

The Corbetts are ‘victorious over all’: agricultural implement making in Shropshire, c.1860 to 1914^{*}

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Abstract

The agricultural implement makers were among the most energetic entrepreneurs in Victorian Britain. They combined the traditional trades of iron-founding and blacksmithing with modern production techniques and marketing; the agricultural and industrial revolutions were both epitomized in their work. Recent general surveys of the industry have highlighted their growth and impact as a group. Despite this, very few studies have been made of the individual firms. This article examines the progress of one family of Shropshire implement makers, the Corbetts, who set up competing firms in Wellington and Shrewsbury. Operating during a period of agricultural depression, the Corbetts had to deploy all the talents of modern industrialists in order to hold their own in a fiercely contested marketplace.

In 1840, a blacksmith called Samuel Corbett started making and selling ploughs in the Shropshire market town of Wellington. Over the next 50 years he and his son William went on to develop and manufacture an extensive range of agricultural machinery and equipment. The family firm enjoyed its finest moment at the Royal Agricultural Society show in Plymouth in 1890 when it submitted a grist mill to the ‘most severe and exhaustive trials’. Having emerged ‘victorious over all’, the mill was jubilantly hailed as ‘The World’s Best’.¹ Samuel Corbett’s rise from town blacksmith to internationally acclaimed engineer was an impressive demonstration of economic and social mobility. This was further emphasized by a younger son, Thomas, who left to found a rival company in Shrewsbury with equal success, becoming, within only ten

* I should like to express my thanks to a number of people for making this article possible: to Elizabeth Morris for generously allowing access to, and use of, archive material relating to Thomas Corbett and the Perseverance Ironworks in Shrewsbury; to Jonathan and Fearghal Corbett for pictures, trade literature, and other personal insights into S. Corbett and Son that would not have been obtainable elsewhere; to Ian Pritchard and Katie Brown at Blists Hill Victorian Town for providing information on the Corbett family and the company wood engravings respectively; to Matt Thompson for advice on nineteenth-century advertising; to the *Review*’s referees and editor for their comments and suggestions on this paper; and to Ian Bapty, Joanne Smith and my other friends and colleagues at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust for patiently aiding, abetting and nurturing my interest in nineteenth-century grinding mills.

¹ S. Corbett and Son catalogue, n.d. but c.1900, archive of S. Corbett and Son, the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (hereafter IGMT), CORB. 54.

years or so, one of the biggest employers in the town.² During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Corbett name was associated with a wide variety of agricultural implements, from small domestic items such as name plates, fire buckets, cheese presses and knife stands, to ploughs, mangold drills and winnowers.³

Samuel Corbett came to prominence when agricultural implement manufacture was at its peak. The period of 'high farming' in Britain between 1840 and 1860 is considered to have been a golden age for these firms.⁴ In its loosest and least contentious sense, 'high farming' was characterized by the use of new technology in combination with increasingly efficient methods of cultivation. Its development coincided with the so-called second industrial revolution, when cheap raw materials and efficient processes stimulated production. Opportunities abounded for manufacturing companies to thrive. Though the market was dominated by the likes of Ransomes of Ipswich, Bamfords of Uttoxeter and Burrells of Thetford, many hundreds of smaller firms – including the Corbetts – flourished alongside them.

However, the golden age of farming was not to last beyond the 1870s. Once the agricultural sector was hit by severe depression, the market forces that had previously worked in the farmers' favour were turned against them. Crop prices fell and farmers turned arable land over to grass for livestock. This presented a problem for the implement manufacturers, who mainly focused on tillage and cultivation.⁵ Whilst engineering was still a boom industry, the customer base for agricultural tools and machinery was diminishing. What Peter Dewey identified as the period of 'brief supremacy' enjoyed by the manufacturers was over by 1875.⁶ As a result, the remaining marketplace was fiercely contested. For the shrewd firm, there was still an opportunity to thrive. The high level of competition between the Victorian implement makers engendered a distinctive publicity culture which rested upon the twin foundations of printed trade literature and performances at ploughing matches and agricultural shows. These firms possessed a special talent for hyperbole, and were among the first to exploit modern marketing media to promote their products.

The history of the Corbetts, though seldom told beyond the county, exemplifies the trends in Victorian agricultural entrepreneurship identified above, and contributes to the scholarly interpretation of the national picture. Peter Dewey's *'Iron harvests of the field': the making of farm machinery in Britain since 1880* serves as an excellent general survey. However, single studies of local firms are still few and far between, given the number of firms that were active between the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the last quarter of the nineteenth. It is these studies that can help us build a more nuanced picture of the industry.

Through an examination of the approaches taken by both S. Corbett and Son and Thomas Corbett to agricultural shows and trade publications, this paper reflects on the complex relationship between the farming and manufacturing sectors. This relationship, it is argued,

² B. Trinder, 'Introduction', in Trinder (ed.), *Victorian Shrewsbury: studies in the history of a county town* (1984), p. 15.

³ Francis Corbett, another of William's sons, took over John Williams and Son of Rhuddlan in 1908, forming Corbett-Williams and Son. See E. Scourfield, 'John Williams and Son, Phoenix Ironworks, Rhuddlan',

Flintshire Historical Society J. 28 (1977–78), pp. 71–7.

⁴ P. J. Perry, 'High farming in Victorian Britain: prospect and retrospect', *Agricultural Hist.* 55 (1981), p. 156.

⁵ P. Dewey, *'Iron harvests of the field': the making of farm machinery in Britain since 1800* (2008), pp. 92–3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

directly influenced advertising practices at the time. The conditions under which the implement makers were forced to operate inspired innovations in marketing rather than engineering. With the downturn in agriculture, it became increasingly important to gain status and reputation. The Corbetts (alongside the other implement makers) contested hundreds of prizes, enthusiastically promoted their wares, and went to great lengths to secure overseas customers. Creating public spectacles and circulating flamboyant trade literature were characteristic of the industry's approach, rather than relying on major technological advances. These were fundamentally modern urban and industrial phenomena; they just happened to be playing out in an agricultural sphere. By examining the marketing activities of the Corbetts, we are able to shed valuable light on this unique facet of the Victorian economy.

