

## THE STORY OF SIMPKIN & JAMES

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On 10th November 1970 the Leicester Mercury announced to its readers that Simpkin & James, the oldest grocers in Leicester, was shortly to close. The reasons given were falling profits, rising operating costs, a failure to increase turnover, taxation and parking restrictions. The news came as a shock to many people, whether customers or not, who looked upon Simpkin's as a much loved local institution. The disappearance of old established, locally owned shops from the centre of Leicester was a process which had started in the late 1950's, as one by one firms like Morley's, Lea's, Pochin's and the Beehive closed down, victims of rising overheads and the coming of the supermarkets, or like Raiment's and Joseph Johnson's were taken over.

In the local press and indeed in the firm's last annual report, Simpkin & James was said to have been in existence since at least the beginning of the 19th century. This was not so (1). Its beginnings can in fact be dated exactly – to 21st August 1862, when Joseph Simpkin of Narborough bought the business of a retiring grocer, James Kirby, of 41 Market Place, for £3200 at an auction sale at the Three Crowns Hotel, Horsefair Street (2). In the announcement of the impending sale in the Leicester Journal, Kirby was described as having been in business here 'upwards of 45 years' (3). His premises stretched from the Market Place to Horsefair Street (a distance of 67 feet), with frontages to both. In addition to the shop accommodation, there was a kitchen and parlour on the ground floor, two large bedrooms on the second floor, and an attic above that, while underneath the shop itself was a bakehouse.

Joseph Simpkin had previously been a partner in the firm of Sarson & Simpkin, grocers, of 11 Hotel Street, and first appears as such in the 1846 Leicester directory. The partnership was still in existence in 1860, but by the following year appears to have been dissolved, and Joseph Simpkin prematurely retired to Narborough (he was then only forty-five) (4). In the deeds relating to 41 Market Place dated 1st January 1863 he is described as 'gentleman'.

A joint notice appeared in the Leicester Journal on 6th February 1863 from James Kirby on his retirement, thanking the public for their support, and his successors, Joseph Simpkin & Son, announcing their intention of conducting the business as before, 'with the addition of such improvements as the present age requires'. Then followed a short list of some of the innovations they had in mind – 'chrysalized (sic) foreign fruits, Italian foods, and wax, sperm and other patent candles'. The son in the notice was Joseph Guy Simpkin, then aged nineteen. The new business first appears

**SIMPKIN & JAMES,**  
**Tea Merchants, Family Grocers,**

**AND ITALIAN WAREHOUSEMEN,**  
**IMPORTERS OF WINES, SPIRITS & CIGARS,**  
*The Leicester & Midland Counties' Supply Stores*  
**MARKET PLACE & HORSEFAIR STREET,**  
**LEICESTER.**

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☛ The only establishment in Leicester or Midland Counties where Groceries, Wines and Spirits, can be obtained at London Co-operative Stores' prices.

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**INDIAN TEA FROM DARJEELING,**  
per **2/6** lb.

*THE ONLY TEA WORTH DRINKING.*

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**THE CELEBRATED FRENCH COFFEE,**  
Per 1lb. Canister, 1/4; 2lb Canister, 2/8.  
**A PERFECT LUXURY.**

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*The Grand ST. EMILION CLARET, 18/- per doz.*

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**Jameson's very old Irish Whisky.**

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**THE CREAM OF SCOTCH WHISKY.**

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**THE "GEM" DINNER ALE,**  
The Best 1/- Bitter Beer in Leicester.

