the late sixteenth century by the building of a third bay on the western end of the original structure. Again, there are structural clues as to the timing; the side purlin roof indicates a later date of construction. Probably at around the same time, the timber and wattle and daub exterior walls were encased in brick to make them weatherproof. It would seem that Robert Quenell was not only making improvements to his own standard of living but was improving the quality of accommodation for his tenants.

They would have been very happy with their new chimney. The late sixteenth century saw many similar structures sprouting out of old roofs; not only was the smoke channelled neatly out of the house but the narrow flues of the chimney also made the fire draw, burn and radiate heat more effectively. Moreover, it was now possible to have a hearth in upstairs rooms.

Why were these changes made in such a sudden way? Was it just a response to the desire for an improved standard of living and more living space or were there other factors at work? Perhaps the social changes following the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s made the hierarchical structure that was embodied in the layout of the open hall seem old-fashioned. Or was the creation of smaller rooms that were easier to heat also a natural reaction to a worsening climate?

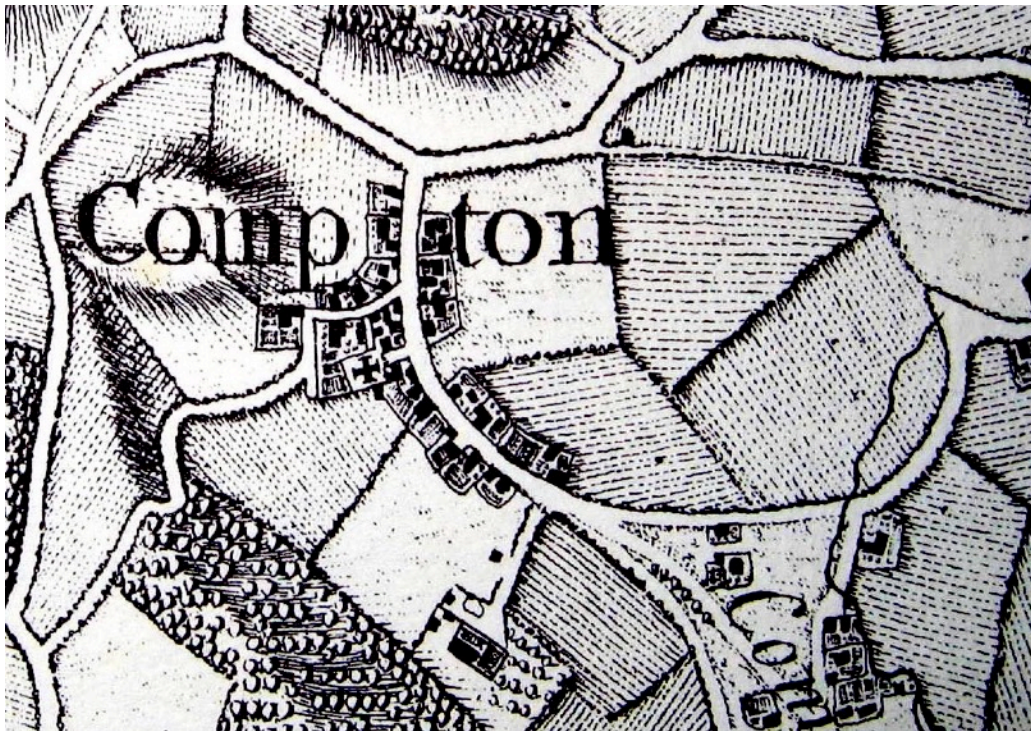
The weather conditions in the British Isles deteriorated rapidly during the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth with the winters becoming dramatically colder. It reached a nadir in the mid to late seventeenth century when, during the 1660s, winters were cold enough to freeze the tidal Thames sufficiently for fairs to be held on the ice. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that by the mid seventeenth century, new houses were being built with integral multi-flue chimneys, ceilings and draught-excluding wooden panelling.

