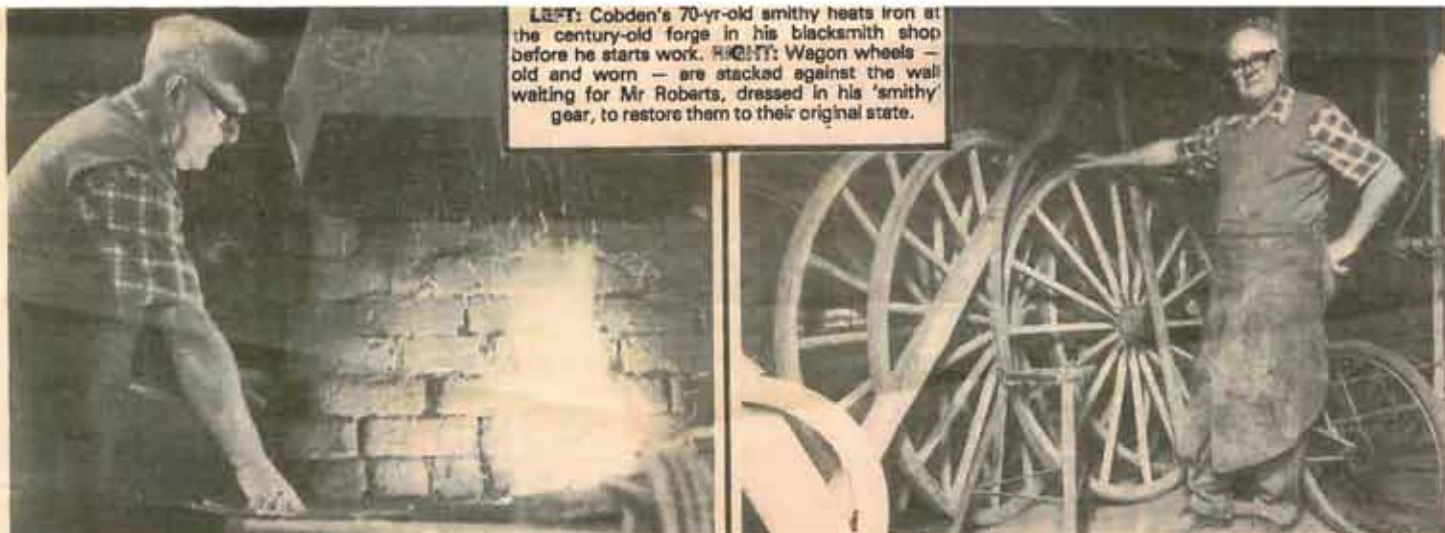




LEFT: Cobden's 70-yr-old smithy heats iron at the century-old forge in his blacksmith shop before he starts work. RIGHT: Wagon wheels — old and worn — are stacked against the wall waiting for Mr Roberts, dressed in his 'smithy' gear, to restore them to their original state.

Blacksmith's shop is part of another era

Stepping through the doorway of 53 Curdie St, Cobden is like taking a nostalgic journey back into a by-gone era.

The well-trodden raw-timbered floorboards are piled high with wagon wheels of all shapes and sizes, and the tin walls are lined with bridges and dust-covered horseshoes.

Eyes blink unbelievably as the dim interior reveals, through another doorway, a setting reminiscent of pioneering settlement days.

The dirt floor, sawdust, iron bars, hundreds of beaten horseshoes and blacksmith's anvil are dwarfed by the monumental water-cooled forge, complete with a red-hot coke fire, dominating the scene.

The modern-day blacksmith, still working as his forefathers did at the turn of the century, heats and bends the iron into shape.

For 64 years, Mr Bill Roberts has been the full-time blacksmith, but recently relinquished this 'boss' role to work part-time in retirement.

His apprentice, Des O'Keeffe, now a fully qualified 'smithy' works at the anvil taking care of the farrier works.

Mr Roberts, now 70, spends many hours as a wheelwright, restoring buggy wheels to their original beauty.

Mr Roberts' blacksmithing career began when he was apprenticed to Thomas Webb (coachbuilder and undertaker) in 1927.

After being employed for 15 years, Mr Roberts became the owner of the blacksmithing — undertaking business when Webb died in 1943.

Mr Roberts, whose appearance belies his age, remembers that he earned 15 shillings a week when he began work and 'there weren't many cars'.

'Apart from shoeing horses a lot of time was spent repairing milk wagons, jinkers and buggies,' he said.

His memory wanders further back to his childhood when his father was the town grocer, operating from premises on the corner of Curdie and Victoria St.

A grocery store, in the form of Lees Supermarket, still operates at the site.

Mr Robert's sister, Dulcie, manages the supermarket.

Mr Roberts remembers his father delivering groceries and

small goods in a horse-drawn vehicle over rough tracks to farms in the district surrounding the town.

He said the blacksmithing business was as economical today as it was in the early part of this century.

While some of the process changes slightly with the introduction of modern materials, the principle lingers on.

Where many of the horses dealt with in the early days would have been workers, today's animals needing the 'smithy's' care are trotters, race horses and ponies belonging to district pony club members.

'Shoes, while they can now be fashioned from plastic and aluminium, are still more serviceable if made from iron,' Mr Roberts said.

By KAYE DOWDY

Horse shoe-nails are imported from Sweden — 'the same as when I was a kid,' he said.

The iron is heated in the forge, assisted by electric bellows now instead of the hand-pumped model of the past, then hammered to shape over the anvil.

The brick-based forge and chimney being used today is the original, built when the shop was established at the turn of the century.

The blacksmith still has the same personal contact with his clients — it is impossible to fit shoes to a horse without handling him carefully, measuring for size and then making the fitting.

Mr Roberts said one of the prime ingredients for the work

was to be good-tempered and have a love of four-legged animals.

The side-line of Mr Roberts' business — the undertaker's parlor in adjoining premises has been sold and is no longer part of the 'smithy's' shop.

Mr Roberts, father of five and grandfather of 10, lives with his wife Hannah in Cemetery Lane and spends almost as many hours at the shop as he did when fully employed.

Big buggy wheels, little jinker wheels, old wheels, worn wheels and almost new wheels sit more than a metre deep against the walls.

In the corner sits a rubber tyre machine which dates back to the early part of this century.

A giant wheel-horse sits in a corner near the blacksmith's forge.

'This,' said Mr Roberts, 'is the basic equipment I need to restore and repair wheels.'

The wheels are held in place while Mr Roberts replaced spokes and rims.

His work is in demand with enquiries being made from as far away as Hamilton, Geelong and Malvern.

'There is a lot of people restoring buggies, jinkers, wagons and other types of horse-drawn vehicles,' he said.

'While there is still an interest in that area, there will always be a need for a wheelwright.'

Just as a profession peculiar to the beginning of the century survives, Cobden's 70 year-old 'smithy' is able to use his talents to help preserve things from that by-gone era.

Stepping back into the bright daylight of 1981, it is hard to believe the scene behind the doorway is actually taking place 'today'.