

# 'Knacky' Stephens and the Welcoming Hands of Castlemartin

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Imagine, if you will, visiting the quiet church of St Michael and All Angels' in Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire, on a misty morning, or a dark winter's evening. As you approach the lychgate – unable to clearly discern the exact details of the ironwork ahead of you – you grope for the gate handles ... and grasp a pair of small, icy hands!

In broad daylight, the 'welcoming hands' of Castlemartin's Victorian lychgate are a charming curiosity that lend a rather steampunk touch to the otherwise Arts & Crafts-meets-Medieval Gothic style of this grand entrance to the churchyard, and the ancient Grade I listed church beyond.

The wrought iron gate is ornamented with numerous decorations in cast iron, including trailing flowers and foliage, fleur de lys finials, large decorative cross plates and two panels framing quotes from Psalms. On the left panel (looking towards the church) is the apt if rather literal use of Psalm 100:4:

ENTER INTO HIS GATES  
WITH THANKSGIVING  
AND INTO HIS COURTS  
WITH PRAISE

The theme of thanksgiving is also illustrated through symbols of harvest on the cross above.

The right-hand panel offers the first verse of Psalm 65, beneath a crucifix bearing the IHS monogram for Jesus.

PRAISE WAITETH FOR  
THEE O GOD IN SION  
AND UNTO THEE SHALL  
THE VOW BE PERFORMED

And at the centre of the gate are those intriguing hands, cast from bronze, on cast iron backing plates with yet more words circling the hands in relief: BE HE ALL OF ONE MIND/SEEK THE LORD & HIS PRAISE.

Anyone who pauses to study the gate will also notice two small, identical scrolls which record that the gate was PRESENTED 1890 [by] J & A STEPHENS.



The lychgate of St Michael and All Angels', Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire.

J & A Stephens, an engineering company with works in nearby Pembroke, was named after its founders and owners – brothers John and Archibald 'Archie' Stephens. Locally, the family and their business were affectionately known as 'Knacky Stephens'. Much of the information about them in this article comes from a descendant, the late Peter Hurlow-Jones, who left a rich legacy of family photographs and stories to Pembroke Museum.

Thanks to Peter, we know that the original 'Knacky' Stephens was John Stephens Sr., Castlemartin's blacksmith (b. c.1810), who lived in a house in the village called 'Jericho'. The story goes that John, a skilful and resourceful



worker, was able to repair a badly damaged plough for a farmer. The farmer, having resigned himself to the expense of replacing the plough, was so impressed and grateful that he exclaimed ‘Well done, John. I’ll christen thee “Johnny Knacky”’. The name stuck, and several generations later, children in the family were still called ‘little knackies’.

John trained his sons John (b. 1846) and Archie (b. 1858) as blacksmiths. However, like their father, they also had the knack for all things mechanical, and in 1873, they started a firm as Agricultural, Marine and Motor engineers and millwrights in Pembroke’s East Back. J & A Stephens carried out repairs to ships and salvaged shipwrecks, worked for the Admiralty dockyard, hired out traction engines and threshing machines, repaired mining machinery and loaned steam rollers to the local council. They helped build a lighthouse on Skokholm Island, and for a time, they also ran a limestone quarry. As the business grew, the brothers continued to innovate. Not all of their ideas got off the ground – Archie’s patented design for a new submarine shackle never went into production – but by the time they made and donated the gate to Castlemartin church, business was booming.

As the century turned, John and Archie Stephens were the first in the area to embrace many new technologies, especially anything on wheels. Firstly, they introduced what they dubbed the ‘Castlemartin bicycle’ to the district, bringing the parts from Birmingham and assembling them in the Pembroke Works. Archie competed in local cycling races. With a fleet of motorcars, they ran Pembroke’s first taxi service. Next, they acquired motorcycles, which must have brought speed and convenience to local deliveries. But the star



J & A Stephens engineering works in Pembroke.



‘The Dreadnought’ – a converted Glasgow tram.

of their transport empire was surely the Glasgow city tram, nicknamed ‘The Dreadnought’, that they adapted as a double-decker bus and then hired out to groups for day trips. Unfortunately, when the bus arrived, it only had one gear and a gravity-feed petrol tank and could not climb hills. Ever inventive, Knacky Stephens cured the problem by repositioning the petrol tank and designing a new gearbox, which was cast at a local foundry.

In the best possible way, the Stephenses’ enthusiasm for motor vehicles brings to mind Mr Toad: ‘Glorious, stirring sight! The poetry of motion! The real way to travel! The only way to travel!’

It appears that the Knacky Stephenses were just as forward-looking socially as technologically, and the women of the family were independent and influential. In a time when many people frowned on the idea of women riding bicycles, Archie’s daughter Alethea Dorothy, nicknamed ‘Dodo’, gave the local ladies cycling lessons. She was later awarded medals for her Red Cross service in WW1. Another of the Knacky Stephens family – Bessie, known as ‘Bob’ – was the first woman to drive a motorcar in Pembroke. I like to think that it was Bob and Dodo who arranged for the ‘Dreadnought’ to be hired out to suffragettes during Mrs Pankhurst’s campaign – presumably this was during Emmeline Pankhurst’s visit to Pembroke in 1908, when she canvassed in opposition to the Liberals during by-elections.

