

Entering the world of yesterday —

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restoration in the rafters

THE Black Barn, Mill Hill, Alresford, looks just as its address suggests. Situated at the bottom of the architecturally elegant Broad Street, its position may seem a little unusual, but nevertheless, its dark bulk blends with the surroundings.

Black Barn dates back to the early 1800s, when presumably it was in use for farming purposes. In living memory however, its use appears to have been varied, ranging from a hostel for down and outs, a fully operative garage with petrol pumps on the opposite side of the road, and a store house. Later it was used as a workshop for the restoration of vintage cars, reverted back to a store, and was then leased to a contemporary furniture maker.

A year ago it changed hands once more. A small, well-polished brass plaque says very simply, George Watson, Restoration and Repairs.

Through the barn door, up a flight of narrow steep steps to the roof area, and you enter the world of yesterday.

Tools are stacked, stored and hung in every conceivable space and cases of grandfather clocks stand around alongside the odd chair.

George Watson, puffing away on his pipe as he works, looks for all the world like a man who enjoys what he does. And in this instance, looks do not deceive.

George first started "mending things" as a small boy, and indeed as a result, owned the finest collection of toys of any child living within his family's financial circumstances. His father worked on a watercress farm, and George used to collect the unwanted broken toys belonging to the employer's children, and restore them.

LIFELONG AMBITION

Born in Alresford, it was always his ambition to have a business in his own home town one day. But it was a winding course that George Watson took before realising his dream.

On leaving the local school, he began a varied series of jobs — from gardening, gate-making and trailer-making, to watercress worker and cow man. National Service in the RAF saw him trained as a gas turbine mechanic, and on leaving the service, he turned to the building trade.

Meanwhile he started taking on part-time evening work for Mr. Laurence Oxley, antiquarian book and art expert, who also dealt with antique furniture repairs. This work increased to the extent that in 1952 it was no longer possible to cope on a part-time basis, and Laurence Oxley guaranteed George six months' work if he would come into the business full time. Those six months lasted for 25 years.

During the 25 years with Mr. Oxley, George built up the picture framing side of the business, which he left in the hands of staff, in order to concentrate on furniture restoring himself. Meanwhile he took courses and read everything he could lay his hands on about the art of picture restoring. Today he is an Associate of the International Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works and a member of the Guild of Master Craftsmen.

As a sideline and hobby, he also built up his own workshop at home to make model farm parts, all made to scale and in the same woods as the original working carts. Some of the larger models have been sold to museums.

When Black Barn became available last year, it seemed the ideal opportunity for George finally to work for himself in his home town. As word of his impending business



Finishing touches to a model farm cart.

spread in the area work started to come in, and within two days of opening his workshop was full.

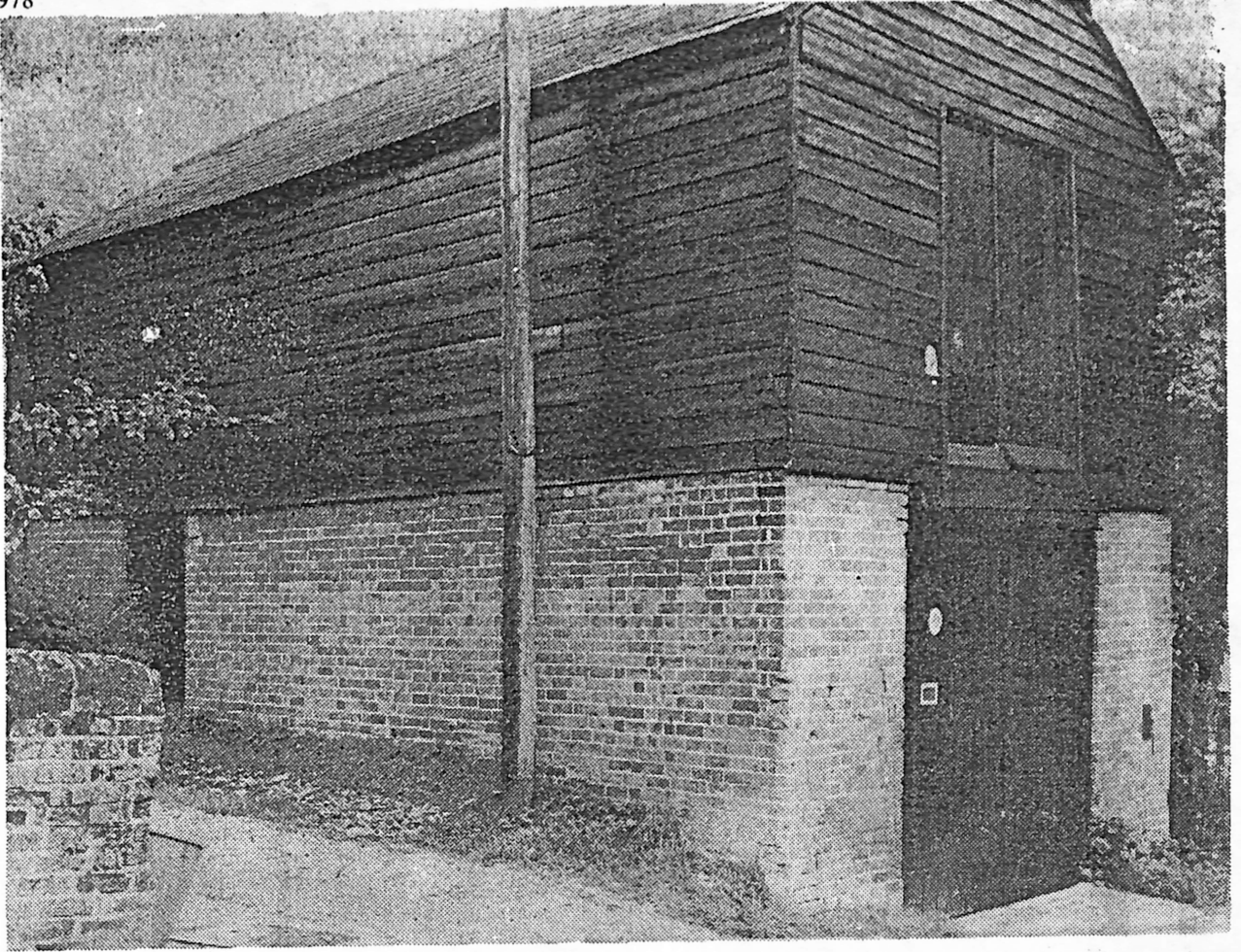
George says he does not specialise in anything. But watching him making a leg for a square piano, one questions the credibility of that statement. He specialises in making better that which is worn and broken, in replacing