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**THE CELEBRATED GUINEA SHERRY**

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Detailed Lists of Groceries, Wines, Spirits, &c., free on application

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from Spencer's Illustrated Leicester Almanack 1887

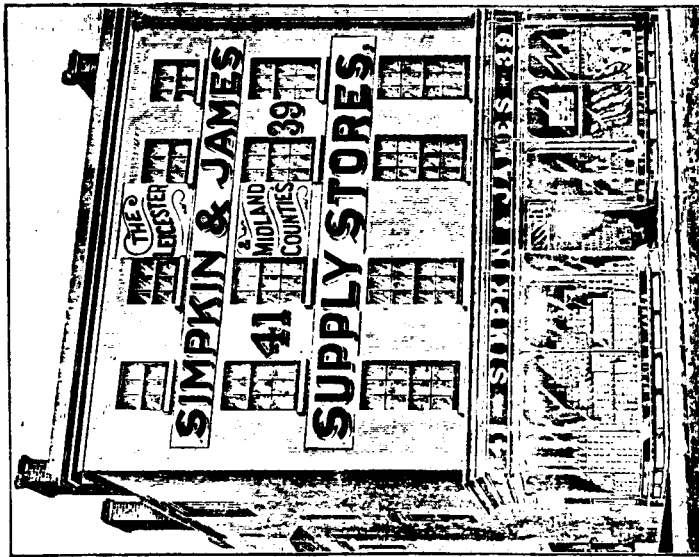
in the Leicester directory the following year, from which it is clear that Joseph Guy Simpkin was installed at the shop, while his father continued to live at Narborough.

From 1874 Joseph Simpkin's name disappears from the voting lists for 41 Market Place, and from 1875 the shop appears in directories as Joseph Guy Simpkin, tea merchant, grocer, Italian warehouseman and wine and spirit merchant. Joseph Simpkin's disengagement from the grocery business after so many years may have been because of his interest in a firm of hosiery manufacturers at Hinckley called Wileman & Simpkin, in which his younger son, Samuel John Simpkin was a partner. This subsequently became Simpkin, Son & Smith, of which Joseph Simpkin was described as head at his death on 5th March 1886, at the age of sixty-nine. Three hundred workpeople from the firm attended his funeral in Narborough churchyard four days later (5). He left almost £20,000; one wonders how much of this derived from the grocery trade.

On 6th July 1883 the business became known as Simpkin & James, when Joseph Guy Simpkin took his manager, Henry George James, into Partnership with him (6). Nine years younger than Simpkin, James came from Gayton in Staffordshire and had been employed as manager since at least 1880, living at that time on Aylestone Road. By 1884 Simpkin had moved to Narborough, and James had taken over the living accommodation at 41 Market Place. Four years later he too had moved, to a house at Oadby.

From the entry of Henry George James into the business dates the expansion which was to make Simpkin & James into one of the most successful retail business in the county. First about 1890 came the acquisition of 39 Market Place, formerly occupied by Raithby & Lawrence, the printers, and extensive alterations to the premises. Three years later, by an agreement dated 28th July 1893, Simpkin withdrew from an active involvement in the firm and became a sleeping partner (7). Like his late father he too had other business interests – the family hosiery firm (this later changed its name yet again to Simpkin, Son & Emery) and also the Enderby & Stoney Stanton Granite Company, of which he was chairman (8). In 1894 came the first branch – a florist's and Fruiterer's at 94 (later 106) Granby Street. By the turn of the century the firm was no longer limited to Leicester; there were branches at Loughborough (9) and Ashby-de-la-Zouch, and by 1905 one at Hinckley also. The main Leicester premises expanded yet again about 1904, when 37 Market Place, the old Leicester Advertiser office, was acquired.

Simpkin & James represented a new departure in retailing. It was a store rather than a shop (in the nineties it was actually called the Leicester and Midland Counties Supply Stores) which brought together under one roof



39 AND 41, MARKET PLACE.

from Leicester in 1891 Illustrated (above)  
and Official Guide to Leicester 1913 (right)

**SIMPKIN & JAMES**  
LIMITED, Ltd.  
The County Grocers  
Market Place, LEICESTER

**SIMPKIN & JAMES**  
LIMITED,  
The County Wine  
& Spirit Merchants  
Market Place, LEICESTER

such commodities as tea and coffee, groceries (including tinned foods), provisions (cheese, bacon, butter, eggs, items not previously sold by grocers), wines and spirits and toilet requisites. Furthermore it was a multiple store, with four branches by the early 1900's. Its customers were the gentry, clergy, and commercial and professional classes, many of whom had previously shopped by post at the large London stores established in the seventies and eighties. The social composition of these did not really change much until after the Second World War.

