

HENRY KNOTT'S COACHWORKS

Henry Knott was already established in Birchington in his trade of Wheelwright and Coachbuilder by 1882. He appears in the Kelly's Directory for 1883-4 and continues to be listed there until just after 1916. His Wheelwright's business was carried on in a large shed at the back of Grove House. His Coachworks was across the road in a building in the front garden of his house 'The Sycamores', which stood at the back of what later became Jenner's Garage. He ran the two businesses side by side, with any metalwork that was required being made in the Blacksmith's forge at the street end of Grove House. This forge has stood here since the mid-1600s and part of the premises are still used for metal repairs to machinery today.

When the wheels had been made or the repairs completed, the men would roll them across the road to be fitted to the wagons or coaches in the coachworks. When I first came to Birchington in 1961, several of the older residents of the village recalled either witnessing this or being told about it by their parents. The coachworks were housed in the two-storey building which later became Jenner's Showrooms and offices, with storerooms above. When the garage was sold recently for a new development of flats, an old wagon wheel was discovered up in the loft of the old coachworks. This has now been carefully restored by Stephen Kendall of Hazlemere High Wickham, Bucks.

In the photograph of the Wheelwright's works, there is a group of people standing beside the fence, with the workshop behind them to the right and Grove House to the left. You can see the roof of the Wesleyan Chapel (built in 1831) behind this. One of the people in the group is almost certainly Mrs Knott, but which one is Henry is not known. There is also a young boy, possibly an apprentice, or perhaps a son. When Henry set up his business here in Birchington, he was the only person in his type of work trading here. There was plenty of work at this period, with nine or ten farms in and around the village. Their carts would have been in constant use and need of repairs. There were also several wealthy families, notably those at Quex Park and Birchington Hall, plus the local doctors and Vicar, together with a number of other residents, all of whom owned horse-drawn vehicles.

All the tradesmen needed some form of transport to deliver the bread, milk, coal, groceries and greengroceries to their customers. Getting to Margate, Canterbury and Minster all needed horse-drawn carriages, though not many of these were locally owned. It was not until about 1914 and the advent of the First World War that the motor vehicle began to take over more and more, leaving the wheelwrights and coachbuilders with an ever decreasing number of customers. It appears from the Kelly's Directories that Henry was still running his business in 1916, but by 1919, he was only listed as living in Grove Cottage. By then Thomas Jenner was occupying 'The Sycamores' and the old coachworks now traded as 'Birchington Motor Engineering Works'.