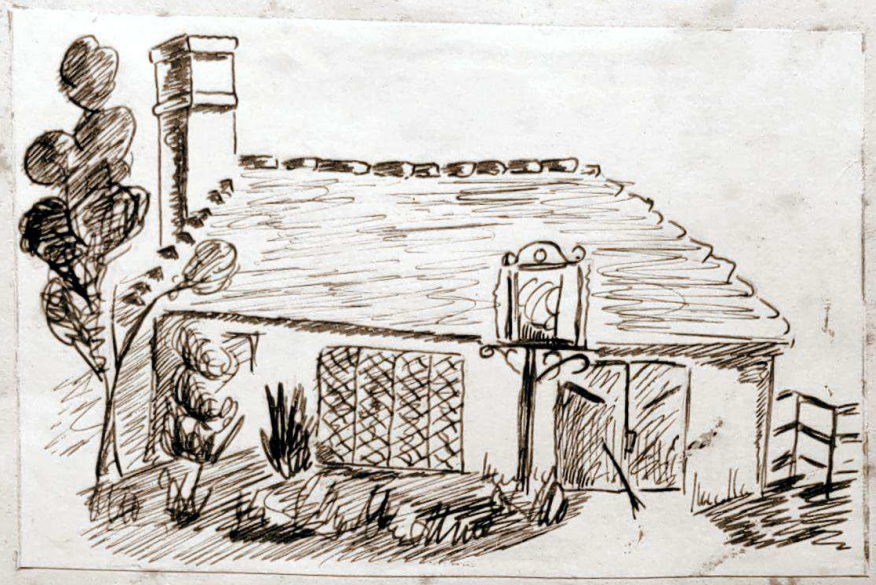
ANNE'S REPORT on the FORGE in BISHOPSBOURNE

In 1954, at the end of the first year of her Teacher Training at Roehampton, Anne Church spent time with the Blacksmith in the Forge in Bishopsbourne. Her conversation with him and observations about his skill resulted in this illustrated essay.

(Anne' father, Geoffrey Church, was at that time Vicar of Bridge. Sadly Anne died 10 years later at the age of 30.)

He now concentrates almost entirely on ornamental wrought iron work which he has loved for many years.



His forge is in the centre of the quiet, almost feudal village, where more than half the cottages belong to the Squire. From inside the low, dark, cool building one can look out onto the narrow road and see the villagers stopping to talk in the sun. Occasionally some one would come into the forge to talk to Mr. Milward, perhaps to ask his advice about a technical difficulty, which he is always ready to give, or just to talk to him about work on the farm, or perhaps the new porch lamp he is making for the Squire's wife. Even though wrought ironwork is his work, Mr. Milward is always ready to help the villagers

A Local craft.

Ornamental wrought iron work.

Ornamental wrought ironwork is a craft which has been shrinking quickly during the last hundred years, until now it is often only to be found in big cities and in small, out-of-the-way villages where there is one man, working by himself in his own small forge who keeps the craft alive. The craft is indeed still very much alive in this quiet way, as these few men can tell one. They themselves have enough work to last for years, even though it is nothing to be compared with the work available a hundred years ago.

I am extremely lucky to live near the small, quiet village of Bishopsbourne, in Kent, where Mr. Milward, a blacksmith lives, and works. He has been in the blacksmith profession all his life, having studied all sides of the craft, including engineering, the shoeing of horses and sheet metal working.

Old English tradition, the Tudor domestic work, the great style introduced by Tijou and the later settling down of these into a new English form.

Mr Milward's forge is an interesting place at all times, but when the firing is being done it becomes strangely beautiful. It is dark inside, except for the pale light coming from the windows, and the small but intense glow radiating from the fire itself.

It is a wonderful experience to watch the firing. When all his tools, including several tongs and pokers are laid on top of the wide flat fire place, the anvil is in a convenient position and the cooling tank refilled with water, the smith, in his worn overalls, cap and leather apron takes up his position to the left of the huge fire place. He has already made the embers red hot, so now uses a built in pump to the side of the fire to make a draught and increase the flame. Then, with the tongs for the short bars, and his hands for the long bars, he pushes the iron into the fire. When a piece is red hot and nearly moylton he quickly draws it out of the fire, takes it to the anvil, and with quick, rythmical strokes, of the hammer, moulds and bends it into the shape he wants. The first vigorous bangs of

with their ordinary farm implements and tools. He was also pleased to help me with my "paper", as he called it, especially as two other students had been to watch him "quite recently". (I found that this had happened several years ago.)

