

NICKS & CO, LONG ESTABLISHED TIMBER MERCHANTS OF GLOUCESTER

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The firm of Nicks & Co has been importing timber through Gloucester for more than 150 years and can claim to be Gloucester's longest established independent business. Founded by William Nicks, it has remained essentially a family concern through five generations.

Early Days

William Nicks was the second son of a builder and contractor of Warwick who came to Gloucester in the early 1840s as a traveller for timber merchants Price & Co (1). There he met Robert Heane, and following a misunderstanding with their managing partner, the two young men broke away to set up their own business in 1849. Trading under the name of Heane & Nicks, they quickly built up a successful business importing timber for the railways being built in the Midlands. However, it seems that Heane was not very enthusiastic about business life, and in 1855 Nicks, then aged 35, took over the business in partnership with Thomas Wyatt Baxter, thus establishing the firm still known as Nicks & Co (2).

The 1850s was a difficult time for the timber trade in Gloucester as the war with Russia in the Crimea had the effect of blocking access to Russian controlled ports in the Baltic from where many imports had previously been received. So Nicks & Co's early imports were mainly from Canada with less from Sweden. Each ship typically brought a few hundred baulks of oak or pine and several thousand sawn soft-wood deals and battens, often topped up with hundreds of barrel staves and/or lengths of lathwood. The firm also traded in slates for roofing, mainly in sizes known as duchesses and countesses, which smaller vessels brought from Portmadoc in North Wales (3).

Nicks & Co evidently supplied builders and contractors in Gloucester and the Midlands. An invoice dated 1858 has survived for 29 bundles of lathwood, totalling 5050 feet in length and costing £2 18s 1d, supplied to Messrs Jones & Son who were builders based at Worcester Parade, Gloucester. Remarkably, the same firm continued as a customer for at least ninety years and probably longer (4). It was normal to allow some credit to regular customers, but this led to a bad debt when contractor William Maxwell of Redditch and Banbury went bankrupt in 1860 and William Nicks acted as one of the trustees for his creditors (5).

Bakers Quay

Nicks & Co initially operated from premises on Bakers Quay with a 45 yards frontage on the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal immediately to the south of the Pillar Warehouse and straddling what is now called Merchants Road (6). (Grid Ref. 826180) A large storage area was necessary to keep at least four months stock of timber because the Baltic froze over around the end of November and first open water was at the beginning of April. Their office is shown in a photograph dated 1863, and standing by the door is William Nicks himself wearing a top hat (7). (Fig. 1) The firm did not have their own saw mill and so presumably employed hand-sawyers, although they may also have used a nearby saw mill owned by Samuel Moreland (who later became a celebrated match manufacturer) (8). Goods for customers in the Midlands could be forwarded by canal boat or via the Midland Railway which had a yard at the southern end of Bakers Quay.



Fig. 1 Nicks & Co's office on Bakers Quay in 1863 with William Nicks standing in the doorway. (Nicks Archive)

In 1860, Nicks & Baxter were joined by Henry Morgan Hooper, who with his former partner Joseph Robert Sanders had traded from the neighbouring yards to the south. These had a canal frontage of 63 yards, and the enlarged firm took them over, thereby more than doubling the previous area (9). Benefiting also from the ending of the war with Russia, in 1860 Nicks & Co dealt with 13 ships from Baltic ports, 11 from Canada, 2 from Gothenburg and 2 from Savannah, Georgia. Most cargoes were primarily softwood deals and battens with some baulks, but those from Savannah comprised large pieces of pitch pine. There were also four smaller cargoes of slates from Portmadoc (10).

The prosperity of this period allowed William Nicks to build Greville House, a fine new residence on the west side of the Tewkesbury Road (now the Gloucestershire Club) (11) As well as running his main business, Nicks was a leading promoter and director of the Gloucester Wagon Company established in 1860. He also took an active role in the public life of his adopted city, serving on the city council as a Conservative and being elected Mayor in 1859 and 1862. He helped to set up the Gloucester City Rifle Company and was an active organiser of the Grand Volunteer Review held in Gloucester in 1860. During his second term as Mayor, he helped to establish penny entertainments for working men and often assisted both as singer and reader (12).

