Edward Gibbs and Son

Edward Gibbs and Son, lronmongers and Seed Merchants, became an institution in Reepham and their shop and general agricultural services to the farming fraternity in and around Reepham is still remembered with fondness today by many people even though their shop closed many years ago. It was said that the Gibbs' business was famous for two things: firstly, its picturesque premises and the excellent service it gave, and secondly, the late Mr Edward Gibbs, who attended the business daily until he was 98.

The premises were large, with many warehouses, each one assigned to one section of the various goods stocked. Two years after Edward Gibbs took over the original business, the grocers' shop adjoining became vacant and this was added to the existing shop. There was a dwelling house attached which was enlarged in 1904 to assist with the expansion of the business. Behind the front buildings there was a courtyard surrounded by the warehouses and other buildings that made up the complex which for the next 60 years was to become such a vital and well-respected part of business life in Reepham.

It is said that there were ironmongers on this site long before the business was bought by Gibbs. The exact date of the foundation of this business is not known but in the churchyard is a tombstone inscribed "William Samuel George, ironmonger of this parish who died at the age of 69 years in 1802". The George family ran the business until it was purchased by a firm called S & S W Leeds in the early 1870s who ran it until 1888 when Mr Edward Gibbs took it over.

Edward Gibbs was born in 1860 the son of a farmer; he always wanted to be a farmer but during the 1870s farming was in a bad way so he applied for an apprenticeship with James Cooper and Son, ironmongers of East Dereham. He was accepted at a premium of £30 and served his five years starting at 2s 6d a week. He stayed with them until 1887 and when he left his weekly wages had been raised to 30s. On 11 October 1888 he took over the business of S & S W Leeds and a week after he was married at St Mary's Church, Hickling. His two children subsequently became partners: his son Edward in 1920 and in about 1957 his daughter Marjorie took an active partnership.

Edward Gibbs Senior took an active part in the business until he was 94, and he then maintained a daily interest almost until his death in December 1959 at the age of 99. Edward Gibbs Junior started to work for his father immediately after leaving school, and only service in the First World War intervened. A motorcycle accident in 1915 robbed him of his sight but he still carried on working in the shop. At the age of 74 (in 1966) Edward Gibbs Junior decided to retire together with his sister, Marjorie, although both regarded the closing of the business as a "matter of real regret". Mr

Gibbs, after 60 years in the business, decided to retire for two reasons: firstly, because he wanted to, and secondly, because of a declining trade. The days of horses in farm work had long since departed; he stocked the equipment they needed for which there was no longer a demand.

It was decided in 1966 to try and sell the business as a going concern but unfortunately the firm was unable to find a buyer. Early in 1967 the stock was discounted by 5% and this discounting continued for the next three months reaching 20% before an auction was held in April 1967 in Ireland's saleroom in Reepham (now the site of the car park in Station Road) when the remaining items were sold off.

The old-fashioned ironmonger's shop is now a thing of the past. Those that have survived have adapted their methods and their stock to meet today's requirements. With no horses on farms there are no blacksmiths requiring iron for horseshoes and wagon tyres. Nobody has oil lamps any more and there is little demand for paraffin. It is a similar story for the seed merchants. There are no horses needing hay and so there is no call for hay seed. Bullocks are no longer fattened in yards and so farmers do not grow swedes and mangolds. Much as the passing of these traditional trades may be regretted, change is inevitable. lronmongery is just one of the many trades that once flourished in Reepham and is now gone. In 50 years time will the computers that now fill the shop premises of Edward Gibbs evoke as much nostalgia as does the smell of linseed oil and the sight of hazy sunshine pouring through the mixing of clover, rape and trefoil seeds?

