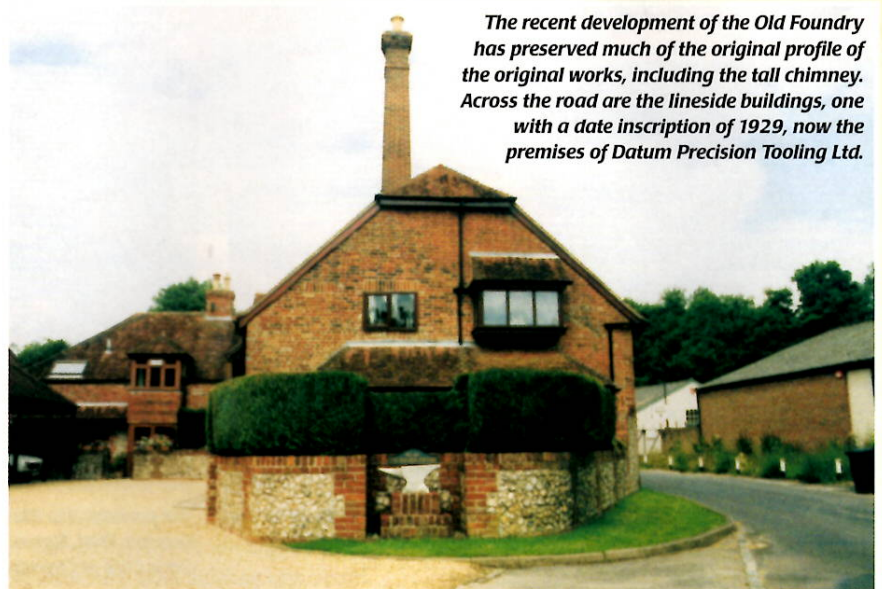


‘Lifting the lid of the Cannings’ works ...’

Mike Wall investigates a little known southern engineering company

Once upon a time, there were two little villages. Neither of them was more than a cluster of cottages huddled around a tiny chapel. They nestled, but a short mile apart, close to the edge of Stansted Forest in the lower folds of the South Downs at the border between Sussex and Hampshire. Their names were Idsworth and Dene. All that now remains at Old Idsworth is the 11th century church of St Peter, standing alone in the fields where the village once lay, whereas ‘Dene’ – from the Anglo Saxon for ‘open glade bordering woodland’ – has survived, although now, and since time out of mind, known to us as Finchdean.

The old name is still used by the few remaining locals who can trace family roots back for several generations, and also survives as Dean Lane End, the hamlet around the junction of the lanes to and from Finchdean, Rowlands Castle and West Marden via Forestside. In the early 19th century, Finchdean itself still had no more than twenty houses yet it supported a blacksmiths, a wheelwright & undertakers, a bakery and, perhaps more



The recent development of the Old Foundry has preserved much of the original profile of the original works, including the tall chimney. Across the road are the lineside buildings, one with a date inscription of 1929, now the premises of Datum Precision Tooling Ltd.

surprisingly its own, albeit cottage-sized, workhouse – and the beginnings of an iron foundry!

Although all early records of the business have long since disappeared, it is said to have been set up in 1816 by John Cannings in partnership with a Mr Howell. Long lost local legend once had

it that they were commercial travellers in ironware who decided to go into production – and that Cannings ‘came from Andover’.

The very tenuous Andover link and the name Cannings could lead us to a connection with the Taskers whose family origins stem from the villages of Pewsey



Left: Possibly the earliest-surviving product of Finchdean Ironworks, this Cannings Howell roller could be as early as 1816.



Right: Finchdean village green was often cluttered with the paraphernalia of the surrounding businesses, the blacksmith, the wheelwright and the ironworks. Of particular interest among the farm implements is the water cart with its wooden wheels and flame, and the Gypsy caravan, which is of the ledge-wagon type. Perhaps the travellers are having a horse shod at the forge or maybe just stopping on the common land of the village green. Courtesy Hampshire County Museum Service