I

Before the mid-nineteenth century, the introduction of a new agricultural implement was looked upon as a great novelty, if not something more foreboding. The *Farmers' and Gardeners' Almanack* of 1877 observed that 'the Winnowing Machine was an instrument of much superstitious dread when it was first introduced' in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.⁷ Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* includes a memorable description of a horse drill resembling 'a compound of hornet, grasshopper, and shrimp, magnified enormously ... a sort of agricultural piano'.⁸ These gaudily coloured contraptions sat dissonantly in the rural landscape, and were obvious and unsettling symbols of change. In 1830, agricultural workers in Kent protested against low pay by destroying a mechanical threshing machine. This act of destruction marked the beginning of the so-called 'Swing Riots'. Anger was directed against the big landowners who were held to be depressing wages and inflating bread prices, causing great hardship. Farm labourers viewed the mechanization of agriculture as a threat to their employment.⁹ However disruptive they were to the individual landowners, the Swing Rioters could not stop technological progress. By the end of the nineteenth century a plethora of implements had been unleashed on the populace. With a dizzying array of drills, presses, cutters, choppers, grinders and pulpers, the Victorians had brought the fields firmly under their dominion.

Trevor Wild argued that the burst of manufacturing activity that took place between 1840 and the 1890s was tantamount to a 'revolution in farming mechanization'. Following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, farmers were fully exposed to market forces. As a consequence, their resistance to new technological advances slackened, and they chose to adopt new tools to help with tillage and cultivation. Mechanical threshing machines, formerly the targets of the Swing Rioters, reappeared in farm yards.¹⁰ Increasing interest on the farms in turn expedited the

⁷ Extracted in 'Opinions of the Press', Thomas Corbett's notebook (hereafter TCN), seen through the kindness of Mrs Morris, n.p.

⁸ T. Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1998 edn), p. 167.

⁹ J. E. Archer, *Social unrest and popular protest in England, 1780-1840* (2000), p. 16; Dewey, 'Iron

harvests', p. 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3. The promulgation of the later Acts of Enclosure also served as an encouragement to mechanized cultivation and tillage. Farmers with large contiguous tracts of land were more likely to invest in machinery to work them.

development of cottage blacksmithing industries into small urban factories.¹¹ In 1844 machine-maker James Slight remarked that the present age was ‘perhaps the most remarkable ... [for] the perfection of almost every kind of machine or tool required in the various departments of arts and manufactures’.¹² Peter Dewey called it a ‘watershed’.¹³ With iron both plentiful and cheap, the period between 1840 and 1860 saw the formation of several hundred new firms.¹⁴ One of these was set up by Samuel Corbett.

For nearly 20 years Samuel plied his trade as a blacksmith and tinsmith in Wellington. He probably began as an apprentice at the premises of George Wycherley, on what is now King Street. The 1841 census shows that after he had served his apprenticeship he set up as a tinsmith. A little over ten years later, Samuel had earned enough to move to bigger premises on Park Street.¹⁵ By the late 1850s, with his eldest son William on board, he had begun trading as S. Corbett and Son. When the 1861 census was taken, Samuel was described as an ‘Agricultural Implement Manufacturer’ employing 14 men and five boys at Park Street. At the same time he was supplementing his income as a ‘Beer Seller’ in an adjacent public house called ‘The Travellers’ Rest’.¹⁶ However, by 1871 he appears to have devoted himself fully to his manufacturing business, and is listed as an ‘engineer’ employing 25 men and four boys.¹⁷ In addition to the Park Street works, Samuel also owned an ironmonger’s shop on Church Street, Wellington (Figure 1). After his death in 1885, control of S. Corbett and Son passed to his sons William and George. The business was in a flourishing condition, with Samuel’s personal estate being worth nearly £4500.¹⁸ At this time William also took sole ownership of the ironmonger’s, later renaming it W. Corbett and Son. He remained at the helm of both firms until his death in 1904, at which time he also left an estate of considerable worth to his own son, Howard.¹⁹ The success of the Corbetts shows that opportunities were available to cottage blacksmiths and tinsmiths to succeed in the field of agricultural implement manufacture.²⁰

Whilst Samuel and William built up their business, Samuel’s younger son Thomas Corbett also demonstrated the family’s entrepreneurial spirit by turning his attention to Shrewsbury. Whether through ambition or necessity, when he was 20, Thomas severed all ties with the family firm in Wellington and went to work as an agent for Samuelson of Banbury’s reaping machines in Shrewsbury.²¹ Around 1867 he set up an ironworks on Chester Street, placing him in direct competition with his father and brother. Whilst the works was in its infancy, Corbett worked with the implement-seller, Richard Chipchase, of Albert Street and Castle Foregate in Shrewsbury. This arrangement lasted until 1877.²² In 1869, Thomas purchased a

¹¹ T. Wild, *Village England: A social history of the countryside* (2004), p. 90; E. J. T. Collins, ‘The age of machinery’, in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian countryside* (2 vols, 1981, new edn, 2000), I, p. 203; Dewey, ‘Iron harvests’, p. 11.

¹² J. Slight and R. Scott Burn, *Book of farm implements and machines* (ed.) H. Stephens (1858), p. 147.

¹³ Dewey, ‘Iron harvests’, p. 29.

¹⁴ Collins, ‘Age of machinery’, p. 205.

¹⁵ J. Meeson, ‘Samuel Corbett, blacksmith’, *Wellingtonia* 16 (2014), p. 14.

¹⁶ K. Corbett, ‘Methodist churches in Wellington’, in A. Smith and G. Evans (eds), *Latest memories of old Wellington* (1991), p. 26; 1861 census.

