

# TRADITIONAL, AND CONTEMPORARY BLACKSMITHING

Richard Quinnell, Leatherhead 13th October 2001

Just to show that we are not so hidebound that we only study wood, Chris Currie arranged an excellent day at Rowhurst Forge where traditional and modern techniques are regarded as equally valid in this 'hot bed' of the revival of the blacksmith's craft. Richard has built up quite a group of skilled and like-minded colleagues, and it was one of these, Peter Parkinson, who in a purpose-built centre gave a fine demonstration of some of the basic techniques of shaping, twisting, splitting and welding using a traditional forge and, later, oxyacetylene equipment in order to get more focussed heat.

Mild steel (containing a little carbon), which is used today for all but the most exactly specified work, is pretty well indistinguishable from much more expensive wrought iron (containing silica). It will potentially last as long and is less likely to split and contain imperfections. Wrought iron was anyway made in various grades; the poor stuff, often used for railings, could be very poor. One surprising fact is how bad a conductor of heat the metal is. Also, unlike most operations in wood, it is pretty well waste-free as the material can easily be recycled. The more times that work is heated and cooled, the more that crystals in it grow to form a granulated surface – the makings of patination!

Peter also gave us, with the aid of slides, a sprint through the history of wrought iron, pointing out its suffering under the enormous challenge of cheaper cast iron during the 19th century, which led, with occasionally superb flowerings particularly in France and Belgium during the Art Nouveau and Art Deco periods, to a few mundane pastiches of former glories in country villages in the post-war petrol revolution.

Richard took up this point again in a rather moving talk after an excellent and colourful lunch, discussing his rôle in establishing a Blacksmiths' Association in 1978 and the renaissance of the blacksmith as a designer as well as a craftsmen, and how it has 'forged ahead' since then. There were many links with furniture here and some slides of spectacular modern work by leading lights both here and in America.

With this feeling of up-beat professional pride in our minds, we then set-to to create... well something, ourselves. Many thanks to all who contributed to such a memorable experience.

*Christopher Claxton Stevens*