

MATTHEWS & COMPANY – GLOUCESTER'S PREMIER FURNITURE MANUFACTURERS

Hugh Conway-Jones

Introduction

John Matthews established his furniture factory in High Orchard Street in 1895, occupying premises now incorporated into the Gloucester Quays designer outlet centre (Grid Ref 827180). During the previous twenty years, he had developed a good business with workshops and showrooms on the corner of Southgate St and Parliament St, where he had installed some modern American machines for producing furniture. These proved so successful that he was able to finance the new factory, which was fitted out with all the latest machines needed for mass production (1). Initially, the new building comprised 16 two-storey bays along the east side of High Orchard St. At the north end was an existing office block, previously occupied by the timber merchants Price & Co, and this was enlarged by adding an extra bay. The factory was evidently successful, and two years later the building was more than doubled in length by adding a further 17 bays (2) (Figure 1). As demand for the company's products continued to increase, a new three-storey building facing Llanthony Rd (known as the Annexe) was erected in 1901, and this was linked to the main building by a bridge over High Orchard St (3). The upper floors of the Annexe were mainly used for storing finished pieces of furniture, and the ground floor served as the base for the company's delivery vans. The former premises on the corner of Parliament St were retained as showrooms. In the following years, the company employed over 250 men (4).

Logs arrived by rail at a private siding to the east of the works and were transferred to a saw bench to be cut into planks. The planks were initially stored in large sheds on the west side of High Orchard St and were later taken to a drying room to remove any residual sap. Once in the mill, the planks were cut up into pieces, and each piece was passed in turn to a series of machines that produced the required shape and surface finish for a particular component. The machines were driven by under-floor shafts powered by a 240hp compound condensing engine, with two boilers working at 100psi. Attached to each machine was a suction pipe so that shavings and sawdust could be collected and sent to fuel the boilers. The basic components were then assembled by the cabinet makers and finished by the French polishers, with upholstery added where required.

For each design of final product, it was usual to make an initial batch of 100 items, and if these sold well, subsequent batches were larger. All of the workshops were well lit by electricity generated on the premises and were well ventilated by warm air in the winter and cool air in the summer. The finished products were sent out by rail or by the company's own delivery vans, some items

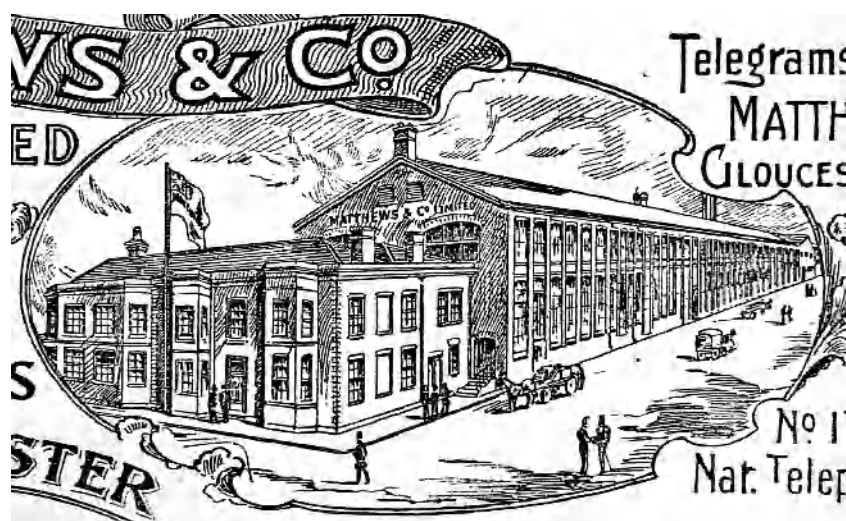


Figure 1 The factory in 1904

being taken to the docks to be loaded aboard one of the regular steamers to Hamburg. It was said that there was scarcely a single town in the United Kingdom having a population of 12,000 or over which had not an account with the company (5).

The business had become a limited company in 1898 with many local people taking up shares. John Matthews was the Chairman and Governing Director, his brother George looked after the accounts, his eldest son Morgan was in charge of the showrooms and his second son Albert was manager of the works (6).