¹⁷ 1871 census.

¹⁸ Meeson, ‘Samuel Corbett’, 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dewey, ‘Iron harvests’, pp. 11, 14.

²¹ E. Morris, personal correspondence relating to Thomas Corbett (20 June 2014); B. Trinder, *The industrial archaeology of Shropshire* (1996), pp. 60–1.

²² *London Gazette*, 5 Jan. 1877. When the partnership



FIGURE 1: S. Corbett and Son's Iron Merchants on Church Street, Wellington, before 1885. Courtesy of Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust Library and Archives.

new yard on Castle Foregate (parallel to Chester Street) which, by 1871, had been developed as the Perseverance Ironworks. Not long afterwards he began working with another seller, Arthur John Peele, in a partnership that would continue until 1881. After this, Thomas became its sole proprietor, expanding the Perseverance works to the west of Castle Foregate in 1884.²³ By this date both Corbett firms appeared to be flourishing, producing thousands of items a year bearing the family name. But how did they achieve this, and at what cost?

II

At the beginning of this paper it was suggested that the success of the agricultural implement manufacturers rested upon their ability to exploit the chief marketing activities available to them, namely distributing advertising and trade literature, and making regular appearances at agricultural shows. Jonathan Brown, who researched this topic in the early 1990s, argued

Note 22 *continued*
dissolved, Chipchase continued as 'a seller' for 6 years, but was then declared bankrupt. See the *London Gazette*, 26 June 1883.

²³ Shropshire Historic Environment Record, HER number (PRN): 06746; B. Trinder, *Beyond the bridges: the suburbs of Shrewsbury, 1760–1960* (2006), pp. 146–7.

that the implement makers 'became some of the most dynamic of nineteenth-century manufacturers in their marketing efforts'.²⁴ Whilst Peter Dewey's work acknowledges the same phenomenon (referencing, among other sources, the literature produced for the 1851 Great Exhibition), its breadth precludes a detailed examination of individual firms.²⁵ A case study such as the Corbett family enables us to learn more about the implement makers' entrepreneurial style. The following section looks more closely at the phenomenon of the agricultural show, assessing its value to the implement makers and its impact on the sector more generally.

Brown identified agricultural shows as key battlegrounds on which the implement makers determined their market share. The engineer Robert Ransome of Ipswich was one of the first to realize their potential. Ransome and Co. (later Ransome and Sons) was exhibiting at shows at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and dominating them by the 1830s. The companies employed networks of agents to represent them nationwide. Ransomes were also among the first to enter ploughing matches as a way of demonstrating their products. Before this, matches were primarily regarded as tests for the individual ploughmen. However, the implement makers changed the nature of the competition by signing up the most skilled ploughmen to sponsorship programmes.²⁶ Ploughing matches were becoming places for items to be shown off, taking advantage of the Victorians' love of contraptions.²⁷ Shows were also broadening their appeal to manufacturers in other ways. The first show sponsored by the Royal Agricultural Society of England was held in 1839 and, from the 1840s, both the National and Royal Agricultural Societies were touring, and encouraging local people to attend by offering a variety of entertainments.²⁸ They were fast becoming social events at which the manufacturers could gain profitable exposure. This was affirmed in 1851 when around 300 companies came to the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace and around 50 prizes were awarded.²⁹ By the time S. Corbett and Son was established, these shows were firmly embedded in the agricultural implement makers' consciousness.

The Corbetts' home county of Shropshire had a vital role to play in their success. One of the birthplaces of the Industrial Revolution, Shropshire already had a long history of iron-founding and could boast the raw materials, processing plants and knowledge required for a successful manufacturing industry. It also remained a largely rural county, with arable and dairy farming mainly concentrated in the north and east of the county, and livestock rearing in the south and west.³⁰ In 1890 a writer for the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* remarked that 'Few counties in England give greater encouragement to the farm labourer than Shropshire, which outside its Agricultural Shows, [has] six societies giving prizes for ploughing, hedging &c'.³¹ These gave similar encouragement to the implement makers. Ploughing matches were particularly common in the Welsh

²⁴ J. Brown, 'Success and adversity: entrepreneurship in agricultural engineering, 1800–1939', in J. Brown and M. B. Rose (eds), *Entrepreneurship, networks and modern business* (1993), p. 219.

²⁵ Dewey, 'Iron harvests', pp. 36–8, 81–5.

²⁶ Brown, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 220.

²⁷ 'Agricultural shows and their influence on agricultural progress', *Farmers' Magazine* (1866), p. 374.

²⁸ Dewey, 'Iron harvests', pp. 28–9; 'Agricultural

shows and their influence', p. 374.

²⁹ Dewey, 'Iron harvests', p. 36; *Exhibition of the works of industry of all nations: reports by the juries on the subjects in the thirty classes into which the exhibition was divided* (1852), p. 242.

³⁰ R. Perren, '1875–1985', VCH *Shropshire*, IV, *Agriculture* (1989), pp. 232–69.

³¹ Extracted from the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, Oct. 1890, in TCN, n.p.

