

Oral History Interview with Tony Fry Caroline & Ron Ingerson.



East Meon Forge in 1909



East Meon Forge, and Forge Cottage on right

00.00

Caroline. This is an interview with Tony Fry about East Meon Forge, 1983 to 2003. Interviewers C & R Ingerson. Tony, how did your twenty years at the Forge begin?

Tony. As I said originally, Derek and I were ex-navy artificers, retiring on pension, and we were looking for a job to keep us busy but not to make a fortune – just something to do, really. We started in the farm in Horndean where we had part of a barn as a workshop; we were making wrought-iron gates and bits and pieces for people. Then we heard through the grapevine that the Forge here was available and the same day – we came straight down in the van – and happened to find Freddie Standfield, the owner, behind the Forge lighting a bonfire burning his garden rubbish. The Forge at that time had been closed for several years as a lock-up store by a local electrical contractor who actually lived in that house there, right next door to me (not that I was living here at the time; this was before we came).



The Forge in the 1980s, L to R, Derek Mustchin, apprentice, Tony Fry.

So we were both commuting from Horndean and Cowplain, to start with, every day to the Forge and working there and Freddie was quite happy for us to open it up as it was, but it meant quite a bit of work. It had been empty for quite a long time, part of the chimney had been demolished . We had to do a lot of work; we ended up decorating the inside with some wrought-iron work and white paint to freshen it all up. We had to rebuild the forge itself and put an electric fan on the side because the old bellows that they used to use in the days of horse-shoeing were long gone. In fact, there were a couple of ladies that lived up the road who in their nineties walked up the road, and in the summer we had the double doors open, they would stop and say “We used to come here as children, watching the horses being shod.” Of course, we’re not farriers, we don’t touch horses – that’s a different trade these days...

02.50

Caroline. So it certainly wasn’t an up-and-running business when you began?

Tony. No, no business at all. It had been closed, as a lock-up store, for years and it was in a pretty sorry state; we had to do a lot of work to renovate it. Moving on a bit, we actually built an office and a toilet at the back of it; it was L-shaped, in the corner. We said to the landlord that we wanted planning permission for that and he said, “Well you do it and I’ll pay for the materials,” if we did the work which is what we did, so that got it more usable, since up to then we had no toilet and as we both lived out of the village, it was a bit of a long trek to go back home to go to the loo ... once we got that established, it was much better.

03.59

Caroline. You originally thought you would do agricultural work, did you get to do agricultural stuff?

Tony. No, not really. We’d had a market survey done by the Portsmouth News, the newspaper in Portsmouth, and they had done some research around the farms, and it turned out, the results of the survey was that there wasn’t a business there because although Derek was a diesel engineer and I was a welder, I was a ship-wright in the navy, I had welding and blacksmithing and carpentry in my remit, the tractors in the farms weren’t the old Ferguson tractors, they were John Deere and they were under warranty, and the welding, at the same time, in the early ‘80s, the little portable welding machines were introduced worldwide, well countrywide anyway, so that all the farmers could plug something together quite happily, though it didn’t look, probably, very good, or not as good as my welding would have been, it still did the job. So they didn’t want us. We were making gates and railings and anything we could get hold of; back in the early days we were taking in all sorts of stuff, anything that was going, because I could do carpentry as well. One job was on a chicken farm up at Steep Marsh and I was up on the roof of these chicken shed patching the felt with hot pitch – we would do anything to earn a little bit of cash, to pay the rent really.

06.07

Caroline. Were there any other setbacks in your planning?



Tony. Well, apart from the twice we had collisions (*pictured, left*) which partly demolished the place, which we had to repair, obviously, but otherwise, business-wise, the only other problem we had was my health, because I'd had an accident in the Navy and both hips were braced, which had to be done, actually, three years after we started at the Forge. I was struggling to walk when

we first went there and three years later I had my hips replaced (which are now thirty years old), I've still got them, Guinness Book of Records, I think.

Otherwise, during that period, we were working elsewhere, we had some shops, we had a shop in Clanfield for about a year, in ?? Road, we had one in Horndean and we had one in the High Street by the War Memorial, that flint building behind which originally was a filling station, it had a window in the wall which is no longer there, so we had a shop in there with a workshop behind. Because I couldn't do the manual work for a period, and we were selling, retailing, all our wall lights and lanterns and garden furniture, fireplace accessories, which we could retail, so that kept us going, really. So I was doing that side of the business and that was when Derek had the apprentices working with him, to help with that side of it.

08.10

Caroline. So as you became more established you managed to train up other people as well then?

