

Forges in the Parish of Lorrha & Dorrha

Seamus J. King

*All I know is a door into the dark.
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.*
(Seamus Heaney)

I have identified six forges in the Parish of Lorrha & Dorrha in the 20th century. Two of these were located in the village of Lorrha, Jim O'Meara's and Bill Boucher's, one in Killycross at Hough's, one in Carrigeen, Lane's, one at the Pike, Brereton's, and one in Clonmona, Delahunt's. There was a forge in Abbeville at the turn of the century, but it appears to have gone out of existence by 1911.

A forge has been described as a type of hearth used for heating metals, which became easier to shape by forging. The workplace where the hearth was located was also called a smithy and the person who worked there was known as a blacksmith.¹

In his poem, *Felix Randal*, the poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins, envisages the farrier at the 'random grim forge, powerful amidst peers, fettling for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal'. The poem is a very fine profile of Felix Randal the farrier and it reminds many of us of our own memories of the village blacksmith.

The forge was a centre of village life in days gone by, a meeting place for the men of the surrounding townlands. The blacksmith not only shod horses, ponies and donkeys as a farrier, but he made and repaired cart axles, wheel rims, scythes, sickles and spades. He was also a very skilled craftsman, forging iron into ornate gates and railings or turning his hand to making more mundane items such as nails, fire grates, tongs or pothooks. According to contributions in the Schools Collection from the 1930s, forge water (the water used to cool the reddened iron) was a good cure for chilblains and warts.²

According to Kevin Danagher, the smith was an expert horse handler and was wise in all the ways of curing sick and injured animals. He would just as readily cauterize a wound or pull a tooth for a human client. His favourite method of removing a tooth was to attach the offending molar to the anvil by a strong cord and then to present the victim with a red-hot horseshoe at close range, whereupon the sufferer drew his own tooth!

Two Forges in Lorrha Village

These forges mostly concentrated on shoeing horses, and they flourished from the 1920s to the 1950s. Jim O'Meara came to Lorrha from Ballingarry in 1934 after serving his time with Kavanaghs in Nenagh and Ballingarry. He started work as a blacksmith in a thatched house which also served as a dwelling, owned by Moylan's, who had the pub beside the river next the church, and he lived there until he purchased the old National School building at the start of the road to Abbeville in the early 1950s.

The main equipment the blacksmith needed in his forge was a bellows, which helped to redden the coal, the anvil on which he forged the reddened iron and a range of tools, usually made by himself. Also, to be found at the forge was the banding-stone for shoeing wheels and the 'traveller', which was used to measure the circumference of a cartwheel. There were also 'swages' with which round bars and axles were shaped. Also important was coal for the fire. During the war years when coal was scarce, blacksmiths added charcoal to the coal to extend its life.

Jim O'Meara's work was mainly with horses and the area was predominantly farming country where most of the farmers kept horses for their tillage needs. According to the statistics, the number of horses and ponies in the country reached a peak 402,000 in 1949, but the numbers declined rapidly after that to 300,000 in 1955 and to 200,000 by 1962. This decline was to parallel the dramatic decline in the number of forges in the country.

As well as horses other work done in the forge was shoeing cartwheels. Most of the transport of material and goods in those years was done with iron-wheeled carts. The iron bands had to be put on new wheels and tightened on old wheels. For new wheels the band of iron to surround the wheel was made slightly smaller than the circumference of the wheel. The band was then reddened and expanded slightly as a result of the heat and in this state was hammered on to the new wheel. When the iron was cooled it contracted and tightened on the wheel. In the case of existing carts, the wheels occasionally shrunk in dry weather and the rims became loose. They had to be taken off and reduced in size before reddening it again to expand and make it possible to put back on the wheel. This work declined during the 1950s as farmers changed from iron wheeled carts to rubber wheeled ones.