A detailed picture has survived of the business as it was in the early nineties (10). The Market Place end of the shop contained the tea and grocery and provisions departments, the Hoursefair Street end the wines and spirits department, and the principals' office; housed in the middle were the clerks' offices and order room. A six horse-power gas engine worked a lift, as well as the tea and coffee mills and fruit washing machine. Extensive cellars under the shop were supplemented by stores in Pocklington's Walk, where there was a bottling plant, and further stores and stabling in Colton Street. Quarterly price lists were issued (these were ninety pages long, an indication of the size of stock), and goods were delivered in the Leicester area on appointed days of the week. They not only blended their own teas, from India, China and Assam, rather than rely on packet teas from 'speculating Metropolitan tea dealers', but had secured the entire output of a tea plantation in Ceylon. Their provisions department included 'Irish and Wiltshire bacon, English, American, Canadian, Westphalia and Irish hams, Bath chaps, special prize dairy Irish and Danish butter, Leicestershire, Cheshire, Cheddar, Parmesan, Gruyère, Gorgonzola, Stilton and other varieties of cheese, lard, eggs, sausages'. The wines and spirits department was equally well stock: 'Ports, sheries and clarets, mellow old Irish and Scotch whiskies, old Cognac, Hennessy's and Martell's brandies, liqueurs, and a choice selection of aerated mineral and table waters. Guinness's stout, Bass's ales, the "Gem" dinner ale, hop bitters, Pilsener and Wrexham lager beers and other high-class beverages'. Tinned foods had come to be accepted by this time, and included such items as salmon, lobster, boars' heads, brawn, soups, beef and mutton, and pâté, 'brilliant in their multi-coloured wrappings'.

The partnership between J G Simpkin and H G James was dissolved when the firm became a limited company on 28th November 1905 (11). Simpkin withdrew on repayment of his original capital of £6000; whether he subsequently became a shareholder in the new company is not clear, though it seems likely. The three original directors of Simpkin & James Ltd (the number was increased to five after the First World War) were H G James himself (chairman), W H Herbert of Whetstone and D J Williams, manager of the Market Place shop. There was a nominal capital of £60,000 in 60,000 £1 shares.

The strain of running an expanding business on his own since 1893 evidently proved too much for H G James, and in July 1908 he suffered a mental breakdown. Less than two years later, on 23rd February 1910, he died at his house at Oadby, at the age of fifty-seven, after a long illness. 'He was a kind and considerate employer, and won the respect and esteem of all with whom he came in contact' said his obituary in the Leicester Chronicle (12). Married three times, he left ten children, of whom three sons were in the business. He had taken no part in the public life of the town; his interests were rural rather than urban – shooting, angling and horticulture. It seems curious that the list of mourners at his funeral on Welford Road cemetery three days later did not include his former partner (13).

J G Simpkin now reappeared on the scene to become the new chairman. As it turned out, this was not a long lasting arrangement, because he died on 16th January 1913. He was sixty-eight, and had lived at Narborough since the eighties, a keen churchman and staunch Conservative, and a former chairman of the Leicestershire Agricultural Society (14). A special train brought over four hundred employees of Simpkin, Son & Emery to the funeral at Narborough cemetery (15). He appears to have had no children, and with his death the link with the Simpkins was broken, but members of the James family continued to serve on the board of directors till the end.

No further shops were opened in the period between the two world wars; in fact the Granby Street branch was closed about 1923, and the fruit and floristry department transferred to Horsefair Street. All the same the business was continuing to grow, as the wages book for the period shows (16). In March 1922, when the firm had five shops, they employed a total of eighty-two staff. Forty-six of these were employed in Leicester – twenty-eight in Horsefair Street (fourteen in the shop, nine in the office and five in the cellar), four in Granby Street, nine in the warehouse and five in the stables; only five of them were women. By September 1928, when there were only four shops, the total number of staff had risen to one hundred and thirty-nine, of whom ninety-four worked in Leicester. At least fifty-eight of these were at Horsefair Street – thirty in the shop, twelve in the office and sixteen in the café, which had opened in 1926; the location of the eight who worked in the bakery is not clear. The number in the warehouse had risen to twenty-two, two travellers had been engaged, and there were now four 'motormen'. The number of women employed had risen to thirty-one which is partly accounted for by the existence of the café. The weekly wages bill for the Leicester employees for the week ending 25th March 1922 was £111.13.6; the highest wage was £6.2.6, the lowest 10/-. The same bill for the week ending 15th September 1928 was £204.18.0; the highest wage then appears to have been £6 and the lowest 12/-.

