



The Roadmen

By Bill Youdale

We who live in this part of the world have the pleasure of being surrounded by a maze of country lanes, and are well used each year to find them growing narrower and narrower as the summer progresses, the hedgerows and verges coming crowding in from all sides. Then suddenly, on some day in late summer, we come home and discover that the local juggernaut with its telescopic arm and whirring flail has progressed along our lane and opened it back out to its original width, covering the road with a carpet of hedge litter.

It was very different in Etchingham in the fifties. In those days all the hedges and verges in the Parish were cut, by hand, by a pair of roadmen, who worked, year round, day after day, five and a half days a week, wielding their swaps (as sickles are called in Sussex) and hooker sticks, these being suitable pieces of hazel cut from the hedge, trimmed so that they were left with a V-joint on the end which could be hooked round the vegetation they were attacking.

They were a wonderful Laurel and Hardy pair, Barney, corpulent and jovial, and his mate, who's name escapes me after all these years, thin and scrawny with a downtrodden look. They were, of course, a permanent and familiar feature of the local landscape. Anyone who has done manual work for a living will be well aware that this type of labour requires regular breaks for rest and recovery. As anyone who has seriously used a swap will also be well aware, one of the prime requirements for doing a good job is a very sharp blade, which can only be achieved with frequent stops for sessions of careful whetting with a sharpening stone. These two requirements meant that most encounters with Barney and his mate would find them at a time when they had time for a chat and exchange of news and views— always an interesting encounter. Not only by the nature of their job, but also quite clearly by inclination, they amassed detailed information on the movement of all the village inhabitants, what went on in every field and over every hedge, and also, one gathered, what went on behind every curtain as well. Barney was a fund of country lore, and a ready source of homespun wisdom on any subject, his mate joining in with grunts of agreement. He was also unsparing in his pithy comments on village affairs (of every sort) and personalities. No need for MI5, Facebook or Twitter so long as Barney was around. As well as all this, they left the verges immaculately groomed, and I seem to remember they actually raked up and burned all they cut, unthinkable today. The juggernaut may be progress, but it's a poor substitute.