Designs

The early success of the company was largely due to the inventiveness and drive of the founder John Matthews. He designed a large number of what the firm called furniture specialities, many of which were patented or registered at the Patent Office. Around 100 designs were produced in the original premises in Southgate St, and the move to the new factory allowed the range to expand considerably. Over the years, more than 1100 designs were given numbers, some of the later ones being created by Albert Matthews. Surviving catalogues show that the firm was offering 200 to 300 different designs at any one time, with new ones being continually added and unsuccessful ones being discontinued. Designs covered a range of qualities to suit a variety of tastes, and many were available in a choice of woods such as oak, walnut or mahogany. The principal products were:

- Open and enclosed bookcases, including some that revolved on castors.
- Tables for offices, cafes, cards and occasional use, including folding and gate leg tables.
- Easy chairs and some settees and couches.
- Writing tables, writing cabinets and bureaux.
- Hall furniture, including hat, umbrella, palm and gong stands.
- Bedroom furniture, including wardrobes, dressing tables and some beds.
- Dining room furniture, including sideboards and some tables and chairs.
- Cupboards, including those for medicine, music and files.
- Dinner and tea wagons and tea companions.
- Magazine, newspaper and music stands.
- Folding screens of vertical rods.
- Washstands, mirrors, towel rails, commodes and bidets (7).



Hall Stand



Sideboard



Bureau Bookcase



Tea Companion

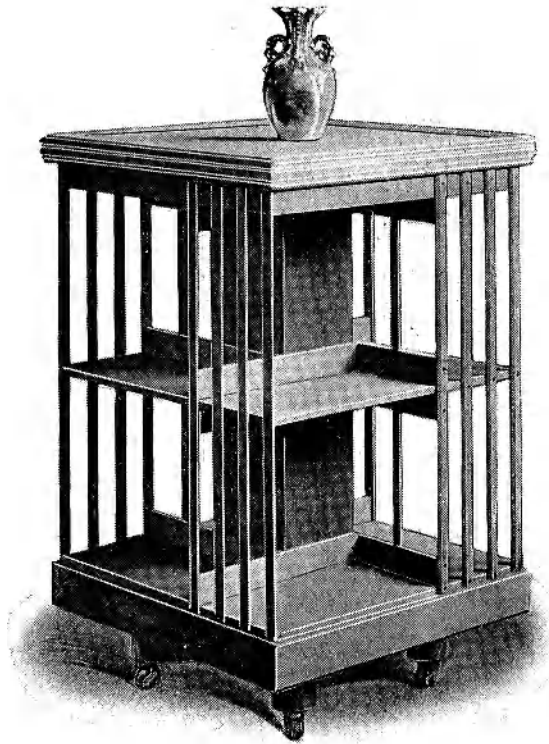


Figure 2 No 1 Revolving Bookcase

The earliest designs in the company's list of products were for various styles of what were called revolving bookcases (Figure 2). Most of these comprised a square unit with shelves accessible from all four side (or just front and rear) and mounted on castors so that the unit could be turned around to access any of the shelves as required. These evidently proved very popular, and Design No 1 continued to be produced throughout the life of the company. When the Times newspaper began selling the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1898 by a pioneering use of payment by instalments, they also offered a revolving bookcase made by Matthews & Co, specially designed to take the volumes. This venture proved so successful that bookcases were dispatched at the rate of 100 a day at times, and a total of 33,200 were sold in five and a half years (8).

Another speciality of the company was the manufacture of tables with folding legs, and John Matthews and his son Albert were responsible for at least four patents for ways of holding stays rigidly in place when the legs were extended. All relied on springy wooden arms under the table top that were deflected by the movement of the stays while the legs were being opened until each stay slotted into a groove in the springy arm (9).

Matthews & Co did not make many armchairs or sofas, but they did produce several designs of easy chair (Figure 3). The Victoria easy chair, with a style that suited its name, was evidently popular as it continued to be made throughout the life of the company. In 1909, Albert Matthews patented a chair with a sliding seat and tilting back that automatically adjusted to the way a person was sitting (Figure 4). This invention was used in the Bathurst Easy Chair, which also had a sliding leg rest that could be hidden under the seat or pulled forward for use, and the combination of these two features made this chair particularly popular (10).



Figure 3 No 78 Victoria Easy Chair

Of course there were designs that did not sell well and were not included in the next catalogue. The Gloucester Domestic Ventilator was a short duct that directed air upwards from an inlet through an external wall and had an adjustable shutter to control the flow. The Revolving Show Stand was a pyramid-shaped display case for a table that could be made to rotate by winding a clockwork motor. The Patent Auto Valet Wardrobe had an internal slide in the hanging compartment enabling



Figure 4 No 541 Bathurst Easy Chair)

the clothes to be pulled forward to aid access to those at the back. This sold well initially but was soon discontinued – presumably because it did not live up to expectations (11).

