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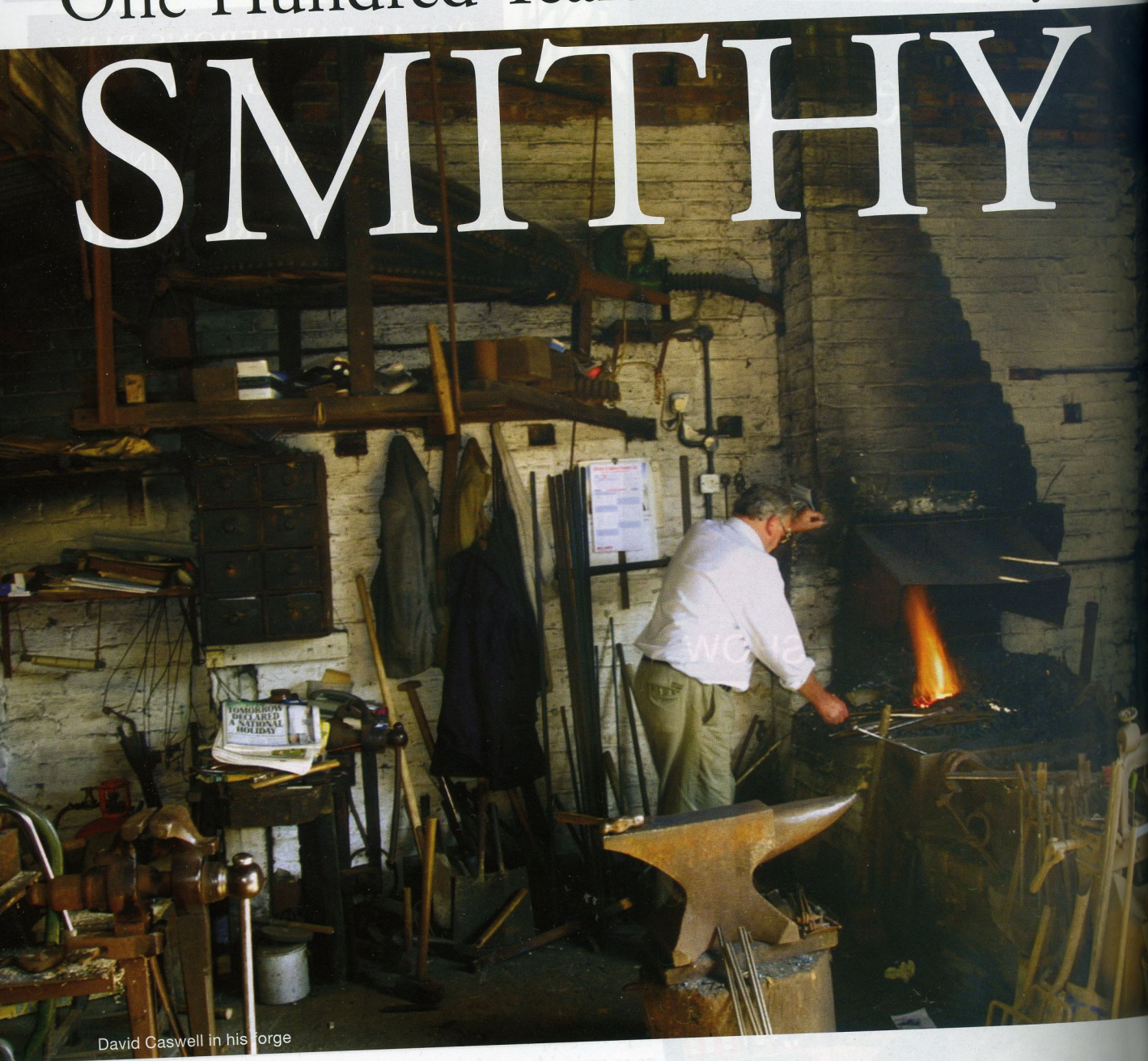
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One Hundred Years of the Badsey

SMITHY



David Caswell in his forge

Badsey, near Evesham, is one of very few villages in Worcestershire to still have a blacksmith. A speciality of the forge was to produce unique tools, such as asparagus knives, sprout net holders and the infamous Evesham hoe, for the area's market gardeners.