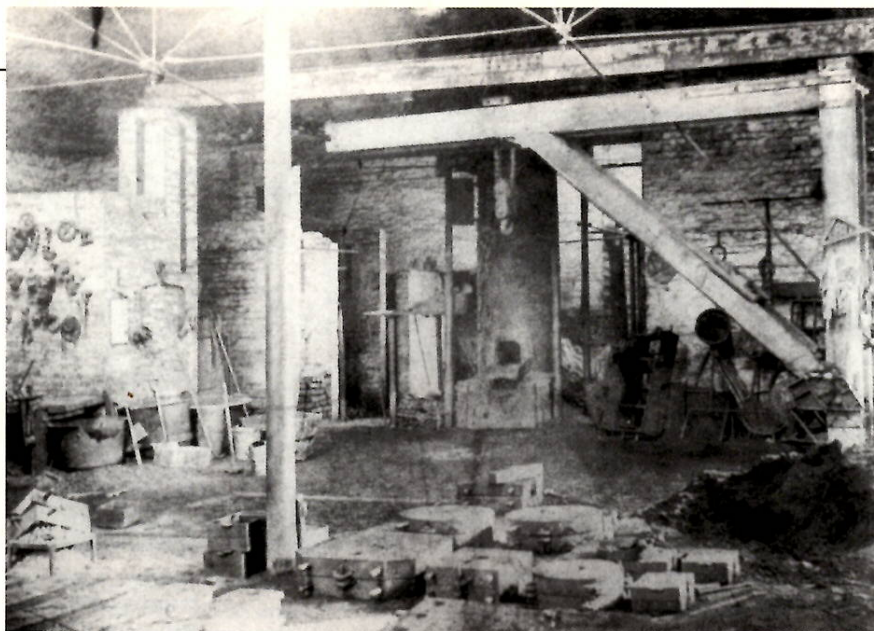
Vale which include both Bishops Cannings and All Cannings – but that, for now at least, is pure speculation! However, as we shall see, certainly by the 1830s, the Cannings were living at Finchdean House – a very pleasant Queen Anne farmhouse, despite the grand name – with the foundry virtually beside it, which makes me wonder if John Cannings was possibly already well established in the village and was able to provide the site and put up finance for the works, whilst Howell's contribution was, perhaps, his expertise as an ironworker.

'...the business . . . is said to have been set up in 1816 by John Cannings...'

For some reason, the partnership was short lived and Mr Howell is said to have 'gone to Poole'. A very rare surviving Cannings & Howell plain or 'flat' horse-drawn roller of otherwise unknown provenance is in the reserve agricultural collection of the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum, near Chichester, along with the largest known collection of Finchdean Ironworks products. The old firm is also said to have found an export market for round cast iron animal feed pans as far afield as Australia and Canada. Other early products were the large farmyard water troughs, some of which were once a fixture in Chichester



This JS & G Cannings cattle cake breaker spent all its working life on a farm at Forestside very near the works.



The casting shop at Finchdean Ironworks with a scattering of sand and mould boxes across the floor, various crucibles and patterns around the walls and the fixed wood-framed crane with travelling pulley block. Courtesy Hampshire County Museum Service

Cattle Market.

In the late 1950s, local historian F O'B Adams recorded the memories of Mr Frank Aslett, then 75 years old. Transcripts of his interviews are housed at Havant Museum. Frank Aslett had begun his working life with the cart horses at Finchdean Ironworks as a boy of thirteen at around the turn of the 19th century – a long way back in time to us, yet still some 80-odd years since the business had started.

The 'old men' had told him that the original furnace was 'outdoors' with 'a tremendous great wheel in a frame with

two men on one side and one the other – like winding a barrel organ, or winding a well – that drove the wind into the furnace to melt the iron.'

John Cannings, as a devout Freechurchman, became interested in the spiritual welfare and education of the village people. In 1830, he converted the coach-house of the family home, Finchdean House, adjacent to the foundry, into what is still the Finchdean Congregational Chapel.

Just outside the village at Dean Lane End he had also built a terrace of nine foundry workers' cottages – later



A trio of Cannings ploughs: from front to back, a long-framed and ley-bodied No. 5, a more compact digger-bodied model XL and the little wood and iron L2, once so popular with local market-gardeners and smallholders.

INDUSTRIAL POWER



'J S & G Cannings Agents Finchdean' painted on the comb-grained body of an old winnowing machine.