The closure prompted the following article by Cyril Jolly which appeared in the *Eastern Daily Press* in April 1969:

> *The Shop That Mirrored 200 Years of Change*
>
> *The Norfolk Ironmonger's Shop now closed after 200 years of trading revealed on its shelves two centuries of social history and change.*
>
> There are more interesting ways of studying social history than in books. The closing of an ironmonger's shop, after 200 years of trading, has shown me in a fascinating way how the tides of change have ebbed and flowed over rural life. Changes in lighting, cooking, travel, farming, sport and craftsmanship – revealed by goods on the shelves of a picturesque 18th century premises making a corner of Reepham's Market Square.
>
> The square has its own charm, with thatched and Georgian houses, Flemish and crow-step gables, and two parish churches enclosed by the winding wall of one churchyard.
>
> The ironmongery is itself a little kingdom, with two double-fronted shops, attics, cellars and a neighbourly medley of store-rooms and granary. Beneath

four panes of “bulls-eye” glass I entered the main shop, which resembled Hampton Court Maze with its passages and stairs.

One stairway beneath the main counter led to a cellar. I bent double under the counter to enter this Ali Baba’s cavern. Instead of oil jars I found two large tanks, one for linseed oil and the other for lard oil. The spillings of generations mixed with sawdust caked the floor, and wall racks held paint, turpentine, black harness oil and preparations only old tradesmen would recognise. A dozen smells also competed for recognition; linseed oil won easily.

In an attic, beneath adze-trimmed beams, were scores of parcels that had slept snug on their dusty shelves for a century. They contained nails (mostly hand-made); nails for carpenters, builders, wagon wheel tyres and strakes; nails for shoeing horses and the bullocks that once worked ploughs; frost nails and caulking nails. Here I tried out a machine that might have eased the drudgery of knife cleaning fifty years ago. “Tortoise” stoves elbowed door furniture into a corner, some would have graced a mansion and some a coal shed. A tub of gum arabic (used for starching shirt fronts in Edwardian times), scythe blades and plough blades, put back the clock half a century.

Climbing up cobwebby stairs to the seed warehouse, I skirted bins labelled clover, rape, trefoil and saw a set of seed riddles and a set of measures made in Dereham by Bradley and Utting and a flailing stool. The operator sat on one end, laid the corn on the other and beat it with a swipe of a hand flail.

In the yard was a gunpowder magazine for cartridges that were made here. A hundred cases were set up in a frame, filled with powder, shot and wadding and the ends rolled in with a treadle machine – now only fit for the scrap heap.

The proprietors, Mr E Gibbs and his sister, showed me the main shed with its countless drawers, each bearing a sample of the contents nailed to the front. What a cavalcade of village life they represented. There were brass plug-taps for wine barrels of halls or public houses (some had a locking device – and probably needed it). Cattle clippers, pig and bull rings, “humbugs” for putting in the nostrils of cows when giving a medicinal drink, cheese wire; a key for fitting skates and ancient brass gear for shutters and blinds.

Some peculiar needles puzzled me – they were larding needles used to pierce meat on a spit and draw off the grease into a larding tray; I handled lamp glasses of all shapes and curious tools for many crafts made in an age when wearing value mattered more than a glossy finish.

In the office was a “wheelers’ round”, used by wheelwrights to measure iron for re-tyring cart wheels, and well-thumbed price books going back to Victoria’s

golden reign, listing nails at 10s 6d a cwt., a bass broom at two pence, and copper sheet at fifteen pence a pound.

My brow furrowed as I picked up a swan-necked object – a stand for goffering irons! There was an ancient machine with a turntable for sharpening horse-clipper blades; unopened boxes of candle snuffers; a whip socket and undressed leather for pump clacks.

Miss Gibbs recalled, as a girl, selling "penn'orths" of red ochre for smartening doorsteps and "penn'orths" of black gunpowder for cleaning out oven and copper flues. Had I known, in my boyhood, what fun I would have had with mother's wall oven!

As a lad, Mr Gibbs first had to collect a frisky pony from the meadow and then had to take down 16 shutters for the shop to open at 7 am. It closed at 7 pm and 9 pm on Saturdays; Thursday was half-day – it closed at 4 pm! He also remembered a tub containing macassar oil which his father boiled with beeswax and oil of lavender to make a hair pomade. We looked in vain for some needles used to make up straw and oat flight mattresses.

