

Object(s): Knife grinding machine

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The Knife grinding machine

A regular feature of village life until the 1970's was the travelling knife grinder. A traditional occupation of the Roma people, the knife grinding machine was operated manually either as an attachment to a normal pedal cycle¹ or, as is the case with the model in our collection, a treadle (foot pedals) operated grinder, attached to a simple cart or frame.

Our knife grinding machine was loaned by Mr Loveridge to the museum in May 1969 and was purchased for our collection in September 1973. It is 3' 6" (106.8cm) long and 3' 5" (104cm) long. It has a saddle and handle for pushing the machine, which add a further 9" (23cm) to its length. It is propelled on two 17" (43cm) wheels. There are two circular grinding wheels, the largest being 6" (15cm) in diameter and the smaller, used for finer work on scissors and kitchen knives, 3½" (9cm) in diameter with a central spindle which attaches, via a driving belt, to the motion of the two treadles. The machine is mounted on a "Trolley", which is painted red with green and yellow decorative work. Mr Loveridge used this machine in and around the village of Haughley, Suffolk during the 1950's and 1960's.

The art of knife grinding

Put simply, grinding or sharpening blades is the process of creating or refining a sharp edge of appropriate shape on a tool or implement designed for cutting. It is done by grinding away material on the implement with an abrasive substance harder than the material of the implement, followed sometimes by processes to polish the sharp surface to increase smoothness and to correct small mechanical deformations without regrinding².



Figure 1: Sharpening Stone

Knife grinding is usually done using an abrasive stone, similar to the one in figure 1³.

Grinding Stones, come in a variety of shapes, sizes and with varying degrees of abrasion (given by the coarseness of the grit in the stone. Grit sizes in grinding stones can vary significantly (from a very coarse 80µm to 0.5µm, with each level of coarseness giving a different finish to the

¹ McCready T. The Gypsy Grinding Bike. Derbyshire: Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group; 2012.

<https://youtu.be/aAG9dn5tFTc>

² Sharpening [Internet]. En.wikipedia.org. 2020 [cited 24 April 2020]. Available from:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharpening#Mobile_sharpening_service

³ No machine-readable author provided. RJFJR assumed (based on copyright claims). - No machine-readable source provided. Own work assumed (based on copyright claims)., Public Domain,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=374996>

blade. The grinding stones in our knife grinding machine are most likely to be 30µm making them suitable for giving a simple sharp edge to knives, garden shears and scissors.

For as long as man has used bladed implements, there has been a need to regularly sharpen them to ensure that they cut smoothly. However, it is believed that modern knife sharpening can be traced back to the 19th Century itinerant knife sharpeners the 'Moletas' of northern Italy. The Moletas were men who worked on farms during the summer months and travelled from village to village, in the winter months, with portable grinding machines, offering to sharpen knives, shears and scissors etc. for a small price.

The itinerant nature of the work, was ideally suited to Gypsies and Travellers who followed a similar lifestyle to the Moletas of Northern Italy. The two communities may well have mixed at some point across northern Europe. Lucassen, Willems and Cottaar suggest that knife grinding and blade sharpening certainly took off as alternative seasonal work in across mainland Europe and the UK during the late 19th Century and throughout most of the 20th Century, travelling knife grinders became a common sight⁴. Cressy⁵ tells us that several observers mention Gypsies and Travellers selling trinkets and wooden pegs door-to-door as well as offering knife-grinding, razor-sharpening and bellow mending in several English counties.

Two Haughley knife grinders

Shirley Hall has lived in the village of Haughley since 1958. Her husband was the village Policeman from 1957 until 1975. She says: "The village was well served by local tradesmen who delivered bread, milk, coal, groceries, vegetables and newspapers to the door. Several local tradesmen had shops too. In those day's we were almost self-sufficient."⁶

Two travelling families had semi-permanent homes in the village and offered door-to-door services. The first to arrive were the Parker family who came to Haughley before the Second World War. Walter Parker used to work on local farms tending livestock during the summer months. In the autumn he turned his attention to helping local villagers with sharpening old steel tools. He rode around the village on his bicycle which he had converted into a travelling grinding machine. He can be seen posing for the camera in 1942, in 'The Book of Haughley'.⁷

During the late 1950's, the Loveridge family arrived from Northamptonshire. Their summers were spent away from the village working on fruit and vegetable picking in the Fens. In the autumn the family returned to the same spot in Haughley, where they would spend the winter months.

Shirley Hall remembers the Loveridge family from their earliest days in the village: "We hadn't been in Haughley long, when the Loveridge family arrived... in those day's there was a lot suspicion of any

⁴ Lucassen L, Willems W, Cottaar A. Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups. London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited; 2015. Page 161.

⁵ Cressy D. Gypsies. [S.I.]: Oxford Univ Press; 2020. Page 240.

⁶ Hall S. Door-to-door services in Haughley 1950 to 1970. Telephone; 2020.

⁷ Stephens C, Stephens H, Hart C. The book of Haughley. [Place of publication not identified]: Halsgrove; 2005. Page 42.



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new family coming into the village and I remember Derek (*Shirley's husband*) going to see them. They were really friendly, hardworking people and it wasn't too long before they were accepted as a normal part of Haughley life... Mr Loveridge was often around sharpening shears and garden tools. He did some for us; I can't remember how we paid him, but the finish was really good."

The Traveller's lot has not always been a happy one. With Travellers often considered in folklore to cast spells on the unsuspecting. Even into the 1960's (the period covered by the interview above), the government were still legislating against travellers⁸. It is easy to see how suspicious a community might be of any new people, especially travellers, moving into a small rural community. The evidence however, points to the fact that in the majority of cases, they were hard working people, fiercely independent, but keen to make an honest living.

⁸ Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 [Internet]. Legislation.gov.uk. 2020 [cited 27 April 2020]. Available from: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/8-9/62>