The timber importing business must have suffered a set-back in 1865 when the two partners, Baxter and Hooper, both died when only in their late thirties (13). Somehow Nicks managed to keep the enterprise going, but then he became concerned about a wider issue. The size of

ships used for international trade was increasing, and some of those arriving at Sharpness were too big to pass up the canal to Gloucester. He became a leading advocate for constructing a larger entrance and dock at Sharpness, and when the Canal Co was slow to respond, he was one of a group who offered to buy the Company in order to carry out the necessary works (14). Rather than see this happen though, the Canal Co shareholders did eventually agree to order the construction themselves.

Before this work started, however, the limitations of the existing entrance at Sharpness were highlighted when Nicks arranged for a cargo of foreign timber to be delivered by steamer – the first of what was to become common practice. In 1869, SS *Prussia* brought almost 7000 sleepers from Riga, but her great length prevented her from passing through the lock at Sharpness, and her cargo had to be discharged into lighters in the tidal basin (15).

Canada Wharf

Realising that when an improved entrance at Sharpness was provided, it would open a new era for the trade of the port, William Nicks obtained the lease of a large area of land for a timber yard three-quarters of a mile down the canal in 1869 (16). (Grid Ref. 822168) Soon known as Canada Wharf, this had a railway along the quayside which linked up with the Midland Railway at Bakers Quay. Although the main business of the firm moved to the new site, a presence was retained on Bakers Quay for a few years until the lease expired (17). Nicks was evidently helped in this move by Albert Buchanan, an energetic young employee who had married Nicks's second daughter and who became a partner in the firm in 1873 (18).

The new dock at Sharpness that William Nicks had advocated was eventually opened in November 1874. Earlier that year, he had been elected a director of the Canal Co, and he no



Fig. 2 Nicks & Co's elevator and crane on the canal frontage of Canada Wharf in the 1880s. (Nicks Archive)

doubt felt particularly proud that the first ship into the entrance, the barque *Director*, was carrying a cargo consigned to his firm - 1025 tons of deals from Canada (19).

Over the next few years, Nicks & Co dealt with 15 to 20 ships a year, bringing sawn deals, baulk timber and some railway sleepers from Canada, the Baltic ports and Archangel with occasional cargoes of pitch pine from the United States of America. The trade in slates continued but at a lower level than previously due to competition from the railways (20). To convert the wood to suit customers' needs, the partners built their own sawing, planing and moulding mill at Canada Wharf, the steam engine being fuelled by waste wood and cooled by water from the canal. They also built a creosoting works for preserving wood, the creosote being supplied from William Butler's tar distilling plant on the river bank at Sandhurst. There was a crane on the quayside for handling large pieces of wood, and in 1881 the partners erected an elevator nearby for landing railway sleepers which were becoming a significant part of their business. (Fig. 2) At the same time, they laid a pipe across the quay underneath the railway to convey creosote from a boat on the canal to the storage tank in the yard (21). As these new premises were some way out of town, the firm also maintained an office at Ashley House (now 174 Southgate St) for several years (22).

Death of William Nicks

In the later years of his life, William Nicks sat regularly as a magistrate and was a trustee or governor of various local schools and charities. He no longer took much part in local politics, but he did establish the Conservative Club in 1883, having bought Constitution House for the purpose before selling it to the company set up to run it. Soon after this, however, his health deteriorated, and after a long illness he died in December 1885 (23). He had no sons to carry on the business, but he was no doubt happy to see it pass into the hands of his son-in-law Albert Buchanan in partnership with Joseph Francis Hooper, the son of Nicks's former partner. By this time, Buchanan was also trading on his own account as a coal merchant in the docks (24).

During the 1890s, the new management of Nicks & Co continued the business much as before. Their imports increased from around 15,000 to 25,000 loads a year (a load being 50 cu ft), mostly deals and railway sleepers with occasional cargoes of pitch pine (25). A surviving contract from this period defines the quantities and prices of fourteen sizes of deals from 3in x 11in down to 2in x 6in being sold to Nicks & Co by the Korsnas sawmill in Finland, which was again supplying the firm a century later. The prices included delivery alongside a ship at Gefle (modern Gavle) across the water in Sweden, and the wood was to be ready for shipment at first open water in 1894 (after the ice had melted) (26).

