THE STEPHENS BROTHERS AND THE ROYAL GLASSWORKS AT MARINHA GRANDE

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Between 1769 and 1826, the royal glassworks at Marinha Grande in Portugal (70 miles north of Lisbon) were owned by two English brothers, William and John James Stephens (Roberts 2003). Born in poverty in England, the patronage of the Portuguese monarchy enabled them to become two of the richest industrialists in Europe.

Their factory at Marinha Grande covered an area of 44 acres and for almost 40 years fulfilled the demand for glass in Portugal and its colonies. The factory made window glass and crystalline glass of all types (including wine glasses and tumblers, decanters, salvers and vases, oil and vinegar dispensers, salt-cellars and inkwells, candlesticks and scent bottles), and provided employment for most of the village, the number of workers increasing from 220 in 1770 to 500 in 1826 (Roberts 2003, 56–9; Duarte 1937, 12–14).

William, the older brother (Fig. 1), was born in Cornwall in 1731 and apprenticed to a trading house in Lisbon at the age of 15. During the next few years, he became a successful merchant in the city, but his partner was killed and his home and business destroyed in the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755. The following year he built a lime factory to provide mortar for rebuilding the city and, when the reconstruction began in 1764, he proved to be a competent and efficient supplier.

At this time, Portugal relied on imports, unable to feed or clothe its people from its own resources. King José I (1714–1777) had little taste for public affairs and the country was run by his first minister, the Marquis of Pombal (1699–1782), who set up a number of new industries, granting loans to men of business who could compete with imported products. Several of the men chosen to run these industries were foreigners; there was so little commercial activity in Portugal, and the country was so heavily in thrall to the church, that it was difficult to find competent Portuguese with business experience.

In 1767, William was asked to reopen the royal glassworks in Marinha Grande, which had closed because of the bankruptcy of John Beare, its Irish director, and which Pombal planned to include in his programme of new industries. William refused the invitation several times, but in 1769 he was asked again, this time by order of the king. He was granted a private audience with José and, in his own words:

The king was greatly pleased by my acceptance and promised his immediate royal protection, for the establishment and progress of the glassworks were very much in his royal interest (Marques 1999, 69).

The king honoured his promise. On 7 July 1769, he signed a decree ordering that William 'be given all the help

and favour as is necessary', and listing 15 conditions under which the business would operate, a beneficial package which included an interest-free loan of about £700,000 in today's values, free use of firewood from the royal pine forest, and exemption from all sales taxes (Barros 1969, 37–48).

The first instalment of the loan was paid on 20 July (Barros 1969, 205) and William left Lisbon the following day, arriving in Marinha Grande on 23 July (de Freitus 3 November 1895). Situated on the fringes of the royal pine forest of Leiria and close to the sea in an area of sandy soil, the village was an excellent location for a glasshouse. William employed the craftsmen who had remained in Marinha Grande and the factory re-entered production in October 1769 (Barros 1969, 50).

During the next three years, elegant stone buildings replaced the old wooden structures (Barros 1969, 251). Inside the gates and beyond the porter’s lodge lay a large

FIG. 1 William Stephens, engraving by A. Smith from a drawing by Bouck, 1799
court yard which William planted with trees to provide shade. The main workshops occupied two sides of
the courtyard and, behind them, were several ancillary
structures for carpentry, sawing and pot making, as well as
engraving, cutting and painting the glass. There was a
large warehouse and several covered areas where firewood
was stored. On the third side of the courtyard, William built
a small but well proportioned mansion house (FIG. 2). The
rooms were partially tiled in azulejo tiles and the windows
at the rear overlooked a garden with a lake, beyond which
lay orchards and vegetable plots. (Roberts 2003, 57–8).

FIG. 2 The mansion house in Marinha Grande, built by William
Stephens, c. 1772; reproduced by permission of Câmara
Municipal da Marinha Grande

Output from the factory increased as the new workshops
entered production, but sales were affected by competition
from Bohemian glass and stocks began to pile up in the
warehouse. Determined to put the glass importers out of
business, William drafted a long and well argued petition
to the king and travelled to Lisbon in June 1772 to present
it personally to the government (Barros 1969, 167–76). His
petition was considered by Pombal, who agreed to double
the duties payable on imported glass (Barros 1969, 255–6).
Marinha Grande was the only glassworks of any
significance in the country, so William was given a
monopoly of glass supply in Portugal and its colonies, a
monopoly which (together with his exemption from taxes)
would enable him to build up an enormous fortune (FIG. 3).

William and Pombal became friends in the summer of
1772, despite an age difference of more than 30 years. They
shared advanced ideas about education and social welfare,
and when Pombal travelled north in September 1772 to
reform the University of Coimbra, he visited Marinha Grande
and spent the night in William’s mansion house (Vasconcellos e Sá, 436, 1720).