Cannings' agent's plate cast in their works for fitting to the other manufacturers' products which they sold. This one was probably from the feed-box of a chaff cutter.

nick-named 'The Barracks' – and still remembered as the homes of the Bastable, Cook and other local families. Here, in 1836, John Cannings provided the first school for the area in the knocked-together downstairs rooms of Nos. 2 & 3, with a lean-to shed for educational apparatus. The Rev Slatterie, from Rowlands Castle congregational church, became the first schoolmaster followed, in 1859, by Mr Snell who was also appointed pastor at Finchdean chapel.

In 1851, Idsworth School had been built by another local benefactor and arrangements were made for older 'Dean' children to continue their education there.

Mr Snell was succeeded as teacher by a series of lady governesses and assistant teachers. By 1874, all the local children were taught at Idsworth and Nos 2 & 3 reverted, once more, to workers' dwellings.

'...the original furnace was 'outdoors' with 'a tremendous great wheel in a frame with two men on one side and one the other...'

Every newlywed Finchdean couple was generously given a set of fire irons, a large cast iron frying pan and a rolling pin, all made in the Cannings' works. The happy couple were also subjected to the age-old custom of 'firing the anvil' in which a succession of celebratory charges of gunpowder were exploded in the blacksmith's anvil in the course of the bridal procession and amidst great merriment – 'a boozin' turnout' as Frank Aslett called it – all round the green and, of course, in and out of The George.

The last remembered firing seems to have been around 1914 at the wedding of a policeman named Crouch which was marred by the tragic death of old Caleb Gibbons, a woodworker at the foundry, who had always loaded the anvil. 'Poor old Cal,' said Frank Aslett, 'he goes back to his work right after the explosion, sits down on a block of wood and died – 'ad a stroke, see?'

As much as personal life revolved around Finchdean village green, which was Common Land, so too did much of its commercial life. Here was the smithy, home of the exploding anvil, also the once famous 'boundary', 'bounder' or 'binding' tree – more properly the 'bonding' tree upon which a modified iron wagon wheel strake and a 'D'-shackle were fixed (now, no doubt, enveloped in the bark) and used to form the curves of all sorts other iron 'bonds', most likely other strakes I think, but reckoned to have been very skillfully used for forming complete circular iron tyres as well.

The blacksmith, the wheelwrights and the ironworks all encroached onto the green with a sprawl of clutter and 'work in hand'. Old farm implements in for repair, new ones awaiting sale or delivery and various carts and wagons in the course of building or repair, but on one day every year the green was completely cleared and tidied as a mark of respect for the village and maybe as a legal necessity to preserve its common status.

As the business gathered momentum, their products included not just agricultural implements and machinery but also such industrial requisites as firebars for waterworks and breweries in Chichester and Portsmouth and for Gales,



The end of the line? This Cannings' tractor-drawn roller is thought to have been the last made at Finchdean in the early 1930s.

the well known brewers, in neighbouring Horndean; architectural ironmongery in terms of cast iron windows and railings; road and street nameplates and, of course, domestic ironware. They also carried out all manner of repairs and maintenance to agricultural and industrial equipment.

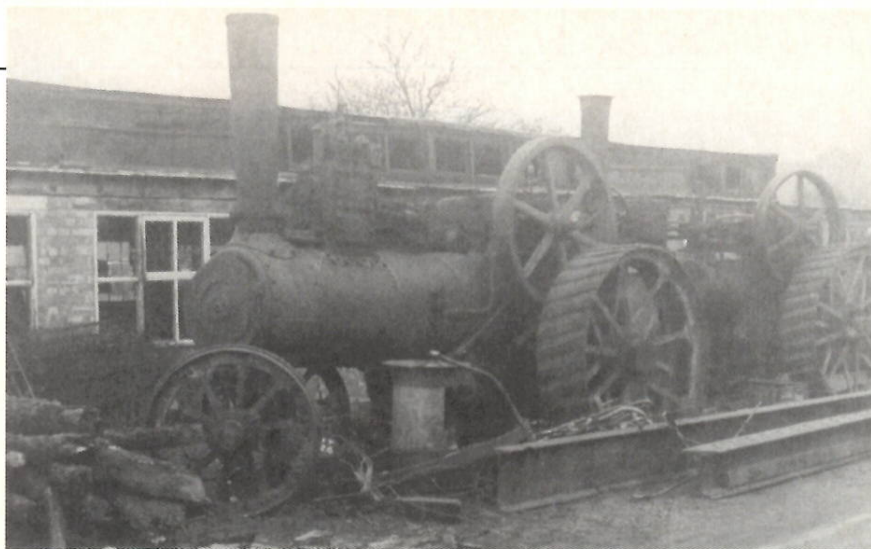
It seems curious that the railway, which runs right past the works before pausing just down the road at Rowlands Castle, appears to have had so little impact on the works. You might have thought a private siding would have been in order for all those deliveries of iron and coke and the easy despatch of Cannings' products to so many more distant parts. Mr Aslett's interviewer touches on this topic by asking if the foundry was there 'before the railway come through ...?'. 'Well, I couldn't say,' came the reply, 'Never heard 'em really say whether the foundry was there before the railway but I s'pects it was!'