*Picture of the O'Meara family and friends in Lorrha, taken in 1935.
Left to right: Jim O'Meara, Miss Mitchel, Patrick O'Meara, Mrs Grogan, Margaret O'Meara. In front Paddy and Johnny O'Meara.*

One of the most painstaking jobs was pointing harrows. This implement had many purposes on tillage farms and was particularly used for harrowing off corn after sowing. In the course of time the points got blunted and needed to be pointed. The points had to be taken off the harrow, and either replaced with new ones, just pointed or, if they were well worn, added to by forging on new pieces.

Help Arrived

Jim O'Meara's son, Paddy, began to help in the forge at an early age and admits that he missed many a day, or part of a day, from school as a result. When he was about 19 years old local county councillor, Mick Cronin, who had also been his National School teacher, informed his father that there was a course coming up in the Vocational School in Thurles that Paddy should attend. It was a Blacksmith and Farrier Course organised by the Vocational Education Committee of North Tipperary in conjunction with Bord na gCapall. It took a lot of persuasion of Jim to let his son go as Paddy had become an important part of his operation. Eventually he did go. The course lasted three months, five days a week and it was a very intensive and wide-ranging course. There were twelve students involved and they were paid £3 – 10 – 0 a week expenses. Paddy cycled from Lorrha to Thurles the first week, leaving home at 6 am and getting to Thurles at 8.30. He got digs for £3 for the five days and cycled home on Friday. Soon he discovered that one of the students was from Kilbarron and had a motorcycle and he travelled with him for the rest of the course. At the end of the course there was an exam in which each of the students had to make a set of horseshoes. Paddy came first in his class, and he has the four horseshoes displayed on a board as witness to his achievement.

Jim O'Meara also worked the forge at Mick Hough's³ of Killycross. Paddy recalls that he went there every Saturday, when the locals came to have their horses shod and other jobs done. His father travelled there in an ass and cart in which he carried the tools of his trade, and it was usually a hard day's work. Mick Hogan of Roden, who was married to Sarah Browne, used to work there. Mick Hough was reputed to have invented the horse grubber, which was effective for tilling between the drills.

The O'Mearas took breaks from the work occasionally and used to ramble over to Hogan's house, which was next door, for a chat. There were three members of the family, Jim, John and Margaret, all unmarried.⁴ Their living conditions on a few acres of land were primitive. John used to dig gardens for people, and he had the habit, when walking to a job, of dragging the fork along the road. On one visit there, Paddy remembers entering the kitchen with his father and seeing a big kettle hanging on a crane over the fire.

Sticking out were the legs of a hare, which was being boiled. ‘Would you like a sup of soup?’ Margaret asked, seeing what was there Jim replied: “No thanks, but the young lad will!’ and Paddy had to drink it!

Bill Boucher’s Forge in Lorrha

One of the longest memories Pat Hough has is getting jaunts in Bill Boucher’s hackney car, when on holidays with his Moylan relations in Lorrha. Bill might be driving up to his home place in Kilbarron and Pat would sit on a cushion between the front seats.

Bill, who was born in 1895, was one of a large family and it’s not quite clear where he trained to be a blacksmith. His brother, Paddy, was one also and he set up in Eyrecourt. At some stage Bill took over Moylan’s forge in Lorrha, which had been operated by Bill Bollard until such time as he moved to Lordspark, where he had land in Culleen.

Bill took part in the War of Independence and was involved in the Modreeny ambush in June 1921. He, and his brother, Jer, were members of the No 4 Battalion of the No. 1 (North) Tipperary Brigade Active Service Unit. On one occasion, while on the run, the British came looking for Bill in Lorrha. He got word beforehand what was up and hid under the bridge over the river beside the Church in the village, until the soldiers left.

Bill married Annie Brett of Lorrha in February 1922. The couple had two children, Vincent, who died in 1940 at the age of 17 years, and Paul, who was born in 1926. He continued to rent Moylan’s forge until he decided to set up his own place beside it.

He continued to work it until his death in 1948, doing all the usual jobs associated with the work, after which the forge ceased to exist.

He also provided a hackney service and is remembered for transporting juvenile teams from the parish to matches. Anne Boucher lived until 1986, dying at the fine age of 93 years.