A divided country

In the seventeenth century, the Quenells and their ironworks at Chiddingfold played a much bigger part in national history. England was about to acquire a new ruler and there were turbulent times ahead. Following the death of his father, King Charles I inherited the throne of England in 1625. Like James, he fervently believed that the monarch

ruled by divine right and was answerable to God alone, a conviction that would ultimately cost him his head.

The population became increasingly discontented by their king as the years passed. His court was extravagant, its lavish life funded by hefty taxes on landowners. Charles disagreed vehemently and violently with his parliament, which he then dissolved to replace with his own, compliant Star Chamber. England was becoming a fiercely divided nation of those who were supporters or opponents of the king and by the late 1630s, civil war loomed on the horizon.



An extract from John Rocque's map of Surrey showing the village, its smithy and Field Place.

Early on in these difficult times, in 1628, came the marriage of Peter Quenell II to Elizabeth Grey, daughter of the rector of Woolbeding in Sussex. The wealth of the Grey family had similar origins because they too had become rich on the back of iron workings on their land. The young couple received Field Place as a part of their marriage settlement and they made it their home. Peter is known to have held a manor court there in 1635.

The Quenells were in the Royalist camp. They made armaments at Imbhams and in 1642 Captain Peter Quenell fought in first battle of the English Civil War at Edgehill. Locally, however, he was outnumbered for

those loyal to Parliament were concentrated in the south and southeast of England. Captain Quenell was forced to comply, to a certain extent, with their demands. His horse was requisitioned in 1642 by the local parliamentary commander, Sir Richard Onslow, but he retained his estate and he even continued making ordnance at Imbhams for the Royalist cause until the contract was brought to an end by Parliament.

Despite being on the losing side in the Civil War and despite being such an obvious supporter of the Royalist cause, Peter Quenell II avoided having his estates confiscated because, like many of the king's supporters, he had also acted for, and contributed to, the Parliamentary cause.



A blacksmith at work.

Wisely, he had kept his head down during the eleven years of the interregnum that followed the execution of King Charles in 1649. His estates intact, he lived quietly at Field Place, tending his business interests and taking his turn in the administration of church and parish. Finally, his patience was rewarded and both he and his wife Elizabeth lived to see the return of the monarchy in 1660.

Henry Ryde

By 1662, the Old Forge was no longer in the hands of the Quenell family and the records of Westbury Manor show that it was held 'in right of his wife' by Henry Ryde.⁷ It is not known how it originally came to be in the Ryde family ownership, because there are no deeds and the property does not figure in records of the manor Westbury for the early seventeenth century.

We do know, however, that Ryde's ownership of the cottage came via his wife Anna. She probably inherited it from a relative who had not possessed a surviving male heir. However, according to the law of the land, it was her husband Henry Ryde who was deemed to be the owner. It was no longer a part of a large estate and a taxation record of 1671 reveals that Ryde did not possess any other property in the village.⁸

Henry Ryde sold the dwelling and its land to Eustace Tax and his daughter Ann in 1674. Although the deed does not survive it was seen by Cecilia Lady Boston and the description of the property is recorded in her History of Compton:

“A tenement, cottage, garden and orchard thereunto belonging containing by estimation ½ acre with appurtenances . . . lying between a close of Sir William More, Baronet, called Fowler’s Croft on the east part, the King’s Highway leading from Godalming to Puttenham on the west part, and the meadow of the said Sir William More called Westbury Meadow on the north part.”

Earliest known occupants

Peter Whitemore was a smith who lived in Compton and who died in 1607. His will indicates that he leased a cottage in the village and owned a selection of blacksmith’s shop tools.⁹ It is very likely he was the occupant of the cottage and its forge but there is no conclusive evidence as it is possible that there may have been more than one blacksmith’s forge in Compton at that time.

By 1664 we can be more certain, however, as *John Snelling the smith* was charged for three hearths in the Hearth Tax collection of that year. Mr Snelling’s will, written at the very end of his life in April 1664, shows that he had a young son and daughter, for whom he was anxious to make good provision. He also had a brother named Thomas.