Ornamental wrought iron work is a craft entailing tremendous skill, artistic ability and patience. The blacksmith is a sculptor-modeller, working his material, iron, in a plastic state. Iron, however is only plastic when at great heat and quickly becomes hard again about one minute after being taken from the fire. J. Seymour Lindsay, in his report on English smithcraft said "The three main ingredients in creating beauty in wrought iron work, are line, modelling, or design, and execution."

Since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the smith first came forward as an art-metal worker, these two ingredients have been used by good smiths. The type of design has undergone various changes since then, but the actual quality of the design and execution have remained important. The smiths of today can draw from the

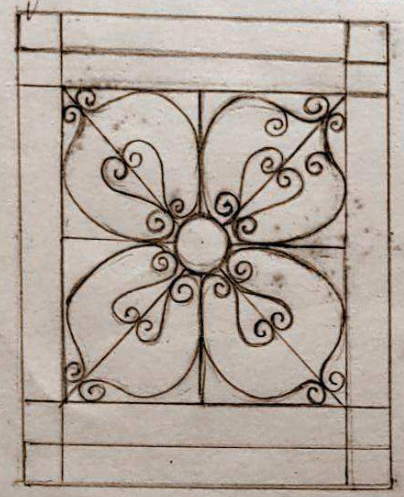
is desired, the edges are first thinned down at the join and then go through the same process before being filed smooth. This is called 'scarfing'.

In front of the fire there is a water tank into which the smith plunges the hot metal to cool it. I noticed once that he had to cool the end, that he was holding, of a long piece of iron, because it had become so hot. Indeed, Mr. Milward's hands are so hardened to heat that, quite without thought, he picked up a burning piece of coal from one part of the fire, and put it, where he wanted it, in another.

To return to the firing itself, Mr. Milward said that each blow given has to have some reason behind it, and the variation of the strength and angle of each blow is very important. He pointed out a great difference between this craft and sculpture or carving: "Everything has to be in the eye". There is no standing back from the work and contemplating, and no gradual coaxing, out of the material, the form wanted. It is clear that there is great skill attached to the moulding of forms by firing, hammering and bending. Inextricably bound up with

this is the skill of keeping the measurements exact.

Mr. Milward has worked out a scheme whereby he can keep a check on the measurements: by drawing the design in the right proportion on a large piece of flat iron. As each part of the design comes from the fire he lays it in its place and checks its size and shape. Measuring and the fitting together of the iron is the least enjoyable and therefore most exacting part of the work. Once when I was in the forge Mr. Milward was unusually successful, with a wrought iron gate, and put it together with only a few minor alterations. He was very surprised at this because the design, though beautiful was not ideal for execution in iron. He had adapted it from his client's rough sketch of the pattern she wanted.

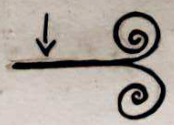


(This is a rough sketch of the gate, but we both agreed that something is wrong with the proportion, and there is too much of a contrast between the intricate centre pattern and the bare outside.)

the hammer produce a myriad of glowing sparks which fly out in all directions. Sometimes the file is used, after the hammer when the iron is still glowing and, when the iron is smooth and ready, formers of various sizes are used to curl and bend it into beautiful shapes.

The formers themselves are made by the smith and are very useful for making coils, as they save a little time, and ensure that perhaps ten coils of the same shape really are the same shape. Not all smiths use formers but this is one instance of original methods being used in an old craft to produce the same effects. Scrolling can also be done simply with deft blows of the hammer, held firmly in tongs.

When the smith wants to join one piece of iron to another he welds the two together so that they become inseperably one. (Mr. Milward explained that, under great heat the molecules open up and fuse together. Nothing is really joined to anything else unless the actual molecules interlock with each other.) Sometimes two pieces are simply put