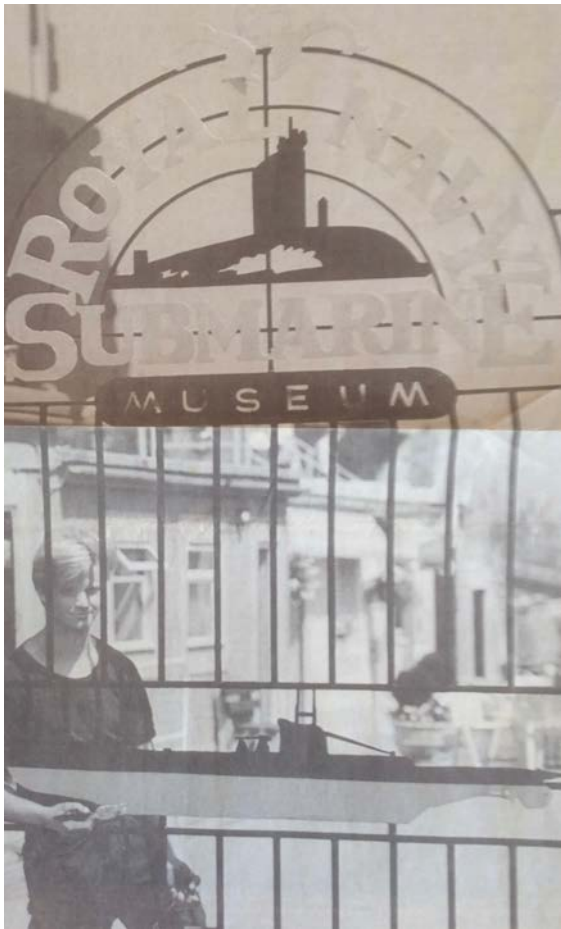
Tony. Oh yes. Michael Ibriani, who is in the picture (*right*), he lived in a foster home in the village, Gowans, up at Pidham Hill, which then was a foster home with about twelve children, and he was at the school, local school, and then he went to Petersfield in the bus with all the others, and when he was 16 he came to work with us until he was 18, when he had to leave the foster home and go back to London where I think his father still lived. So we lost him then, but we trained him up and he was a very good worker; he would go out on site with Derek when I couldn't do the physical labour.



But it worked fine, we still had some income, not too much ... For each operation, of course, I had three months off work. One was in February and one in September for three months, so I lost six months of the year, that particular year.

09.48.

Caroline. In the '80s, what would you say was your typical work and is there anything that really stands out as special?



Newspaper photographs of Gosport Museum gates and Catherington village sign

Tony. We liked the job when we got the Submarine Museum in Gosport. That was a good, big job because the gates are 10 feet high, double gates, and we put in the silhouette of submarines and things there. Unfortunately the Submarine Museum itself expanded soon after that so the gates were no longer the main entrance, but they left the gates there so that people could still see them and as far as I know they're still there today ... not that I've been to the Submarine Museum lately. But that was a good thing and it boosted the fact that we were ex-Navy, it got a bit of publicity for us really, and so we were still getting jobs from outside the village. The same thing happened at Catherington, they wanted a sign made which is still there now, over the pond, we had to make that, and in fact design it, based on an old treadmill they had found in one of the barns, that had gone rotten, the timber, we did make that and recently I've noticed that someone else has refurbished it. I don't know who, but it may have been Steve, the lad who eventually took over from us, because he lives, still, in the area.

11.45

Caroline. Did you go on to specialise in other aspects of your work?

Tony. Well, it was the fireplaces, really, we developed. Because that literally started from just selling a fire-basket to a customer, in fact, in West Meon; he went home with this fire basket, and a big wrought-iron fire bag behind it, and they set it all up in their new inglenook – they'd just moved house – and they set it up and lit a log fire and filled

the house with smoke. So, we got an urgent phone call to go down and see, and we had to go in on our hands and knees into the house because the smoke ceiling was about three feet from the floor and it was absolutely terrible. We managed to get the fire itself out and dump it in the garden and stop the problems, and so it was from there: they said "What can we do about it?". So we started research, really, into fireplaces, and we were helped quite a bit by a place called Kings Worthy Foundry, over at Winchester, because we used to retail, we bought a lot of our fire-baskets and fire backs, from them. So they were able to advise us on you go about making an inglenook fireplace work properly. So, we learned the game, as it were, and then we ended up making canopies and fitting them all over Hampshire. It went as far as Andover at one time, fitting them; nearly every thatched cottage we went past, there was a canopy in it, you know. The other thing we learned then was about the design of thatched cottages, which is going back really into history. In the old a thatched cottage, most of them still today, the front door was on the side of the house and it went into two rooms and the inglenooks were just inside the door, back to back, so any draught needed to make the inglenook work went round the corner from the front door, because they had a big gap underneath the door to allow for the air flow, then go round the corner and up the chimney without affecting the people sat in the room. So that, going back, that's how thatched cottages were built, originally, all with a similar layout. I think we went to the open-air museum at Singleton and had a look at a couple of those just to prove the point. So that's a job we never even dreamt we'd be involved in, but because we had the shops and were then selling these fireplace accessories, that led us into the other side of it, and then we ended up doing more canopies than anything else. At least I did; Derek stayed with the gates and railings and I did the fireplaces.