Words: Maureen Spinks

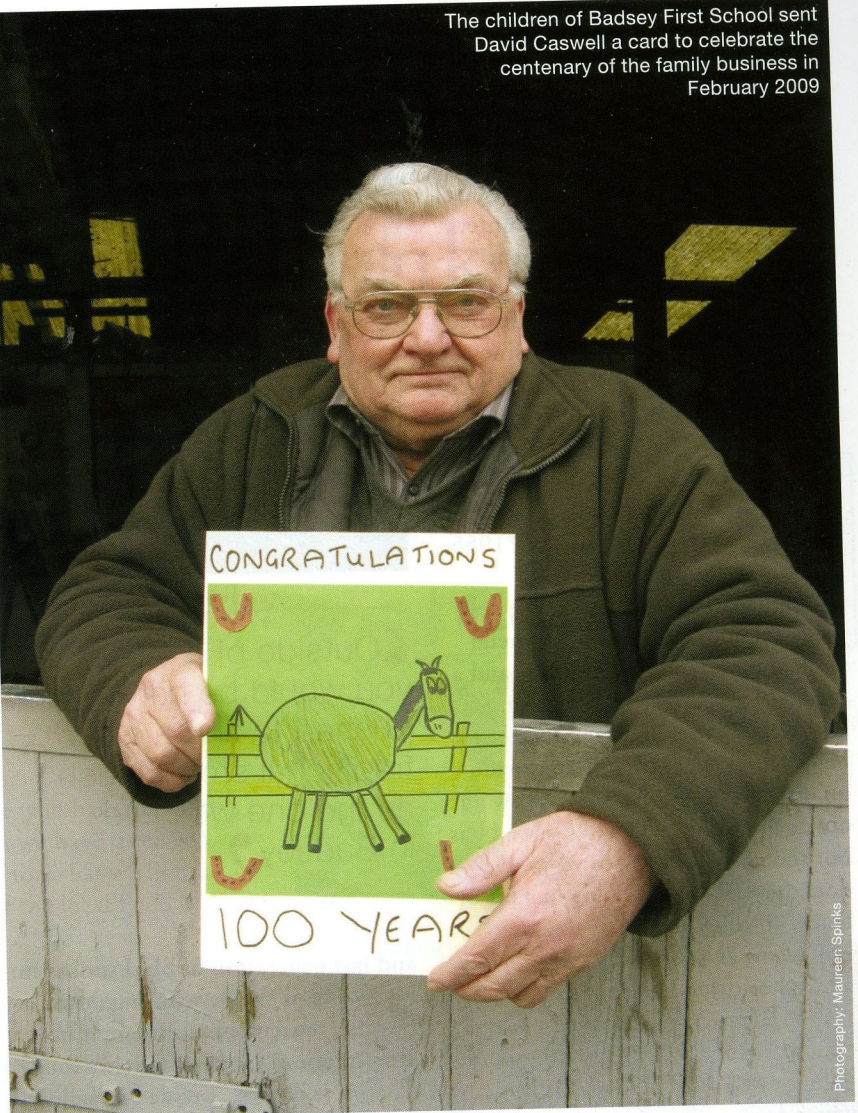
Photographs: courtesy of The Badsey Society

Here in the far south-eastern corner of Worcestershire, a little piece of old rural England still survives. Take a stroll through the centre of Badsey in the Vale of Evesham and, not far from the main street, the chances are that you will see David Caswell, the village blacksmith, leaning over the door of his forge, talking to passers-by. Inside is a gem of a place: a forge which has changed little since his grandfather's day and would not be out of place in a museum.

The year 2009 is a special date in the history of the village blacksmith in Badsey, for this is when David Caswell celebrated the centenary of his family's business. It was on 14th February 1909 that David's grandfather, Frank Caswell, arrived in Badsey and set up his business in Chapel Street. And on 14th February 2009, David lit a fire in the forge, invited in his friends, and had a gossip, as blacksmiths through the ages have been wont to do.

Frank Caswell was born at Stretton-on-Fosse in 1883, one of five children of Ernest and Julia Caswell. Just over a month after the move to Badsey, Frank's wife, Charlotte, gave birth to a son, Richard Henry Caswell (Dick), who was to follow in his father's footsteps, becoming apprenticed to his father after leaving school in 1922.

At the time when the village blacksmith was in decline throughout most of the country, trade for the Caswells flourished during the heyday of market gardening. They were kept busy dealing with market gardeners' cobs, plus looking after the horses belonging to the two bakeries. It was Dick who, in the 1930s, made the first sprout net holder, which soon



The children of Badsey First School sent David Caswell a card to celebrate the centenary of the family business in February 2009

Photography: Maureen Spinks

became a familiar device in Vale market gardens. (A sprout net holder is a hoop of iron which stands on the floor, with struts that rise to another, unfinished hoop, from which the sprout net hangs.) The Caswells also became famous as being the makers of the Evesham hoe and asparagus knife. In the first half of the 20th century, when the production of asparagus was at its height, a Caswell knife was a necessity with its thin, razor-sharp blade which sliced the vegetable away at the root under the ground.