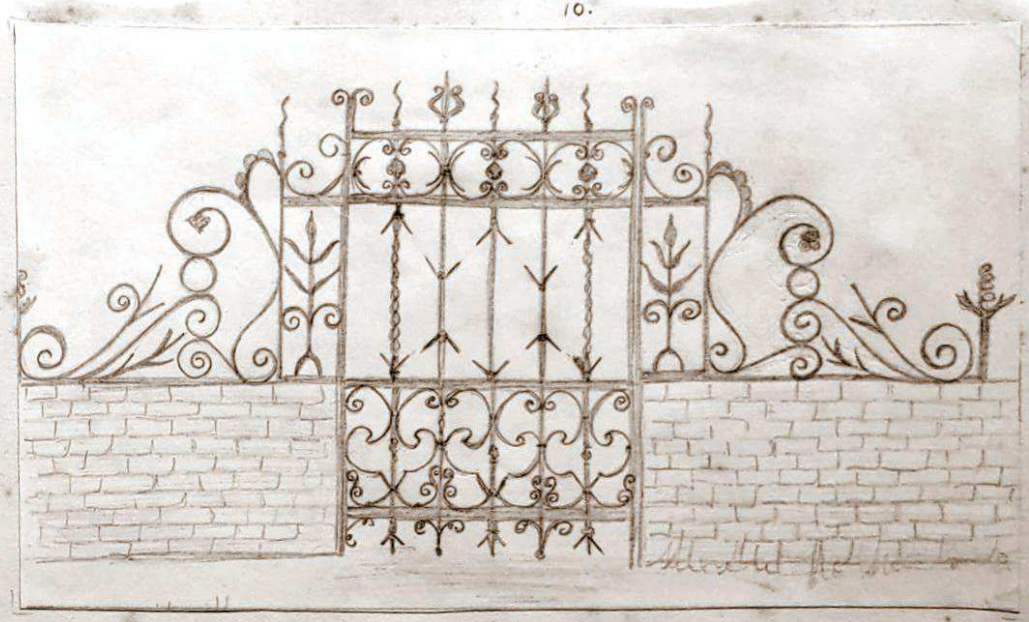


together when red hot and banged hard. At other times, when a bar of consistent thickness

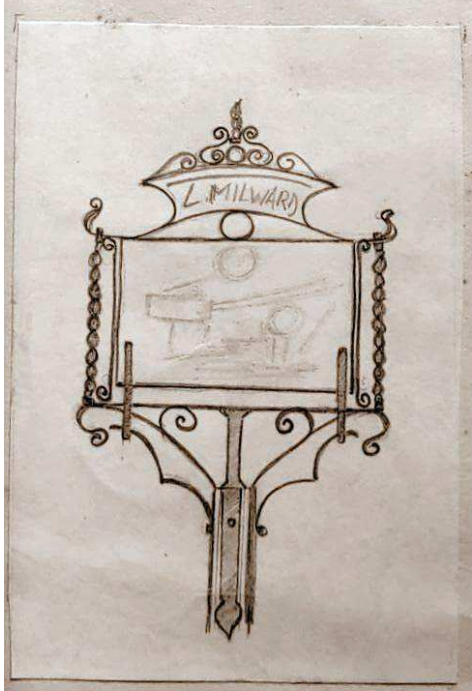
Quite often Mr. Milward would develop and work his clients' own designs but he was really happier when he was given a free hand, and he usually then produced very beautiful things.

Mr. Milward's work is very varied. He has made many ornamental gates. (which in the true wrought iron tradition are very strong and useful.) These are scattered all over Kent. He has made porch lamps, church notice boards, inn signs, chairs of different designs, and some wrought iron pictures. (one of which illustrated the life of Joseph Conrad who lived in Bishopsbourne)

In spite of having many connections with all different types of people through his craft (and life's work) Mr. Milward is still one of the village people, and spends the whole of what would be his leisure time in his beloved forge. He lives just over the narrow village road in a small cottage, with his sister to look after him. She is very proud of him and has in her possession a beautiful fire screen in scroll and leaf work which won for her brother the title of the best wrought iron worker in Kent. (Mr. Milward is, by the way, between

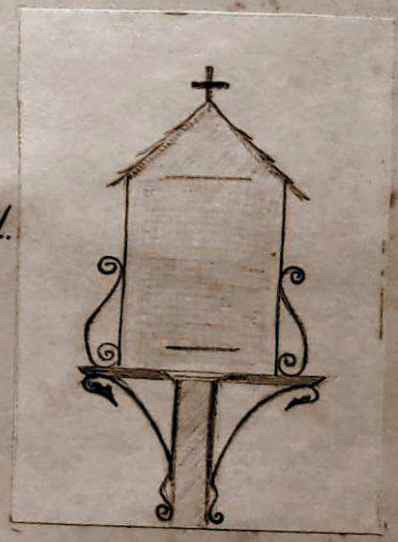


A very beautiful gate in Fordwich. It is about 100 years old.



The sign outside the forge in Bishopsbourne. by Milward.