Marches, and these were eagerly contested by the Corbetts. An advertisement for Thomas's 'World Famed Ploughs' from the early 1890s gives some indication of the number of trials and competitions which took place in the county. On it, his machines are said to have made 'a clean sweep of prizes at the Great Clunside Match, Three Years in succession', taken 'Every First Prize at the Marshbrook Match for Several Years', and gained 'Many Champion and Other First Prizes' at Ludlow, Knighton, Tenbury and Much Wenlock.³²

As well as attending the local ploughing matches, the Corbetts exhibited nationally at the major agricultural society shows. Both firms dined out on their triumphs. In 1890 the Royal Agricultural Society of England held its Disintegrator and Grist Mill Trials at Plymouth, which offered a prize of £20 for the overall winner. The purpose of the trial was, according to the Judges' Report, 'to select from among modern improvements upon the six venerable systems of grinding, that which is best fitted for a farmer's use'.³³ The category was contested by some of the biggest names in agricultural implement manufacture, including Lister of Dursley and Burrell of Thetford. William Corbett entered S. Corbett and Son's grinding mill with patent flat metal discs. William, who liked to appear in person at the big shows rather than appointing an agent, appeared to relish the challenge before him. *Implement and Machinery Review* remarked that:

None of the exhibitors seemed half so happy [as him]. Mr Corbett was far merrier than any of the party present throughout the trials. [He] stood ready to personally set the mill in operation unattended. He was the only exhibitor who acted in this capacity. He appeared to be longing to begin.³⁴

Having come through 'the most severe and exhaustive trials', S. Corbett and Son's mill claimed the top prize. In honour of the victory, the firm began producing the 'Plymouth' variant of the grinding mill. It became the defining work of S. Corbett and Son's *opus*, and was thenceforth termed 'The World's Best Grinding Mill' (Figure 2).

There is little doubt that these firms' achievements in the agricultural shows provided ample material for promotion and marketing. Thomas Corbett boasted of winning over 750 'Royal prizes' between 1865 and 1897, whilst Samuel declared his list of prizes 'too elaborate to publish'.³⁵ Customers were reminded of the virtues of their chosen implements with victories commemorated on name-plates or on machine beds. Of course, the Corbetts by no means gained success at all the shows they attended. For example, Thomas entered a three-horse whippetree at the RASE show at Preston in 1885, which was said by the judges to have 'a fatal defect'.³⁶ However, these failures were not reported in the company's own trade literature, as they clearly made for bad publicity.

This casts some doubt on the effectiveness of agricultural shows *per se* in relation to the growing influence of marketing literature. Indeed, it is not clear whether the principal effect of

³² 'Some of the principal prizes gained by T. Corbett's "World Famed" ploughs', TCN, n.p.

³³ 'Judge's Report of RASE trials', in S. Corbett and Son catalogue, c.1900, IGMT, CORB. 32.3.

³⁴ Extracted from *Implement and Machinery Review* in S. Corbett and Son catalogue, c.1893, p. 21, IGMT

CORB. 32.3.

³⁵ 'Startling successes', TCN, n.p.; 'Descriptive catalogue of implements and machinery manufactured by Samuel Corbett and Son', c.1870s, p. 5, IGMT, CORB. 13.

³⁶ C. G. Roberts, 'Report on implements at Preston', *JRASE* 21 (1885), pp. 694–6.

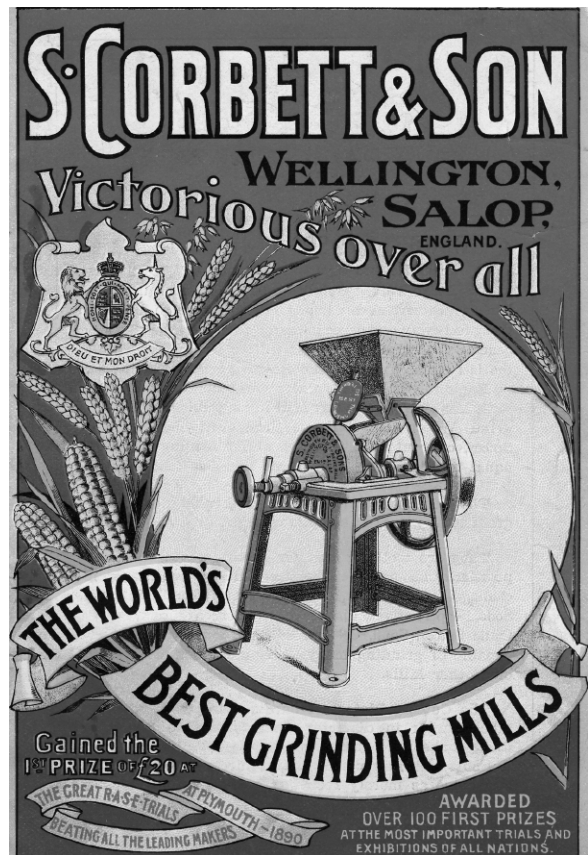


FIGURE 2: Advertising leaflet for S. Corbett and Son's 'World's Best Grinding Mill', c.1890. Courtesy of Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust Library and Archives.

the agricultural show was, as it was doubtless intended, to encourage and stimulate innovation in the sector. In fact, the implement makers shrewdly exploited them for their own ends. For example, the design of S. Corbett and Son's grinding mill changed very little over the 60 or so years it was in production (Figure 3). However, once the firm had applied the moniker of the 'World's Best', they continued to market it as such. In the world of agricultural implement manufacture, prizes and titles were jealously guarded and incessantly trumpeted. Even at the time, farmers and manufacturers asked whether too many prizes were being awarded, and whether they in any way reflected the level of demand and importance accorded to them.

As early as 1855, the RASE modified its system of trials to better reward innovation within the different classes of machinery.³⁷ However, a decade later the matter once again became a subject for debate. In 1866 *The Farmers' Magazine* carried an article entitled 'Agricultural shows and their influence on agricultural progress', reporting on a meeting of the London Central Farmers Club. The meeting was addressed by Alfred Crosskill, a cart and waggon maker from Beverley in Yorkshire.³⁸ Whilst he acknowledged the beneficial effects that agricultural shows had had over the preceding 20 years, Crosskill wanted to draw attention to the problems they created for the agricultural engineering industry – above all, that they did not automatically

³⁷ Dewey, 'Iron harvests', pp. 81–2.

³⁸ 'Agricultural shows and their influence', 374–9.

SEPT. 1, 1931.

THE IMPLEMENT AND MACHINERY REVIEW.³

iii

S. CORBETT & SON, WELLINGTON
PARK ST. WORKS. SALOP

INVENTORS, PATENTEES & SOLE MAKERS OF
THE WORLD'S BEST GRINDING MILLS

AWARDED 1ST PRIZE OF £20 AT THE LAST GREAT R.A.S.E. TRIALS

AWARDED 1ST PRIZE OF £20 AT THE LAST GREAT R.A.S.E. TRIALS

ESTABLISHED 1840
STILL GOING STRONG.