This is followed by an interesting question, possibly based on legendary early plans for the railway – 'Wasn't there some talk of the railway station being here at Finchdean and not at Rowlands?'. But Mr Aslett, in keeping with so many of my own oral history subjects – or victims! – instead of answering, goes off at a tangent at this point and is keener to talk about something totally different which all this stirring of his grey matter has abruptly brought bobbing to the surface!

During Mr Aslett's time, the works itself was continuously employing four ironmoulders, five blacksmiths, two carpenters and a painter – as well as the carters who each worked a pair of horses. Mr Aslett's father had been head carter but had, recent to Frank's employment, become paralysed.

Their long working weekdays began at six in the morning; breakfast at eight until a quarter to nine; dinner from a quarter past twelve to one o'clock followed an afternoon session until half past five. Saturdays were a half day starting at six and finishing at twelve – and all for about 21 shillings (£1.05p) a week!

The works consisted of the foundry itself – 'a biggish shop' with a pattern loft and a tall chimney, 'the top shop' and 'the bottom shop', both being carpenter's; four blacksmith's shops purely for manufacturing or repairs – the firm's horses were always shod at the village smithy – and finally, the paintshop, which



One of John Meredith's four photographs of seven derelict steam engines at Finchdean Ironworks taken on Saturday 30th December 1950. Here is the, so far, otherwise unidentified, Burrell single-crank compound traction engine with the, also unidentified, Marshall traction engine behind. John Meredith

was also used to store finished products awaiting despatch.

The main production emphasis was on farm implements and machinery, especially ploughs, seed drills, hayrakes and hoes, cattle-cake breakers, chaff and turnip cutters, plain 'flat' and ridge-sectioned Cambridge rollers. Their all-iron ploughs ran through a range of numbered sizes, initially model Nos. 1 to 5, but certainly eventually extending to a No. 5.

There was also a corresponding range of much lighter wood and iron ploughs, the 'L' range, again in three sizes. The mid-range L2 was particularly popular with local market gardeners and smallholders. Displaying one of these at Petersfield Market would usually result in orders for half a dozen more.

The wooden components – beams and handles – for the L ploughs were made to order for Cannings' by Halls in Waterlooville or T & W Farlow, the old-established carpenters and wheelwrights at nearby Forestside. Tom and Walt Farlow were implement makers in their own right, well-known for their wood-framed iron-toothed drag harrows and renowned for thatching ladders, so distinctive with the round surfaces of the sides turned inwards so as to present a flat face to the thatching in progress.

As well as showing their wares at the immediately local markets, Cannings also visited agricultural shows, fairs and ploughing matches at considerable distances for those pre-motor transport times.

Frank Aslett's father, driving one of the



Another of John Meredith's photographs. In the foreground is Burrell showman's tractor 3560, new in 1914 to George Baker & Sons of Southampton, with the tender of Tasker tractor 1803 appearing on the left; the other, unidentified Burrell showman's tractor is just visible behind and, to the right, the tender of Allchin traction engine 1460. John Meredith



The railside buildings of Finchdean Ironworks probably at the end of the Arthur Phillips period of agricultural engineering in the late 1970s.

firm's shallow-bodied 'boat' wagons, would always undertake the longer journeys, especially regular excursions into deepest West Sussex for Pulborough Market. This would mean a very early start and a fairly arduous trek both for horses and carter, followed by a tedious amount of hanging about at the market before that long journey home which would so often be made even longer by a series of detours to deliver the day's sales.

