

Joe Parker, Knife Grinder



Joseph Smith, Photo taken by John Drury, 1995, Felsted

Joseph Smith was his real name (*in Felsted he was known as 'Joe Parker, Knife Grinder'*), born on 27 December 1936 and married to Cinderella. Together with their daughter Annie, they lived in the woodlands at Barnston, near Barnston Bends and at the bottom of Parsonage Lane opposite a few cottages (*around the corner from 'The Old School' house*), which became their home for over 30 years. In the woodlands they had a makeshift shelter made with tarpaulin, which slung across a path. The locals knew them as the '*Barnston Borrowers*' as they were quite respectable and decent folk. Most locals did not mind them living rough nearby. During colder conditions they lived in a couple of cars, a caravan on loan as well as a shed. On occasions their cousin would turn up in his Mini and use it as a generator so they could all watch their black and white TV.

Once they were reported on the Anglia TV news by Mary Nightingale as the '*Hedge Row People*' as well as mentioned by Mike Reid who was filming in Essex.

Joseph was known not only for smoking roll-ups but also for his decorative '*Grinder Bicycle*'. The bicycle had a board on the front advertising his services, embellished with multiple doorknobs. There was a grindstone that could be converted via a stand to sharpen knives, gardening shears, scissors and other such implements. As he pedalled his bicycle a grinder spun round while he held the implement to sharpen the blades. Joseph was the only member of the family who cycled to places like Great Leighs, Great Dunmow, Walthams and Felsted on his special Grinder Bicycle.

Felstedians use to address him as 'Joe Parker, Knife Grinder'. To this day I am not sure the reason for this but Annie believes that her father sometimes would give a different name in different places.

Together the family earned their living as pea-pickers and while Joseph went on his Grinder Bicycle, Cinderella and Annie pushed an old pram to sell door-to-door 'lucky heather' looking so cold and smelling very strongly of wood smoke (unsurprisingly!).

Cinderella and Annie would do their shopping (*mainly potatoes*) at the Co-op in Great Dunmow and regularly shopped in Linsells at Felsted, where Annie still shops today. A local from Felsted once gave Cinderella a lift back to Barnston after she walked all the way from Barnston to Felsted through the fields.

The family never bothered the locals in Barnston and the locals never bothered them. During Christmas time some locals would share their food out with them.

Joseph Smith sadly died on 5 December 2000 at the age of 64. The funeral service held a huge gathering at St Andrews Church in Barnston; this is the biggest gathering of people attending a funeral service so far to-date. Soon after the funeral, the council evicted Cinderella and Annie from the Barnston woods. Annie said she wished she could be back in the woods with her mother and her father's bicycle where they could be happy and left alone. Luckily for them both they moved back to Barnston woods in 2013.

I then asked Annie if she would like to add any special memories about her dad and she replied to say, 'My dad always tried to be funny so to make people laugh'. She then left and said, 'Cheerio then'.

Perhaps one day in memory of 'Joseph Smith, Knife Grinder' his bicycle could be donated to a museum.

Jules Wallis

I would like to say thanks to Annie Smith who granted permission to write about her father, as well as thanks for all contributions from staff at Linsells in Felsted and locals from Felsted, Great Dunmow, Great Bardfield and Barnston.