Turning out more drawers we conjectured on the use of "Rotten Stone" powder and green copperas (was it used to prevent lime rubbing off walls?). There were dozens of other objects, once in common use, now museum pieces. They were facets of bygone rural life; peepholes on to a half-forgotten yesterday. In fact, beneath the many-angled roofs was 200 years of social history, told in oil lamps, flat irons, tarred twine – and, I suppose, "Rotten Stone".

After Cyril Jolly's article appeared in the *Eastern Daily Press*, Mr Gibbs received a letter from a reader in Gislingham, Suffolk, who had read about the closure but he wondered if it was possible for him to obtain "a pound or so of the Rotten Stone powder" which so intrigued Mr Jolly. It seems that this powder mixed with certain acids and oils offered the best means of restoring the lustre to ancient copper. The reader had tried with a number of ironmongers and chemists to find some, but to no avail.

Miss Gibbs was able to supply the reader with some of the Rotten Stone and he was able to clean some pieces of antique copper which until then had resisted all the orthodox methods of cleaning.

Thomas Piercy worked for Edward Gibbs and Son for more than 50 years and any article which refers to the history of this firm would not be complete without a mention of his time with them.

Thomas Piercy was born in 1861 and lived with his parents at Thorney Farm, Kerdiston, where his father was steward. After leaving school at fourteen he worked

on the farm with his father but in 1879 he decided that he did not much care for farm work and went to work for S & S W Leeds the ironmongers and seed merchants. He was employed as a carter at 15 shillings per week (75p).

The two Leeds, uncle and nephew, were both named Stephen (not to be confused with the Whitwell tanner who was another Stephen Leeds). The elder Leeds lived at the shop and the younger at Church Hill in the house now occupied by Mr and Mrs Betts. After working for the Leeds for some years Thomas decided to join the Metropolitan Police but when the Leeds heard of this, they promptly revised his wages to one pound per week, quite a good wage a century ago and enough to make him change his mind about the police force.

The business was sold to Mr E Gibbs in 1888. The elder Mrs Leeds (now a widow) moved from the shop and went to live with the other (and younger) Mrs Leeds at Church Hill. When Mr Gibbs purchased and took over the ironmongers' business, he lacked experience in the seed trade. Thomas Piercy knew both sides pretty well and initially Mr Gibbs depended on his knowledge of the seed side of the business. His eldest son, Fred, was taken on to learn the trade of ironmongery from Mr Gibbs, but tragically he was killed in an accident in the shop in 1904 aged fourteen.

His place was taken by another son, Wilfrid, who served for a time and then went to work for a Norwich ironmonger. He was killed in action in France in 1916. Thomas Piercy became a pensioner in 1920 but still went to the shop on a part-time basis. When he died in 1930, he had worked for more than fifty years in employment with Edward Gibbs and Son.

His grandson, Wesley Piercy, who lives in Reepham, recalls his childhood when as a small boy he would frequently visit the premises with his grandfather. While an ironmongers and seed merchants shop may not have been deemed the most interesting of places Wesley always found it fascinating.

"The shop itself had stairs under the counter leading down to a mysterious cellar and other stairs to rooms above. Throughout the entire premises there was an indescribable smell of turpentine, lard oil, linseed oil and the smell of a dozen other substances.

"Across the yard was the seed room. This was reached by ascending a winding staircase to the top floor, at the far end there was a low door with a sign stating, 'Mind Your Head'. Here the various grass and clover seeds were mixed; these would be sown with barley and when grown would be cut for hay.

"Occasionally, I was allowed to accompany my grandfather with the horse and cart delivering bars of iron to blacksmiths in the surrounding district. One of these was Hardiments of Kerdiston which was where the horse went to be shod. Another was

Millets whose smithy was on the main road to Sparham; in those days, the road was often referred to as the turnpike. The most exciting trip was to Barrets at Lyng. In those days this involved going through the river. This was in the early 1920s when the present bridge had not been built.

“I also remember going to Weston House, Weston Longville, and Heydon Hall to deliver paraffin. I believe these trips for me came to an end when Mr Gibbs replaced the horse and cart with a Ford lorry. This was driven by a man named Henry Rose; my grandfather never learned to drive.”

From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine 1993

Reepham,

March, 1887.

