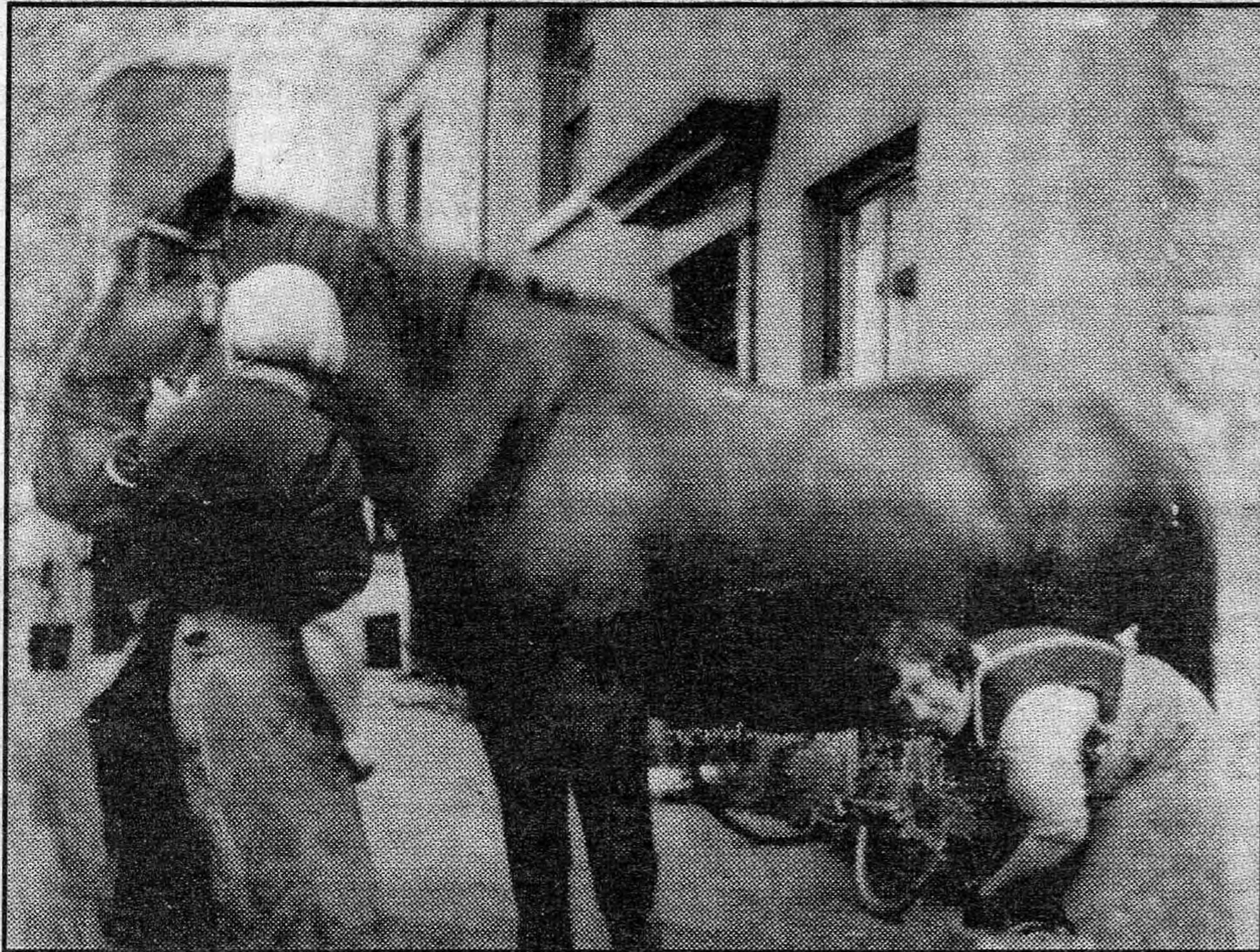


Britain's First Woman Blacksmith

By Sarah Stoner Sunderland Echo



FARRIER SKILLS: Elizabeth Emmett pictured shoeing a horse at Bog Row smithy, Hetton, in the 1940s. A Mrs Wheeler is holding the horse.