When tractors began to replace horses, the farrier side of the blacksmith's job became less important. The Wolseley Merry Tiller (a small 'walking tractor') was an important invention of the 1950s. By the early 1960s, there was hardly

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a market gardener in the Vale who did not have one and the Caswells were kept busy making all the tools which went with it as it quickly became established that their custom-made tools were superior to the ones made by the company.

Although there were not the farm horses to deal with, people would bring their hunters from miles ▶

THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH

around to have them shod in Badsey. Many 20th-century farriers bought their horseshoes ready-made, but not Dick Caswell. He preferred to make them himself as it was cheaper and he felt they were of better quality. So, all winter was spent shoeing hunters and all spring and summer spent making tools. Dick Caswell carried on working until he was 79. He died in 1992, knowing that the business which his father had started in 1909 was safe in the hands of his son.

Following in his father's footsteps, David Caswell, after leaving Prince Henry's Grammar School, joined his father in the family business in 1955. He also undertook a five-year apprentice's course at Evesham College and became a skilled metal work and agricultural engineer and a qualified gas and electric welder. Unlike his father and grandfather before him, the farrier's work made up only half of his business. Now an old-age pensioner, David Caswell has not shod a horse for two years. He does, however, still dabble in a bit of blacksmithing, but these days he might just as easily be asked to make a candlestick or a curtain rail as to make an agricultural implement. He continues to watch the comings and goings of village life from his forge, which forms a regular meeting-place each morning for his friends.

But it is his skills as a raconteur that have been uppermost in the last few years. David is on the tourist circuit for visitors to the Vale and entertains holidaymakers who have cycled from Dumbleton Hall to see the blacksmith's forge which has changed very little since his grandfather's day. Outside of a museum, you would be hard-pushed to find a traditional smithy such as the one we have in Badsey.

What of the future of the blacksmith industry in Badsey? The ring of the hammer on anvil was once a familiar sound in every village, where the blacksmith was a vital part of the community, but sadly this may soon be a sound of the past. We are coming to the end of an era as 70-year-old David, the third

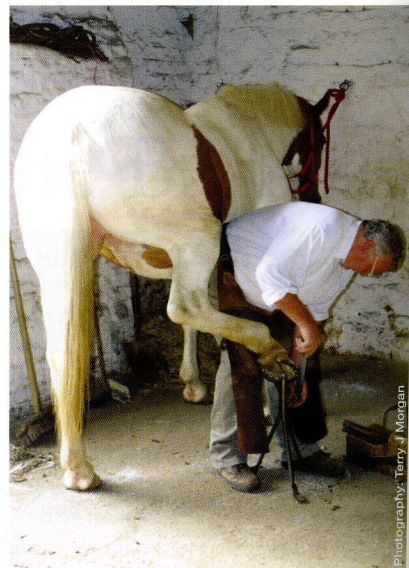
The blacksmith's shop in 1927; Frank and Dick Caswell (grandfather and father of David Caswell, the current blacksmith) are about to repair a plough.



“Outside of a museum, you would be hard-pushed to find a traditional smithy such as the one we have in Badsey”

and last generation of blacksmiths in his family, is slowly winding down towards retirement and there is no one to follow. None of David's four daughters has felt inclined to follow in his footsteps and the grandchildren are still at school. After David Caswell, will there be anyone else to take on the role of the village blacksmith in the last-remaining traditional forge in the Vale? Will Badsey go the way of most other villages in the Vale, where the blacksmith and his forge are consigned to the history books?

But, who knows, there may yet be someone out there happy to take on the role. Whilst the number of blacksmiths in the country is greatly reduced from a century or two ago, the profession of blacksmith is still alive in the Britain of the 21st century. A search of the internet reveals that there are courses on offer at places such as Warwickshire College or there are a number of short traditional blacksmithing courses for those seeking a change in



About The Badsey Society

The Badsey Society was formed in 2002. The Society has published three books and two DVDs (details of other publications may be found at www.badsey.net/bsp). It has gained two awards: The Worcestershire Community Pride award in 2002 for its website www.badsey.net and the Marsh Award for Community Archaeology in 2007 for its innovative Enclosure Map project.

life. Perhaps in years to come we may still have a blacksmith working in Badsey?

In the meantime, congratulations to David Caswell on the 100th anniversary of his family business. The familiar figure of David leaning over the door at his premises lends an air of permanence to the situation, but we know that it cannot last forever. ■

A detailed account of the village blacksmith appears in *Aldington and Badsey: Villages in the Vale, A Tapestry of Local Life*, edited by Richard Phillips and published by The Badsey Society (£6) available from The Spar, Badsey; the Almonry Centre, Evesham; or by post from The Badsey Society, 4 High Street, Badsey, Evesham WR11 7EW (cheques payable to The Badsey Society, please include £2 extra for postage and packing).

