

TROUBLE AT MILL - IRON & STEEL MAKING AT BYFLEET MILL

Iain Wakeford 2014

As promised last week I want to now take a look at the history of Byfleet Mill in a bit more detail – in particular the late 17th and 18th century when the mill was turned over to working iron and the industrial revolution found its way into this quite corner of Surrey.

John Seller's Map, published in 1690, clearly shows two 'Iron Mills' just south of Byfleet Park. But anyone who knows the area will know that Byfleet Mill is actually to the north of the manor house, not the south, so are these two new mills now lost, or is the map just plain wrong. The fact that he calls the River Wey the 'River Loddon' doesn't give me much confidence, and the documentary evidence appears to support the fact that the mills in question were actually on the site of the present mill buildings in Mill Lane.

In 1712 a man named Walter Kent took Thomas Wethered of Byfleet to court. He had apparently invested nearly £6,000 in Wethered's business at Byfleet, making iron hoops and brass and copper plate and wire. He claimed that he had paid too much and that he had been defrauded. It appears that the investment took place in 1703 after Wethered had taken possession of 'certain mills at Byfleet commonly called Byfleet Mills, which had lately been paper mills and corn mills' and which Wethered had bought from Sir Cornwall Bradshaw and his tenants. Wethered claimed to have spent £2,846.9s.0d. on the buildings including £1,198 for the original mills, land and mill-house, with the rest being spent on enlarging the outbuildings on the site.

According to Leonard Stevens in his history of Byfleet, Kent paid 'for a half share and became a partner on 20th January, 1703, though there seems to have been some readjustment of figures when the deed of partnership was drawn up, and finally on 2nd March, 1703, Kent brought the payment for his half share up to £2,927 14s. 6d. and also paid £3,000 into the business'.

It wasn't long before he realised he had paid too much and in 1710 the partnership was dissolved after which the mills were apparently sold to John Hitchcock and others for just £4,000!

The history of the mills then seems to be a little confusing. Derek Stidler in his book on the *Watermills of Surrey* (Barracuda Books, 1990),



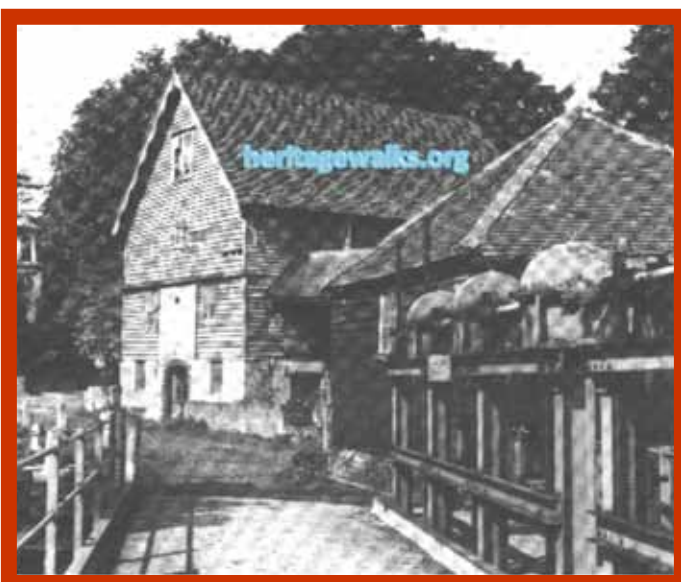
states that 'from 1775 until 1790 small iron artefacts were manufactured here by Jukes Coulson & Co.' (who were listed in 1768 as 'iron merchants' in London), and Howard Cook in his history of the village says that 'by 1794 it was a steel-mill and then reverted to corn'.

But Alan Crosby in his *History of Woking* (Phillimore 2003) puts the closure to 1815 stating that the mill was 'put out of business by the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the exhaustion of easily accessible local ore, and fierce competition from new iron industries in south Wales and the Midlands'.