SIXTIES SCENE: Elizabeth Emmett, pictured on the far right, near the family forge at Bleach Green, Hetton, in 1965. Also pictured are Ernie Gibson and Elizabeth's daughter Jessie and her grandson, Robert Hunter.

MY MOTHER was a very practical lady who could turn her hand to anything," recalls 81-year-old Frank Emmett.

"She worked right the way through World War One as a general blacksmith and farrier. It was a tough and hard job."

Elizabeth Hannah Emmett was born at Seaton, near Seaham, in 1898, the only daughter of gamekeeper James Finch and Hannah Stephenson - a descendent of George Stephenson.

But tragedy struck just a few years after her birth, when James was killed in a railway accident. Elizabeth, her two older brothers and widowed mother were left penniless.

Robert Walker, Elizabeth's great nephew, said: "After James died they were offered a home by George Stephenson, Hannah's father.

"He was a blacksmith at Bleach Green in Hetton and they went to live with him. A few years later, she became apprenticed to George."

The smithy, which stood at what was known as Hetton-in-the-Hole, had originally been a public house served by an adjoining brewery.

However George - whose father was a cousin of the famous engineer - converted the building in the 1870s, after moving his family to Hetton from West Auckland.

"I think George decided to teach Elizabeth the trade so she could be independent," said Mr Walker. "He was way ahead of his time, really, thinking like that."

Elizabeth started her apprenticeship as a blacksmith at the age of 14, working alongside her brothers George and Jim at the foundry.

She later recalled: "We assisted in the mammoth task of shoeing most of the horses from local co-operative societies, tradesmen and farmers. The hours were long and I did not receive any money."

Elizabeth was also responsible for shoeing the horses belonging to the travelling circuses which often visited Hetton.

"We worked almost around the clock," she told a newspaper many years later. "The shoes were ready-made, but we had to shape and fit them."

When World War One was declared and her brothers were called up, Elizabeth found herself shouldering the workload of the forge with just her grandfather for help.

"She worked throughout the war, looking after the needs of the local agricultural community, as well as shoeing horses for miles around," said Mr Walker.

"There was no electricity at the forge then, and the gas was only put in during the 1930s. She would have worked by the light of hurricane lamps."

Elizabeth developed a detailed knowledge of horses during her time as a blacksmith, mixing her own salve to cure their sores and ailments.

She even became known as something of a horse whisperer within the village, as Mr Walker recalls: "A horse reared up after being spooked by a shiny railway line once, tipping the chap off the back of the cart it was pulling."

"But Elizabeth went up to the horse, whispered in its ear and walked it over to the line, to show it there was nothing to be frightened of. It was fine after that."

Elizabeth worked as a blacksmith until 1920,



OLDEN DAYS: George Stephenson and his wife, Hannah, pictured about the turn of the 19th century. The couple took in Elizabeth and her family after her father was killed in a rail accident. George, a direct descendent of railway engineer George Stephenson, later taught Elizabeth her trade as a blacksmith.

when she married her sweetheart Robert Emmett, a miner and amateur boxer.

Robert later turned professional following the strike of 1926, fighting at venues across the North East until he was 40.

The forge itself continued as a family business for several years after the war, before being rented out to Haswell blacksmith Mr. Crowe.

It was later used as a base by building contractors Ellison and Carter until the mid-1960s, when it was then demolished.

Elizabeth lived in the little cottage next to the forge until 1966, when she and Robert were offered a nearby aged miners bungalow.

But in 1960 she was pictured by The Echo standing proudly in front of her house - the mystery picture we appealed for help on last week.