As the size of ships bringing timber continued to increase, Nicks & Co occasionally shared a ship-load with one of the neighbouring timber merchants. Also, more cargoes had to be discharged at Sharpness and carried on to Gloucester in barges or rafts. At busy times, Nicks & Co arranged for surplus rafts to be stored temporarily in a shallow pond adjoining the canal at Two Mile Bend (27). When landing wood at Canada Wharf, most pieces were carried on men's shoulders into the yard and stored in piles until sold to a customer. Heavier pieces were lifted by crane on to trollies that ran on rails around the yard, although this arrangement was superseded in 1897 by a power-driven gantry that could move baulks direct from the waterside to the sawmill or to anywhere in between (28).



Fig. 3 The ruins of Nicks & Co's sawmill after the fire in 1907. (Nicks Archive)

Like his former partner, Albert Buchanan served on the city council as a Conservative, and in 1900 he was elected Mayor. However, he resigned after six months, following a High Court ruling against the election of a fellow councillor which put the Conservatives in a minority (29).

In the early years of the twentieth century, there were changes in Nicks & Co's management arrangements. Long serving accountant John Barnett became a partner, as did Buchanan's sons Albert Ernest and Wilfred Lawrence, and Joseph Francis Hooper left the firm (30).

Premises Described

A contemporary description of Canada Wharf noted that the premises covered an area of approximately seven acres, every foot of which was required for the storage of timber. Private railway sidings extended throughout the yard and into the saw mill. An elevator on the canal side was used for lifting and conveying sleepers, and a power driven gantry carried baulks from the water's edge to the mill. The mill contained log and deal frames, circular saw benches and planing and moulding machines. The creosoting tank could hold 7½ tons of timber at a time, and the creosote was injected under vacuum so that it fully penetrated the pores of the wood. This treatment was a speciality of the firm and was much used for treating timber for railway bridges, sleepers, sheds, fencing and blocks for road surfaces (31).

In the early 1900s, Nicks & Co were prospering with foreign imports of 20,000 to 25,000 loads a year (a load being 50 cu ft) (32). A surviving ledger shows that the firm's customers included a wide range of businesses in Gloucester and the Midlands, particularly railway companies, other timber merchants, builders merchants, wagon makers and other manufacturing companies. Large quantities of sleepers were supplied to the Midland Railway, the Great Western Railway and the London & North Western Railway. Gloucester customers included timber merchants Price Walker & Co, the Gloucester Wagon Co and match makers S J Moreland & Sons. Other well-known customers included the scale makers W & T Avery of Birmingham, brewers Bass Ratcliff & Gretton of Burton on Trent, cider makers Bulmers of

Hereford, wollen cloth makers Playne & Co of Nailsworth and the Salt Union at Stoke Works, Worcestershire. Timber was also supplied to large estates, including those of Earl Bathurst of Cirencester, Earl Beauchamp of Madresfield, the Earl of Dudley and Lord Fitzhardinge of Berkeley. Of the smaller businesses, one notable example was Lewis Blakemore of Longney - his family building firm continued to buy from Nicks & Co for over 100 years, and a third generation Lewis Blakemore was a valued customer in 2003 (33).

Fire Destroyed Mill

The rhythm of normal business was dramatically interrupted in March 1907 when a major fire destroyed Nicks & Co's saw mill. The fire spread to some of the timber in the yard, which soon became one great mass of flames that lit up the whole neighbourhood. The local fire brigades set up four hoses spraying water from the city mains, and the *Salamander* fire-float pumped water from the canal. These combined efforts brought the fire under control in about three hours, but pumping continued for a further four hours until the fire was fully extinguished. (Fig. 3) Two further fires in the neighbouring timber yards on the following days led to suspicion that all three had been started deliberately, and a young man later confessed that he was responsible, saying that he had just wanted to see the fire-float at work! (34) Although the damage was serious, the mill was soon rebuilt on the same site, and the business returned to normal.

In the later years of his life, Albert Buchanan no longer took much part in local politics, but he was vice-president of the Conservative Club and a director of the company that ran it. He also served on the Gloucester Pilotage and Harbour Boards and as a Severn Commissioner. However, his health deteriorated after he sustained a stroke, and not long after a second seizure, he died in April 1913 (35).