But let’s return to 1890, and to the lychgate at Castlemartin. Having learned much about this fascinating family, I still pondered several questions: Why did J & A Stephens of Pembroke give the gate to Castlemartin church, and why then? Which ‘knacky’ made the gate? And, above all, *whose hands were they?*



From the 1891 census of Castlemartin, we learn that John, the original Knacky Stephens, was still living in the village. Though in his late seventies, he was also still Castlemartin's blacksmith. His son Archie, an 'Engine and Machine Maker' was recorded in the same household, with Archie's wife Helena and their two young children: Archibald John Corbett Stephens, known as Corbett, aged two, and baby Ethel. Next door was Archie's brother and business partner John Stephens, 'Engine Maker', and his wife Martha. The Knacky Stephens were evidently still very much rooted in Castlemartin.

Their generous gift of the church gate would have highlighted the capabilities and success of the company and was perhaps their way of paying tribute publically to their father – the original ingenious Knacky Stephens. Many of the family's baptisms, marriages and burials must have taken place at St Michael's, such as the burial of John and Archie's mother Ann in 1882 – and I think we can also see their gift as an act of faith and an expression of thanksgiving to God at the spiritual centre of the community. While it is reasonable to assume that the gate was made at the Stephenses' works in Pembroke, either by one of the Stephens brothers themselves or by their employees, it's worth remembering that John Sr. was still smithing in 1890, so it is possible that it was in fact his skillful work, or direction, that produced this beautiful piece of craftsmanship, right in Castlemartin village. Six years later, John Sr. was buried in the churchyard, and it is poignant to realise that his body would have been carried through the lychgate.

The gate's design was said, by Peter, to have been a copy of a gate at Sandringham, but it looks nothing like those famous 'Norwich Gates' by Barnard, Bishop and Barnard. However, there are hints of the Sandringham design in another gate made by J & A Stephens, which also has a small hand for its handle – the gate to the Stephenses' engineering works in Pembroke. A plaque on that gate, with some letters now missing, announces the entrance to 'J & A Stephens & Son, Established 1873, Engineers Millwrights etc.' The single cast-metal hand-handle grasps a large key, bearing a simple, personal inscription: on one side: 'A.J.C. Stephens 1893' and on the other 'Born 1888'. It reveals that the hand cast in metal was that of Archie's son, Corbett. He would have been about five years old. According to family lore, the handles on the gate at Castlemartin church were also cast from Corbett's hands. However, something doesn't quite add up: when the gate was donated in 1890, Corbett was just a toddler; surely, his hands would have been too small? Could it be that the handles were added to the church gate at a later date? Blacksmith Andrew Renwick (Ridgeway Forge) has advised me that the hands were probably sand cast. A skilled model maker would have modelled the pattern, which could then have been re-used to make the mould for each casting. So, it's certainly possible that the hands at Castlemartin were added some time after the church gate was installed. Corbett's little hands were frozen in childhood in these two gates, but the flesh and blood Corbett grew up, and learned the skills

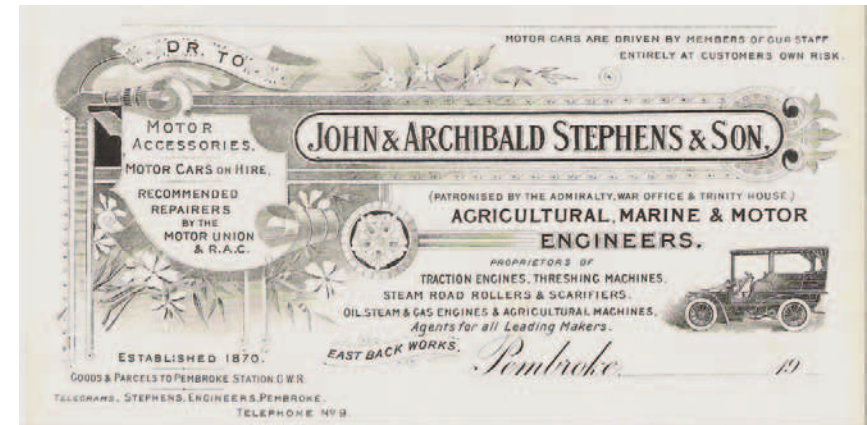


Corbett's hand on the gate of the J & A Stephens Works, Pembroke (left) and on the lychgate at Castlemartin (right).

The company dedication and date on the Castlemartin gate.



Corbett Stephens (1888–1925) as a child with his sister ‘Dodo’ and as an adult.



Company letterhead c.1910

of his father and uncle. Finally, the time came to make him a formal partner in the engineering business at East Back, which became ‘J & A Stephens and Son’. However, Corbett’s engineering career was cut tragically short when he died suddenly on 9 January 1925. He had a weak heart, due to having survived rheumatic fever, and the condition caused a blood clot to his brain. He was just 36.

Corbett was unmarried and had no children, and no other knackies came forward to carry on the business. So, after three generations, Knacky Stephens ceased operations and the workshop passed to another family before the building was turned to other uses, including a nursing home. It’s now a private dwelling. Likewise, the former Mount Pleasant Baptist Chapel next door is now an antiques centre. However, the gate on East Back remains, with Corbett’s hand still clutching the key to the once bustling engineering works. Likewise, at St Michael and All Angels’, Corbett’s hands still greet visitors to the church. Both of these gates serve as lasting reminders of a talented and enterprising Castlemartin family who helped shape the history of Pembrokeshire.

Thanks to conservation architect Andrew Faulkner, Andrew Renwick of Ridgeway Forge in Eckington, Derbyshire and G&E Allen Castings in Sheffield, for their insights into the gates’ and hands’ construction and design.

*Historic photographs © Pembroke Museum, from the collection of Peter Hurlow-Jones, with thanks to museum curator, local historian and former Mayor of Pembroke Linda Asman for allowing us to reproduce these wonderful images. You can listen to Peter talking about his family history and his aunt Dodo’s influence on his own engineering career at [peoplescollection.wales/items/399399](https://peoplescollection.wales/items/399399).*