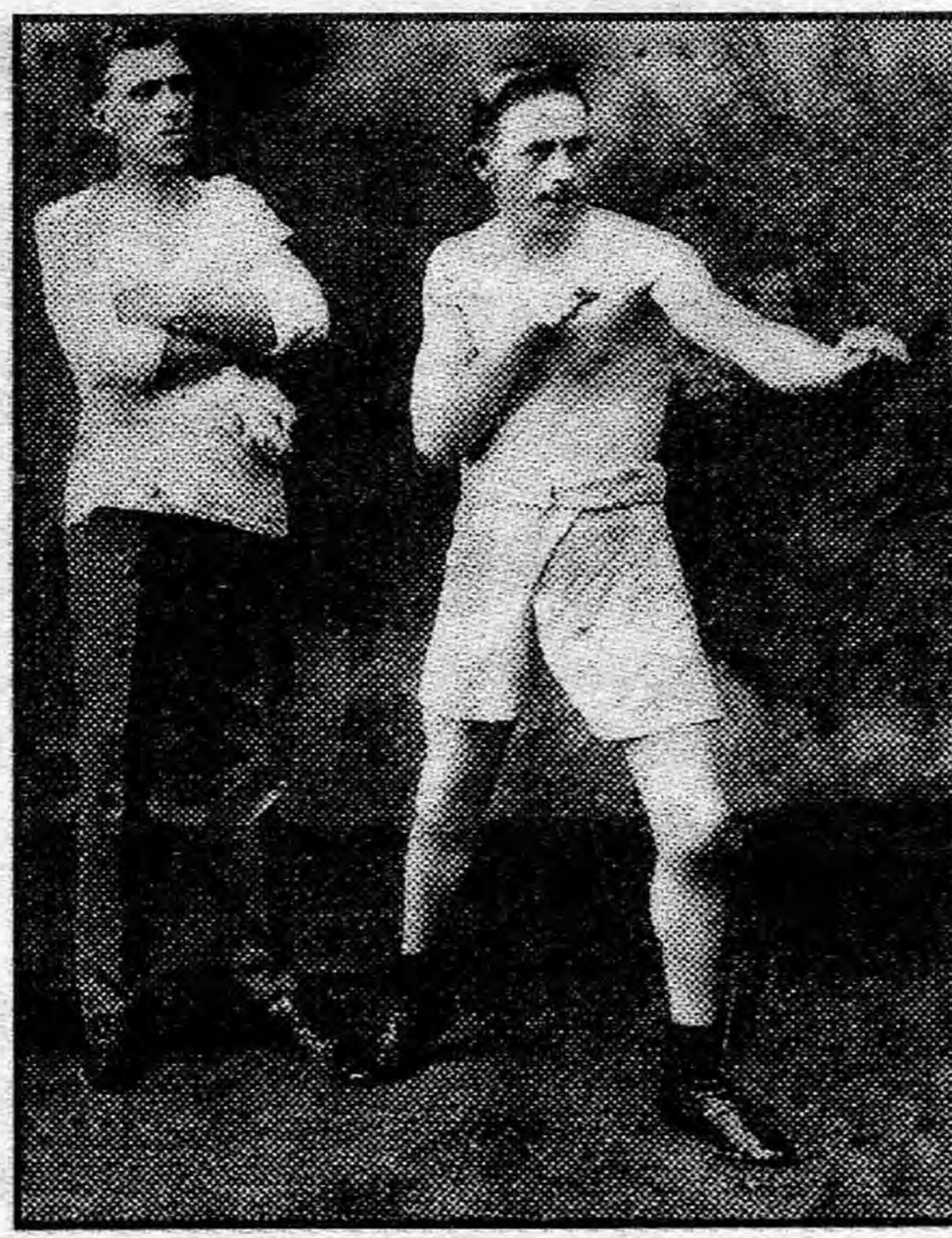
"The large knocker, giant key and lock on the front door were salvaged by her grandfather from the first church in Hetton, St Nicholas's," said Mr Walker.

Elizabeth passed away, aged 86, in 1985, but had been known as a mine of information about old Hetton-le-Hole.

"She could do anything, from welding to cobbling or making you a key," recalls her son-in-law Robert Hunter.

"Elizabeth was a tough and strong woman, so clever with her hands. She was a lady in a million."

* It is believed the Bleach Green area of Hetton acquired its name more than 200 years ago when linen was bleached on the green near the old Rectory.



BOXING CHAMP: Elizabeth's husband, Robert Emmett was a professional bantamweight boxer.



HAPPY DAYS: Elizabeth and her husband, Robert, celebrate their golden wedding anniversary in 1970.