Frustratingly, near home the South Downs presented an almost insurmountable barrier with the notoriously steep ascent of Harting Hill. This always meant resting the horses for an hour in the stables of the Coach & Horses pub at the bottom of the hill and, one imagines, some welcome refreshment for Mr Aslett Snr who reckoned he must have heard Uppark Farm clock strike midnight hundreds of times as he breasted that hilltop!

Having supplied so many ploughs, the firm then needed to keep up with demand for replacement wearing parts and, in particular, the shares. Between regular production of castings for new machines, whole weeks would be devoted just to turning out plough shares. The furnaces were lit in the early hours of a Monday morning and not put out until noon the following Saturday.

Initial firing was with oak cordwood purchased from the woodsmen after the bark had been stripped and sold for tanning. Once this was well alight, special

quality strong coke, delivered in railway truck loads from Bransea Pit in Durham, was added throughout the process, along with the pig iron and steel in 12-15 inch lengths. Peak production rate averaged sixty-dozen shares a day with an allowance of four-and-a half dozen 'bad 'uns' – the rest had to be saleable, hard 'chilled' exactly halfway through, straight from the mould onto the cold block.

Frank Aslett remembered the firm's centenary, presumably in 1916, when they were all given ten shillings (50p in today's money) in celebration.

'The happy couple were also subjected to the age-old custom of firing the anvil...'

Apart from the Cannings & Howell roller, the few surviving Cannings artefacts I've seen are all in some way labelled 'J S & G Cannings', which refers to John Stebbing (possibly a maternal maiden name used as a forename) and George, both, presumably, sons of 'Old John'.

By 1867, the firm is recorded in Kelly's Hampshire Directory as John Stebbing & George Cannings, Agricultural Implement Makers, Finch Dean (sic), Horndean. At the same time, John Stebbing Cannings is also mentioned as a farmer at Wellsworth Farm, Idsworth.

Frank Aslett refers to 'the young(er?) one', possibly (though he couldn't have

been that young!) George Cannings, returning from the First World War and taking on 'water jobs – you know, laying water on farms. O' course that's when all that come in – pumps down wells all over the show – Government give 'em a grant, see, else there was no water on farms before that only what they got in the ponds.'

Foundry work continued apace and Frank Aslett gives us a graphic description of one occasion, when an order for a larger-than-usual casting was the cause of some dispute between the brothers. The 'old chap' who 'had it in his mind to close the place' thought the job should be sent away to a Portsmouth foundry but 'howsomever, the 'young one' and this Alf Bastable – moulder – they said it could be done – or thought it could be done – so then we had orders to try. Well, I tried and got it in and had the metal all down the bottom of the furnace and some more waiting to tumble. When we get to run it into the mould, it took charge of the furnace and burnt the lot and run all across the road . . .'

By the 1930s, John Stebbing is remembered as a blind old man – although Frank Aslett's memoirs suggest he may have even been blind at the time of the firm's centenary – cared for by a devoted housekeeper. Finchdean resident, Mrs Hern, recalled that 'he may have been blind but it didn't stop him from singing the hymns – he knew them all by heart!'

At that time the chapel still had the old fashioned box pews with little doors into them but, shortly before his death in 1934, John Stebbing had the interior refitted with new pine pews. The front row had an extra high hymn book shelf specially for the old man to rest on!

It seems that George Cannings did not survive his brother for very long, there is certainly no more mention of the firm in Kelly's after 1935. It also appears that the business passed briefly into the hands of a relative prior to the closure of the foundry.

Sid Smith, the Harting blacksmith, now in his eighties, remembers the ironworks contents sale and that Wheatleys of Wickham bought the moulding sand and carted several traction wagon loads off to their own foundry in the Meon Valley.

During the war, the works buildings were in use as a grain store. Local memories also recall, with some sadness,

the quantities of Cannings railings which were removed from various properties as scrap for the war effort.