His children were probably too young to take over the business and it is Thomas Snelling who is listed in the 1671 subsidy for Compton, occupying the only property in the parish owned by Henry Ryde. Interestingly, there were a good many blacksmiths by the name of Snelling in the area; it seems to have been very much a family occupation.

The presence of the Snelling family and the quality of their work mattered a great deal. The blacksmith was an essential element of rural life and one of the most important members of the community. Not only did he shoe horses but he made wrought ironwork of every kind, making and repairing tools and implements, often to the specific requirements of the customer, parts of gates and wagons, tyres for wheels, hoops for casks and all manner of other items.

Wheel tyres would almost certainly have been made for the wheelwright whose workshop, during the nineteenth century at least, lay just across

the road next to Beech Cottage. As well as these two crafts that were so vital to the pre-industrial rural economy, there were also cartwrights, saddlers, basket makers and carpenters, charcoal burners, builders, thatchers, coopers and woodland craftsmen. Compton also had its tailors and dressmakers, its shoemakers and its millers.



The village smithy changed little over the centuries: this one is the blacksmith's shop from Southwater, Sussex, reconstructed at the Weald and Downland Museum, Singleton.

The blacksmith's shop in Thomas Snelling's time and for many years before and beyond was a hive of activity and a hub of village life. Lady Boston records the words of a Compton resident who recalled the Compton smithy in the nineteenth century:

“Work usually commenced at 6am and ceased at 7pm, with two hour-long intervals for meals, but occasionally began much earlier when there were many horses to be shod. In the winter evenings, if the smith required more light than that given by the forge, large rush lights soaked in melted fat were used, being held in iron pliers which slid up and down a tall rod to the right height. The smith's shop seems to have been a favourite resort for the village lads on cold dark evenings at this time, and a cheery place it still seems today with the warm glow lighting up its dark mysterious corners and its musical clang and clank of hammer and anvil”

Eighteenth century owners and occupiers

Eustace Tax was a farmer and had bought the property as an investment in 1674. Like his predecessors, he leased the property to various blacksmiths. In 1696, the pattern was broken when he sold the cottage and forge to Nathaniel Lintott, a blacksmith who was to live and work there for two or three years. It was but a short period of owner-occupation, for William Purse bought the cottage and forge from him in 1699. Purse owned a few other properties in Compton, the most notable of which was the White Hart Inn.¹⁰

Purse died in the autumn of 1735 and left the forge to his widowed relative, Ann Plummer. The blacksmith at the time was Edmund Baxter, a man of similar status to Purse for he and his family owned other properties in the area, including various parcels of land and a blacksmith's shop in Haslemere. Despite owning property of his own, he chose to live and work at Compton in leased premises.

Stephen Quillett, who purchased the property in 1754 is also worth a closer look. He was the son of a Huguenot refugee, who came from Chatillon, now a suburb of Paris, and he lived in Westminster in London, not Compton.¹¹ According to his will, his house in Charing Cross had recently burnt down, all of which must have added a little local interest to the image of this owner.

It was becoming common for wealthy Londoners to purchase small places out of town both as an investment and, for some, as a place to live on an occasional basis - having a bolt-hole in the country is not a modern phenomenon. The city was not a particularly clean and wholesome place and many families decamped for lengthy periods to a healthier spot. Perhaps the move became permanent for when Stephen died, aged 55, in 1760, he was buried in Guildford.¹² His widow Mary inherited his property in Compton and was to hold it for another twenty-seven years.

The Hooker family

From the late eighteenth century and possibly before that, numerous members of the same family would come to be closely connected with Forge Cottage, both as its occupiers and, latterly, its owners. The Hooker family can be tracked back to Compton to at least the 1710s, when Daniel Hooker and his siblings were born in the village. Much later, Daniel's son Edmund became the first member of the family to be recorded as the

occupier of the property in 1780 and when he died in 1794, his widow Mary remained at the house for thirty more years.¹³

Both Mary and her only son William appear as owners in the early 1800s. William and his wife Hannah had married at Compton in 1797 and it must have been a very full cottage. By 1814 they had seven surviving children, six sons and a daughter. James was born in 1800 and his younger brother William in 1802 and, in the fullness of time, George, Mary, Henry, Edmund and Thomas arrived into the family.