Change of Management

By this time, accountant John Barnett had become the moving spirit of the firm and had been president of the Bristol Channel Timber Importer's Association in 1912 (36). He was assisted by Albert Buchanan's two sons, Ernest and Lawrence, at what was a very critical time. The outbreak of the First World War had a serious effect on the timber trade because much of the traffic from the Baltic was cut off. The partners were soon in financial difficulties, but the firm survived thanks to help from Frank Croxford, managing director of Price Walker & Co, the principal timber merchants in Gloucester. It seems that Croxford was happy for Nicks & Co to continue to supply smaller customers while Price Walkers concentrated on the larger businesses. To strengthen the management of Nicks & Co, Croxford introduced a new partner in the person of Thomas Lawrence Drury, who had been works manager of timber merchants Thomas Adams & Sons prior to its closure, and Croxford lent enough money to keep Nicks & Co going. Drury brought with him substantial business, including the supply of wood for packing cases to firms like Guest Keen & Nettlefolds of Birmingham. Croxford also arranged for Price Walker's to take over responsibility for the lease of Canada Wharf. Lawrence Buchanan remained as a partner, but Ernest Buchanan and John Barnett departed (37). The Buchanan coal business evidently went through similar difficulties and eventually passed out of the family's control, although the name was retained (38).

Thanks to the loan from Frank Croxford, in 1916 the new management were able to build a large new shed adjoining the south side of the mill building for storing the better classes of timber under cover (39). (Fig. 4) However, even after the war was over, trading conditions remained difficult, and Nicks & Co's imports were only around one third of the level before

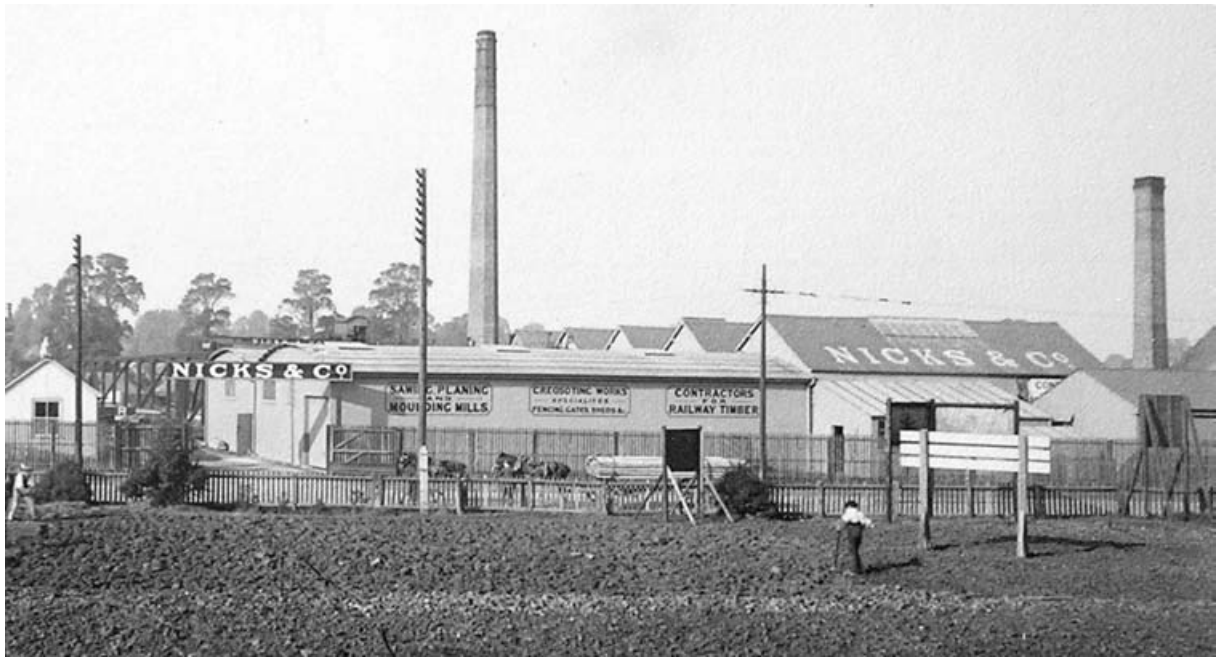


Fig. 4 Nicks & Co's sawmill rebuilt and the new storage shed (left) in 1916. (Nicks Archive)