A RECORD!
GAINED 1,004 of the WORLD'S HIGHEST PRIZES GOLD & SILVER MEDALS FOR SUPERIOR IMPLEMENTS and MACHINERY. As supplied to THE KING

"CAMBRIAN" AND W.P. SERIES OF CHAFF CUTTERS.
"CAMBRIAN" & "TRIUMPH" TURNIP CUTTERS, PULPERS, GRATERS & SLICERS.

MUNCHO-KABLE

FIGURE 3: Advert for S. Corbett and Son's 'World's best grinding mills' from *The Implement and Machinery Review*, 1 Sept. 1931. The same wood engravings are still being used.

inspire engineering improvements. Whilst he noted that the shows gave companies ample opportunities to 'parade' their prizes, he proclaimed that 'The notion that these implement prizes are of any service to the practical agriculturist, is one of the strangest fallacies that has ever been impressed upon the public mind'.

In many cases the implement makers did not have to produce a new piece of equipment to win a prize. Crosskill criticized the number of prizes being awarded time and again to the same machines:

If they had got as good an animal and as good an implement as could be produced, what was the use of constantly offering prizes for the same thing produced over and over again ... How many hundreds, he might always say thousands, of pounds have been spent in the interval on prizes!³⁹

³⁹ Ibid., p. 378. My thanks to the *Review's* referee who pointed out that, ironically, Crosskill & Sons's own clod-crusher was in production for around 75 years.

The Corbetts themselves were serial winners. Thomas's 'Eclipse' winnowing machine was awarded 150 first prizes, and his 'Excelsior' plough won a staggering 300 first prizes. It is arguable that the incentive to innovate was diminished when a product or firm dominated trials for long periods and kept receiving prize money. Crosskill's critical assessment of the agricultural shows suggests there were differences of opinion among the implement makers regarding the real value of competitions. However, there is more than a hint of umbrage in Crosskill's remarks. He had a deep suspicion of the prize judges, whose capability, impartiality and fallibility were all brought into question in his report. 'After every important series of trials', he remarked, 'the columns of the agricultural journals are, for many weeks in succession, filled with remonstrances from spectators as well as competitors, all uniting in condemning the utter inadequacy of the tribunal ... The system of trials and prizes cannot be defended'.⁴⁰

Despite this, it should be remembered that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the real and rapid rise of the agricultural implement manufacturers. When Crosskill aired his grievances in 1866, it was within the period of high farming. Both Corbett works were still in their infancy, and the shows and prizegivings would only get more frequent as the century progressed. Crosskill's contemporaries were more inclined to acknowledge the beneficial effect of the great agricultural shows, and pointed out that farmers had 'learnt how to lay out their money on implements'.⁴¹ But, it was conceded at the end of the report that the implement makers and the farmers were bound to have differing views on the significance of agricultural shows:

The manufacturer used his implement every day of his life, and soon arrived at a just estimate of its value; but a great many of the implements of agriculturists were used only for one or two weeks in the year. How, then, could he be compared in that respect with manufacturers?⁴²

Matches and shows inevitably took on a different complexion for the implement makers, and this underpinned their marketing strategies. Notwithstanding the inventive inertia that they seemed to abide, it is unsurprising that the Corbetts (and others like them) invested them with the significance that they did.

III

In 1914, King George V visited Thomas Corbett's stand at the Shrewsbury Royal Show. The meeting was widely reported in the local and trade press. Both *The Shrewsbury Chronicle* and *The Ironmonger* describe the king turning the handle of a machine which his father had also turned during the Paris Exhibition of 1878, an event that 'created a good deal of pleasure in the implement yard'.⁴³ The episode was even immortalized in an astonishing piece of self-congratulatory doggerel, circulated afterwards with the compliments of Mr Corbett: 'A Royal hand he offered you / The Royal hand you shook / As man to man he talked with you

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 376.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 379.

⁴² Ibid., p. 381.

⁴³ *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 10 July 1914, and *The Ironmonger*, 11 July 1914, extracted in TCN, n.p.

/ While pleasant was his look ... [etc.].'⁴⁴ Whilst on the stand, the king was presented with a copy of the latest Perseverance Ironworks catalogue, encased in a red Morocco leather binding with gilt edges and tooling.⁴⁵ The trade catalogue was the second of the foundations upon which the implement makers' success rested and, as the episode with the king illustrates, was of special importance to the Corbetts. The following section looks at material produced by the family during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and considers how it contributed to their marketing efforts.

The history of product advertising in the United States has been more extensively researched and discussed than that of Britain.⁴⁶ However, the North American scholarship identified a number of phenomena that have come to be accepted as the academic orthodoxy: that larger manufacturers began supplanting local craftsmen and sellers by creating 'brands'; that new technologies such as railways and telephone communication enabled these firms to effectively 'nationalize' their brands; that the ability to mass produce supported this process.⁴⁷ Roy Church points out that, in this scheme, the 'mass market' was almost entirely created by the manufacturers, and the consumers played only a peripheral role in its formation. Advertising, therefore, came to be viewed as something that companies did in order to mitigate the effects of rivals, rather than sell more products.⁴⁸ The same tendencies can be identified amongst the Victorian agricultural implement makers who created a competitive and publicity-heavy market without having a thriving consumer base.