William died in the summer of 1822 at the age of only forty-eight and his mother Mary passed away in three years later. Now it was Hannah's turn as the family matriarch but most of her children had moved by then and the household was much smaller. The census of 1841 lists herself, James, his wife Mary and two little nieces. The girls were Henry's daughters and may have just been visiting. Also at the house was Hannah's younger son Thomas, who, like his brother, was working on the premises as a blacksmith in the family business. He would later become a master smith in nearby Puttenham.¹⁴

Like his father, James Hooker did not make old bones and he died in the summer of 1845. Hannah followed him in September 1846, having reached 73 years of age, and it is likely that William his family took up occupation at this time. Certainly, by 1851, he and his wife were at the helm. William Hooker had married Harriet Mills in 1832, by which time he was a middle-aged, respected figure in this busy village, having also become its parish clerk in the same year.

His was a very different role to that which is undertaken by a modern parish clerk, for it was an official position in the parish church. William arranged baptisms and communions, acted as the sexton, chimed the church bell for services and led the responses from the congregation. The men who held this role were not ordained, but they had a position of responsibility for which they sometimes received a stipend.

The later nineteenth century

William Hooker's life was very busy, for not only did he spend a great deal of time at the church but he was one of the craftsmen of the village. At the middle of nineteenth century, as well as the work of the forge, Compton had a wheelwright, two shoemakers, a grocer and at least two bakers. The women too were very busy; there were dressmakers, cooks and laundresses amongst their number and their lives were very industrious.

By 1861 William had retired from his work as a blacksmith but was still living at the house with his wife Harriet, where they were assisted by his sister Mary. He died three years later and by the early 1870s the premises, described as ‘Smith shop’ in the census returns, were home to his brothers Henry and Edmund Hooker and their wives Margaret and Ann.

It is possible that Edmund, now aged 61 suffered from dementia for he is described as an imbecile in the census. This rather forceful description could cover a multitude of unfortunate circumstances in Victorian times but Edmund’s occupation had certainly not been too taxing, for he had formerly worked as a bank messenger. Henry, who had been living and working in Battersea, was also a retired smith.



This view of Compton Street, painted by Edward Hassell in 1830, would have been very familiar to the Hooker family.

It was unusual that William, Henry and Edmund had been all able to retire, for it was a luxury that was denied to most of the villagers. There was no old age pension at that time and those who managed to reach an advanced age frequently worked well into their seventies. Some were supported by younger family members whilst others, the less fortunate, ended their days in the workhouse. Older members of the relatively well-off Hooker family escaped this fate.



Henry Hooker 1808 - 1881.

We have our last sight of the family as residents at the cottage in 1881, when Henry and Margaret Hooker were being looked after there by their daughter Esther and a young household servant. In the meantime, the work of the smith had been continuing on the premises and the business was in the hands of George Mansfield, who lived just across the road in Brewery Cottages next to the Harrow.

By this time, George was aged 47 and he had two young sons working with him as apprentice blacksmiths. His boarder, Charles, was also a smith. It would seem that the forge was a very busy place and in good hands. Henry Hooker died in May 1881 and Margaret passed away two years later. The cottage and its business would shortly see new faces.

The arrival of the Sex family

The name of Sex is a very familiar one to those who have lengthy connections with Compton. Henry and Mary Ann Sex were the first of the family to live and work at the forge but neither of them had been born in the village.

Henry came from nearby Cranleigh and was the son of a labourer. Unusually, he had become a blacksmith, a trade that was normally kept very much within families, generation upon generation.