Dear Sir,

We beg to inform you that we have carefully selected, and can now offer a variety of GENUINE ENGLISH (HOME GROWN) AND FOREIGN

Agricultural Seeds,

which we highly recommend for cleanliness, rare quality and reasonable prices. We have also some good SEED OATS, grown in this parish.

MANGOLD, SWEDE and TURNIP SEED at lowest prices.

Your kind favours are respectfully solicited by, and shall receive the prompt attention of

Your obedient Servants,

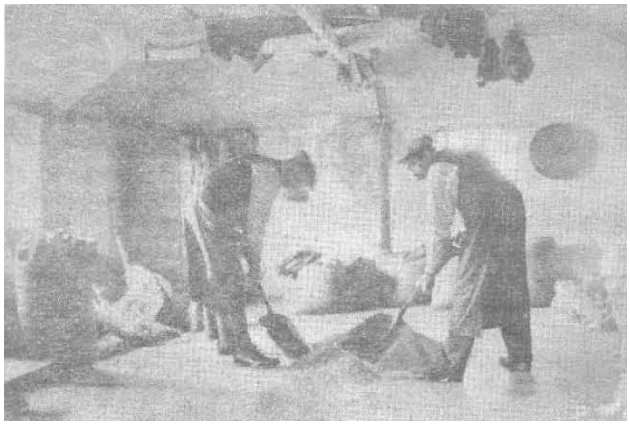
S. & S. W. LEEDS,

CORN, POLLARD, MEAL, &c.

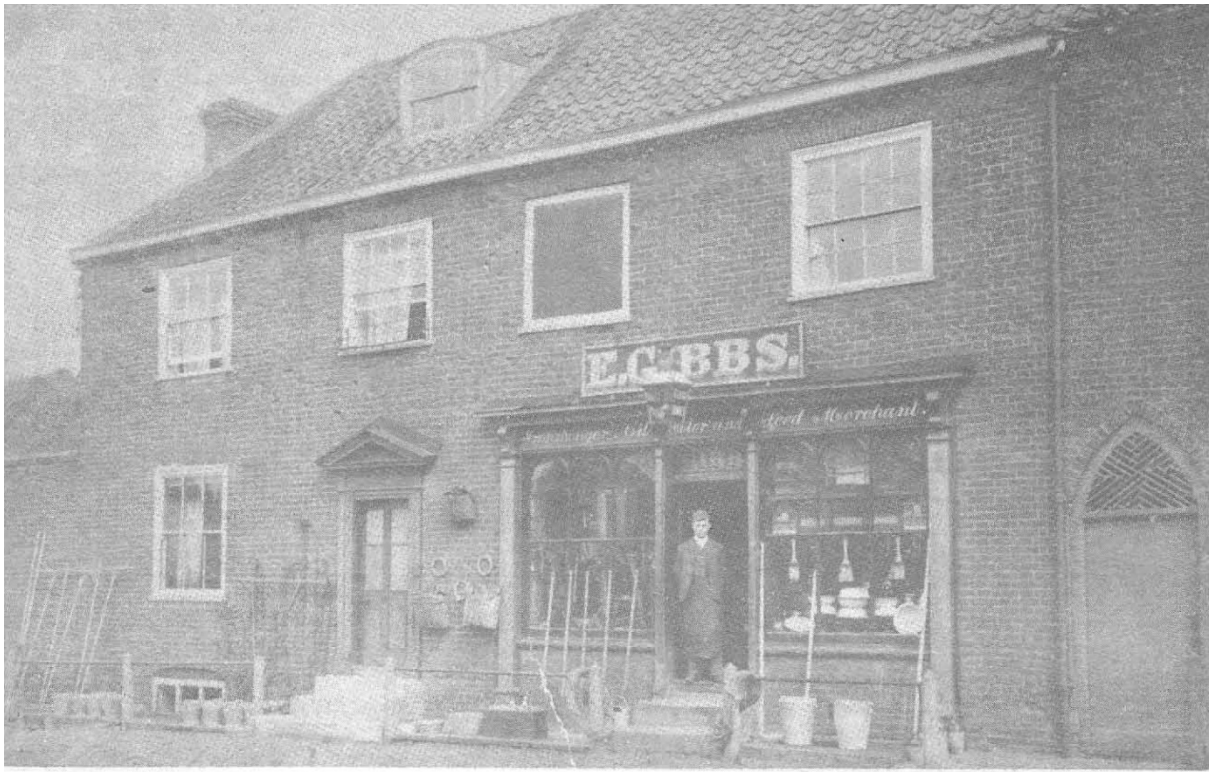
TILES, PAVEMENTS AND DRAIN PIPES.