Brereton’s Forge at the Pike

Brereton’s forge with the zinc roof at the Pike was a familiar sight for anyone travelling towards Birr or going to hurling training in Moylan’s field in the 1940s and 1950s.

It was operated by Jack Brereton, who set up his business there in a house and garden, which belonged to John Reddan of Cullagh, sometime in the 1930s. Jack, who was also a handy seannos dancer, came from Borrisokane, where his father had a forge.

He did all the usual jobs of a blacksmith, shoeing horses, fixing wheels, repairing machinery and was particularly noted for making gates.

Jack married Alice Egan of Abbeyville about 1940 and the couple had six children, three boys and three girls. They were Ena, Detty, Pat, Oliver, Flannan, and Francis. Interestingly, Alice was related to Bill Boucher’s wife in Lorrha.

Jack Brereton died suddenly in 1960 at the age of sixty-four years. The last job he did was for Mick Brophy of Lisballyard, and he was getting ready for Mass the following morning, Sunday, July 10, when he dropped dead.

His sons, Pat and Oliver, tried to run the forge for a short time after his death but were too young and it closed down after a short time. The Pike, where there were 18 children at the time in the Brereton, O’Meara and Gormley families, as well as groups collecting for pitch and toss sessions on summer evenings, is now a deserted place.



Bill Boucher and his wife Anne in a formal pose.

Lane's Forge at Culleen

Lane's forge was on the bad bend on the opposite side of the road from the cottage at Culleen, in the Lordspark. It was originally owned by Bill Bollard, who was married to Mary Lane, a grandaunt of Jack's. Bill played on the Lorrha hurling team that won the North Tipperary senior hurling championship of 1905, and he can be seen in the second row of the picture of the team in the Lorrha G.A.A. history.

The Bollard family originally had a forge in Moylan's of Lorrha, before Jim O'Meara and Bill Boucher set up in the same place. It appears that Bill Bollard got a cottage at some stage in Culleen and opened a forge there, Jack Lane went to work for him.

Jack Lane's grandfather, John, was born at Oranmore in 1826. He served initially with the Revenue Police until they were disbanded in 1857, when he transferred to the RIC, from which he retired on pension in 1877. He married Brigid Stanley at Lorrha in 1871 and settled in Ballyquirke, where he died in 1913 and was buried in Aglish.

The marriage produced three children, the eldest of whom was John. He married Brigid Burke of Camross in 1908, and the eldest child, Jack, was born in 1909, and baptised in the church at the Pike of Rushall. At some stage in his life, Jack came to live with his grandparents at Ballyquirke and when Bill Bollard opened the forge at Culleen, he went to work for him. According to Pat Hough, Jack was very smart with horses and recalls an incident when his father's horse got a stone in the hoof, which became septic, and he was in danger of losing the animal until Jack 'operated' on him, removing the stone and saving the horse's life.

Jack eventually took over the running of the forge after Bill's death. He married Patricia Lang in Redwood Church in January 1939. She had a farm in Carrigeen. Jack continued his work as a blacksmith, while Sonny Mahony helped his wife on the farm. The couple had seven children, Sean, Mary, Jim, Noel and Deirdre. Gerard and Finbarr, died at the untimely ages of three and seven years. Jack closed the forge sometime in the early nineteen-fifties but continued to shoe a few horses for neighbours. His children remember the anvil on a little stone bench in the farmyard.

Delahunt's Forge at Clonmona

According to the Census of Ireland 1911, John Delahunt, a 51-year-old married man, was a blacksmith at Clonmona, Co. Tipperary. His wife's name was Margaret of the same age and the couple had five children. The eldest, Richard, was 18 years and a blacksmith, Joseph was 16, William 10, John 8 and the youngest, Edward, was 7 years, and they are all described as scholars. Also in the house was Peter Cash, a servant, 33 years old, and a blacksmith.

It is believed that the family came originally from Ballingarry to Clonmona in the second half of the 19th century and set up a forge in the area. In the course of time, it became an important centre of activity for the farming community not only shoeing horses but repairing machinery also. In time the family became main agents for Deering machinery.