As a respected man within Compton, he was one of the small group of residents who were periodically appointed to do unpaid jobs and, in March 1886, he was chosen to be the Overseer of the Poor for the parish.¹⁵ Farmers and tradesmen such as Henry often found themselves appointed as parish officers - whether they wanted it or not. The overseers were responsible for collecting the poor rates from households in the parish. Most of these monies went to fund the Union workhouse in Warren Road, Guildford, or to support paupers (financially vulnerable people) who lived in their own homes.

Mary Ann Sex had been born in Kidderminster, in Worcestershire. Most of the villagers in Compton were still locally born but a sprinkling of people came from further afield, a percentage that was now growing annually. Better roads and the coming of the railway to Guildford and Godalming had added new faces and new accents to Compton and other villages in the locality.

At the start of the 1890s Henry and Mary Ann shared their home with six sons. The eldest two were working with their father as blacksmiths and the younger boys attended the village school. All the boys had been born nearby but only Frank and Walter, aged seven and six, had been born in Compton itself, which suggests that the family came to live at the forge very shortly after the death of Henry Hooker.

A decade later, four sons remained at the house and Henry was employing the eldest three in his business. The youngest, however, was working in a very different way, for Walter was listed on the census return as a clay modeller. He was one of villagers working for the artist and designer Mary Watts, who had established her pottery business after moving to Compton with her husband, the artist George Frederick Watts. Her aim was to promote traditional handicrafts amongst the local community

Based at their home, Limnerslease, the business became a great and enduring success. Working in terracotta, the potters created the interior of Watts Chapel and made items such as garden pots, memorials and sundials, all of which were very distinctive in style. By 1904, the Compton Potters Arts Guild was established at Watts Picture Gallery. Accommodation was provided for the apprentices and it is possible, as his family home was somewhat crowded, that Walter lived on site.

The establishment of the pottery business in Compton was unusual, for it bucked a national trend. By now, the traditional craft enterprises that existed in virtually every parish had gradually declined as mass produced, factory-made products replaced locally made goods. Younger people ceased to enter the trades and the self-sufficiency of local communities diminished. Villages became satellites of towns, increasingly reliant on urban suppliers of goods and services.

Blacksmiths lasted longer than most of these tradesmen because of the continuing need to have horses shod. However, they often adapted their skills and turned also to the repair of cycles and motor vehicles that were starting to become the main forms of transport from the 1890s onwards.



Compton Street and the smithy in May 1905.



*The smith Henry Sex on the left, with his sons, Clarence and Gus.
A young Fred Stovold stands between the two elm trees.*

The house in the early twentieth century

The older boys of the Sex family gradually married and moved away from the family home. Two of them remained working with their father, whilst another two were living in Send and continuing in the blacksmith trade. In the spring of 1911 Wilfred and Walter were still single and living at Forge Cottage but neither was involved in the family business. Walter continued to be employed by Mary Watts and Wilfred was working as a cycle maker, possibly for Dennis Brothers in Guildford who also made bicycles in the early days of their motor manufacturing business.

In November 1911 Walter Sex married Elizabeth Float, who came from Wallington. The marriage was probably conducted with a little haste as their son Douglas arrived in May 1912. The couple were, by this time, living in one of the Field Place cottages. In the meantime, Walter's parents remained at the forge and were the occupiers when the premises were visited and valued by the Inland Revenue in October 1912, when Henry Sex was approaching his mid sixties. We can see that he did not own the house and forge, despite his high standing in the village, and that William Hooker, of New Road, Wandsworth, still retained the freehold.¹⁶

William was the only son of the previous occupants, Henry and Margaret Hooker. His father had moved away Compton to London as a young man and had set up his business firstly as a smith and then, more specifically, as a farrier. William, who was born in 1840, had followed in his father's working footsteps. By the time of the valuation he was retired and sharing his Battersea home with his wife and some of his younger relatives.

He and his family must have been visitors to the forge over the years and perhaps most especially during the period when his elderly parents and sister lived there. They must also have been well acquainted with the Sex family. We cannot be sure, but it is pleasant to imagine that the two elderly men, William Hooker and Henry Sex, had many shared memories.