15.07

Caroline. In the village, where are examples of work that you're pleased to have done?



Bar at Ye Olde George Inn, with glass rack by Tony Fry



Hall at Court House, chandeliers by Tony Fry

Tony. Well ... a chap called Jake Cable owned the George in Church Street and he contracted us to make wrought-iron work over the bar to hang his glasses on, to make a rack, and that's still there now, that was quite a big job, and then, after that, we did lighting, that was another area we got into, through the shop, really. Because we were selling lighting. People came and said that they would like their own design, so we were

given a job of repairing, or replacing, the large chandeliers, if you like, in the Court Hall, in the village and that was quite an exciting job because we had to get a big scaffolding tower to get up, it was so high in the air. So that was done and we designed it as a ring with what looked like candles; they're not really, they're electric these days, and then we did a similar job later on, when the new room was built behind the church, and they wanted lights to match the ones that were in the church but on a smaller scale, which is what we did they're still there as well.

It's interesting; recently I was just talking about the gates outside the new housing on the Green, because they're some other examples of our work on the gates side. I was liaison from the Parish Council with the developer and he was talking about these gates and we ended up discussing them and they said "We're going to leave a metre-wide gap in every wall in front of the front door" and we said, "Well, that's fine, that's where the gate's got to go." So we made gates to fit the metre-wide gap, no, 900 wide gap, 9 hundredths, centimetres, and when we went to fit them they'd left the gap 100, one metre wide so we then had to put posts down each side of the gates to fill up the gap. But that's what you meet all the time in business, I'm afraid. Anyway, we made all the gates for all the houses and they're still, as far as I know they are still there. The six on the front, the developer and I went to the school and had a chat to the children and said "We want pictures of things to do with the village" and we asked them to draw them. Eventually they gave me a big stack of about a hundred drawings by the children and I went through them all and picked out ... obviously there was a lot of duplication and we picked out several ideas and then designed the gates to fit the ideas, and again, they're the six that face the green, they've got six different designs (*pictured, below*).



That's another thing that could go in the records, and the other area I haven't covered is, we were making weather vanes as well, quite a few weather vanes, because we could buy them from Kings Worthy and sell them on, retail them, but mostly people wanted their own design. So we ended up making various weather vanes and there's one still on the top of the sports pavilion by the village green, which was a pheasant. There's one in Petersfield, in the 'Village' part of Petersfield, the one way street system, there's an island, in the middle of there there's a block of garages and there's a weather vane on the top of that which I made and fitted, which is in fact a couple of owls and the moon, which I designed, and that's still there, because I saw it last week.

19.38

Caroline. Finally, the business changed again, about 1999?

Tony. I'm not sure of my dates, but it was when Freddie Standfield died, his son, in his will, he had a lot of property including the Forge. We weren't offered ownership of it so it was sold to the Museum – it wasn't sold, he just gave it to them because he was a founder of the Museum, Freddie, he gave them a lot of artefacts when it first opened, which he had in his house; they had the ownership and we, by this time, handed over to Steve Weeks and Steve was paying his rent to the Museum for about two years. Then, something happened again and the Forge went back on the market and Steve actually bid for it and I helped him prepare his bid – I was still working part-time with him – and we put in a bid, which was a sealed bid, at auction, and he never got it. It went to a developer, in fact several developers have had it since, and the first one obviously wanted Steve out so that he could develop the place, and first of all he put the rent up, then he wanted him to get it re-wired, electrically, then he wanted the walls repaired, the roof re-done, and the floor levelled, everything was added on and on until Steve said, "I can't run a business like this, I'm on my own here and I can't afford all that. So they came to a mutual agreement, and he left the lease, he walked away from it. There have been troubles since, I won't go into that.

21.58

Caroline. In your time you have given a huge amount that lends to the distinctive character of this fine community. Thank you.

Tony ... we had a nice time there, we enjoyed it. As I say, we haven't made a fortune; from time to time we were struggling – usually when the audit came round and we had to pay someone lots of money to audit the books, the accounts, so that was always a strain. Some months we had pay, some months we didn't. We had variety – you wouldn't believe, you go to a forge and you think 'they shoe horses', you know, well, they don't. In our case, we ran it as a business successfully for twenty years, and enjoyed it.

Caroline. Which matters most ... Thank you, very very much.



The Forge today photo Charlie Gaisford