In his work on Victorian entrepreneurship, Jonathan Brown identified the particular significance of trade literature to the agricultural implement manufacturers. He noted that they made use of the widest possible range of advertising literature, from catalogues and pamphlets through to postcards, calendars and railway timetables.⁴⁹ This is certainly borne out by the variety of material produced by S. Corbett and Son, which includes examples of all these items.⁵⁰ However, it was with the traditional trade catalogue that the implement manufacturers particularly excelled, being 'amongst the earliest to distribute illustrated literature'. Above all, they were pioneering in the use of fine line engravings, which other types of manufacturers were much slower to adopt.⁵¹

The refined technique of engraving – where images were scored into the end-grain of hardwoods such as boxwood or cherry – was first developed in the eighteenth century. The process enabled a wide variety of textures and tones to be captured for the first time. Implement makers recognized the potential in the technique for showing off the quality of their workmanship. Engravers could make accurate representations of wood grain, blades, wheels, and all manner of innovative and complex castings. If an engraving was destined for repeated use in the production of trade catalogues, a more robust 'electrotype' (a metal cast of the printing block), could be created.

⁴⁴ 'Congratulations to Mr Thomas Corbett on the occasion of His Majesty the King's visit to his stand at the Royal Show, 1914', original flyer from archive of Thomas Corbett (courtesy of Mrs E. Morris).

⁴⁵ Extracted from *The Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 10 July 1914, in TCN, n.p.

⁴⁶ R. Church, 'Advertising consumer goods in

nineteenth-century Britain: reinterpretations', *EcHR* 53 (2000), p. 621.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 622; Dewey, 'Iron harvests', p. 32.

⁴⁸ Church, 'Advertising consumer goods', p. 624.

⁴⁹ Brown, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 219.

⁵⁰ IGMT, CORB. 1–120.

⁵¹ Brown, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 219.

Like many other firms at the time, both S. Corbett and Son and Thomas Corbett employed the talents of the noted engraver, Jabez Hare (1798–1851), who was the craftsman of choice for the implement makers.⁵² Hare made engravings for Ransomes in the 1840s, and established Hare and Co. in 1846 specifically to provide for this sector.⁵³ Even after the advent of photography, the need to produce clear crisp images meant that the skill of the engraver remained very much in demand.⁵⁴

Trade literature was not only produced to display diagrams of machinery and product specifications, but also to help companies establish a brand. A measure of the importance of these publications is the amount of attention lavished on the cover artwork. Ransomes were using colour lithographs for the front covers of their catalogues in the 1870s although, as Brown points out, this was something of a novelty at the time.⁵⁵ Samuel Corbett's catalogue of the 1870s was more typical for the earlier period, printed in black and white with a plain blue card cover.⁵⁶ However, by the 1890s he was producing literature sporting colourful and exuberant designs. Other engineering firms followed suit. An 1883 newspaper article on the Perseverance Ironworks commented on Thomas Corbett's 'handsome [and] profusely illustrated' colonial catalogue 'printed throughout in two colours' with an 'admirably designed cover lithographed in several colours' (Figure 4).⁵⁷ The implement makers were looking to express the quality of their products through the quality of their advertising literature.

The self-assurance and exuberance of the artwork was carried through into the text itself, with both Corbett firms using inflated language to win the attention of prospective customers. Rhetoric has been an important feature of advertising since the late seventeenth century, when it was introduced into posters and broadsides selling goods. During the eighteenth century, with the proliferation of newspapers, it became ubiquitous. In the nineteenth century, advertising rhetoric needed to stand out more and more in order to be effective. Certain items received excessive treatment. Church identifies laundry products as particularly prone to 'the excesses of modern advertising'.⁵⁸ Though not discussed alongside these 'consumer' goods in the secondary literature, agricultural implements can certainly be placed in this category.

The implement makers' rhetoric was a necessary response to the conditions of their market at that time. Whilst the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion in the number of manufacturers and the numbers of products available, the agricultural depression meant that it was not matched by demand from British farmers.⁵⁹ The *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* reported a 'dull trade' in the home market in 1885.⁶⁰ Brown argued that the lack of demand was the very thing that galvanized the agricultural implement

⁵² Dewey, 'Iron harvests', p. 27.

⁵³ B. Russell, 'The Coalbrookdale wood engravings' (unpublished paper, 2009), p. 1.

⁵⁴ There are one or two photographs of machinery in TCN. For a discussion on the imagery of industry, see G. Beegan, 'Finding Florence in Birmingham: hybridity and the photomechanical images in the 1890s', in M. Kang and A. Woodson-Boulton (eds), *Visions of the industrial age, 1830–1914: modernity and the anxiety of representation in Europe* (2008), pp. 81–107.

⁵⁵ Brown, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 219.

⁵⁶ 'Descriptive catalogue of implements and machinery manufactured by Samuel Corbett and Son', c.1870s, p. 5, IGMT, CORB. 13.

⁵⁷ *New Zealand Industrial Gazette* 3 (31) (1883), p. 1.

⁵⁸ Church, 'Advertising consumer goods', p. 642.

⁵⁹ C. MacLeod, *Inventing the industrial revolution: the English patent system, 1660–1800* (2002), pp. 99–100.

⁶⁰ C. G. Roberts, 'Report on implements at Preston', *JRASE*, sec ser. 21 (1885), p. 687. The export market was, however, a different proposition at this time.