After the war, our story takes an unexpectedly intriguing turn when, in 1950, a young man called John Meredith enters our story. John, now a well-known and much respected transport authority and photographer, had read, in 'Modern Transport' magazine, that the Southern Gas Board were still using an old Foden steam wagon at their Hilsea Works for recovering hot coke from the retorts when the normal equipment was out of use. He sought permission to see the vehicle and was invited to visit the works on Saturday 30th December, when the wagon would be in steam. His trip to Portsmouth resulted in a very successful series of photographs which include the Foden wagon, two Southern Gas Board Beyer-Peacock locomotives, a Portsmouth Corporation Aveling & Porter steam roller and two new Portsmouth Corporation trolley buses!

But this is all another story and we digress from Finchdean where John had often noticed, from passing trains, a group of derelict traction engines in a yard beside the railway line. They were easily seen from the train but actually reaching them was a different matter! It entailed disembarking from the train at Rowlands Castle station and walking to Finchdean, taking photographs and walking back to catch another train – 'in those days 99% of Southern Electric trains ran to time and I accomplished the task with no problems . . . !'

'So it was, then, late on that December Saturday afternoon, following his exciting Portsmouth trip and 'in inclement winter weather', I then took four photographs – jaded engines in indifferent light don't make the best photographs . . . ' he wrote to me! Jaded engines and poor light perhaps, but what a remarkable record of the seven engines which lay there beside the old ironworks buildings. John Meredith has even preserved his notebook sketch showing their exact positions in the yard. The well-honed knowledge of Les Burberry and Eric Best and some computerised magnification has revealed some their identities as follows:

1. Burrell single-crank compound traction engine.
2. Marshall traction engine.
3. Tasker three-speed chain drive tractor No.1803, registration HO 2781, new to



Once known as 'The Barracks', John Cannings' row of foundry workers cottages at Dean Lane End still have the pretty iron window frames which were cast at Finchdean Ironworks.

Portsea Island Mutual Co-operative Society.

4. Burrell showman's tractor No. 3560, new, in April 1914, to George Baker & Sons, Southampton.

5. Another, so far unidentified, Burrell showman's tractor.

6. Allchin traction engine No.1460, registration PR 9605 (Surrey CC No. 17).

7. Marshall traction engine No. 51024, AC 9260.

But what were they doing there? Sid Smith recalls a Mr Matthews running a scrapyard at the old ironworks after the war and tales of suspicious-sounding 'aero engines in cases hidden up in a chalkpit up the woods' and illicit scrap being sent across to Europe 'when Germany wasn't allowed to have any' – I'd have thought there would have been plenty already over there so soon after the war. . .

Engine records for the Tasker tractor certainly conclude with a B Matthews of Finchdean. Further confirmation comes from another photograph of the engines taken by the late Joe Latham on 6th May 1950 for which he names the location as 'Matthews' Yard'. Sifting this evidence, and the fact that none of these engines has survived, does suggest that they were certainly scrapped and, possibly, having been dismantled, were shipped to Europe as 'tractor parts'!

Tractor parts, and indeed, complete new tractors and modern farm machinery were certainly the order of the day during the second half of the 20th century when Arthur Phillips operated PFI or Phillips' Finchdean Ironworks at the old Cannings

works. He was an International agent and latterly large yellow Muir-Hill four-wheel-drive tractors filled his showroom window.

In Finchdean today, the tall iron foundry chimney, although far from massive, still dominates the 1992 development of the old works into seven 'courtyard homes' with names like 'The Old Iron Foundry', 'Bellows Cottage' and, less obviously 'Gaggers Cottage'! But, in all fairness to the developer, much of the original works profile has been retained including the cast-iron trusses in the foundry roof – and an anvil mounted in the wall outside!

Just across the road, in the railside former ironworks buildings – one of which still bears the date 1929 – Datum Precision Tooling Ltd carry out state of the art specialist toolmaking for the most demanding requirements of the aerospace, automotive, medical and military industries.

Not far away, at sleepy Dean Lane End, the terrace of former foundry workers' cottages, once known as 'The Barracks', dozes gently in the summer sunshine. It twinkles on the many panes of those ornate iron windows cast over 170 years ago at John Cannings' old Finchdean Ironworks. Woe betide any double-glazers who try to replace them!

'...near home the South Downs presented an almost insurmountable barrier with the notoriously steep ascent of Harting Hill.'