The 'local ore' it seems came from the nearby commons at St George's Hill and at Wisley and Ockham Commons where according to Eric Gardner in the *Surrey Archaeological Collections* (Vol 34, 1921), 'a series of more or less parallel trenches, somewhat like furrows on arable land, but irregular and varying in depth' are the remains of old iron workings 'where ironstone was obtained locally' about 150 years before (i.e. in the 1770's).

Those 'furrows' can still be seen on Ockham Common between the M25 and A3, where the Boldermere Pond may also be a reminder of the former iron-working, being used either as a hammer pond or to flush away the soil to reveal the iron-pan below the soil.

Having said that there are some who question whether the iron for the local mills actually came from the local iron ore or whether it was





The mill and mill house stand on an island in the River Wey, which has clearly changed its course over the years with the cutting of new leats to power the mill wheels.

'imported' ore or scrap metal that was being re-worked. That must certainly be the case with the brass and copper working. Maybe the truth is a bit of both - some local ore being supplemented with other material brought in from elsewhere (probably on the Wey Navigation).

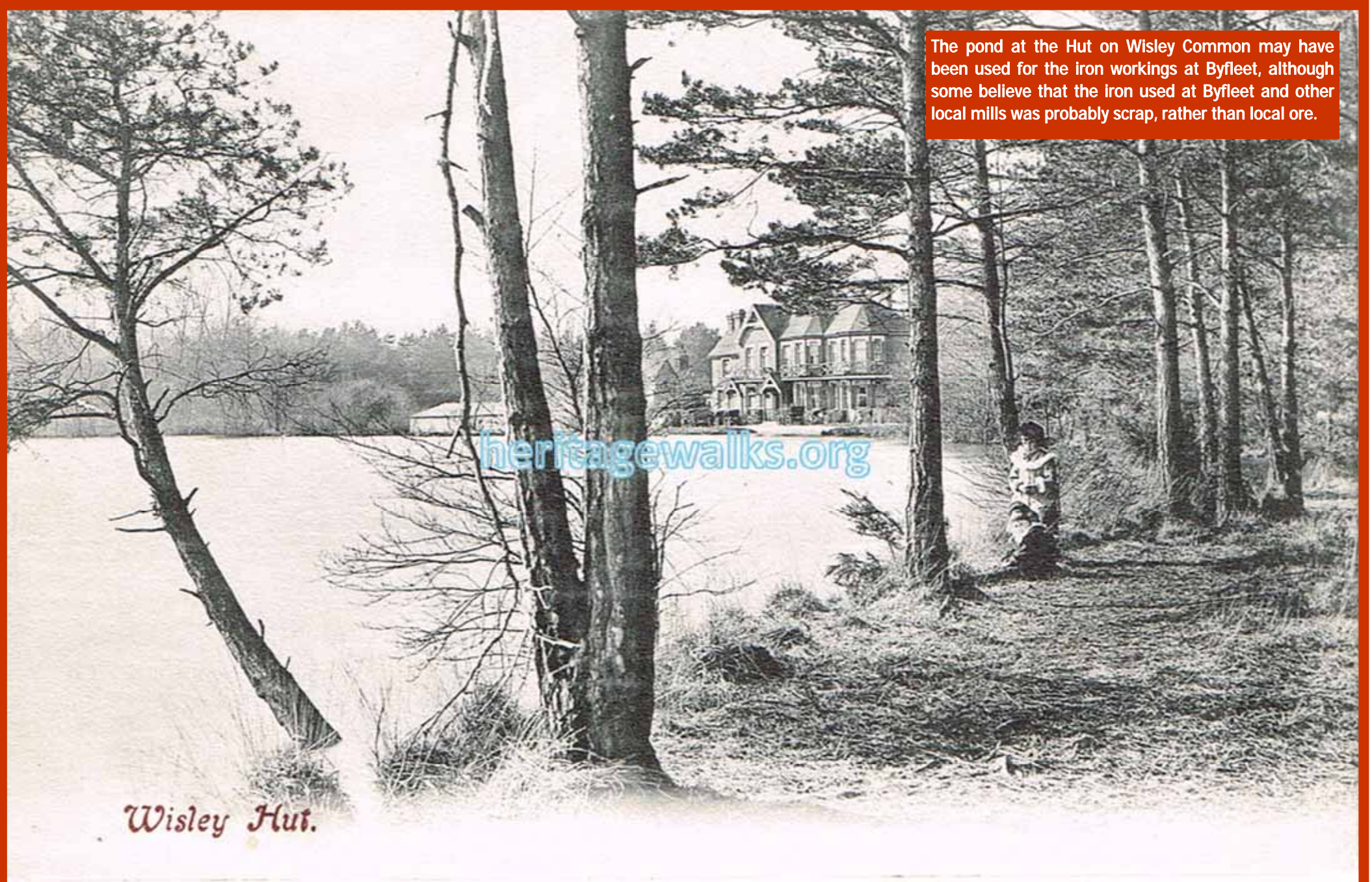
Gardner mentions an Act of Parliament of 1803 that referred to the 'iron mills at Byfleet used in the iron and steel manufacture' in 1760 by John Bardow Esquire, when apparently 'the