the war, mainly coming from the Baltic and Scandanavian countries (40). A surviving agreement between the employers and the Dock Wharf Riverside and General Workers Union shows that the working hours in the timber yard on weekdays were 6 am to 5 pm in summer (7 am start in winter), and 12 noon finish on Saturdays. There were breaks of 90 minutes for breakfast, 60 minutes for lunch, and 30 minutes for bait each morning and afternoon. Piece-work pay rates were agreed for men discharging lighters and carrying deals to piles in the yard, with additional money for carrying more than 80 yards, and day-work rates were agreed for taking wood from pile for dispatch. The height of the piles was not to exceed 80 three-inch deals or equivalent (20 ft) in order to limit the height of the lines of planks supported by trestles along which the men ran when carrying the wood to pile (41).

By the end of the 1920s, some ships used in the timber trade were too big to enter Sharpness, and Nicks & Co received some imports as part-cargoes discharged at larger ports such as Avonmouth and sent on by barge (42). Another timber shed was built to the north of the mill in 1927 (43), but before much benefit could be derived from this, Lawrence Buchanan died in January 1929. He had not played a major role in public life, but he was one of the senior members of the Gloucester Freemen's Committee and he was a trustee of the Municipal Charities (44). Following his death, Buchanan's family wanted to withdraw their financial interest in Nicks & Co, and Tom Drury managed to find sufficient finance to pay them off, leaving him as the sole proprietor until his son Thomas Robert Drury joined him a few years later.

Business in the 1930s

A number of surviving documents indicate how timber imports were arranged. London agents issued schedules of prices for timber that would be available at supply ports in the coming months. When needing more stock, Nicks & Co sent in an offer to buy so many standards of a range of specific sizes, a standard being 165 cubic feet, and the agent usually sent back a counter offer quoting slightly different quantities to suit better what he had available. Once both parties were satisfied, the agent sent a formal contract recording the names of the seller



Fig. 5 MV *Eos*, the last coaster to deliver timber for Nicks & Co in July 1986. (Cedric Catt)

and buyer, the place and date of shipment and the agreed quantities and prices for all of the sizes ordered. Some contracts included the cost of freight and insurance while for others the buyer arranged the shipment separately. In either case, transport was arranged in accordance with a standard form of charter party appropriate to ports in the Bristol Channel, although it was common for specific clauses to be amended to suit each particular shipment. Before the ship departed, a bill of lading was prepared specifying the quantities that had been loaded - which could differ from what was ordered depending on practicalities at the time. When the ship was discharged, the numbers of each size received were checked by a tally man, and then a clerk had to enter the information into a ledger and calculate the total quantity for comparison with the bill of lading. As the dimensions were in feet and inches and the quantities shipped were in standards, the calculations were tedious and prone to error (45).

During the 1930s, Nicks & Co continued to import timber from the Baltic and Scandinavian countries with some shipments from Archangel, Canada and the United States. In 1933, the firm stopped using G T Beard's lighters to bring the timber from Sharpness to Gloucester, and changed over to Mousell Chadborn & Co instead. Most of their timber was sent away by rail, but lorries were coming into use and some wood was still carried up country in canal boats (46). One of the railway sidings in Nicks's yard became known as Hellfire Pass because it sloped down towards the canal and wagons sometimes got out of control. If the man on the brake missed his footing, the wagon could continue on its own, rushing down to join the line alongside the canal and crashing through any planks across the line being used in discharging a lighter. It was also known for a free-running wagon to hit an obstacle and tip into the canal (47).

A more serious accident occurred in May 1932 when four boys employed by Nicks & Co were playing hide-and-seek in the timber yard after having their mid-day meal. One boy climbed the back of a stack of timber, and as he was coming down the front by means of the



Fig. 6 An aerial view of Nicks & Co's sawmill and retail store in the 1990s. (Nicks Archive)

projecting arms, he lost his balance and fell 10ft to the ground. He was taken to the Infirmary but did not regain consciousness and died the same evening due to laceration of the brain. An inquest jury returned a verdict of accidental death. As the accident did not occur during hours of duty, Nicks & Co did not consider they were formally responsible, but they did make a contribution towards the boy's funeral expenses (48).