Pombal was the effective dictator of his country and,
for the next five years, he ensured that William’s operation
at Marinha Grande ran as smoothly and as profitably as
possible. He intervened in many of William’s local
difficulties – excessive bureaucracy in local government,
intrusiveness of forest officials, and religious hostility
(William, a Protestant, was often referred to as a heretic) –
and promptly approved all William’s ideas for improving
conditions in the factory (Barros 1969, 250, 253; Marques

Despite his religion, William was much loved in the
village. He saw himself as patron and protector of his
workforce, and introduced a system of welfare 30 years
ahead of similar developments in Britain. He paid good
wages, opened an elementary school, provided a first aid
post and a relief fund for illness, and set up a generous
pension scheme. He closed the taverns and, to fill the spare
time of his workers, he employed teachers of music and
dance, and built a theatre where his workmen acted in plays
translated from Shakespeare and Voltaire (Barros 1969, 24;
Duarte 1937, 22–4).

His motives were not entirely altruistic, for he was aware
that productivity increased with a happy and healthy
workforce. With a monopoly of production, he could sell
as much glass as his factory could produce – and at high
prices too, for Pombal had approved a new price list at the
same time as imposing higher import duties (Correia 1999,
41; transcription of price list in Barros 1969, 173–6).

During these years, most of William’s success resulted
from the patronage, not of the king, but of his first minister
the Marquis of Pombal. But Pombal fell from power when
José died in 1777 and the throne passed to his eldest
daughter. The new queen, Maria I (1736–1816), harboured
a deep distrust of Pombal and banished him to a small town
20 miles from Marinha Grande. She dismissed his
collaborators from office and reduced payments to the new
industries.
In this difficult situation, William had the courage to act with honour as well as self-interest. He maintained his friendship with Pombal (Stephens 1777-78, MS letters to Marquis of Pombal), but he also set out to charm the queen. Maria was extremely religious and it was difficult for William – as a Protestant as well as a friend of Pombal – to make a good impression. But he persevered, and such was his charm and charisma that she soon became her favourite industrialist. In December 1780 she endorse the privileges agreed by her father and confirmed the high level of duties on imported glass. She even widened William’s exemption from taxes, to include import tax on raw materials and export tax on finished glass. (Barros 1969, 261–3).

Maria visited the glassworks on two occasions. The first was in 1786, the year when William made the final repayment on his loan from the government. He told the poet, Robert Southey:

\[ I went through this affair with great éclat. It was an honour they have never done any of their own subjects. I was therefore without a precedent to go by. I requested nothing from the palace but their cooks and kitchen utensils (Southey 1960, 19–20). \]

The second visit was in June 1788 when Maria stayed in Marinha Grande for three days and was entertained with a play performed in the factory theatre (Withering 1822, 1, 314–15; Marinha Grande, MS accounts book). But her mental health was unstable and, after the death of her eldest son a few months later, she began to lose her mind. Her second son, Prince João (1767–1826), became regent in 1799 and soon confirmed that William had earned the benefit of continued royal protection (Barros 1969, 285).

William’s glass was not of the highest quality – with a monopoly of supply, there was little incentive to improve standards. The Count of Hofmannsegg, who visited Marinha Grande in 1798, commented on the high quality of the raw materials used and concluded that the factory failed to prepare them correctly. As a result, he explained, ‘the glass has neither the durability nor the brilliance of imported glass and it breaks easily’ (Hofmannsegg 1805, 256–7).

William was a good businessman and aware of the value of repeat sales. He is said to have told his manager to stop making tavern glasses that were thick and strong because they were too difficult to break (Barros 1969, 25).

He was also a man of intellectual curiosity and he experimented with the production of tempered glass. He gave samples of what he called his ‘tough glass’ to Dr William Withering, a member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, who visited Marinha Grande in 1793. Withering brought them back to England and gave them to James Watt, a fellow member of the Lunar Society (a group of men from the Midlands who met monthly, near the time of the full moon, to discuss developments in science and technology – see Uglow 2002). Watt tested the samples and sent his findings to the president of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks. ‘Mr Stephens’s glass’, he wrote, ‘bears the alternatives of heat and cold much better than any other I have had occasion to try’ (Watt to Banks, 5 November 1797).

Unfortunately, Banks had an accident with the samples. ‘I fear it was my inexperience in manipulation which broke Mr Stephens’s glass’, he wrote to Withering in December 1797 (Banks to Withering, 23 December 1797). A few months later, he asked for more samples, as ‘I mean to put them into the hands of my chemical friends as soon as I get them’ (Banks to Withering, 18 May 1798). Sadly, there is no further mention of glass from Marinha Grande in the Banks correspondence, probably because William’s health was deteriorating and he was spending more of his time in Lisbon, leaving the factory in the hands of his manager, José de Sousa e Oliveira.

