

Workman & Sons, Engineers of Slimbridge

GSIA Chairman Steve Mills writes:-

Tucked away in the little village of Slimbridge was once a small engineering company that came to achieve a degree of national prominence. Workmans was originally set up around 1861 as a general engineer, but given the location, a lot of their business came from the local agricultural and farming sector. At their peak, around 30 men were employed at the works.

Initially, like so many small engineers, the company undertook almost any type of work. They built and repaired carts and farm vehicles, built pumps and steam engines for waterworks, repaired early cars, and made equipment such as mowing machines for local farms. They also worked on steam traction engines used on farms and fairgrounds. They even made castings for the well-known Gloucester-based company of Kell & Co, iron founders and renowned manufacturers of agricultural implements and machines such as ploughs. For many years, Kell & Co was one of the biggest specialist manufacturers in the West of England. Workmans also undertook casting for companies that included the Dudbridge Iron Works. For a time, they sold Garrett traction engines and also serviced and repaired Sentinel steam lorries.

They also built and supplied wood sawing machinery to customers that included the Berkeley and Badminton Estates, Walkers Sticks of Nailsworth, and the Peake family sawmills nearby in Cambridge.



Rare surviving wood sawing equipment. Originally supplied to the Berkeley Estate but now located at Halmore Mill near Cam. Visited by the GSIA in 2016

However, it was to be their range of cider making equipment that brought them to the attention of a wider public. From this rather unlikely location, Workmans were credited with developing a range of highly efficient mechanical mills and presses that revolutionised the rate of apple juice extraction.

The company's catalogue of cider making machinery carried testimonials from a number of happy customers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some were Gloucestershire based although many were in the heartland of cider and perry making, the county of Somerset. However, their products became well known and appreciated not just in the UK, as equipment was also sent farther afield to locations that included Jersey, Ireland and even the USA.

Their range of cider making equipment focused mainly on various types of portable apple mills, presses and pumps. Mills were used to pulp the apples prior to pressing – these were sometimes referred to as 'scratter' mills. Some were stand-alone whereas others formed part of portable combined mill and press units. It was the latter that were particularly favoured in the industry. These were mounted on a trailer so if necessary, could be moved easily between locations. The frame was built from oak and carried pennant stone rollers mounted in gunmetal bearings. Power was transmitted via a worm gear mechanism worked from an overhead shaft. The combined unit required 8 hp to power it, and this could come from almost any source such as water power, steam, oil or petrol engines. Small Lister diesels were also popular. Bigger units featured two presses, one at each end. This meant that whilst one was in operation, the other could be loaded, then vice versa. It was claimed that 2000 gallons of juice could be extracted per day. Oak was used for much of the construction as cider apple juice is very acidic and full of tannins, so corrodes iron if it comes in contact.

Workmans equipment was highly regarded and the company won awards at a number of major agricultural shows. Some of the more notable included the Royal Agricultural Society of England trials in Plymouth in 1890, and the Gloucestershire Agricultural Society Stroud Meeting in 1892. All in all, quite a feat for a small rural concern!



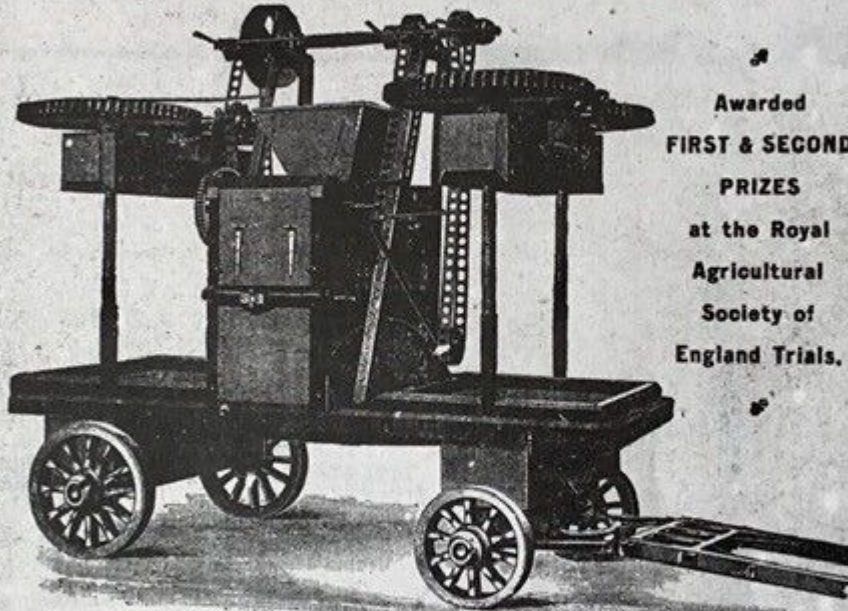
A rather dilapidated Workmans portable combined mill and press. This was up for sale on a Slimbridge farm around a decade ago (courtesy Ian Standing)

Telegraphic Address:
WORKMAN, SLIMBRIDGE

Catalogue
of

Nearest Railway Station:
COALEY JUNCTION

**CIDER MAKING MACHINERY,
PRESSES, PUMPS, &c.**



Awarded
FIRST & SECOND
PRIZES
at the Royal
Agricultural
Society of
England Trials.

WORKMAN & SONS,
Slimbridge, Stonehouse,
Gloucestershire.

Workmans catalogue showing combined mill and press