

'Convict bricks' at the old forge.

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There has been an exciting find by the craftsmen rebuilding the old forge in The Street. Heavy plain bricks were discovered with a heart shape imprint on one side, and it is believed they are what was called 'Convict Bricks', that is bricks made in Australia or Tasmania by transported criminals.

Research is ongoing, but from what we have learned so far, they could have been brought to England as ballast in returning ships, as there was a shortage of bricks in the early 19th century, (maybe a result of the Napoleonic Wars), but they were only used to build forges. Prisoners were allocated to private developers and each brick kiln had its own symbol – the most common were hearts, spades, diamonds and clubs. There were several small smithy's in Ewelme in the 19th century, tacked onto cottages and beer houses. (In the 1850's two Glanville brothers John and George, kept beer houses with a smithy at The Shepherd's Hut and The Coach & Horses - now The Old Coach House). The Lamb Inn had a working forge until demolished in 1942, so the forge in the High Street was the only building to survive.



The old Forge before its rebuild



Blacksmith and farrier Edward Godden (1845-1924) and his wife Rebecca (obit 1923) came to Ewelme in 1875, with their young sons Frank and John (later an Army Master Farrier). Samuel was born a decade later. Besides shoeing horses at his forge, Edward would get up as early as 4.0 am to go to Downs Farm to shoe farm horses before they were needed for the day's work, he also contracted to keep farm ploughs in good order for £1 a year.



Edward and Rebecca Godden

The forge became a popular evening meeting place for men to gossip and keep warm, and Bertha Godden's daughter, Cynthia Winfield – who lived in Forge Cottage - remembers local family pigs could be taken there on Saturday mornings to be killed, their protesting squeals echoing down The Street. Frank followed his father into the business, but machinery was replacing the work for agricultural blacksmiths and Frank eventually became a builder, a profession followed by his son Frank Jnr. (The archive has all Frank Jnr's Workbooks from his first job in January 1935, building a bedroom cupboard for Miss Maxwell at Saffron House, to the last in September 1988. His neat handwriting recording each job and itemising and pricing the materials). The forge still housed its old tools and other useful things. In the 1950's schoolboy Derek Robinson remembered a display window with bicycle parts and he often called on Frank Jnr at Forge House to purchase brake blocks, inner tubes, puncture repair kits etc. *'I would rummage around to find what I wanted. In hindsight I suspect that most of his stock was very old and passed its shelf life, but he didn't charge much'*. Frank Jnr died in 1996.

The present 'Godden' owner – Frank's great niece - has had the wall facing the road rebuilt using recovered materials, so three 'convict bricks' are incorporated in that wall, with the door and window having two either side. Therefore, what was a derelict relic of the past is now revived. (She has also generously donated two 'convict bricks' to the archive, and we will have one on display at our Heritage Exhibition).

Ewelme Village Archive