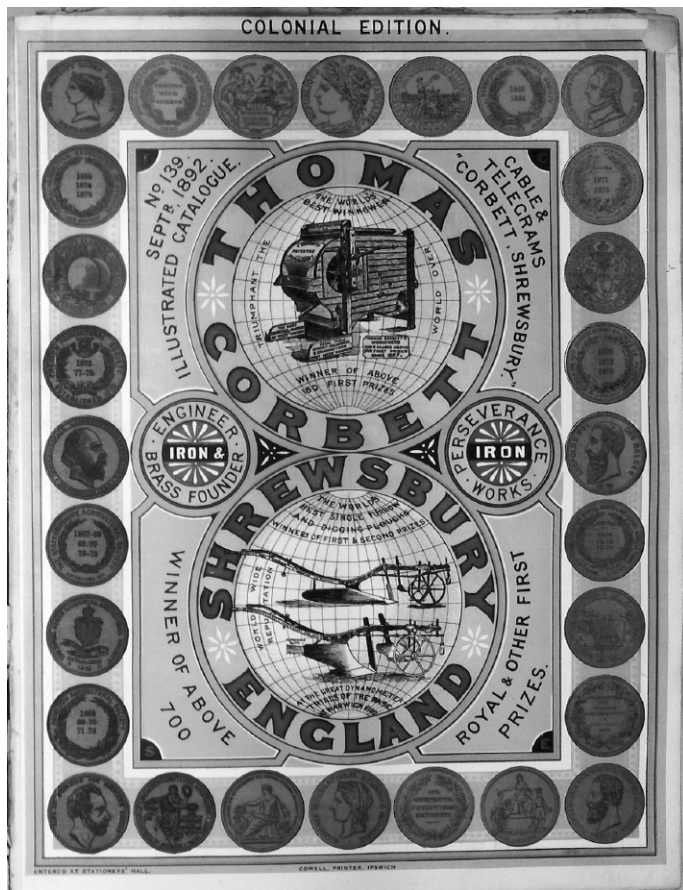


FIGURE 4: 1892 colonial edition of Thomas Corbett's catalogue. Courtesy of Mrs E. Morris.

makers. Development was costly and competition was fierce. Firms were forced, in Brown's words, to 'employ all their powers of persuasion to coax, cajole and nurture interest in their products'.⁶¹

This being the case, it was essential that the implement manufacturers set their products – and themselves – apart from one another. Trying to distinguish one prize-winning double furrow plough from another cannot have been an easy task at the best of times, and the process had added significance for the likes of the Corbetts, who were competing against each other for business using the same name. Thomas Corbett employed lively language to draw in potential customers. Items in his catalogue were billed as 'Very special, worth reading' and full of 'Facts worth knowing'.⁶² Those who took advice and read on were treated to accounts of 'startling successes', and were doubtless gratified to discover that 'the digging plough question [had been] settled!!!' S. Corbett and Son were slightly less exuberant in their approach, but their success at the Plymouth trials still moved them to describe it as their 'most triumphant victory'. Today it seems outlandish that ploughs, kibbling mills and mangold drills were subjected

⁶¹ Brown, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 219.

⁶² 'Very special, worth reading' and 'Facts worth knowing', advertisements in TCN, n.p.

to such hyperbole. However, it does show that the implement-manufacturers were pushing rhetoric to the limit in order to drum up interest in their products.

Strap-lines and brand names were accorded a similar level of importance by the Corbetts. As already shown, S. Corbett and Son started using the phrase 'The World's Best Grinding Mill' following their victory at the Plymouth Grist Mill Trials. This was later imitated by Bamfords, who styled their mill as 'The Best the World has Ever Produced'.⁶³ As a rule, however – the world's best grinding mill notwithstanding – S. Corbett and Son tended to name their products after local landmarks such as the Wrekin (a prominent hill on the outskirts of Wellington), which lent its name *inter alia* to a cattle crib, a wheeled trough and a chaff cutter. The Wellington firm appears to have focused its efforts on appealing to local consumers, using known and trusted names. Thomas, on the other hand, exhibited his more bullish tendencies by assigning to his machinery such monikers as 'Excelsior', 'Defiance' and 'Champion'.

This was not unusual in itself. Victorian manufacturers produced all sorts of items bearing these names, from golf clubs to lavatories. In many ways it was symptomatic of the confidence and ebullience of the period. Both firms were selling an idea as well as a product – something that began to characterize advertising in the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.⁶⁴ Using a strong brand name was also a way of elevating a product above that of a rival in a challenging marketplace. The implement makers kept a close eye on their competitors' marketing strategies. Indeed, Dewey went as far as to suggest that 'industrial espionage was rife'.⁶⁵ Thomas Corbett had advertising material relating to the products of other companies glued onto the pastedowns of his private notebooks.⁶⁶ S. Corbett and Son likewise retained trade literature from A. C. Bamlett of York and Powell Brothers and Whitaker of Wrexham amongst others. The Corbett firms' attitudes to one another were slightly more ambiguous. The S. Corbett and Son archive contains nothing relating to Thomas. However, adverts for S. Corbett mills and barrel pulpers were found among Thomas's papers. Yet, he never expressly mentioned his father's firm in his notebooks. Indeed, in one of the adverts for an S. Corbett grinding mill that Thomas had kept, all references to the manufacturer's name were removed. On the illustration, the word 'Corbett's' has been erased from the casing of the grinding mechanism. The text below it, which appears verbatim in both S. Corbett's catalogues and the *Implement and Machinery Review*, has been altered. Where it originally read 'Mr Corbett', it now simply reads 'the Maker'.⁶⁷ While there is no overt evidence of enmity between the two branches of the Corbetts, they were certainly estranged by the 1860s. The manipulation of the image and text shows that trade literature mattered to Thomas Corbett; it was one of the public

⁶³ 'Bamford's "Rapid" grinding mills', advert available on: www.gracesguide.co.uk/File:Im19020911Ag-Bam.jpg [accessed 27 June 2014].

⁶⁴ See Church, 'Advertising consumer goods', pp. 639–41. This relates to the model of 'rational' and 'irrational' advertising put forward by scholars during the latter half of the twentieth century. 'Irrational' advertising is partially based on instilling 'ideas' rather than 'facts'. The implement makers demonstrate the use

of both facts and ideas to sell their products.

⁶⁵ Dewey, *Iron harvests*, p. xv.

⁶⁶ Thomas Corbett's notebooks incorporate extracts from his catalogues as well as handwritten notes, designs, etc.

⁶⁷ 'Special advantages of the Patent Plymouth RASE First Prize Grinding and Kibbling Mills over all others', in TCN, n.p.

faces of the industry, and an important one at that. It also shows that local – even familial – rivalries shaped the attitudes of the implement makers as much as national ones. This was the case even as they began to look towards the international markets.

