

## The 19thC Blacksmiths of Stoke St Gregory

*“The smith, a mighty man is he, With large and sinewy hands;  
And the muscles of his brawny arms Are strong as iron bands.”*

Longfellow's 'The Village Blacksmith' emphasises his strength, but he would often be a central figure in many village activities. Not only was he the local tool maker and repairer, farrier, and general engineer, he might well be a magistrate or a churchwarden. His workshop was not only a place filled with the noise of horses and hammering and the smell of burning hoofs. It was often the centre of village gossip and more serious discussion of local affairs, while people waited for the work to be done. Some can just remember calling in on the way home from school, maybe being allowed to pump the bellows of the forge.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have the first records of blacksmiths in Stoke. We know from records of their childrens' baptisms that William Hooper, George Jenkins and William Farthing were operating then as blacksmiths in Stoke. Although they may also have been practising blacksmiths earlier, two other smiths, Lot Watts and George Watts, became parents in the 1820s and 30s. They either worked together or had separate establishments in what later became Albert Williams' Bakery and Village Stores. Later on, Lot Watts took up farming, giving his name to Watts Farm, opposite the churchyard.

Again from the baptism details, which record the father's occupation, we know that William Grigg was a practising blacksmith in 1839, when he and his wife, Charlotte's first child, Taphines, was born. George Whaites is recorded as a father in 1841, Martin Keirle in 1866, Daniel North in 1876, Henry Pulsford in 1888, and William Hector in 1890. All were blacksmiths in Stoke.

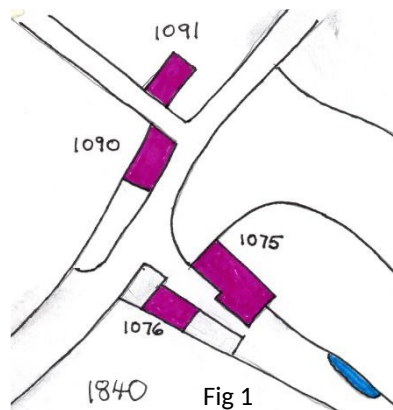
Census records tell us of other blacksmiths. Edward Poole was born about 1803 in Somerset. The 1861 census lists him as 58yrs, at Meare Green, with wife Sarah 65yrs (also born in Somerset). William Jennings was born about 1804 in North Petherton, Somerset. The 1861 census lists him as 57yrs, at Stoke St Gregory, Somerset with wife Hannah 50yrs (also born in Somerset).

The 1871 census lists the following blacksmiths: George Hayman, age 20, born in Ruishton, living at Meare Green; Richard Hembrow, age 26, at Huntham, Stoke St Gregory, with wife Mary A, 24yrs (born in North Curry, Somerset); Mark Keirle, age 29, born in Othery, Somerset, with wife Anna, 25yrs (born Stoke St Gregory); Henry Kelland, age 44, at Cutts Rd Stoke St Gregory, with wife Sarah, 46yrs (born in Taunton); Albion North, age 14, apprenticed, presumably to his father Daniel, age 47, at his Meare Green smithy; Edward Pool, age 71, at Meare Green, Stoke St Gregory, with wife Eliza 52yrs (born in Stoke St Gregory); another Edward Poole, age 58, at Meare Green, with wife Sarah 65yrs (born in Somerset).

A factor in the 'wider role' of the blacksmith was that, along with other tradespeople, they would have travelled more widely than the regular population. They may well have moved from their birth village for their apprenticeship, and would certainly have moved from place to place to complete their journeyman years. A good example was the North family, whose forge was in Meare Green.