The valuer's description records that the property consisted of a house, a smithy and premises. We do not have indoor details of the smithy but the tiled cottage was of quite a good size. However, it was still essentially a simple dwelling, containing four bedrooms, a box room, two living rooms and a kitchen. No bathroom or indoor water closet was listed. Outside, there was a large garden and there were several portable, corrugated iron buildings that belonged to Henry Sex and his family.

By now, this property, with its mixed business and residential use was a unique fixture in the village. The other craft premises that flourished in

the nineteenth century had closed and the forge was the sole survivor of that time. More changes were now on the horizon; its elderly owner, William Hooker, died in January 1914, leaving instructions in his will that his estate was to be sold. After so many years, the long connection with the Hooker family was ending at last. A few months after this, the Great War broke out and village life was to about to change dramatically.

A changed village

It seems likely, although we cannot be sure, that Henry Sex purchased the cottage and smithy after the death of William Hooker. Certainly, the family were to live there for many decades to follow. However, soon after the estate was available to buy there were other, very pressing matters in hand.

One by one the young men of the village were leaving to fight in the war. Two of the earliest recruits from Compton were Frank and Arthur Sex, who signed up to serve in September and October 1914. Frank became a sergeant in the Army Service Corps and Private Arthur Sex fought in the Surrey Yeomanry in Egypt.¹⁷ We deduce from this that Frank could drive motor vehicles because the Army Service Corps was seeking to recruit men with this particular skill.

By the end of the conflict there were many households in Compton who were mourning the loss or the life lasting injuries of their menfolk. Fortunately, Henry and Mary Ann Sex did not lose any of their sons at this terrible time and by 1918 Henry and some of his descendants were still running the blacksmith forge.

It had been a time of enormous upheaval but some peaceful traditions, however, had still lived on; in 1909 a family named Jackson had moved to Poplar Cottage, just down the road. Henry Sex rented a field next to their house and paid Mr Jackson to use it as a paddock for his horse. In the summer months the long grass would be cut by hand to make hay to feed this horse.

Hilda Jackson, who lived grew up with her younger siblings throughout the 1910s remembers peeping out of their bedroom windows to watch the men at work with their scythes, working their way around the field in the late summer evenings. Eventually, the rhythmic swishing sound would send the children back to their beds and lull them into a peaceful sleep.

In early 1921 Mary Ann died and her husband, who was now well into his seventies, passed away in May 1924. Perhaps the older sons continued to

work the forge for another decade or so but it cannot have been very busy or lucrative by this time.

By the end of the 1930s it was home to just Walter and Elizabeth Sex and it was no longer in sole use as a smithy. Their son Douglas had married and, although he and his wife lived nearby, he was certainly not working as a blacksmith; his occupation is listed as a motorcycle and wireless engineer and he was the proprietor of a garage.¹⁸

Pottery making had continued in the village but by this time, Walter was working as a machine shop labourer. Transport in the village was provided in various ways and many people still rode horses, but bicycles, buses and cars were also much used. Compton villagers also enjoyed many outings in the local charabanc, the Farncombe Belle, driven by Philip Gorton's grandfather. In the fullness of time a petrol pump appeared at the smithy and Mr and Mrs Sex also sold heating oil on the premises. Philip remembers walking up to the forge with his mother regularly from their home in Spiceall to buy heating oil from Mr & Mrs Sex in the early 1960s. To him, the couple seemed unbelievably ancient! There was a rickety corrugated iron shelter over the back door and, despite their frequent visits, they were never invited into the house.



Elizabeth Sex.

At that time the road through the village had not yet been widened, so there was no pavement on the forge side of the road. The small volume of traffic was such that his mother considered it safe to walk on that side of the carriageway, against the boundary hedge.

The property in the late 1960s

Photographs taken of the house and its surroundings in the late 1960s show the property to be in very poor condition.¹⁹ It is unlikely that Walter and Elizabeth Sex had a great deal of money to keep up the premises.



These two images from 1969 show just how dilapidated the property had become.