AGENTS FOR AGRICULTURAL MACHINERY.

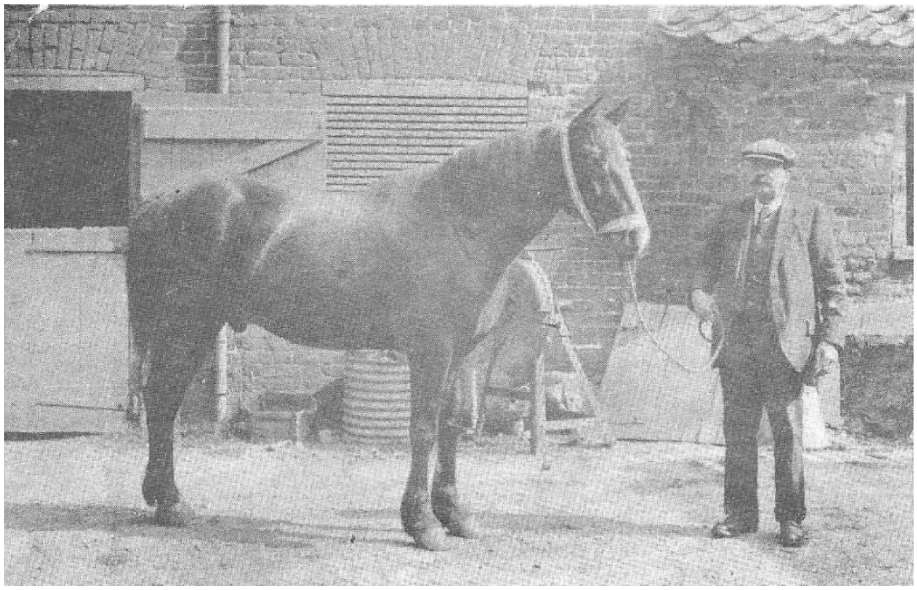
S & S W Leeds ran the business until it was purchased by Edward Gibbs in 1888. This is a card presented to local farmers by this firm. Such representations today would be hard to find.



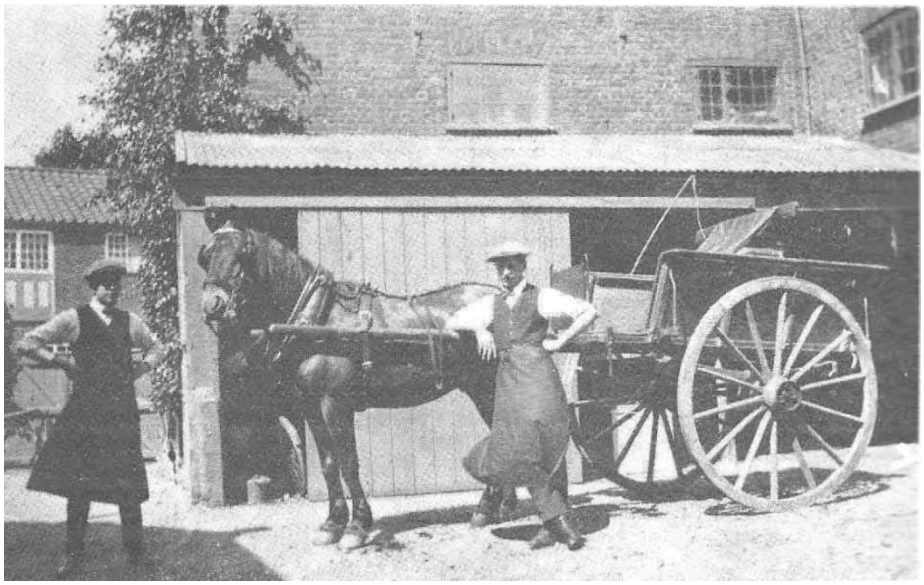
Thomas Piercy (on the left) and Edward Gibbs Senior mixing seed in the seed room.