## Daniel North

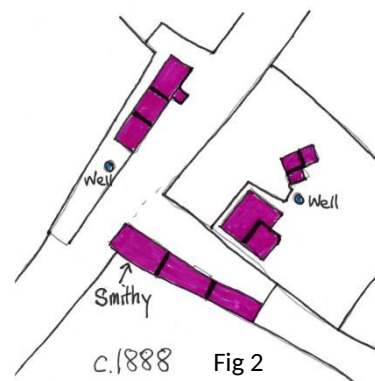
Daniel North was born in Beercrowcombe around 1826. At the age of 15 he was apprenticed as a blacksmith to John Mare of Curry Rivel. Not very far, but in those days some people never stepped over the parish boundary. By 1851 he had moved to Isle Brewers and was living with, and working as a qualified blacksmith for, Abraham Tapp, originally from Isle Abbots, a Master Machinist, who employed 2 other men and one boy. In March 1853 Daniel married Hannah Jane Aplin, from Bickenhall, in Hatch Beauchamp. We don't know whether the couple lived there for a while, but by 1861 they had moved to Meare green, Stoke St Gregory.



They moved to a building on Denman's Hill, which at the time of the Tithe Apportionment in 1840 had been owned and occupied by a Mary Percy - 'House & Plot' 1076 in Fig 1. By now the Norths had a son, Albion, and Daniel had an apprentice. This was Richard Hembrow, aged 16, son of John and Mary Hembrow, who lived further along the road in Meare Green. By 1871 Richard Hembrow had set up as a blacksmith in his own right and was married to Mary. In the 1891 census he is recorded as an agricultural labourer, but it was common at the time for a

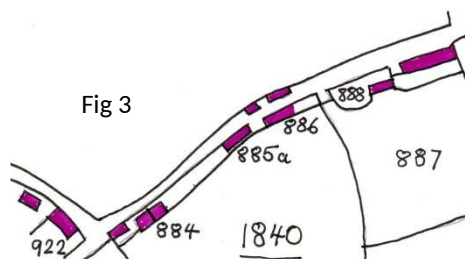
tradesperson to have other employment. Even landowners were described thus, as the wife would often look after the smallholding while the husband worked for wages on one of the larger farms. Also in 1871, Albion North, aged 14, had become apprenticed to his father as a blacksmith. He was still at home as a qualified blacksmith ten years later, but it is not known what happened to him after that.

At some time between 1840 and 1861 a smithy had been added on the road end of Mary Percy's old cottage. It is not known whether Daniel North took over an existing business, or whether he built the forge himself. Figure 2 shows the layout of the buildings in about 1888. As well as the smithy, another section had been added to the other end of the cottage. Across the road the building now comprised three separate dwellings. At the other end of Meare Green another blacksmith was at work.



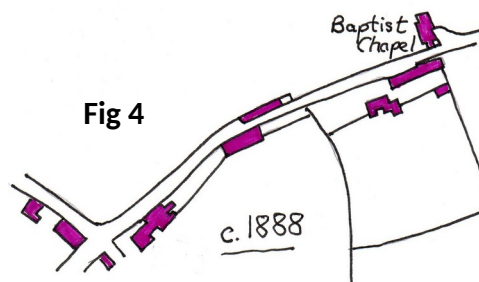
## William Grigg

William had been born to James and Ann Grigg of Isle Abbots in 1804. He married Charlotte Andrews in North Curry in 1836. By the 1841 Census, they were living next to the smithy in what was called Lane End, later becoming known as Griggs Hill. They had three children - Samuel, 3, Taphines, 2, and Thomas, 5 months. They had lost their first child, James in 1838, aged 2. Also living with the Griggs were Charles Dare, aged 13,



and Thomas Street (from 'out of county). The census does not give details, but they may have been apprentice blacksmiths. The house and smithy are marked 885a in Fig 3, the property being owned by John Lyddon, sometimes spelt Liddon.

By 1851 William and Charlotte had four more sons - William, 8, James, 5 (it was customary to name another child after one who had died), Henry, 3, and Edward, 1. Charles Dare, a local 19 year old, was a journeyman blacksmith (apprenticeship completed) at William's Smithy. In 1861, son Thomas was now working alongside his father as a qualified blacksmith. The 1860s were bad times for the family. In 1861 James and Samuel both died, aged 14 and 22. Thomas the blacksmith died in 1866, aged 25, and his father, William died 2 years later, aged 66. Charlotte took over the business and worked alongside another son, William. In the 1871 census Taphines was also at home working as a dressmaker, and son Edward, aged 20, is listed as a



farmer of 6 acres. Charlotte died in 1879, aged 61, and there is no record of Edward or William in the Stoke census records for 1881. Samuel and Hannah Barrington were still living opposite the old Baptist Chapel (Fig 4), but the smithy and adjoining cottage were not inhabited, and neither was the cottage at the rear of the chapel.