Their income from their pensions and the sale of oil and petrol was modest and they had probably struggled, literally, to keep the roof over their heads. When they died in the late 1960s the house was in a state of disrepair. It was a far cry from the days of the working smithy, when those who lived there were at the very heart of village life and bringing in a good income.

The final nail in the coffin for the smithy came in the early 1970s when Compton Street was widened. It was the only structure to be demolished in the process; even the old, gnarled, elm tree that stood beside the smithy was spared. Sadly, this tree succumbed to dutch elm disease not long afterwards. Compton acquired a wider street to take the increasing volume of wheeled traffic and, ironically, in doing so it lost the building that symbolised the old way of transport.

Such was the poor state of the house, a builder was needed to bring it back to life and it was purchased by Fred Alexander, who made it habitable once more. The photographs from 1969 make it clear just how dilapidated the building had become and the extent of the work that was required to save the Old Forge. It largely thanks to Fred's efforts that the house has survived into its seventh century. He sold the cottage but retained the land that had once been the garden and orchard on which he built a house for himself and his wife Brenda. In more recent years, their son, Mark, built a second house on the land.

After the renovation the Old Forge had a succession of owners and, since June 2014, it has been the home of Matthew Tobiss and Carl Hall.



The Old Forge nowadays is very warm and welcoming and is much enjoyed by its owners. The house and its predecessors have been a part of the Compton scene for well over 500 years and records of its owners and occupiers take their story back to the early sixteenth century. Since then, the cottage has been the home and workplace for about eighteen generations of people. How many people lived there before that time we will never know but, hopefully, there will be countless more and the Old Forge will continue to be a village home for many years to come.

Known owners and occupiers of The Old Forge

	Owners	Occupiers
Before 1515	John Hether	
Before 1515	Richard Carrington	
1515	Anne Lady Roos	
1526	Thomas Manners, Earl of Rutland Sir Thomas Manners sons of Lady Roos	
1542	Thomas Hall	
1546	Joan Hall, Thomas's widow	
1554	George Hall, her son	
1569	Elizabeth Hall, George Hall's eight year old daughter	
Late 16C	Robert Quenell, husband of Elizabeth	
1607		Probably Paul Whitemore
1612	Peter Quenell	
1662	Henry Ryde in right of his wife Anna	
1664	Henry Ryde	John Snelling
1671	Henry Ryde	Thomas Snelling
1674	Eustace Tax	
1696	Nathaniel Lintott	
1699	William Purse	
1734	Ann Plummer	Edmund Baxter
1754	Stephen Quillett	
1760	Mary Quillett, his widow	
1780	Mrs Quillett	Edmund Hooker
1795		Mary Hooker
1808	William Hooker	Mary Roker
1810-23	Mary Hooker	Herself
1825	James Hooker	Himself
1826-31	Hannah Hooker	Herself

	Owners	Occupiers
1841	Hannah Hooker	Herself
1884	William Hooker	Henry Sex
c. 1914	Henry Sex	Himself
1924-67	Walter and Elizabeth Sex	Themselves
c.1968	Fred Alexander	
	Hamburger family	Themselves
	Mark Smithers	Himself
2014	Matthew Tobiss and Carl Hall	Themselves



Notes and references

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- ⁷ Westbury manor rental 15 April 1662, ref: LM184, SHC.
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- ⁹ Will of John Snelling, 1664, Surrey Commissary Court.
- ¹⁰ Will of William Purse, 1734, Surrey Archdeaconry Court.
- ¹¹ Will of Stephen Quillett, 1732, PCC.
- ¹² Will of Stephen Quillett the younger, 1760, PCC.
- ¹³ Land tax returns for Compton, SHC.
- ¹⁴ Family details from Compton census returns and parish registers.
- ¹⁵ West Surrey Times, 27 March 1886.
- ¹⁶ Inland Revenue valuer's book, ref: IR 58/34180, TNA.
- ¹⁷ British Army medal card index.
- ¹⁸ 1939 Register.
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