

A Village of Smiths.

By S. S. SWITHAINE.

There are a group of quaint little hamlets in Lancashire where practically everyone lives by nail-making—an industry which is carried on to-day almost exactly as it was hundreds of years ago. This article gives an interesting glimpse into the lives of these little-known craftsmen, many of whom have been working in the same ancient smithies all their lives, making incredible numbers of nails every day. From Photographs by Harry Parkes.



HEN that great navigator, Captain Cook, first visited Tahiti, the largest of the Society Islands, he found the natives had in use nails of wood, bone, shell, and even stone. When the simple savages were shown nails of iron they fancied them to be shoots of some sort of very hard wood, and, desirous of securing for future use such a valuable commodity, they went so far as to *plant* such nails as they could get in order to propagate the species.

If, however, the native of Tahiti could have been transported to a nail-making village, such as that of Far Moor, in Lancashire, he would have seen that the iron nail was a thing that did not grow like a thorn in a hedge, but attained its usefulness only after it had passed through the furnace fire and had been beaten into shape by a skilled craftsman under the ringing strokes of his hammer.

The nailsmith is the most conservative of craftsmen. He works in the same smithy, at the same anvil, and in exactly the same manner as his father and his father's forefathers worked before him. Smithcraft is the art of shaping metals to the use of man, and it may be said that civilization dawned when the first smith lighted his fire and perfected his trade through discovery and practice.

"As busy as a nailer" is a phrase that has passed into a proverb, but one can only understand its practical significance by a visit to a nail-making village. The hammers ring and clang incessantly, and the whole countryside is vocal with their song of industry. The bellows blow, the sparks fly, and the heated irons are beaten into many shapes, while the nailers sweat over fire and anvil in their quaint old stone-built

smithies, full of playing shadows which would have delighted Rembrandt.

Far Moor is situated on a ridge of rising ground that stands betwixt the west coast and the busy inland towns of industrial Lancashire. Near by are the nail-making villages of Tontine and Downall Green, and a few miles inland is the quaint old hamlet of Chowbent, likewise an ancient centre of the same industry. Curiously enough, while the blacksmith generally pitches his smithy at the cross-roads, and the silversmith and the coppersmith ply their callings in the crowded cities, the nailsmiths gather together clannishly in villages, and all the country round echoes to their anvil strokes.

Far Moor, the "village of smiths," which forms the subject of this article, is a place of narrow streets and alleys that twist and curve about tortuously. The houses are quaintly built, solid and angular of structure, and rich in those points which stamp a place with character. When the oldest cottages were built, in the days



From a)

GENERAL VIEW OF FAR MOOR, THE "VILLAGE OF SMITHS."

[Photo.

of long ago, the smithy frequently communicated with the cottage, so that the craftsman was able to walk from his home into his workshop almost with a stride, and his wife and children could hear him all day long at his labours.

To-day the smith's note—the echo of the anvil—is still dominant in Far Moor. It seems to set industry to music, and, in fact, as the visitor lingers, listening, he almost involuntarily exclaims, "In just such a place Handel might have composed his 'Harmonious Blacksmith'!" And so it is.

It is interesting to follow the evolution of an iron nail. The raw material is received at the smithies in the shape of bundles of iron rods. These bundles vary in weight and the rods are of different lengths and thicknesses. The nail-smith puts several rods into the fire at once. With his left hand he blows the bellows while the sparks fly upwards; and with his right he trims the furnace and handles the reddening irons. As soon as the requisite heat has been attained he takes one rod out of the flames and hammers it on his small "stithy" to the shape desired. Every nail is made on the end of the iron rod and then cut off. In the case of the smaller sorts of nails, such as the "sparrow-bill" (so called from its resemblance to the bird's beak), the end of the rod, when it has been beaten to the desired shape, is held upon a cutting-chisel that stands at the perpendicular, and a blow from the hammer—which falls on two small iron buffers, raised just high enough to protect the chisel—severs the nail from the iron rod, whereupon it falls, still red with heat, into the heap of gradually cooling nails. As the smith beats the iron he works with his foot a small blow-pipe, little larger than a goose-quill, which fans the heated end of the bar that is