Richard Delahunt and his wife, Betty, on their wedding day in 1976.

The facilities in the place included two metal melting furnaces, which moulded boards for ploughs. Located on the outside of a building the molten metal was poured into moulds on the inside. It was a specialist job and suggest the range of services offered by the forge.

The forge was a busy place, where farmers and other clients came not only to avail of the services on offer but to catch up with the latest gossip. Nearby was Harding's Cross, another important meeting place. The current owner, Richard, who is married to Betty, and they have four daughters, Sarah, Gillian, Emma and Gail, remembers hurling at the crossroads, and pitch-and-toss, but also plenty of talk and catching up with news until late on summer evenings. Tom Smith, who lived nearby and represented Tipperary in junior hurling, was a regular at the cross.

The forge continued to function until 1969. By that time the Delahunts had expanded their acreage of land and farming had taken over as the main activity of the family. The busy forge had gradually become quiet,

and the door was closed except for the odd job.

Today the building still stands as a preserved structure. Inside, everything is still intact, the fire, the bellows, the anvil and an incredible selection of tools, all shapes and sizes, fit for multiple functions. Richard starts the fire occasionally, and when he does the old place comes alive again. One can imagine the sound of the metal beaten on the anvil, the wheeze of the bellows, the reddened iron sizzling in the water.

As I left, I thought the forge deserved to be developed as a museum to the past. The darkness, the sights, the smells and the many and varied tools and pieces of equipment, a veritable treasure-trove, would give a valuable insight to a way of life, well and truly past.

The Forge in Abbeyville

According to the 1901 Census Rody Quinlan was a publican and farmer in Abbeyville, 53 years of age, and a widower. Tradition has it that he bought the pub, formerly an RIC Barracks, before the turn of the century. Before that he lived across the road, where he had a forge and twenty-five acres. He must have continued to work the forge because it is listed among the outhouses of his residence in Form B of the census. There is a tradition that a horse, The Liberator, which won the Aintree Grand National in 1879, was connected with Abbeyville and was shod in Quinlan's forge.⁵ Whatever about the tenuousness of the connection, the forge ceased to exist early in the 1900s, but the building that housed the forge still stands. Rody Quinlan passed on the pub and farm to his children in 1909 and there is no mention of a forge in the 1911 Census, which may have ceased with his death. According to James Heenan's research, the Quinlans were reputed to have a forge down Sean Lambe's lane in Redwood and another at the Ferry in the 19th century.

As stated at the beginning of this account, the forge as we knew it no longer exists. What was the forge has been transformed with the electric gear, the welding apparatus and the drill. The blacksmith, who as a master craftsman, versatile and respected, is no more. He has been replaced by the mechanic.

I would like to conclude with a verse from the evocative poem, *The Village Blacksmith*, by the American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a framed copy of which hangs in Paddy O'Meara's house:

*And children coming home from school
Look in at the open door;
They love to see the flaming forge,
And hear the bellows roar,
And catch the burning sparks that fly
Like chaff from a threshing-floor.*

Endnotes

- 1 And what about farriers? The difference between the farrier and blacksmith is that a farrier is a person who maintains the health and balance of horses' feet through the trimming of the hoof and placement of horseshoes, while the blacksmith is a person who forges and shapes iron as well as shoeing horses.
- 2 The Schools Collection, Volume 0530, pages 172-173, 300.
- 3 Mick Hough (1885-1971) married Elizabeth (Lil) Clarke, who had a small farm beside Sommerville's Pub, in February 1947.
- 4 James Hogan (1876-1944, Margaret Hogan (1872-1947), John Hogan (1869-1948). Their parents were James Hogan and Anne Flaherty.
- 5 Read *Solving the Puzzle of the Liberator* by David Broderick, *The Lamp* 2023, pp. 36-38.



Paddy O'Meara with the award winning horseshoes he made on the Blacksmith and Farrier Course he did in Thurles in the 1940s.