

Hooping Day

Uncle Wilf Skelton died years ago; I last saw Owen about two years ago in Aldborough where he now lives, but still regularly visits Withernwick I understand; in my mind they are still there young and fit, swinging their hammers and hooping wagon wheels.

Early memories, being strapped in my pram
After a good tanning from an angry mam;
The snows of Forty Seven when the Shires died;
Billy Bulson's farm and my only Shire ride;
Hooping day in the blacksmiths yard
When Owen and uncle worked so hard

Checking and balancing each wheel's trim
Before replacing each wheel's worn metal rim.
There was this big cast plate on the ground
With a ring of braziers circled around.
At the centre of the plate, at the very nub
Was a hole to accommodate each wood hub.

You could feel the heat, each brazier red,
As each hoop was lowered into its bed
Where it would expand so it would slip
Around a wheel rim to shrink and grip.
Each was doused to speed the cold
And so increase the tight firm hold.

They worked the whole day
That was the only possible way
Each wagon was ready for the fields
To transport that year's harvest yield.
After school we kids watched, standing around
Well out of the way of the working ground.

If any kid got a bit too near
Uncle or Owen would clip an ear.
That was in the years after the war
Five or six at the most, certainly no more,
Before Fordson and Fergies finally ousted shires
And metal rims were replaced by pneumatic tyres.

Close my eyes and I can hear the sounds
Of iron shod wooden wheels booling the ground:
Open my eyes and it's a whole world away,
Slower, gentler, nicer perhaps, than today.
Sometime I think now I understand why
Old people accept when it's their time to die.
Without a single kick or scream
Just slipping away into their dreams.