Second World War

In July 1939, Nicks & Co agreed to take half of a cargo of 600 standards of spruce being shipped from Digby and St Johns in Canada, with neighbours Griggs & Co taking the other half. To aid discharge, Nicks & Co asked for their half to be put up one end of the vessel and their neighbour's half at the other end as the two firms used different lighterage firms on the canal between Sharpness and Gloucester. However, while the steamer *Rimfakse* was in transit, Britain declared war on Germany, and the government of Norway (where the ship was registered) ordered the ship to dock at Queenstown, Ireland, rather than sail to any country at war. After urgent communications between the various parties, Nicks and Griggs agreed to pay the extra war insurance, and the ship arrived at Sharpness on 15 September (49).

With Britain at war, the Ministry of Supply took control of the timber trade, arranging all imports and issuing licences to recognised timber merchants to sell from the national stock. Nicks & Co then took on the role of wharfingers, receiving and storing timber and selling to approved customers. In November 1940, the coaster *Ngatia* brought a cargo of timber to Nicks's yard from a big ship that had discharged at Milford Haven, and for many years this was thought to be the last coaster to discharge at the yard (but later events proved this fear wrong). In 1941, concern grew that the concentration of timber yards beside the canal at

Gloucester was vulnerable to enemy action, and arrangements were made to disperse much of the local stock to sites further down the canal and to other places further inland. The controls continued for a few years after the war and were relaxed in stages (50).

Private Limited Company

As Nicks & Co was readjusting to the role of timber merchant again, senior partner Thomas Drury died in August 1955, leaving the business to be carried on by his sons Tom, John and Kenneth. In January 1960, the three brothers converted the business into a private limited company, and a year later they purchased the freehold of Canada Wharf. This paved the way for them to upgrade the mill, including replacing their steam engine by electric power in 1963 (51).

The 1960s was a time of great change in the timber trade, particularly due to the new practice of packaging timber in the country of origin and the use of machines for handling timber in the yard. Tom Drury and his son Chris toured the Baltic ports to persuade suppliers to package their timber, and they arranged for this to be shipped in coasters that could deliver direct to Canada Wharf. This saved the expense of transshipment into lighters at Sharpness, but the Gloucester dockers claimed it was their work to unload a coaster and insisted on the employment of a much larger gang than was really needed. This method of importing continued until July 1986, when MV *Eos* arrived from Oskarshamn, Sweden, with 1062 cu m for Nicks & Co and Romans & Co. (Fig. 5) After that, all supplies arrived by lorry from east coast ports and from forests in Scotland (52).

Another Fire

By this time, the management of Nicks & Co had passed to Chris Drury and his cousin Tony Drury. Their world was dramatically disrupted in June 1987 when history repeated itself and their saw mill was gutted by a spectacular fire. The blaze started at about 8.20 pm, and it took more than 60 firemen using nine pumps and an hydraulic platform to bring it under control. Although the mill was completely destroyed, the cousins were determined to remain in business. Most of their stock survived, and initially they got the machining done by other local firms. At the same time, they cleared out the timber shed to the north of the mill and within ten days had installed two new shaping machines and two second-hand saws. They already had plans for a new retail store to the south of their site, and these were modified to include a new mill, both being completed in 1989 (Fig. 6) This development allowed Nicks & Co not only to supply timber to businesses but also to develop retail sales of timber and related products to the general public (53).

After much hard work, the business was beginning to prosper again until trading conditions became difficult due to the recession in the 1990s. To reduce their borrowings, the Drury cousins decided to sell off the northern half of Canada Wharf as by that time they did not need so much storage area because the atomic-powered ice breakers kept the Baltic open throughout the winter and most of the timber was kiln dried in the country of origin. Recognising also the need to introduce new ideas, in 1998 the cousins recruited a new managing director, Phil McCormick, who had formerly been sales director of timber merchants Williams & Farmer's and had later traded under the name Gloucester Timber Co, selling timber expertise to builders merchants (54). With this strengthened management and their modern buildings, Nicks & Co are well placed to continue importing and distributing timber as they have done for the past 150 years. .

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