

The Severn Valley Fruit Company (The Jam Factory)

by Vicki Walker

The Smith family moved to Stonehouse in the early 1800s. Frederick Smith set up a grocery and bakery business in the High Street where Broomhall's butcher's shop is now located. By 1861 his nephew Richard had taken over the bakery. It seems that he demolished the original shop and buildings and, in 1877, built the houses and shops that are still on the site. His property extended west behind the street as far as the school.

When Richard Smith retired in 1890, he persuaded his son, Charles Lister Smith, to give up his job as a draper's clerk in London and return to Stonehouse to take over the baking business. Charles saw the potential for creating a new business using the surplus fruit from local orchards. As early as 1903 C.L. Smith is recorded as "*exhibiting specimen jars of Severn Valley Fruits*" at Stonehouse Flower Show and his new company Severn Valley Fruit Company (SVF Co.) was set up in around 1906. The new factory, which made jams and bottled fruit, was located off High Street behind the shops.

Smith was running both businesses side by side. The bakery business retained the name of Richard Smith & Sons long after Richard died in 1901. Arthur Johnson was also a baker in High Street and eventually C.L. Smith sold his bakery to Johnson and concentrated on the SVF Co.

Charles Lister Smith had four children. His eldest son, Herbert had been born in 1886 in London. When the family returned to Stonehouse he attended Wycliffe College from 1897 to 1901 when he joined the Stroud News as an apprentice journalist. In 1906 he gave up his career in journalism to help his father manage the SVF Co.

In 1907 the Gloucester Journal reported under "Local Inventions", a patent applied for by C.L. Smith for "*improvements in closing cans applicable to the preservation of fruits and other foods.*"

Herbert Round Smith served as a gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery during World War One. He married Marion Armstrong in 1915. After the war he became managing director of Severn Valley Fruits but his father still continued to assist in the business during the 1930s. The firm became a limited company in 1936 and C.L. Smith acted as secretary until his death in 1945. In the 1939 register* Herbert is described as a "*Director of a Fruit Preserving Factory*" and he was also a member of the Observer Corps during WW2. His son Austin was described as a "*jam boiler*" before he became a pilot in the RAF and sadly died in a plane crash in August 1940.

After the war Herbert Round Smith retired from the business and his sons Geoffrey and Thomas took over. Trading became more difficult in the late 50s and early 60s as tastes changed and the motorway system developed bringing more competition. The business needed major investment to modernise and diversify but it wasn't available. Herbert died in 1962 and in 1964 the Company ceased trading, being wound up in 1966.



The Round Smith family c1912.

*Back l to r:
Herbert, Marjorie,
Alan, Gertrude
(known as Mary).*

*Front: Gertrude
Smith (nee Round),
Charles Lister Smith*

Memories of the Jam Factory

From Jeremy Round Smith (son of Geoffrey Round Smith and Stephanie Hart. Grandson of Herbert Round Smith)

As a child growing up in the 1950s I remember the family business of the Jam Factory well - I was even called "*Jerry the Jam*" at school. The factory was very busy at that time and produced bottled and canned fruit and vegetables as well as a range of jams. My father Geoff ran the business and production side while his twin brother Tom was the technical expert researching and supervising recipes, preservatives, and quality control. There was a workforce of perhaps 12 to 15 but during the busy fruit season this would swell to around 40 or so by employing ladies from the village.

The factory spread over a large site just off the High Street (where Orchard Court is now). I remember being put in the production line after school to keep me out of mischief. I put the paper discs onto the jam in each jar as they went by on a conveyor belt before the machine screwed the lids on. All around us in this sweet, heady aroma of warm raspberry or blackberry jam would be hundreds of wasps, despite the numerous electric zappers. Even today I have a bit of a phobia about them!

Next door was a preparation room with rows of machines operated by the ladies, apple peelers and corers, shredders and dicers, with a deep sump for waste set in the floor, full of peelings and a soupy mess, which naturally I managed to fall into. Beyond that was a vast gloomy warehouse with row upon row of large galvanised water tanks into which were lowered crates of newly canned tins to cool off after steaming. My father would often go back to the factory in the evenings to hoist them out with the overhead gantry. At that age I thought it rather a sinister place.

One room had a large anthracite furnace operated by Wilf Underwood, and it was possible for a small child to squeeze all the way round the back of this monster in the warm dry air. Then there was a loading bay, ramps, and an open yard where there stood rows of wooden barrels full of fruit pulp, great for running along the top of until one day I put my foot through a rotten barrel!