mills with their warehouses, etc., were of greater annual value than the manors of Byfleet and Weybridge with their lands and park'.

It seems hard to believe that if that was the case that all the ore could have come off the local commons!

Whenever the iron mills at Byfleet finally closed, it is clear from parish records that in the early part of the 18th century at least a number of people were employed locally in the industry.

There are a number of 'wiredrawers' and a couple of 'melters' recorded between 1703 and 1705 as the fathers to children in the Baptism Register of St Mary's Church at Byfleet; with Peter Shortman, a wiredrawer being buried at the church on the 26th November 1734. Finally in 1768, Samuel Harvey an 'iron hoop maker' is recorded in the burial register, just three days before Christmas that year, and within a few decades of his death, for one reason or another, his industry too was dead in this area and Byfleet Mill reverted to milling flour.



The pond at the Hut on Wisley Common may have been used for the iron workings at Byfleet, although some believe that the iron used at Byfleet and other local mills was probably scrap, rather than local ore.

Wisley Hut.

MAYFORD FORGE



Whilst the working of iron on an industrial scale took place at Byfleet Mill, on a smaller scale most local villages possessed their own village blacksmith.

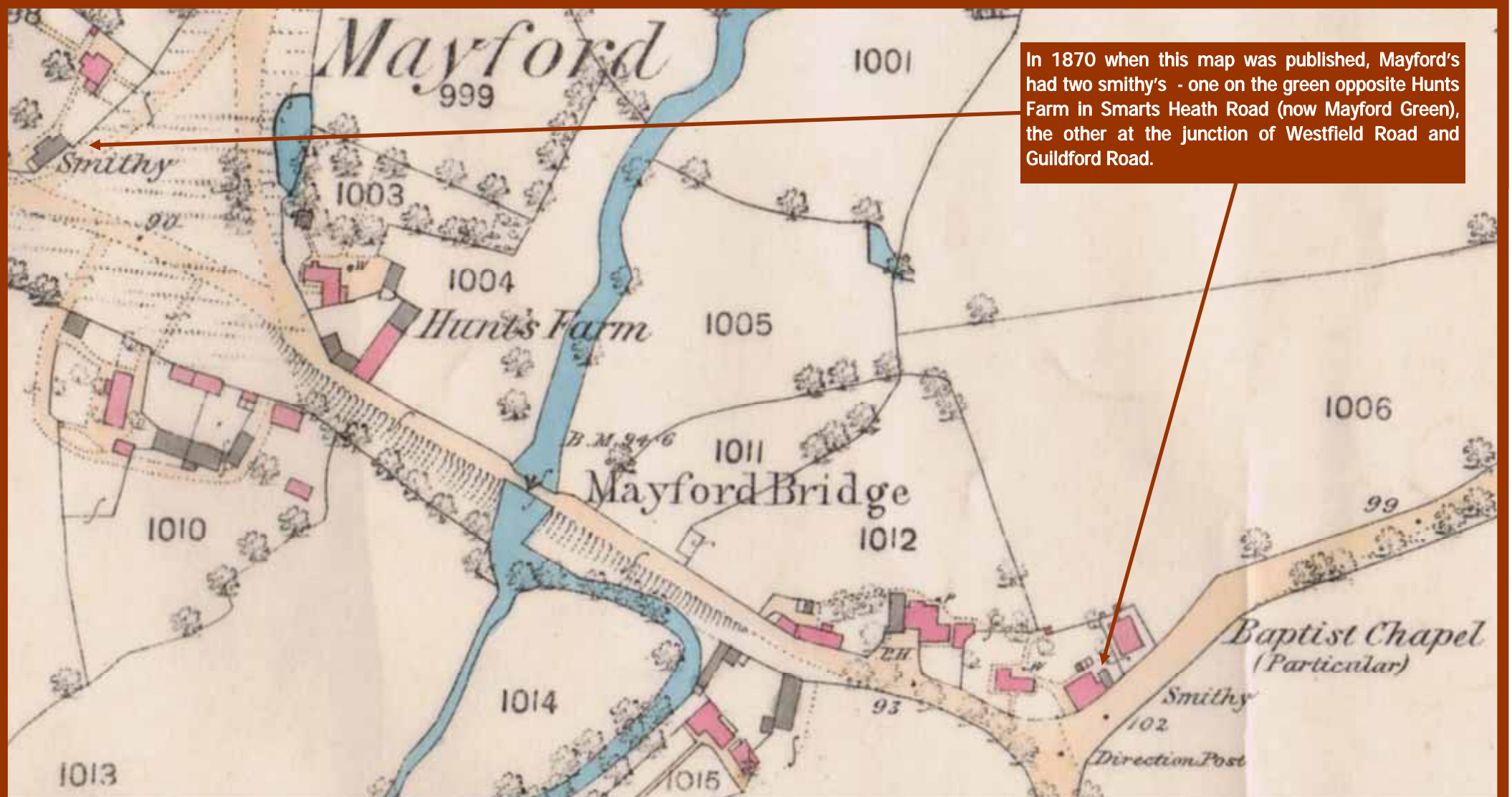
In Mayford there were at least two – the one pictured here which in more recent years was a chandlers shop - and one in Smarts Heath Road.

I don't know which one was the workplace of John Stedman, but when he died in 1837 he

left his 'copyhold messuage or tenement building in my own occupation unto my friends William Wilcox of Woking, carpenter and John Wible of Guildford, ironmonger and their heirs' together with all his 'household goods and furniture, plate, linen, china and all other real and personal estate and effects, to carry on my business of a blacksmith at Mayford (or wholly discontinue the same as they shall see most advantageous)' with the nett gains for the benefit of my wife Ann Stedman during her life'.

I don't know why they would need all his plate, linen and china to run the blacksmith business, but apart from the profits all Ann was personally left appears to be 'all the provisions wines and liquors of which I shall die possessed for her absolute use and benefit'. Being a blacksmith was thirsty work!

The one pictured here was run in the early 20th century by Charles Stocker, whose family I believe were connected with the forge in Stockers Lane, Kingfield.



In 1870 when this map was published, Mayford's had two smithy's - one on the green opposite Hunts Farm in Smarts Heath Road (now Mayford Green), the other at the junction of Westfield Road and Guildford Road.

