

H W Stephens Incubator Works, Gloucester

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It's surprising what you come across when you're not expecting it. While recently rummaging around an antique/junk emporium in Warwickshire, I came across this unusual piece of equipment – it turned out to be what was left of an egg incubator made by the Gloucester-based firm of Horace W Stephens.



Although there was an obvious clue in the name, I can't say that I had ever given any thought to how they worked. Clearly, they were used widely to incubate various types of eggs, although the biggest 'client' seems to have been chickens. For the successful development of chicken eggs, it is crucial to maintain the correct incubator temperature – a range of 37.8–38.9°C is recommended throughout the incubation period of 20-21 days. In essence, an incubator works by maintaining a consistent, warm temperature and humidity, mimicking the conditions under a mother hen, thereby allowing fertilised eggs to develop and hatch chicks.

Egg incubators were made by numerous firms throughout the country, although Stephens appear to have been one of the bigger ones, manufacturing a number of different models such as the *Glevum Superior*. All models had two drop-down doors and pull-out shelves, and most had paraffin-heaters attached.

The company appears to have started operating in the early part of the 20th century. Kellys Directory for 1914 refers to 'Horace Walter Stephens - incubator manufacturer, poultry house maker & manufacturing joiner'. At this time the company was located in Linden Road in Gloucester, although by 1919, they were based in Calton Road, and it was here that disaster struck. In that year, a newspaper reported that:

A fire broke out with alarming suddenness at Mr H W Stephens' Glevum Incubator Works in Carlton Road. The building which was in close proximity to several dwelling houses had a galvanised roof and contained large quantities of dry wood, naturally of an inflammable character.

Despite the fire brigade's efforts, it was seen from the outset that there was little hope of saving the works, so they concentrated on protecting the surrounding houses, although the brigade continued to play water on the smouldering remains of the works throughout the night. The origin of the fire was never determined but is thought to have started in the varnishing room. Unfortunately, the building was not covered by insurance.

Despite this major setback, the company survived and subsequently expanded, moving to much larger premises at Llanthony in Gloucester Docks, close to the priory remains. The 1923 OS map shows the works to have been a single rectangular building, although by the 1930s, it had expanded considerably. At its peak, the company was employing at least 150 people.



The Glevum Works at Llanthony in 1932 (courtesy britainfromabove.org.uk)



The Incubator Works at Llanthony in 1938 (courtesy Ordnance Survey)

Just how long they were at Llanthony isn't clear, and it seems there was yet another relocation at some point during the 1950s. By 1961, Horace W Stephens & Sons were now in Hempstead Lane, producers of 'poultry rearing equipment'. Interestingly, there was also a second company mentioned (Buckeye-Stephens Ltd) which also had the same telephone number, so clearly, there was a commercial connection (Buckeye was a long-established US-based manufacturer of incubators, having been active in the USA from at least the early 1900s). However, in September 1966, there were press reports of 'liquidation', although in September 1967, the *Gloucester Journal* reported that Buckeye-Stephens had been awarded a gold medal at the International Brno trade fair in what was then Czechoslovakia.

There followed mentions in the trade press of Gordon Johnson-Stephens Holdings Ltd of Gloucester, poultry processing equipment manufacturers, who during the 1960s and 70s, apparently wholly owned and operated various UK and overseas subsidiary companies that included Buckeye-Stephens Ltd, as well as several "non-trading" UK registered subsidiaries that included Horace W. Stephens and Sons Ltd. In 1978, Gordon Johnson-Stephens Holdings Ltd was taken over by Simon Engineering Ltd.

So, H W Stephens finally disappeared from the scene, but I wonder how many million chicken eggs were hatched in their incubators during the company's long lifetime!