It would be wonderful to connect the Griggs of Stoke St Gregory with an Australian blacksmith, Joe Griggs, 1852 - 1934, but alas we can find no link. He was the unwilling maker of the armour worn by Ned Kelly in the shootout at the Glenrowan Hotel in June 1880. It seems Kelly took over Joe's smithy and forced him to make a suit of armour from parts of ploughs and harvesting machines. Ned Kelly paid well in gold sovereigns, and later, when Joe told the authorities, he was allowed to keep the money.

### Lot Watts

The third family of Stoke's Victorian blacksmiths were the Watts. Lot Watts was born in Mark, Somerset, in 1793, to another Lot Watts and his wife Sarah. Lot's older sister had been born in Shipham, Somerset, two years earlier. At least two of his younger siblings, Anna and George, were born in Middlezoy, Somerset. We do not know if Lot's father was also a blacksmith, but he was obviously involved in a trade that involved him moving home several times.

Young Lot married Stoke girl, Jemima Cummins, in October 1823. Unless there was already a family connection, that would suggest that he had already set up in business in the village as a blacksmith. Jemima and her older brother Anthony were the children of Stoke residents, Robert and Mary Cummins.

In 1832, Lot's house suffered a devastating fire, caused by a spark from the chimney of his forge next door. The Taunton Courier reported on the incident on 13th June:

*"On Wednesday last, about eleven o'clock in the forenoon a destructive fire occurred in Stoke St Gregory, on the premises of Mr Lot Watts, blacksmith, which entirely destroyed the interior the dwelling house, leaving nothing more than the bare walls. Through the prompt exertions of the neighbours they succeeded in saving the household goods from the devouring element. It is supposed that a spark, flying from the chimney of the smith's shop, and falling on the thatch (which was very dry) occasioned the mischief. It is hoped that this will be a caution to country blacksmiths who, for the*

most part, have thatched houses adjoining their smiths' shops, and which, in dry weather, so very much endanger not only their own houses and property, but those of their neighbours. The expense of substituting tiles would be a mere trifle when compared with the damage to which they are daily and hourly exposed by the use of thatch."



By 1840, when the Tithe apportionments were made, Lot owned and occupied the land, including the old village stores, around the corner to Huntham Lane, to what is now the rear entrance to Jessamine (724 in Fig 5). His wife Jemima had died in 1835, aged 37. This

was around the time of giving birth to George. Lot and Jemima had had at least four previous children, Mary, 1824, John Class Cummins, 1827, Robert, 1830, and Jane, 1833. Robert died aged 2, and John died in 1844, aged 17. In 1836, Lot had remarried to Priscilla Ball in North Curry. They had one son, William, in 1837, but he died in infancy.

The 1841 census shows Lot and Priscilla living with the four surviving children, Mary, John, Jane and George. In 1851 Mary and George are still at home, John having died and Jane presumably having left home. By 1861 Lot had given up blacksmithing and the census describes him as farmer of 60 acres. The farm he took over, opposite the church, became known as Watts Farm. George was still at home, presumably working on the farm, but in March 1857 Mary had married Alfred Parker, a farmer in Aller. The 1871 census is the last record of the Watts family being in Stoke. Lot and Priscilla are both 73, and their grandson, George E Parker is living with them and going to school in the village.

At some point in the 1870s, the Watts moved to Bradon Farm in Isle Brewers, along with Alfred, Mary and their family. In the 1881 census, Lot was still recorded as head of the household. Priscilla had died in 1879, aged 79, and Lot was later to die in 1883.

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