KNAPHILL FORGE



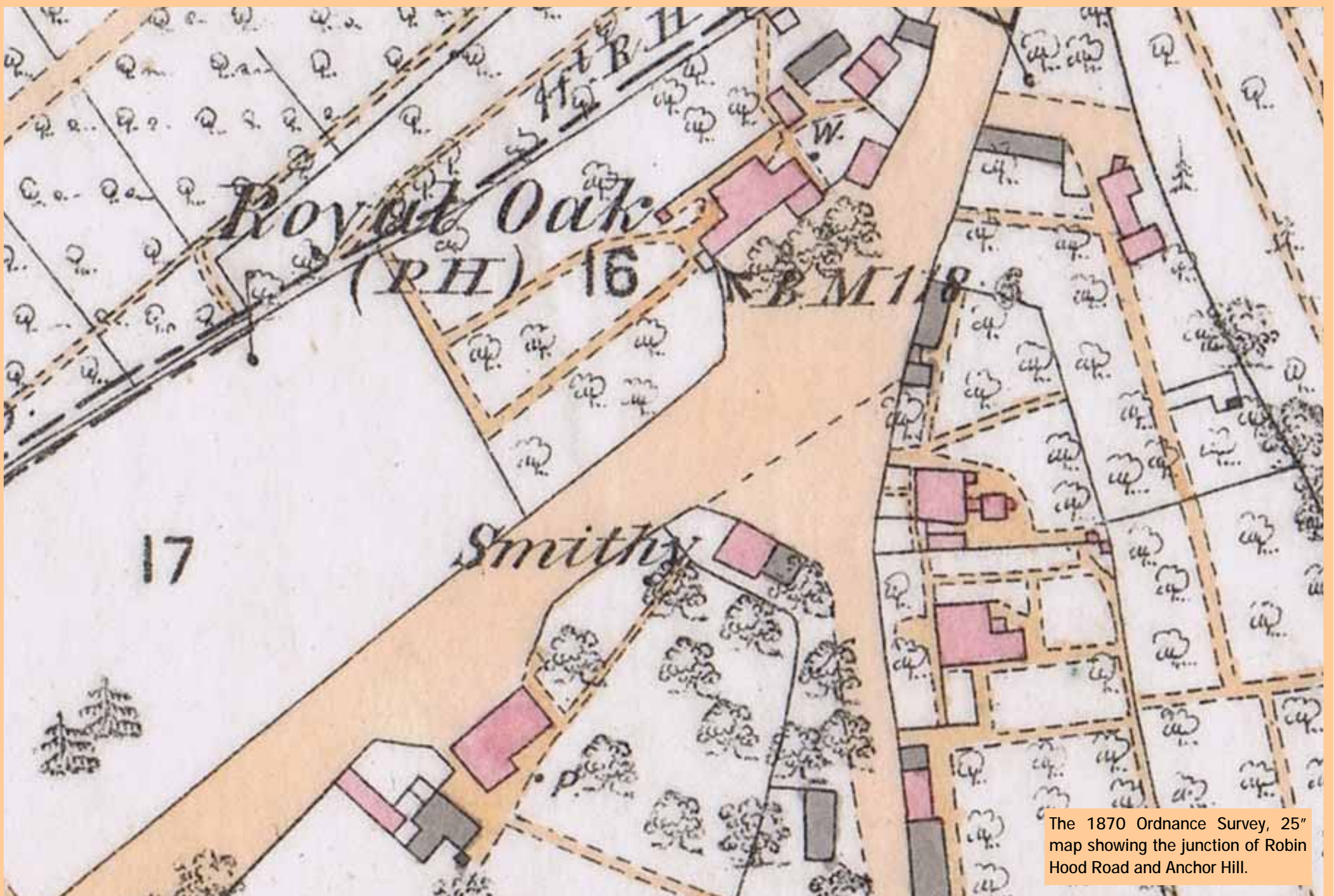
The parish records for Woking mention numerous blacksmiths (and whitesmiths) including in the early 18th century a gentleman in the Shackleford area of Old Woking called John Wakeford, who may or may not be one of my ancestors!

He had four sons baptised at St Peter's

between September and 1701 and August 1711, so perhaps one of them is a direct relative of mine.

This forge at Knaphill, opposite the Royal Oak pub, was run for many years by the Gosden Brothers, who even in the early 1980's were still forging items for one of the companies I

worked for. The forge has now been replaced by a new office building, but how old the original structure was is anybody's guess. It may have been the one recorded in 1712 as belonging to William Collyer, a blacksmith at Sithwood in Woking – Sithwood then being the name for the area at the bottom of Anchor Hill.



The 1870 Ordnance Survey, 25" map showing the junction of Robin Hood Road and Anchor Hill.