At the rear of the yard were two big Nissen huts for warehousing. The production was mainly for wholesale to commercial customers and sometimes I went in one of the vans on delivery. Frenchay Hospital was one I remember, and my father would also take me on trips to Worcester and Evesham, to the fruit growers to select orders. At home there would be ripe fruit everywhere in the season, to a point where I became thoroughly sick of the sight of cherries, pears, apples and plums, given to me to take to school every day.

I was 12 when the family decided to close the factory in 1964 and sell the site. I have many happy memories of growing up in the village surrounded by such lovely countryside.



Geoffrey Round Smith at the factory c1950s

From John McCallum (son of Margaret Joan “Bobbie” Round Smith and Ian McCallum. Grandson of Herbert Round Smith.)

The company had hit hard times in the early 1930s in the Depression and a majority shareholding was taken by Cheltenham Dairies with my Grandfather, Herbert, as Managing Director. After the war he was joined in the business by his twin sons, Tom and Geoff.

The SVF Co. produced both canned fruit and jams, mainly for wholesale with large quantities going to the NHS and schools. Much of the remaining stock was sold through H. H. and S. Budgett, a large Bristol wholesale company. The cans came from the Metal Box Co. The fruit mainly came from growers in the Vale of Evesham, though I do remember going to Kent to pick fruit up with my Uncle Geoff more than once.



*Geoffrey Round Smith
with Dennis the driver c1956*

I used to spend a lot of time there as a child and worked there in the summer holidays for three years after I was 14; the last year helping my Uncle Geoff clear the premises ready for sale - that was sad. I broke up hundreds of wooden barrels. A lot of fruit used to be stored in them, with sulphur used as a preservative. I can still remember the smell! The wasps used to be dreadful; you were stung continually, despite the devices meant to zap them! During the summer, when most of the canning was done, the factory employed a lot of female temporary workers. It was noisy, steamy work with “*Music while you work*” blaring out over the radio loudspeakers. My very first pay packet was a brown envelope from the factory with 15/- in it!

I have very clear memories of some of the long-serving permanent staff: Winnie Elliott who ran the office single-handed; Kathleen Hillman who did the labelling and a million other jobs; Dennis the driver - I spent many hours on the road with him when I was young (it was a way of occupying me during the school holidays!); Wilf Underwood - a lovely old fellow who again did all sorts; lighting the steam boiler early in the morning, making the syrup in huge vats and he made the strongest homemade wine I have ever tasted. He was a real countryman and lived in the end bungalow on Orchard Place, just up the entry road.



L to r: Wilf Underwood, Winnie Elliott, Dennis the driver, Kath Hillman, Jack Lansbury.



It all seems a very long time ago now but I do remember very happy memories of the SVF Co. as a child; it wasn't just a place of work but a way of life.

I also remember lots of children bringing in blackberries. They used to be paid sixpence a punnet!

Here are some comments from the Stonehouse History Group Facebook page from local people who remember picking fruit for the factory. Most agree they got about 3d per pound or 6d per punnet which was about 2lb.

Audrey Ricks Generations of Stonehouse children earned money during the summer holidays by gathering blackberries and taking them to the factory. We got 6d a punnet for them in the 50s.

Tommy Price We used to pick blackberries and rose hips and take them to the jam factory for about 3 old pennies a pound.

Roger Sanders Brilliant! We used to go blackberry picking and take them to the jam factory.

Bryan Billau My brothers and I would collect blackberries and take them there when we were kids. We never bought jam from there, of course, because our mums would make loads of it at home, along with chutney and pickled onions.

Ray and Mary Barr Remember picking blackberries and taking them down to the jam factory.

John Parker I had a summer holiday job there in the 50s working for the Smith brothers who lived at the top of Verney Road. I recall drinking a lot of the fruit juice from the vats. There was a lady working there called Betty, who was a real character, and kept us well entertained.

Julie Baker Spent many happy hours up at Doverow and Cotswold Green picking blackberries, then taking them to jam factory. Happy days!



Some photos of local children with their blackberries, taken by Tom Smith in the late 50s or early 60s. Unfortunately we have been unable to name any of the children pictured.



Sources of Information

Severn Valley Fruits: newspaper articles accessed via Find My Past www.findmypast.co.uk

Smith family archive: photos and information provided by Tom Round Smith, John McCallum and Jeremy Round Smith

Smith family history: ancestry.co.uk *The 1939 England and Wales Register was similar to a census, taken at the start of World War Two to record people's details for National Identity Cards.

Stonehouse History Group Facebook page:

https://www.facebook.com/stonehousehistorygroup?ref=aymt_homepage_panel