The end of rationing in 1954 and the rise of the affluent society are reflected in the firm's annual reports. In 1950 the profits were just over £11,000; by 1960 they had risen to £25,000. Another period of expansion seemed on the way, and by 1963 three more branches had been opened – at Allandale Road, Oadby and Wigston. By 1965 profits had risen to £32,000, but that was the peak year and after that they slumped dramatically – to £19,000 in 1966, £15,000 in 1967 and £14,000 in 1968. Closure of the unprofitable Ashby and Wigston branches in 1968 made no difference, and in 1969 profits reached an all time low of £2500 (only half the figure for 1903, without taking into account the enormous difference in the value of the pound). 1970 was little better, and a voluntary winding-up of the company was agreed at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the shareholders held on 24th May 1971.

Simpkin & James' original shop closed on 6th February 1971, and was demolished in August of that year. The Hinckley and Loughborough shops closed at the same time, the Oadby shop was already closed, and the Allandale Road branch remained open about another week.

'The Shutters go up on Simpkin & James' was the title of the Leicester Mercury's report on the closure, which went on to highlight some of the shop's special features – the cheese counter which stocked a hundred different varieties, the exotic foods like kangaroo tail soup, quails' eggs, caviare and chocolate-coated ants' eggs, the willingness to obtain items not in stock, deliver and give credit, and the fact that they made their own chocolates and confectionary (17).

It was also the subject of a television programme on ATV call 'The Passing of Simpkin & James' on 13th April 1971. The cameras filmed the last day at the Leicester shop, hardly a typical one, with the crowds of last-minute bargain hunters. Not thought to be very satisfactory, it made no attempt to explain why it was happening (18). What was significant, as Jack Simmons has pointed out in a recent book, was that the film was made at all; the end of Simpkin & James was felt to be an event of more than just local interest (19).

## References:

1. The error has undoubtedly arisen from the survival of a grocer's day book for the period 1804–1808 (5D 71/1), now among the Simpkin & James records in the Leicestershire Record Office. Nothing to do with Simpkin & James, its provenance is unknown, though it might relate to a grocery business carried on at 41 Market Place by one of their predecessors.
2. Deeds relating to Simpkin & James premises (21D 71/58) in Leicestershire Record Office.
3. *Leicester Journal* 15th August 1862
4. Registers of Borough Electors 1860–1861, though Sarson & Simpkin appears in the 1861 *Leicester Directory*.
5. *Leicester Chronicle* 13th March 1886
6. Simpkin & James Ltd file no 86640 at Companies House, London EC1
7. *Ibid*
8. Reflected in his will – he left over £33,000; H G James left less than £10,000.
9. The manager of the Loughborough branch was Tom Mayo (1849–1930), seven times mayor of Loughborough and originator of the Boxing Day meet of the Quorn Hunt in Loughborough Market Place.
10. *Leicester in 1891 Illustrated*, p 108–9; *Illustrated Leicester – its History and Commerce* (1895), p 19–21
11. Simpkin & James Ltd file no 86640 at Companies House
12. *Leicester Chronicle* 26th February 1910
13. *Ibid* 5th March 1910
14. *Leicester Daily Post* 17th January 1913
15. *Ibid* 21st January 1913
16. Simpkin & James wages book March 1922 – December 1928 (5D 71/5) in Leicestershire Record Office
17. *Leicester Mercury* 6th February 1971



18. *Ibid* 14th April 1971
20. *Leicester Past and Present*, volume 2, p96–7, which includes an affectionate pen-portrait of the Horsefair Street shop.