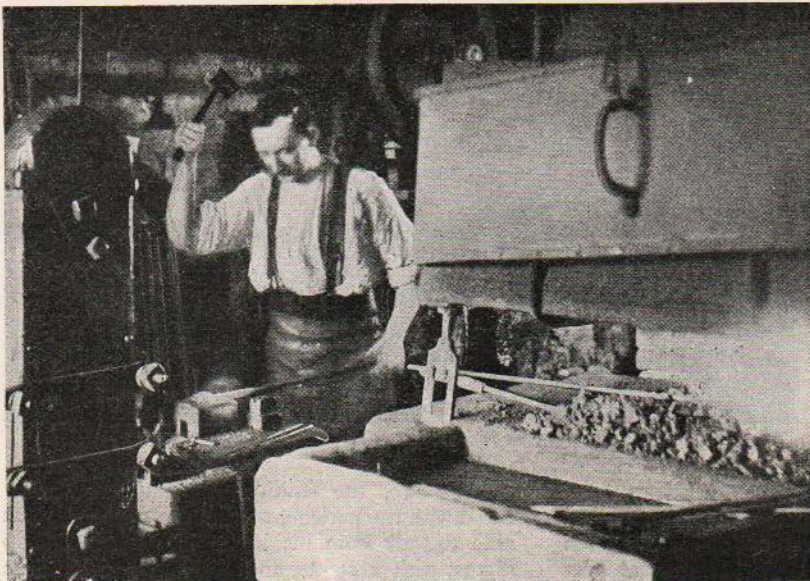
being beaten into a still greater glow. The sparrow-bill is the nail that is used so largely by the shoemaker in the sole of the stronger kinds of boots and shoes, especially in the heel. It has no head, being driven into the leather until the top is level with the surface of the sole. There is a great demand for this nail, thousands of tons being used by the shoemakers of the country in the course of the year. A skilled nailsmith will make sparrow-bills with incredible speed.

"I can make two gross of sparrow-bills an hour, with a blower," said one nailer to the writer. This works out at twenty-four gross for a day of twelve hours. That is to say, a single nailer at his best, with a girl or boy at the bellows-handle, may make in the course of one day's work anything from three to four thousand small nails! Five sparrow-bills, ready for use, fall from his stithy every minute of his working day!

It is hard work, and it makes hardy men. There is no time to measure the blows—they fall too fast; and the craft requires a trained and practised eye and a strong and precise arm. Time was when the whole family—man, wife, and children—were all engaged in the various processes of the craft, the man doing the more arduous work, the woman joining in the lighter tasks, while the children blew the bellows and sorted the nails, or helped in other ways.

One of the photographs shows two septuagenarian smiths standing, hammer in hand, at the smithy door, just as they have left their anvil, and another depicts one of them actually at work, at the ripe age of seventy-six. Yet another photograph shows a girl-smith who is putting the thread screws on the bolts as they leave the anvil of her veteran grandfather, who is still working, day in and day out, from morning till night, though he has long since passed the "allotted span."

The names of the various kinds of nails are almost legion, each being named from its shape, its size, the use to which it is put, or some other characteristic. Thus there are sparrow-bills, diamonds, roseheads,



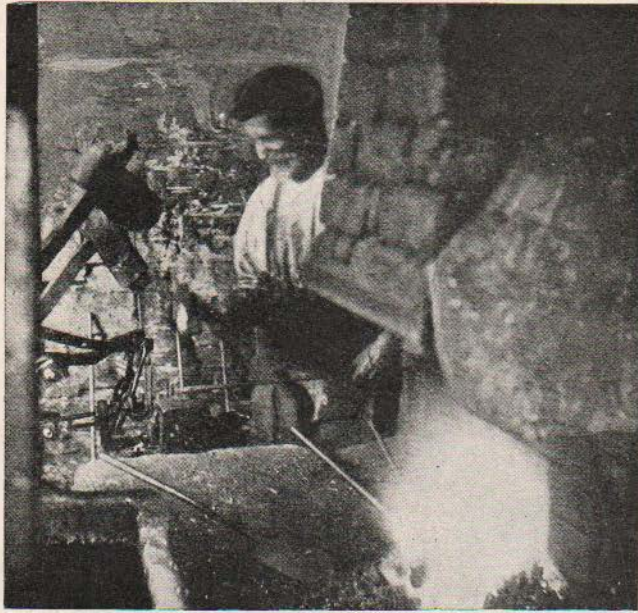
From a

A TYPICAL SMITHY INTERIOR.

[Photo.

horseshoes, shingles, and ship-carpenters; chisel-pointed, cut, wrought, and wire nails; fourpenny and tenpenny nails, and so on. The tenpenny nails and others of like nomenclature get their names from the ancient custom of making them by weight, a certain number of pounds of iron being used in the making of a thousand nails. Thus, the tenpenny nail counts a thousand to ten pounds, and the eightpenny a thousand to eight pounds. Strictly speaking, the name should be the "ten-pound" nail, and so forth.

In the making of the smaller kinds of nails the hand-hammer is employed, but for large nails and for bolts the hammers, which are very heavy, are worked by the foot. In the fashioning of bolts, for instance, it is "all foot and hard work," as a nailsmith described it. Each smith has two large lever-hammers that he works with his feet by means of a kind of treadle. When the iron is hot he holds it with the left hand, a small hammer being in his right, while with his feet he works the large hammers as required. One of the large lever-hammers is grooved on the face, as is also the stithy upon



From a]

A SMITH OF SEVENTY-SIX STILL HARD AT WORK.