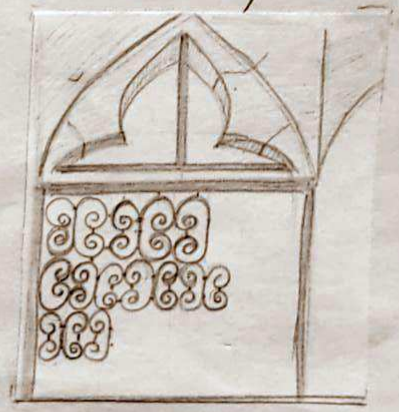
Patrixbourne church notice board. (iron & oak) Milward.



the ages of sixty and seventy)

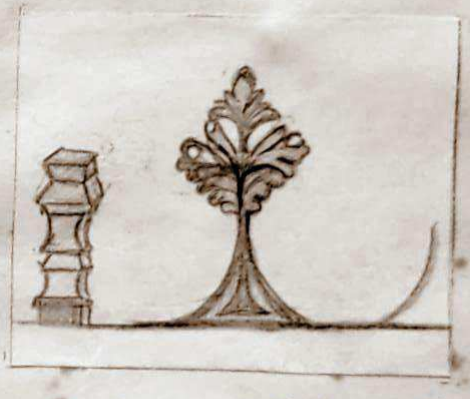
Before our leaving the forge Mr. Milward promised me that I, and my small sister of seven who had accompanied me twice, could go and watch him whenever we liked. It certainly is a wonderful experience to stand in the dimly lit forge and watch beautiful shapes being fashioned from the relentless but exciting material, iron.

Whilst studying the actual process of the craft of ornamental wrought iron work I went round the neighbourhood and managed to get several interesting examples of the work; some of which are by Mr. Milward.

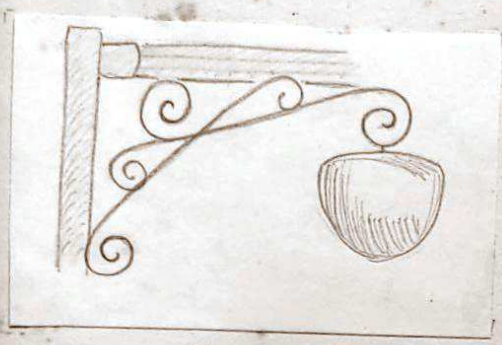


Part of a very old (c 12th) wrought iron gate in St. Anselm's chapel.

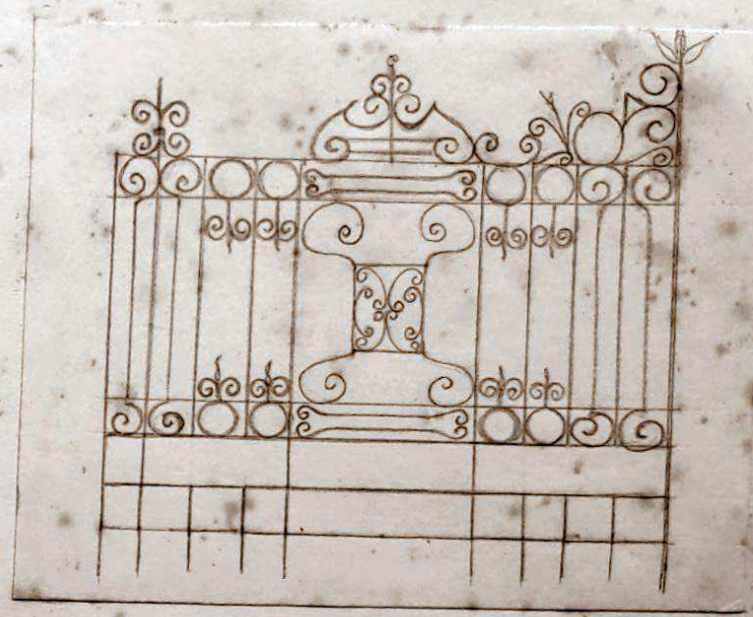
In Canterbury Cathedral.



One of the pairs of decorations on a heavy iron gate in the N.W. corner of the nave.
Milward.



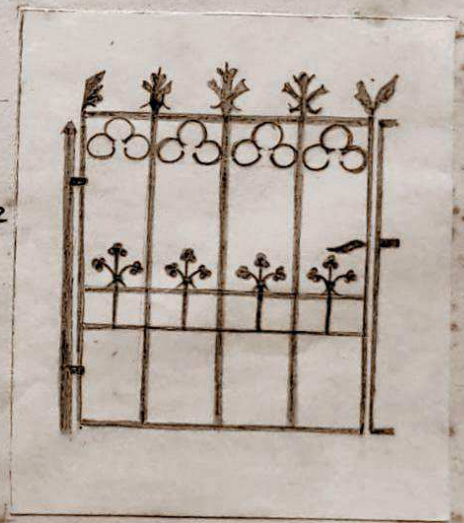
A small lamp bracket, by another smith, in Mr. Milward's forge.



A part of one of a pair of gates in Fordwich - by Mr. Milward. They are impressive and go with a beautiful modern house.

One of a pair of small wrought iron gates of Patrixbourne church.

Milward.



You must continue this collection of wrought iron work. You have enjoyed this work and it is good and interesting to read