William died in 1803, leaving the factory – and his fortune – to his much younger brother, John James, a man who lacked William’s charisma and intelligence. At the same time, the political climate was changing. England was at war with France and, although Portugal remained neutral, the French ambassador was inciting anti-British feelings amongst the Portuguese.

The factory was in good financial shape when William died (Barros 1969, 290–314), and John James should have acted quickly to protect its profitability. But he was too miserable at the loss of his beloved brother to think about procedure or to safeguard his royal patronage. At the same time, a number of government advisers were joining the French faction in Lisbon and the factory lost some of its privileges (Barros 1969, 315; Marques 1999, 86–7).

This was a time of increasing danger for Portugal. Napoleon tried to force Prince João to close his ports to British shipping and, when the prince refused, an invasion force crossed the border. The royal family fled to Brazil in November 1807, their ships leaving the harbour just one day before the French army occupied Lisbon. The glass factory was sequestrated by occupying forces on 7 December and, on 13 January, John James became a prisoner of war, spending four months incarcerated in the British Hospital in Lisbon which had been requisitioned to house English prisoners (Unattributed 1896, 11).

John James repossessed his factory after the country was liberated by British troops in September 1808 (Unattributed 1896, 11). Two years later, another French army crossed the border into central Portugal. By this time, the Duke of Wellington had built his famous lines of defence north of Lisbon – the lines of Torres Vedras – and now he ordered that all people and provisions between the lines and the border be cleared from the land. Workers in Marinha Grande closed the factory, destroyed their food supplies, and travelled to safety in the city. And during the next few months, enemy soldiers roamed the countryside in search of food, burning property and killing those who had remained in their homes.

The glassworkers stayed in Lisbon for seven months until starvation forced the French to retreat into Spain. In the spring of 1811, they returned to the factory and found it, in the words of the manager, ‘in a state which would have saddened and discouraged the bravest of men’. The main workshop had been burnt to the ground, 74 villagers killed by the French, and the area was suffering from starvation and disease (Balsamão 1815, 257–8; Aranha 1871, 154–6; Marques 1999, 87).

John James used his fortune to rebuild the glassworks to the exact design of William’s buildings of the early 1770s. The factory re-entered production in October 1812 (Stephens to Sousa, October 1812) but it lost much of its royal protection. The government had become anti-British and the prince regent remained in Brazil. All matters relating to royal favour were referred for his personal attention and
long sea voyages were involved in any exchange of correspondence.

Prince João inherited the throne on his mother’s death in 1816, but he only returned to Portugal after the constitutional revolution of 1820. Meanwhile, duties on imported glass had been reduced. The glass factory had lost its monopoly, and, after the declaration of peace in 1815, imports began to arrive in increasing quantities and at decreasing prices (costs of raw materials and transport had fallen with the ending of hostilities).

John James failed to understand the change in the market. He refused to lower his prices and he refused to cut back on production. As a result, his stocks increased and, as profits began to slide into loss, he made up the shortfall from his own deep pocket. By 1820 he was subsidising the entire running costs of the factory, estimated at almost half a million pounds a year in today's values (Marques 1999, 87–8, 90–1; Barros 1969, 321).

He died in November 1826, leaving the glassworks to the Portuguese nation. He wrote in his will:

1 firmly hope that prosperity, stability and permanency may afford this useful and beautiful fabric to the benefit of Marinha Grande in particular, and the advantage of this kingdom in general, and for ever (J.J. Stephens, will proved London, December 1826).

Meanwhile, Portugal was in political turmoil. King João had died a few months before John James, and his two sons, Pedro and Miguel, were manoeuvring for control of the country, a situation that would soon lead to civil war. State coffers were empty and, for several months, the government refused to accept such a loss-making enterprise. It was not until May 1827, when a consortium of businessmen offered to lease the glassworks on a rent-free basis, that the state finally accepted the bequest (Almeida 1860, 11–18; de Freitas 1 December 1895).

William and John James had owned the factory for almost 60 years; the state would own it for more than one and a half centuries. It remained in production until 1992, when the older buildings were transferred to the town council of Marinha Grande (William’s mansion house is now a glass museum) and the 20th-century workshop sold to a Danish industrialist who still operates the factory today. And William’s legacy lives on, for Marinha Grande is the centre of glass production in Portugal, as well as moulds for the injection-moulding of plastics. It is also one of the wealthiest areas in the country.

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