John Stephens, Son & Co Ltd. Gloucester Vinegar Works Jam and Pickle Factory

by Stephen Mills May 2025

This Gloucester-based firm was set up in 1870 in St Catherine's Street and Hare Lane in buildings previously used as a tannery/parchment works. They went on to produce pickles, preserves, lemon curd, mincemeat, marmalade, peels, and brewed malt vinegar, becoming known locally as 'Jammy Stephens', after its founder.

At the end of the first decade of operation, more than 100 workers were employed at the works, mostly women. The company gradually expanded, eventually distributing its goods via its own fleet of railway wagons supplied by Gloucester Railway Carriage & Wagon Company. Products were sent throughout the UK and to many parts of the British empire such as Singapore, Malta, Malaysia, the West Indies, and Africa – pretty much anywhere the British were to be found!

At some point around 1887, much of the site was rebuilt using designs from the Gloucester architectural partnership of Moore and Maberly - this included new offices. James Philip Moore worked as an architect in Gloucester between 1872 and 1902, and was responsible for a number of local industrial buildings including several in Gloucester Docks (*incidentally, I have several of his detailed journals describing his international travels, but that's a story for another day*!)

Moore & Maberly's design for new office block

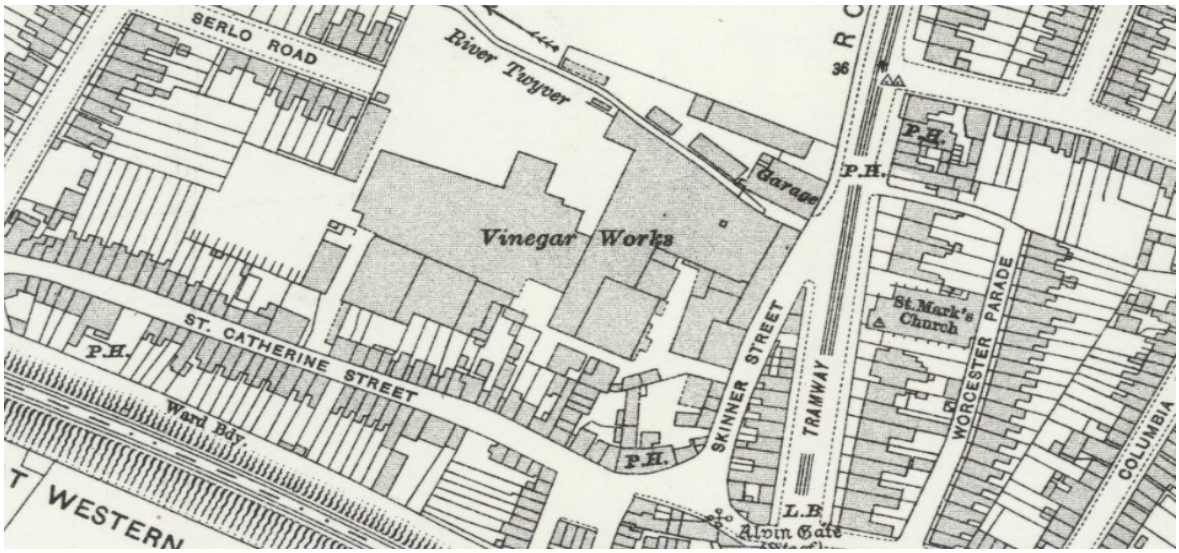
By 1901, the workforce had grown to around 400 mostly local people and the company was advertising as "purveyors, packers, bottlers, and manufacturers of, or dealers in pickles, jams, marmalade, fruits, sauces, soup, jellies, foodstuffs, provisions, confectionary, etc". The registered office was now The Vinegar Works, Worcester Street, Gloucester.

The company seems to have been quite successful, but not all went well – for example, there was a staff strike in 1912. The photo to the right (courtesy Gloucester Police Archives) shows Sergeant Brooks and Police Constable Ball guarding the gates during the strike, apparently enjoying themselves!

However, during the company's long lifetime, it continued to expand, and the works eventually comprised a jumble of buildings bordered by the little River Twyver, all now demolished. The company finally went out of business in 1956.

The site is only a few yards from Gloucester Rugby's Kingsholm stadium.

Interestingly, Gloucestershire Heritage Hub recently reported that company records had been deposited with them and will be catalogued, packaged, and added to the collection in the next few weeks.



The works in 1923 (courtesy Ordinance Survey)

Two Stephen's jam pots gathered on my travels over the years.

The left-hand one was made in the Rylands' Hope Glass Works in Barnsley. It is embossed with two geese(?) – no idea of the significance!

The one on the right has what appears to be an iron cross on the bottom.

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