what no other man will replace, in giving perhaps another 100 years of life to an item already 200 years old.

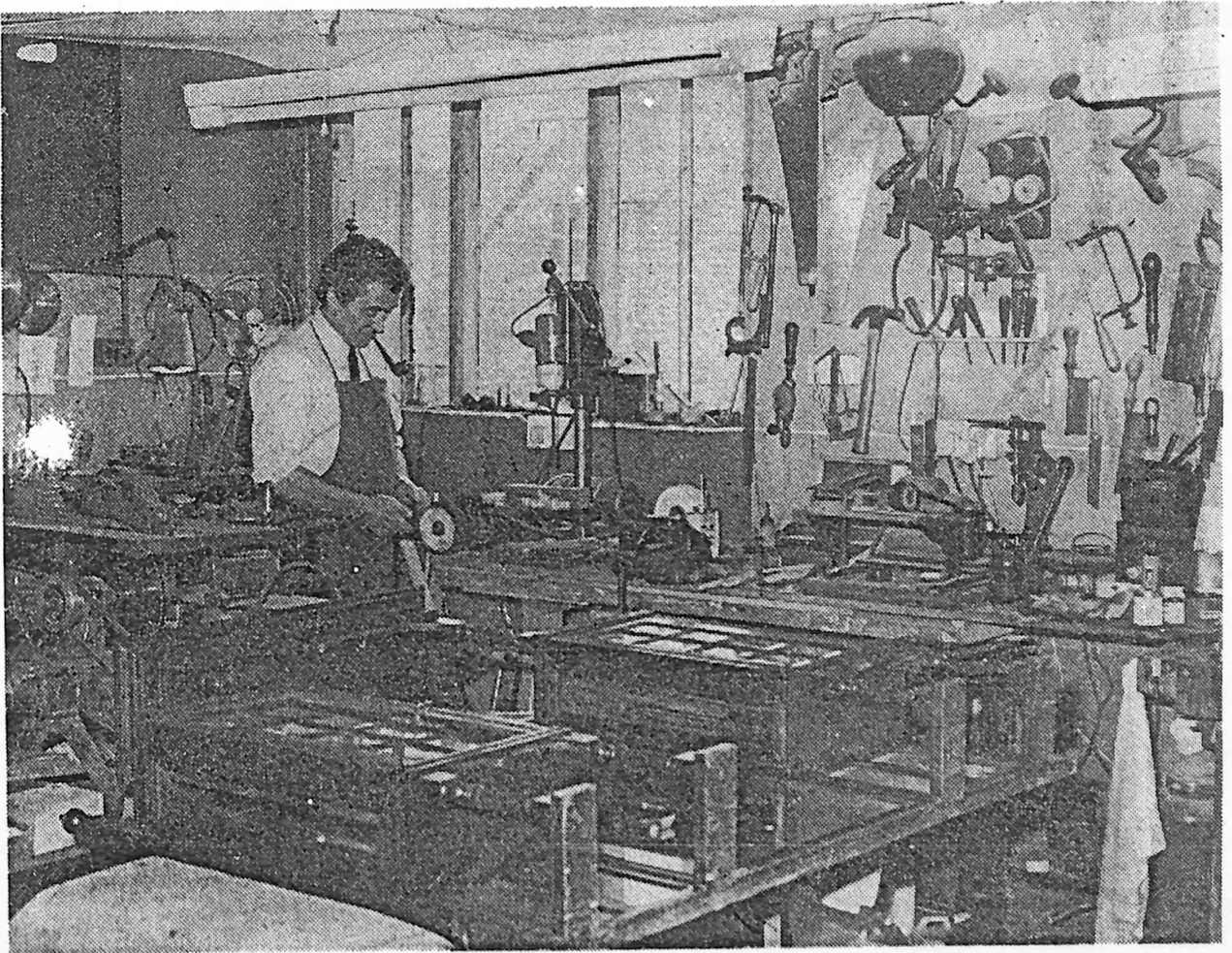
"HOSPITAL"

He describes his workshop in the rafters as "a hospital for furniture and pictures. They come in sick and go out with a new lease of life."

Handling, working and caring for something which has been created a century or more ago, and knowing that perhaps it will some time in the future be restored again, creates a sense of timelessness. This, measured against the short life-span of man, is something curiously satisfying, particularly to a craftsman like George Watson.



The Barn.



Inside the well-equipped workshop.