IV

Successful marketing at home, through both the trade literature and the agricultural shows, enabled the Corbetts to expand their businesses to more fertile markets abroad. S. Corbett and Son and the Perseverance Ironworks took different approaches to their overseas markets. S. Corbett and Son mainly focused their attention on the United Kingdom and western Europe.⁶⁸ Thomas, on the other hand, embarked on a ‘world tour’ in 1882–83 to court the big Australasian markets. This was a shrewd move, not only because of the downturn in Britain, but also because protectionism hampered trade with many European countries.⁶⁹ He specially adapted many of the Perseverance Ironworks’ machines to cope with the harsher conditions of Antipodean farms, and also to address a perceived lack of a skilled mechanical labour force. In Thomas’s mind, he was ‘in competition with the world’ (although, in the 1880s–1890s at least, much of this competition was coming from within the United Kingdom).⁷⁰ Thomas Corbett took foreign markets seriously. As well as producing the exclusive ‘Colonial’ version of the Perseverance Ironworks catalogue, he participated in newspaper interviews for publications such as the *New Zealand Industrial Gazette* and the *Adelaide Advertiser* (both in 1883).⁷¹

However, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, and the twentieth century dawned, the international marketplace was becoming an ever more crowded one. Thomas and his firm in particular faced increasing competition in the export market from American manufacturers such as Massey-Harrison and Sawyer-Massey. Whereas in the 1870s British firms made 93 per cent of the agricultural implements sold in Victoria, Australia, by 1914 this figure was reduced to just 20 per cent.⁷² Moreover, with the advent of the petrol engine and motor-tractor, markets both at home and abroad were set to be permanently transformed. Although the world wars created opportunities for the implement makers in terms of mass production, this was driven by necessity rather than invention.⁷³

Lack of invention – particularly on the part of the second- and third-generation implement makers – was one of the reasons why the industry ultimately fell into decline.⁷⁴ It was Thomas Corbett’s charisma that carried his firm through the first part of the twentieth century, including recovering from a major fire in 1905. When he died in 1917, the works continued to be operated by his executors. However, the firm was still selling the same products that had made its founder his fortune in the nineteenth century. In 1929 the Perseverance Ironworks closed,

⁶⁸ E.g., ‘Moulins à meules métalliques “Corbett”’ and ‘Corbett’s graanmolens’, IGMT, CORB. 26–27.

⁶⁹ Dewey, ‘Iron harvests’, pp. 87–8, 94.

⁷⁰ ‘Revised illustrated catalogue of improved patent agricultural implements and machinery’, extracted in TCN, n.p.

⁷¹ *New Zealand Industrial Gazette* 3 (31) (1883); *Adelaide Advertiser*, 10 Aug. 1893, p. 6.

⁷² Brown, ‘Entrepreneurship’, pp. 223–4.

⁷³ Ken Corbett recalled the firm receiving a contract to make 1000 grinding mills for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association after the end of the Second World War. See K. Corbett, *Reminiscences of Wellington* (1989), p. 17.

⁷⁴ Dewey, ‘Iron harvests’, pp. 109–12.

and the buildings were taken on by an oil blending firm.⁷⁵ William Corbett's descendents, on the other hand, continued to manufacture agricultural appliances in Wellington until 1974.⁷⁶ Manufacture centred on troughs and sheep racks, small boilers, wheels and small iron and brass fittings, as well as updated versions of older implements. The company also produced some novelties, such as the 'Crark' farrowing ark for Harper-Adams College.⁷⁷ Overall, however, the spirit of innovation that characterized the heyday of the company had abated.⁷⁸

V

This paper has examined the histories of two firms of agricultural implement manufacturers during a period of rapid development and change. Although other scholars have addressed different facets of the topic, the research has been couched in largely general terms. With the exception of A. E. Musson's study of Williams and Peel of Manchester, few local examples have been drawn out and situated within the wider historical context.⁷⁹ The present work has focused on a specific period in the history of the Corbett agricultural engineering firms of Wellington and Shrewsbury. The Corbetts embodied everything which was new and effervescent about Victorian agricultural engineering. Samuel's career attests to the opportunities presented to cottage blacksmiths to become fully-fledged industrialists. However, the conditions that created these opportunities – cheap raw materials, changes in farming practice – did not promise sustained success. A great many firms were established, and these had to compete with one another to survive during a period of depression in the agricultural sector.

The implement makers developed a particular way of operating that was not primarily based on manufacturing innovation. The impression of unbridled success that engineers such as the Corbetts cultivated was chiefly built on hyperbolic trade literature and public demonstrations of prowess at agricultural shows. By virtue of British colonial activity, these endeavours found expression at the furthest reaches of the globe. But, beneath the veneer of prizes, awards, and marketing puff was a much more insular economy. The manufacturers directed most of their attention towards one another. They also relied heavily on past achievements to promote current products.

The industrial and agricultural revolutions combined to shape many areas of the modern economy, and the rise of the implement makers was one consequence of this relationship. But, ultimately, these people pursued the activities and strategies of iron-founders and engineers rather than agriculturalists. This is demonstrated by the type of advertising and marketing that they employed. However, more fundamental technological changes would eventually revolutionize the face of farming, and finally a new group of manufacturers could lay claim to being 'victorious over all'.

⁷⁵ Trinder, *Industrial Archaeology*, p. 61. Morris Lubricants continue to occupy the buildings of the former Perseverance Ironworks.

⁷⁶ Meeson, 'Samuel Corbett', p. 15.

⁷⁷ See, for example, IGMT, CORB. 18, 82 and 98.

⁷⁸ I am grateful to David and Jonathan Corbett for

sharing their memories of the later years of S. Corbett and Son.

⁷⁹ A. E. Musson, 'An early engineering firm: Peel, Williams and Co. of Manchester', in A. E. Musson and E. Robinson (eds), *Science and technology in the industrial revolution* (1969).