This picture was taken in the 1890s a few years after the business was purchased by Edward Gibbs.

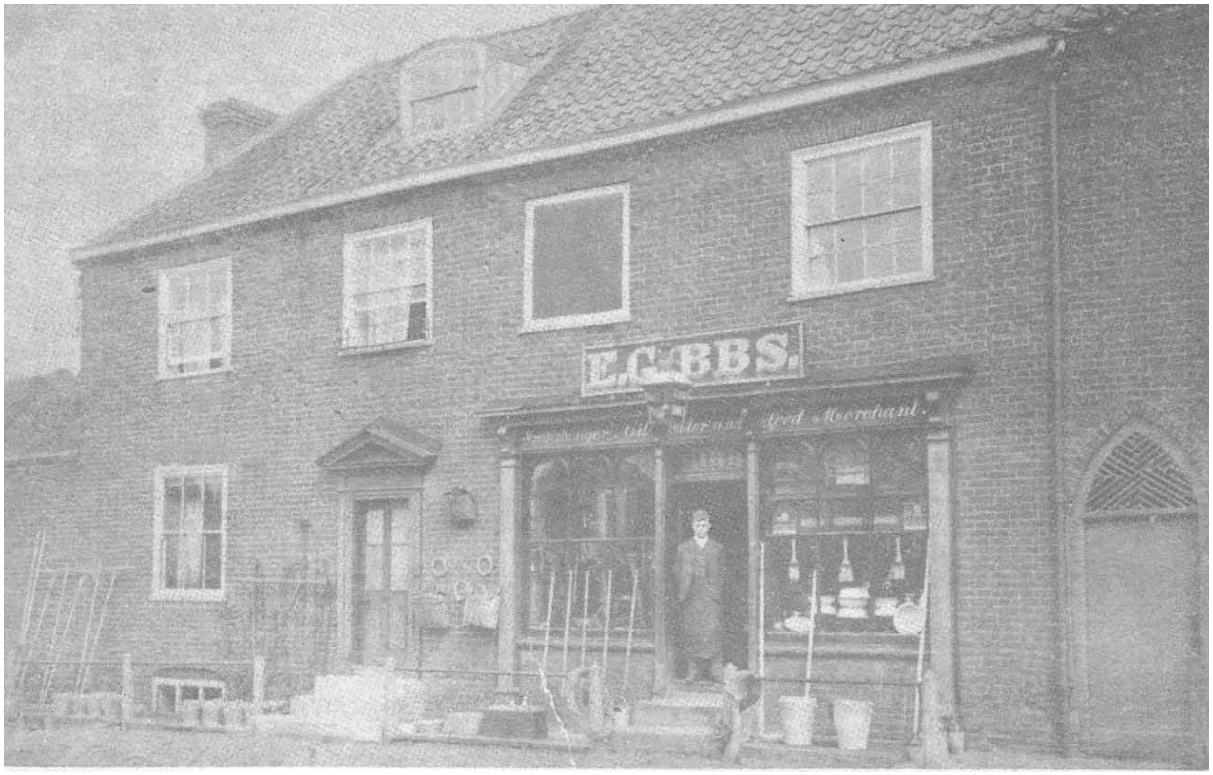


Edward Gibbs Senior with “Monarch” – the horse was stabled at the rear of the premises, the area now known as Merchants Yard.



“Monarch” ready for the day’s deliveries. During the First World War the Honourable Artillery Company was Reepham based and “Monarch” had to share his stable with two of their horses.

The late 1950s... and horses.



The business premises had been enlarged in 1904 and now occupied the whole of the frontage which is contained today between Towns End Corner and the former Barclays Bank. Apparently, the array of hardwood and ironmongery was brought out every morning and taken in again at the end of each day.

The premises in the 1950s: wares are no longer displayed in such volume outside the shop. The Virginia creeper has by this time nearly covered the whole frontage .