

I think you've already checked these but please have a quick look A.

JOBS AND SKILLS OF DAYS LONG PAST

Road Mending

The first time I saw a road mender was in school days on the Aynho Road where cart loads of huge lumps of granite were tipped at the road side. A man came and broke them into four to six inch bits. He used a heavy hammer to break them down, then a very small hammer on a long handle which was either ash nut or witch elm so they were pliable. The man wore goggles and shin guards. Stones used after then came ready crushed from Hartshill Quarries, Atherstone, Warwickshire, by rail; Oxford stone by canal in the Quarries' own boats, unloaded by the whole family together.

If the road to be repaired had any lumps, potholes or ruts, the hard part would be loosened up on the steam roller. Two strong steel pointed rods were attached to it on the left hand side at the rear of the engine, just behind the driving wheel. The rods were at an angle, the points forward. They were lowered by a wheel. The gang foreman operated it, then the stones were evenly spread on the road on top of them. A thick coat of soil was spread. Then a horse-drawn square water cart with a sprinkler beam at the rear soaked the soil. Then it was rolled by the engine several times.

During the summer the roadmen would mow the grass verges with scythes and trim the edges using a line (it's the reverse today). In winter much of the time was taken up scraping mud from the road, usually one inch thick, and then shovelling the mud up on to the grass. Tar was first used in the 1920s. It was heated in a large horse-drawn boiler. The pipes with sprays on the end, held by two men, sprayed it on the road. It was a dirty job. Their boots were soaked in tar. Then soft sand from Henry Sykes' sand pit at Dane Hill was spread over it, which was alright till hot weather came and melted the tar. It would come to the surface and have to be sanded again. Later, as now, granite chippings were used.

Hedge Laying

The first thing the hedge cutter did was to trim the sides, cutting out brambles, dead wood and overhanging branches. Then he would make a gap at the end of the hedge to start laying. The most important sticks in a hedge were the ones that grew from the bottom of the hedge. These could be layered low to block sheep runs. Stakes were cut from the surplus wood. Some would leave live stakes which was not good for the hedges as they grew vigorously and stifled the other growths. All long thin sticks were put aside for ^{binding} bending along the top of the finished hedge, the stakes neatly cut level just above the binding to make a neat job. The contract hedge layers worked from the rough side of the hedge, pulling the layers towards them, so making it easier to build a more dense and compact hedge. Most other hedgers worked from the smooth side. Prices ranged from 7s.6d. (37½p) to 10 shillings (50p) per chain (22 yards), depending on the size of the hedge. What a ghastly sight hedges are today. I have done quite a lot myself, but not quite so polished a finish as the experts!

Hay Dealers Hay Tiers

This was a thriving business before motor transport arrived. The dealer would go to a farm to buy the hay rick, either as it stood or by the ton. To test the quality he had a six foot steel rod with a handle on and a slot at the end. He would push it full length into the rick. The slot would bring a wisp of hay from the middle of the rick. After a lot of sniffing the wisps and more tests, the bargaining would be done.

When this type of hay was needed the tier would bring his hay press, or a boy would. I took many around the district. They were horse-drawn on two wheels, operated by a strong wooden shaft working on a ratchet. It had to be set level as it also weighed them at half hundred weight per truss. A truss-width of thatch was then removed. A truss was 3 feet by 2 feet. Then the weathered parts would be cut away and the tier would then start cutting out the blocks of hay with a huge knife, making steps up the roof of the rick. He would push his long steel skewer through the loose block of hay and come down backwards with it to the press. The trusses were tied with a special knot: first a slip knot making a figure of eight with the loose end, pulling it tight, then taking hold of the long string to make a half hitch and put over the loose end to lock the knot on a well settled solid rick.

The tier would tie seventy to a hundred trusses in a day at around 7s.6d. (37½p) for 40 (one ton in weight). When he had 108 trusses it would be put on the rail. The local dealer here was Mr John Welford. The last two tiers were brothers George and Fred Drinkwater, who came to work with us when the hay trade finished. They told me a lot about their younger days going back 100 years so I will record some of their reminiscences. George was older than Fred by 20 years. Like me, he remembered everything in his life.