

William Swift, Edge-tool manufacturer of Seal

A couple of weeks ago John Hider, who has lived in Kemsing since the 1940s, brought a garden tool in to show your editor, Julian, and to ask if there was anyone in Seal who could tell him anything about it. He has used it for years on his allotment and asked one of his neighbouring allotment holders, Roger, if he knew what the markings on it meant. These were the initials WS repeated with a crown in between them. Roger found out from an internet site, www.billhooks.co.uk managed by a Bob Burgess, that these marks indicated that it was an edge-tool manufactured by William Swift of Seal. Julian asked me if I could give John any further information.

First of all, I took photographs of the tool, two of which are shown. Then I looked up to see what we had written in *Seal: the history of a parish* which I had co-authored with Jean Fox and Peter Mountfield. Three extracts are below.

“In the 19th century Seal became well known for the edge-tools manufactured by Swift & Co in their works on Seal Hill, on the right as you go out of the village towards Ightham. These were the hand tools associated with agriculture, scythes, bills, axes, slashers and so on. The business had been started by William Shoebridge who was born in Seal in 1716 and carried on by generations of the Shoebridge family. There is evidence of other edge-tool manufacturers in the village, usually associated with the forges like Marchants in Church Street and the Swifts, who bought the Shoebridge business, had also owned a forge.

Why should such a specialised industry come to Seal? Location would have been paramount, with access to the raw materials of iron from the Weald and timber for the handles. The iron would have had to have been specially tempered. Seal also had a plentiful supply of water and was located on through routes, both east-west and north-south, in the middle of an agricultural district. The several forges in the village would have provided the technical expertise for small manufacture, which would have led on to the more substantial Shoebridge business acquired by the Swifts.”

“The other manufacturing businesses were in the edge-tool manufacture. At one time, there were at least two, sometimes three, such businesses in the village, sometimes doubling as forges. It is not clear where their raw material came from, but they must have used a fairly well-tempered steel, probably imported from Sheffield or from the Black Country. The charcoal will originally have come from the local woods, replaced by coke after the gasworks was built in Sevenoaks. These were of course much smaller-scale operations than the silk mill; apparently they employed only two or three men each. But they supplied a wider market than the immediate surrounding villages. A 1906 obituary of one of the workers recorded that ‘Swift’s tools were famed in the woodlands of Kent, Sussex and Essex’. Eventually, in the 1920s, the last surviving edge-tool business moved away, to Bridgetown, Staffordshire, where Swift’s operated from ‘Seal Works’; its surviving catalogue lists an impressive range of tools. When the Seal site was sold in 1921, it still included an engine house and grindery, a forge, a furnace, a hardening hearth and a stable.”

The latter sale refers to that of the Wildernesse Estate which owned the Swift’s works. The full description of the business premises is ‘A Freehold commodious business premises known as Swift’s Engineering Works occupying an excellent position in the High Street, Seal and comprises an extensive brick and tile **workshop**, having cement floor and fitted with inspection pit and benches; a brick and slate **engine house** and **grindery**, with cement floor

and company' water supply laid on; a small enclosed **coal yard**; a brick and tile slate **forge**, with furnaces, and timber and tile extension fitted with hardening hearth; **store room** under the same roof; a timber built single stall **stable**, on ragstone and brick foundation, with loft over and tile roof; a timber and corrugated-iron coach house adjoining all standing in a **spacious yard**, together with a picturesque XVI century residence built of ragstone and brick.' The sale document then describes the five-bedroomed house and garden. The rent for these premises was £40 a year and the expected sale price was £860.

“Swift's engineering works, at the bottom of Seal Hill **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, had already developed out of the long-established edge-tool business...[which] eventually moved to the Midlands but in the 1920s and 30s, what remained was described as automobile and electrical engineers, and offered 'smart well-appointed' cars for hire and 'house lighting installations'; they were also 'experts in lawn-mower repairs' showing that petrol driven mowers were already in use in the locality. The garage and workshop continued in business until well after the second world war.”

The garage and workshops were demolished and replaced by an office building. The 16th-century house is still there.

I then looked at Bob Burgess' website and found a history of edge-tool manufacturers in Kent and Sussex which had been written some years ago by Tony Bayfield. This included a list of edge-tool makers (42 from East Sussex, 13 from West Sussex and 15 from Kent). Intriguingly, Swifts was the only one described as a 'Country Factory' which implies that their manufacture was on a greater scale than the others which are described as 'Blacksmith Makers of Edge-Tools'.

In order to gauge the influence edge-tool manufacturing had on Seal, I looked at the census returns from 1841 to 1911. William Swift appears in 1841 as a 25 year old 'journeyman smith', the son of James Swift, a carpenter. In 1861 there were four men, including William Swift, and one woman, Anne Shoebridge, whose occupations were 'edge-tool maker', while in 1861 William Swift was recorded as an 'edge-tool maker employing five men and two boys'. One family of edge-tool makers which is recorded throughout the census returns is Moyce with four generations (James, Edward, William and John) living in Seal for over 60 years, from before 1841 into the 20th century. In 1911 there were still three edge-tool makers including Solomon Roberts, originally from Deanshanger in Northamptonshire, living in Seal Works. He was first recorded in Seal in the 1881 census when he was lodging with William Swift, who by that time had retired, so presumably Roberts was running the business for him. William Swift died, age 70, in 1885.