[Photo.

which it falls. It comes down with a thunderous clamp, and "swages" the iron to the shape and thickness of the bolt required. The other foot-worked hammer, with the anvil upon which it falls, is also grooved, but differently from the first, and this puts the head upon the bolt. When the rod of iron has been "swaged" to the right length and thickness under the first hammer, the smith, while the watcher winks, rams it into the circular groove in the anvil of the second foot-worked hammer, breaks it off with a stroke from his hand-hammer, and then down comes the heavy lever-hammer and puts the head on with a blow. The bolt is now finished, with the exception of the screw, and it is allowed to fall, still red-hot, into the heap of cooling iron on the earthen floor beside the anvil. As soon as the bolts have cooled they are taken up by another person—such as the girl-smith shown in the photograph—who puts the spiral screw upon the end that is turned into the "nut" by the aid of a machine called a "die." This girl-smith told the writer that she is able to put the screw-end on seventeen or eighteen gross of bolts each day, so that about two thousand five hundred bolts pass through her hands in one working day! She works in the same smithy as her uncle and her grandfather, each of whom can make as many bolts as she can "screw."

When the nails and the bolts are finished they are sorted out and stored away, to be dispatched later on as orders come in from all



From a]

A COUPLE OF SEPTUAGENARIANS.

[Photo.



From a) A GIRL-SMITH FINISHING OFF BOLTS. [Photo.

over the country. They are used in ship-building and house-building, for the making of coal "corves" that go down into the under-ways of the mines to be filled with "black diamonds" by the colliers, and for the jointing together of the carriages that are horse-drawn or motor-driven on the surface. In fact, the finished work of these smiths is used in the building of almost every structure that man puts his hand to—and certainly in more ways than can be enumerated here.

Before the days of the railways the finished smith-work—nails and bolts and screws, hinges, locks, and kindred things—was taken from the villages in horse-drawn vehicles. Those were times of perilous travel and long journeys, taken after much preparation. The highwayman was on the road with pistol and blunderbuss, and though he might allow the heavily-loaded cart to lumber past him and go free, yet when the driver returned, laden with provisions and carrying a fat money-bag, the knight of the road was tempted to hold up the horses and cry, "Your money or your life!"

Many of these veteran nailsmiths have been working in the same smithies for seventy years. Thus, William Dickinson, who is over seventy-seven years old, began work in the smithy in his eighth year, and he is still at it. In his prime he could reckon upon making an average of some sixteen gross of bolts a day; and even to-day, in his extreme old age, he makes him-

self responsible for fully half that quantity—nearly twelve hundred a day! The nailers, as a rule, work from eight in the morning until eight in the evening, winter and summer.

Old William Dickinson's experience goes back to the days of the "Tommy-shop" of sixty years ago, and he often tells the younger generation round the smithy fire how the master-nailer used to pay his workmen at the rate of seven or eight shillings a day, out of which they had to "find their own fire and steel." "But no money, mind you," old William adds. The master who found the work in those days also kept the shop where the wages were spent before they were paid. The worker had simply a standing account with the master who employed him. The employer, as the shopkeeper, could put whatever price he chose on his goods, and the shopkeeper, as the employer, could pay whatever wages he liked. Only the workers never saw money; they were paid in kind. This pernicious system, which extended to many trades besides nailing, led to the greatest abuses, so that Parliament found it necessary to step in and put a stop to it by passing what is known as the Truck Act. With the passing of the "Tommy-shop" the nail-

smith's craft greatly improved. "When I was a young man and got married, which was at thirty-eight years of age, I could earn about two pounds a week with hard work," old William Dickinson told the writer, "but out of that I had to find my own fire and my own iron and steel. But to-day a man may start at eight o'clock in the morning and work as hard as he may until eight o'clock at night, and he'll not have a pound clear for himself in a whole week."

In another smithy two smiths were busy, one a young man of some thirty years and the other a veteran of seventy-seven. The aged smith told how at his best he was wont to earn seven shillings a day for the best class of work, while a man would earn five shillings a day for the inferior kinds of work.

"To-day," said the younger man, gloomily, "a nailer won't get more than half a crown for his day's work."

"Aye," added the aged smith, "and he'll have to be a fleet man at his work to get that."

For centuries the ancient craft of the nailsmith has flourished in these parts. During the Cromwellian period the smiths of the district were in great request for the making as well as the mending of the weapons of war. When more peaceful times came, however, they went back to their nailmaking, and they will probably be at it still when many more pretentious industries have passed away.