Early Twentieth Century

Unfortunately, production was interrupted by a disastrous fire during the night of 25 July 1912 (Figure 5). Starting in the packing shop at the north end of the main factory, the fire soon spread to the polishing shop above and then travelled rapidly along the full length of the building as there were no dividing walls. The flames rose to a great height and sparks spread over a wide area. By the time the fire brigade arrived, it was too late to save the factory, and so they used their hoses to minimise damage to

neighbouring properties. Nevertheless, nine houses on the opposite side of High Orchard St were badly damaged, as were six houses in Exhibition St at the southern end of the factory, and most of the residents lost all of their belongings (12).

The company quickly made arrangements to continue some production in temporary premises, but many of their employees had to be laid off. At the same time, they placed a contract for rebuilding the factory and ordered the latest designs of woodworking machinery. They also took the opportunity of installing a sprinkler system supplied from a huge roof-top tank which was a feature of the skyline for many years (13).



Figure 5 Mathews factory after the fire of 25 July 1912

It took the company about twelve months to get back to normal operation, and then a year later came the start of the first World War. The manufacture of furniture continued for a time, but in due course the Government took over the works for aircraft production, particularly the making of wings. Furniture production started again in January 1919, and advantage was taken of the trade boom then existing to lay down more new machinery (14).

1919 was a good year for Matthews & Co, but it was saddened by the death of the firm's founder. As well as building up a very successful business, John Matthews had played an active role in public life, serving as Mayor twice in the 1890s and as president of the Gloucester Chamber of Commerce and of the Gloucester Charity Trustees. He was also a director of several local companies. Following his passing, his two sons Morgan and Albert took over management of the company, and they were joined on the board by their sons John and Lionel (15).

Decline and Closure

Following a few good years after the war, trading conditions became more difficult in 1923, and the number of employees fell to 160. However, the company remained the largest of its kind in the West of England and continued to distribute its products throughout the country. Better times returned for a few years, but in 1930 the company reported a loss, and this was repeated in subsequent years. By 1935, it was clear that the business could not continue trading, and the company was put into voluntary liquidation (16).

In the late 1930s, the former Matthews furniture factory and warehouse became the Jubilee Mills of the Gloucester Carpet Company, manufacturing high quality Axminster carpets. During the second World War, the machinery was moth-balled and the buildings were used for storing food and other essential goods. Production began again after the war, and in the 1950s the company was employing over 250 workers. By the 1970s, however, the market for high quality carpets was declining, and the business was closed down in 1978 (17). For the next twenty-five years, the old factory buildings were little used, but eventually they were refurbished to become part of the Gloucester Quays designer outlet centre. This opened in 2009 with the warehouse facing Llanthony Rd providing a new home for the Gloucester Antiques Centre.

References

- (1) Gloucestershire Chronicle (GC) 21 May 1898 p5c2.
- (2) Gloucestershire Archives (GA) GBR L20/1895/52, 63; GBR L20/1897/53.
- (3) GA GBR L22/1/133.
- (4) GA Glos Collection (GA-GC) Box 8.93 Goad Insurance Map 1912; GC 28 Apr 1923.
- (5) Glos Chron 21 May 1898 p5c2; Glos Arch IN 11 Ind Glos 1904; GC 7 May 1910 p6c6.
- (6) The National Archives BT 31/31627/57777; GA IN 11 Industrial Glos. 1904.
- (7) GA D8711 Acc No 10778 Company catalogues.
- (8) GA D8711 Acc No 10778; IN 11; Times 6 May 1898, 18 Dec 1903.
- (9) GB Patents 1898/02746, 1902/02218, 1911/23440, 1912/13092.
- (10) GB Patent 1909/04732; GC 7 May 1910 p6c6.
- (11) GA D8711 Acc No 10778 Company catalogues.
- (12) Gloucester Journal 27 Jul 1912.
- (13) GC 28 Apr 1923.
- (14) GC 28 Apr 1923.
- (15) GJ 15 Feb 1919; GC 28 Apr 1923.
- (16) GC 28 Apr 1923; TNA BT 31/31627/57777.
- (17) Citizen 27 Aug 1975 p9, 9 May 1987 p1; GA-GC SR2/Box 8.93 Goad Insurance map 1958.